

## Montanans in Combat Post WWII

By Tom Harpole

Immediately following World War Two the United States let its own military deteriorate due to budgetary restrictions and the rapid demobilization of the nation's military forces. The National Security Act of 1947 brought U.S military forces to their lowest level since the 1920's.

President Truman, after authorizing the use of nuclear weapons on Japan, believed that the character and materiel of warfare was forever altered, obviating infantry, ground assault vehicles, and hand-held weapons. General Omar Bradley's disdain for amphibious assault and ground war was often cited as the rationale for the lack of research and development of new weapons and vehicles for ground warfare.

Secretaries of War James Forrestal and Louis Johnson effectively halted the research and development of new conventional weapons and communications equipment. The indifference to developing better communications proved frustrating and, at times, deadly, to the troops in Korea, who resorted to "runners" in lieu of the unpredictability of primitive radio and wireless equipment.

"Collective security," under the aegis of the United Nations, was to organize mutual support to the non-Communist world. But the surprising volatility of the Korean peninsula, controlled by the Communist North, gave way to a new war in Asia when, on June 25, 1950, 60,000 North Korean troops crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and invaded the Republic of Korea. Two days later the NK troops had control of Seoul.

On June 26<sup>th</sup>, President Truman authorized U.S. forces to attack North Korean troops and installations. Although the U.S. military was woefully unprepared for yet another conflict, from that day until the armistice, 19,915 men and women from Montana were once again engaged in combat throughout the 37 months of active conflict.

The result of the massive demobilization post WWII was that all the services: Marines, Air Force, Navy and Army realized they were under manned. Montana reservists; some volunteers, others veterans, and conscriptees went into service and were soon in combat on the other side of the world.

Even though there were 60 member nations in the U.N. 93 percent of the forces engaged in the Korean War were Americans. During the 37 months of fighting the U.N. forces lost 74,000 men while 250,000 were wounded. The Chinese and North Koreans are estimated to have suffered 1,500,000 dead and wounded. For the first time in history, through the Indian wars, the Spanish American war, the Philippine Insurrection, and both World Wars, Montana did not have an identifying presence.

Although **Montana's 163rd Regiment, 41<sup>st</sup> Division** had been designated as a unit for the Great War on August 5, 1917. Montana had no signature outfit that went to Korea as a unit. In 1950, when President Truman was forced to call up reservists to serve in Korea, more than 4,000 Montanans were soon in combat, many of them volunteers.

A total of 350 Montanans lost their lives in the conflict with many hundreds more coming home wounded. In every battle and victory in this unexpected and perplexing war there were Montanans fighting on land, at sea, and in the air.

In early September, 1950 **Lieutenant General Frank W. Milborn**, U.S. Army, who had served as head of the R.O.T.C. at Montana State University at Missoula, while also coaching football and baseball, took charge of the newly formed "I" corps, tackling the daunting effort to stem the tide of invading North Koreans and Chinese communists. It was under his command that the U.N. forces took the "Iron Triangle" from the enemy, thus giving the ground forces commanding positions to the U.S. Eighth Army and subsequently influencing the armistice negotiations that were previously mired as each side attempted to gain significant control of the battlefields.

A number of "Distinguished Service Crosses," the penultimate honor bestowed for bravery, were awarded to Montanans. At the other end of the chain of command from General Milburn, for instance, was 19-year-old **Pfc. Richard Fleishmann**, from Anaconda, who, under heavy fire ran forward to give medical aid and dragged a fallen section leader back to relative safety. Fleishmann then returned through heavy fire to the vacant machine gun position and fired on the enemy until he was killed.

That Montana did not muster a single organized unit to send to Korea was largely due to political foot-dragging in Washington and Helena. It was not until 1953 that the U.S. Secretary of the Army redesignated the **Montana National Guard** as an armored cavregiment.

It was another two years, in 1955, that the Montana legislature adopted House Bill 139 finally granting the Armory Board funding to construct armories. Essentially, during the time between the WWII and Korea, Montanans had not received any federal funding for armories or materiel. Training often consisted of soldiers carrying WWI rifles and pistols, or resorting to fence posts to simulate rifles while stovepipes served as fake mortars.

Many infantry troops in Korea were relegated to using outmoded weapons including WWI era rifles, due to the lack of development of new weaponry. One unit of a couple dozen men from Shelby were sent to California, put on a Korea-bound troop ship and received their "training" during the 19-day passage across the Pacific.

**Jack Price**, a draftee from Avon and a Marine corporal arrived in Korea in early 1950, wearing wool leggings, civilian shoes, dungarees, a uniform jacket, flak jacket, and helmet. He was one of 27 draftees from Montana at that point and he was given the task of providing 50-caliber machine gun support from bunkers to prevent enemy advances.

He remembers, with his Marine's unflinching dignity "holding the line" as the main objective of the "police action" that the U.N. was calling the Korean conflict. "We'd go out on night patrols to make some contact, and maybe grab a prisoner to question, but we mostly tried to halt the advance of the North Koreans and Chinese down near Inchon, about 20 miles southwest of Seoul. We weren't pushing north.

"The night fighting was okay," Price says with a shiver, "But in the winter it was the coldest I've ever been. Fighting was something to do besides freeze. I'd fire that 50 cal. until the barrel glowed red and that made for some warmth while I changed barrels in the foxhole, wearing

asbestos gloves. There'd be two guys to a foxhole and digging them warmed you up," this 4<sup>th</sup> generation rancher and grandfather says. "During the day one guy would stay awake while the other guy got a few winks. The sleeping bags were really just a piece of wool blanket with a zipper."

"The 50 cal. was a good weapon that had been around forever. Trouble was, a lot of our other equipment had been too. The flamethrower had a bullet hole in it and didn't work. We had telephone handsets and you had to crank and then whistle into them to get the guy on the other end to know someone was calling. Then a mortar fragment would cut the line and you had to string out another one. There were wires everywhere."

Radios were rare and reserved for patrols. Price recalls that the two major battles he was engaged in would have turned out differently had communications been better. "We were up on a hill we called 'Little Siberia' and we started the night fighting with 202 guys and the North Koreans and Chinese were coming at us in steady assaults. I heard a radioman hollering 'Yellow Jacket, Yellow Jacket,' for hours, but I guess he never got on the right frequency. Most of the fighting happened at night. They'd fire at our muzzle flashes and we'd shoot back at their burp gun bursts. In the winter, with a little snow on the ground and a full moon it was almost as good as seeing in daylight. That winter was the coldest I've ever been, so heating up the barrel of that 50 cal was a good way to spend the night."

At the Battle of Chosin Reserv November 25 – December 15, the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division suffered more than 7,300 losses due to frostbite. "I didn't like to fire more than twenty round bursts because the enemy could get a fix on my position." Price recalls. "When the frogs quit croaking in the paddies, we knew that the enemy was out there close."

"The next morning there were eight of us left up there on Little Siberia. I think a lot of the guys who carried dead and wounded back to base just refused to return. About 11 o'clock that morning a squadron of Corsairs and Sabre jets showed up to give us close cover so we could get out of there. Bad deal. A few tanks showed up and helped drive back the enemy. Like most everything else we had they were South Pacific leftovers from World War Two. If we'd had a radio that worked, we'd have called for them a long time before that. Anyway, about 11:00 that morning we ran for it and found a dead guy and the eight of us took turns carrying him out four at a time. It seems now like it was an awfully long way back to the base but it was kind of interesting to watch those Corsairs and Sabres flying those big loops and strafing the enemy. As we came off the hill, they were about eye level with us. We waved to them, but I guess they were too busy to wave back."

It has been fifty years since Jack Price went to fight in Korea and in September of 2011 he's going back to look around." Fifty years and I'm just getting to where I can talk a little about the whole deal," Price says with a shrug.

**Sergeant James "Bing" Gleason** spent 14 months in Korea in 1952. He was drafted and he asked to be taken into the Marine Corps. While at the boot camp at San Diego, California he was selected to play baseball for the Marine Corp team. "I didn't join to play ball," Gleason says, "I asked to go fight. I was kind of a 'Radar' type character, the unit clerk, but since the telephones were nearly useless, when trouble started, I was also one of the runners for the old man. The colonel would send guys to the perimeter positions to keep things coordinated.

“The fighting usually started after dark and I never really got shot at that much. About all the North Koreans had were burp guns that they held horizontally and just kind of sprayed sideways. I carried a WW2 M1 with a bayonet and my personal frog sticker in my boot and kept moving pretty fast. We didn’t have walkie-talkies or any radios that worked. It wasn’t like bullets were flying all the time, but when the attacks came, we really depended on the runners to coordinate defense.”

Gleason never felt that he wouldn’t make it home. “About the worst stuff we saw was when the big planes that carried the heavy bombs would come back with a bomb stuck to the undercarriage. Sometimes they wouldn’t release all the way and the pilots would try to bounce the plane on the metal mesh runway to get it to fall off, but then sometimes they’d explode and blow the plane up. Once I was playing catch with Jerry Coleman, who was a second baseman for the New York Yankees, and an A-D came in and bounced one off and it came skidding down the runway right at us and finally slowed down when it hit a duffel bag and it didn’t blow up.

“The monsoons were miserable. We had Quonset huts with room for about 18 guys and a coal oil stove in the middle. We covered them with sand bags against the mortar attacks and once, during a real heavy rain it looked like it was going to cave in and we all ran for the bunker, but the first two guys who jumped in basically ended up in a swimming pool and we kind of muddled through the rest of that storm and went back to the Quonset hut.”

The incursion into South Korea by the Chinese and North Koreans was a complete surprise and Gleason wasn’t sure why American forces had to be activated. “It wasn’t like Pearl Harbor but I guess we figured if we didn’t stick our noses in it, it would only get worse. When the Russian tanks and planes and Chinese weapons and soldiers started showing up it got much worse, so you could understand that they had to be stopped. Most guys just figured they’d put their time in and come back in a box, wounded, or whole. We just sort of slipped back into the country, no one thought much of our service one way or another. We didn’t get any kind of job preference. I got a job with Montana Power in October digging ditches with a pick and shovel, but by November they laid me off.”

Gleason adds an aside that reveals the rather raw side of the maleness of the vets who served in Korea: “The ships that brought us home carried about 5,000 troops and usually 3,000 or more had picked up some kind of venereal disease and they’d check them out before they landed at San Francisco and the infected guys weren’t allowed to come ashore until they were medicated and cured. That ended tying up a lot of ships and really had a bad effect on troop movements back and forth. Guys that got a week off in Japan ended up sorry for their escapades.”

“Bing” Gleason sums up his tour in Korea with the thought that, at 20, he didn’t have many goals set other than playing baseball, but the realities of war gave him the attitude that he wanted to accomplish more. He did, he retired from a very successful beer distributing business and lives in a veritable compound he’s built on a mountaintop above the Little Blackfoot River. “It’s ironic,” Gleason says, “It was the lack of dependable communications that put me in the most danger in Korea; out running at night from one perimeter position to the next, but now, with all this computer and television stuff I think communications are leading to the end of civilization.”

**Bill Sternhagen**, a decorated Korean War fighter pilot, exclaims, "I believe Communism is plain evil. When I went to Korea, I went to fight the spread of Communism. My football coach at Carroll College wanted me to finish my senior year, but I wanted to go fight. I come from a family that is military. All the guys in my family are good shots; trap shooting, game birds, big game, hell, we always kept the freezers full." So, against the wishes of his coach at Carroll College, (where he eventually gained Hall of Fame status for football, playing both ways), Sternhagen joined the war effort as a 22-year-old junior and went to learn to fly jets, which were new in warfare. "I didn't want the U.S. involved in a war that I wasn't part of," he says unequivocally.

He put in a couple hundred hours as a T-33 jet pilot and then took his training in the new Sabre F-86's at Nellis AFB in Nevada. "I put in a couple hundred hours of training and headed to Korea. I found out I was good at dropping bombs, supporting ground troops, and dogfighting." The contested peninsula usually offered short flights to battles zones, which gave the jet jockeys plenty of fuel to burn, "I was stationed at the northernmost base, K-13, near Suwon," Sternhagen says.

The six 50 caliber machine guns heated up if you put too many rounds through them too fast. They were arrayed around the nose of the Sabre, which carried 1,800 rounds, plus a rack of bombs. "I'd shoot a quick burst and let up on the trigger. It didn't take long but you had to let the barrels cool down at 16 rounds per second. You couldn't see the machine gun muzzles, but once they melted, they'd quit firing."

Finally, he gets around to the day he earned the Distinguished Flying Cross. "One day we were on a mission and an FAC (Forward Air Control) asked us to help out a bunch of UN troops (Americans) who were a little southeast of the Iron Triangle. The FAC had seen a pretty significant column of NK troops headed up towards the Iron Triangle. We diverted, dropped our bombs and started strafing the advancing enemy. The three other pilots in my flight basically ran out of ammo, although they probably just melted their gun barrels. Two headed home but I asked my wingman to kind of orbit to the south and watch in case I had to eject while I attempted to provide air to ground support. I must have made ten strafing runs, and they were shooting at me constantly. I'd disappear over the horizon then come at them from a different direction every time, conserving fuel and my machine gun barrels and I drove the enemy back and the troops preserved their position near the Iron Triangle, a critical target where all the rail lines from North Korea converged to deliver and supply the NK troops."

"I returned to base a few times, maybe one out of ten, with anti-aircraft rounds or flak piercing my plane, but I never considered not making it home."

Sternhagen flew 52 missions in Korea. His squadron, in one day, accomplished 121 missions, a record that still stands. In his strafing runs that supported American ground troops he was doing about 300 miles per hour twenty feet above the ground by the end of his run. An eighth-inch change in the hand he had on his stick would have been the end of him and his jet. The idea of flying a machine that can break the sound barrier while fixated on a target and doing so repeatedly in the period of less than an hour is hard to reconcile.

Fatalities were common. "We were fired at constantly, whether making bomb drops, or strafing. The guys who flew high, looking for dogfights hardly ever had a bullet come their way. The

ground-based armaments couldn't reach the high fliers." As Bill Sternhagen puts it, "There weren't any sprained ankles, you either came home in a box, or went back to what you were doing. I loved the Air Force and spent a couple more years as an instructor pilot, then finished at Carroll and went on to law school. "I've often wished I'd have kept flying," he says, after years of winning litigation as though he was a born sharpshooter.

When the Cold War began radar coverage between the USSR and the US was nearly nonexistent. The most expeditious route for a Soviet attack was pretty much over the North Pole and Montana. Soviet bombers were designed to deliver multi kiloton bombs and return. The only way to know if an attack was imminent in the early 1950s was to watch and listen constantly.

Once the Cold War hit its stride nearly **12,000 Montanans in the Ground Observer Corp** took the responsibility of watching the skies for Soviet bombers. In many rural communities there was just one telephone so the observers, or "Skywatchers," post had to be in proximity to the telephone in case a suspicious aircraft was spotted. The volunteers were also told specifically to keep a watch for flying saucers. The skywatcher would call a "filter center" in Billings or Colorado. If subsequent calls were received along a defined and suspect flight path the filter centers were ready to scramble fighter jets to intercept the aircraft that was being tracked. The program was somewhat unusual, in that Madison Avenue ad agencies were commissioned to recruit Skywatchers and to keep alive the plausible fears of an attack from Russia over the North Pole.

Advertisements for spotters included such phraseology as: "Who will strike first in the next war? The Kremlin has 1,000 war planes capable of dropping a bomb on your home."

Entire Girl Scout troops would join up for the two-hour shifts which, according to **Anna Stearns** from Big Fork, who, at seven-years-old, was the youngest spotter in the country, "It was very cold in the winter. My parents did it because they were patriotic, but I just thought planes were cool." Many other northern tier states were involved, but Montana was at the epicenter of this activity. As far as historians can determine, no interceptors were ever scrambled to shoot down a suspicious plane.

Sputnik, in 1957 obviated the need for Skywatchers. Here was a delivery system capable of multiple orbits, out of sound or hearing that presaged the years of Mutually Assured Destruction. The DEW Line, and early warning system to detect a missile attack was also largely in place by 1957. By 1959 the Ground Observer Corp was decommissioned, but, if nothing else, it had given countless Montana communities a sense of protecting the country against another Pearl Harbor.

Anticipating the spreading Fascism in Europe and Asia, the **MTNG's 163<sup>rd</sup> Infantry** was called to active duty on September 16, 1940 for one year, a period that was extended after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. The 163<sup>rd</sup> remained assigned to the **41<sup>st</sup> Infantry "Sunset"** division and received recognition numerous times for exemplary service in the Pacific Theater.

On January 1, 1946 the regiment was deactivated. **Adjutant General Spencer H. Mitchell** began reorganizing the 163<sup>rd</sup> in the autumn of 1946. Since being "federalized" in 1940, Montana had been without guard units for seven years. Mitchell, who served as adjutant

general for nearly 20 years, from 1943-1962, faced the challenge of coordinating and negotiating with Congress, the War Department, the U.S. Army, and the National Guard Bureau. He prevailed and the Montana Regiment was reconstituted in October, 1947, as the **163<sup>rd</sup> Regimental Combat Team**.

The newly organized regiment consisted of the **443<sup>rd</sup> Field Artillery Battalion** headquartered in Missoula (with companies in Kalispell, Missoula and Deer Lodge), the **210<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineers**, stationed at Bozeman and the **3669<sup>th</sup> Ordnance Company** in Helena. The **163<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment** was headquartered in Bozeman with three battalions stationed in Culbertson, Bozeman, and Billings.

In 1959, the 443<sup>rd</sup> again reorganized with additional units in Hamilton and Thompson Falls. With the world enmeshed in the Cold War the **639<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery**, headquartered in Kalispell became the Second Battalion, which remained in Kalispell with units in Whitefish, Kalispell, and Polson.

Then, in 1963 another reorganization created the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 190<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery, as **Company C, 19<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group** in Missoula. Reorganization came again in 1967 when the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 190<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery, was reclassified as the **2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron of the 163<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry**. For the first time since WWII the MNG was again under the direction of one regiment. The State headquarters and separate unit organizations, including aviation, were located in Helena.

The seemingly amorphous nature of all these various reorganizations and refinements were in direct response of the ever-changing actualities in world politics. In 1987 the guard's mission took a turn when the department of the Army recommended transforming the 163<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry into a Heavy Separate Armored Brigade-the **163<sup>rd</sup> Armored Brigade**, thus bringing two new battalion headquarters to Havre and Butte. More changes followed that brought a total of 27 locations associated with the latest reorganization.

The demise of the Soviet Union meant the U.S. began downsizing the military. In 1991 **Maj. Gen. Blair**, Montana's adjutant general, received word that the 163<sup>rd</sup> Armored Brigade would be deactivated as early as 1994, with no offer of replacement units. But, as always, the world's governments were in many cases unstable and threatened the security of the U.S. Just around the corner, so to speak, farsighted leaders were getting inklings of a need to prepare for overseas combat missions and local emergencies.

The creation of the **Montana Air National Guard** based in Great Falls in 1947, under President Truman was significant, creating a diverse military structure, setting the stage for the guard's evolution in the Post WWII era.

During the Cold War Montana National Guard performed numerous non-combats but risky operations such as quelling the murderous riot of armed inmates and releasing hostages at the Deer Lodge prison riot in 1959. National Guard men and women stepped in to help during strikes at the prison, Warm Springs, Galen and Boulder. Troops airlifted hay to thousands of cattle during several winter blizzards, fought forest fires, and aided communities inundated with flooding.

In 1959, after the tremendous earthquake in the Madison valley that killed nine campers and blocked 75 miles of road, the MTNG 163<sup>rd</sup> provided bulldozers and trucks for clearing roads, hauling supplies and evacuating people.

In 1975, Governor Tom Judge acknowledged that the kind of assistance and service the MTNG provided was indispensable in sparsely populated counties with small infrastructure and low tax bases.

It was also during the decade of the 1960s that 200 missile silos were constructed in Montana mostly in proximity of Malmstrom Airbase, which assigned the crews who manned the missile silos. **Whit Hibbard**, a fourth-generation rancher near Cascade said that driving by two of the silos on his ranch gave him the feeling that they were now living in a bull's-eye for Soviet ICBMs. But eminent domain was invoked and the silos went in wherever the powers that be designated.

A rarely acknowledged bargaining chip J.F.K held in the Cuban Missile Crisis was that ten of the recently constructed Montana missile silos were armed, aimed, and ready, a fact that was not publically acknowledged at the time, but played a critical role in preventing a Third World War.

**Retired Staff Sergeant Ray Beasley**, 82, spent the Korean War years stationed in Alaska with the 10<sup>th</sup> Air and Sea Rescue. When he was discharged, in 1953, he was in Boise and went to McCall, Idaho to see about some summer work with the smoke jumpers, after all the survival and parachute training, he'd received in Alaska it seemed a natural step. He made the grade and fought fires until the end of the season. "I didn't want to go on the dole, like a lot of the guys did," Beasley says. "I was trying to figure out what to do." Then one phone call led his life into the shadowy world of Air America, the CIA operated "airline" that trained and dropped insurgents, war materiel, and propaganda leaflets wherever Communism was attempting to gain a foothold.

"They were recruiting Montana smokejumpers for obvious reasons and about ten guys from the Missoula base went." The C.I.A (or, "The Company"), bought out the Johnson Flying Service in Missoula, and began using those aircraft. Beasley and his fellow smokejumpers and a handful of other Montanans trained in Japan, Okinawa, and Thailand and ran some operations in Laos, where they weren't supposed to be. "We were training Hmong people to resist the Communist incursions from North Vietnam and China."

Beasley's recollections are hazy now, perhaps due to the length of time that has passed since his Air America days, partly because he was never allowed to see the big picture. "We operated strictly on a 'need to know' basis," he says. "We just followed orders while making some damn good money." Beasley appraises his role with Air America as a kind of drone. "It was safest not to ask questions, to do your job, whether it was emptying ashtrays or parachuting into a jungle or making STOL (short takeoff and landing) incursions in Pilatus Porter airplanes." His group made night drops of food and ammo in Cuba, and he can probably tell stories for days, but he still honors the code of secrecy that he swore to when he joined Air America. "We lost our clandestine standing over the years. Air America is no longer around but 'The Company' is still in business. I haven't kept up with all that business and wouldn't talk about it if I did." Beasley declares.

Beasley helped train some Guatemalans who were instrumental in the Bay of Pigs invasion, although by the day of the invasion he was back in Laos. He also trained Tibetan nationals to sabotage and set up listening posts and to disrupt enemy communications. His unit dropped somewhere around 10 teams of 25 to 28 insurgents as well as propaganda to foment resistance to the Chinese. "It was pretty safe flying; we rarely took much more than small arms fire. Sometimes, if we were flying over a convoy of bad guys on the Ho Chi Minh trail, I'd pull the pin on some frag grenades and hold the handle down with a parachute rigging rubber band and when the grenade hit the ground or a vehicle it would explode. It was a little crazy, but what the hell, I was a drone and knowing your place helped you survive, but sometimes I'd step over the line. A little adrenaline never hurt anyone."

Beasley returned to Montana during fire season for another 12 years of smokejumping, and has lost track of how many jumps he has logged. In a little can he keeps a quarter-sized gold medallion that signifies his bravery and dedication that he prefers to keep to himself.

## Vietnam

With some Allied aid, Ho Chi Minh and his rebels expelled the Japanese and some straggling French from Vietnam after the Axis was defeated in 1945. But after the Geneva Accords partitioned the country into the Communist North and their ideological opposites in the South, the North, with China looming encouragingly over their shoulders, decided to take on South Vietnam's military forces. The American role in this advance of communism soon grew from 44 "advisors" in the late 1950's, to creating a proxy conflict between the U.S. vs. China and Russia that involved more than 550,000 Americans by 1968-69 and ultimately saw more than 2 million American men and women serve in Vietnam.

During the decade from 1965 to 1975 the **Montana National Guard** was not called to serve in Vietnam. Units from more populous states were activated. The MTNG remained focused on training and renovating infrastructure, as well as fighting forest fires and airlifting hay and grain to winter-stranded livestock. In the 1973 fire season more than 500 guardsmen worked fighting fires. In 1974, 430 MTNG personnel crossed picket lines at Warm Springs State hospital to aid patients during a strike of 600 union workers. A Warm Springs physician declared that, "If we hadn't had the Guard step in, we'd of had dead patients."

Throughout more than a decade of involvement in Vietnam more than **19,000 Montanans** served and 273 didn't return alive while countless others were wounded. To say theirs was a shared, common experience would trivialize the individual travails, terrors, and challenges our service men and women faced in Vietnam, but making some sense of the experience can happen when individual voices articulate that conflict.

It was an utterly incomprehensible guerilla war unlike anything American forces and their civilian bosses could assimilate, with advances and retreats, wins and losses that took place over and over again in the same locales. Few recollections can represent the experiences of thousands of men and women who served. It was a war fraught with decisions made by a civilian government half a world away that often confounded the G.I.s on the battlefields. Korea

had been relatively invisible in many ways; little more than casualty figures were reported in the print media and visual coverage was nearly moot with fewer than 20 percent of American households owning television sets.

In Korea, the enemy was practically faceless. Battles in Korea were usually night fighting, mostly shooting at the other side's muzzle flashes. In Vietnam more action occurred during daylight hours, most especially for infantry. Taking out a uniformed North Korean who was somewhat aimlessly spraying a burp gun in the dark leaves a very different psychological impression than taking direct aim at an enemy who often wore no uniform and deciding to kill him. The certain knowledge of collateral damages, seeing dead civilians including women and infants, was a common experience for soldiers in Vietnam.

One consequence of such proximity and intimacy, looking the enemy in the eye and killing him or her, and finding civilian casualties, brought on an enormous increase of the diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, (PTSD). Coming home from WW2 or Korea "shell shocked" or with "combat fatigue," euphemisms for what we now try to treat as PTSD, was somewhat of a stigma for troops who fought.

Nez Perce elders, more than 200 years ago recognized the disorder and associated abnormal post war behavior and consoled and warned returning warriors with the following wisdom that resonates down through the centuries for every warrior:

***They said I would be changed in my body. I would move through the physical world in a different way. I would hold myself in a different posture. I would have pains where there was no blood. I would react to sounds, movement and touch in a crazy way, as though I was back in the war.***

***They said I would be wounded in my thoughts. I would forget how to trust and think that others were trying to harm me. I would see danger in the kindness and concern of my relatives and others. Most of all I would not be able to think in a reasonable manner and it would seem everyone else was crazy. They told me that it would appear to me that I was alone and lost even in the midst of my people, that there was no one else like me.***

***They warned me that it would be as though my emotions were locked up and that I would be cold in my heart and not remember the ways of caring for others. While I might give soft meat or blankets to the elders or food to the children, I would be unable to feel the goodness of these actions. I would do these things out of habit and from caring. They predicted that I would be ruled by dark anger and that I might do harm to others without plan or intention.***

***They knew my spirit would be wounded. They said I would be lonely and that I would find no comfort in family, friends, elders, or spirits. I would be cut off from both beauty and pain. My dreams and visions would be dark and frightening. My days and nights would be filled with searching and not finding. I would be unable to find the connections between myself and the rest of creation. I would look forward to an early death. And I would need healing in all these things.***

Author unknown

Vietnam, compared to Korea, was thoroughly and sometimes horrifyingly covered on television and it was also guerilla warfare of a nature unknown to American forces. The visibility of the enemy, when they could be identified, left many who fought on the ground and from the air certain that they'd just killed many other humans, but uncertain if they were truly enemy combatants. One result was a huge spike in PTSD, a mental disorder with residues of guilt, confusion, despair, and depression that, after four decades still seems unshakeable for many veterans.

But from infantrymen to Navy aviators who never set foot on Vietnamese soil, the ghosts that haunt veterans manifest uniquely. Here are a few recollections of that conflict:

**Mike Chapman**, who has spent 24 years at the Office of Public Instruction in Helena, flew A-7 Bravo jet aircraft based on the aircraft carrier Ticonderoga. Chapman flew 122 missions in 15 months. He shows no sign whatsoever of PTSD. "I knew when I was a junior at Annapolis that I'd be flying jets in Vietnam and I supposed I wondered if I'd make it home, but I came back unscathed. Looking back, the whole experience seems like a big, violent video game."

From the cockpit of his A-7 he occasionally saw the destruction he wrought. "Mostly I bombed river fords because all the bridges were long gone. In my bomb racks I carried 24 250-pounders and I'd let them go and see 120-foot-tall trees flipping into the air like a majorette tossing a baton. The Vietcong would hear us coming and be long gone. Then you could go back the next day and they'd have the ford rebuilt, all ready to blow up again."

Chapman smiles and adds, "The only real action I saw was in Olongapo Village in Subic Bay where the Filipino girls carried cards to prove they were disease free. I came home and worked as a pilot instructor and could have imagined a career in Navy aviation except that I'd quit dreaming." He smiles nostalgically at a memory only he can reconcile. "As soon as I quit the Navy I started dreaming again."

Chapman won some ribbons but isn't quite sure what they were for. "I think they gave the whole squadron some kind of Distinguished Flying something or other, I didn't care much about all that," he says with a quick laugh.

"Once, on a night mission I saw some flak, but I never got a bullet hole in any jet I flew. We'd get our orders from a Forward Air Controller before we launched, usually during about a two-hour briefing. Once we were in the air we did a total radio blackout, but we listened. The Vietcong had some Russian Shrike missiles, but very few and we could tune into the frequency they used for firing at us so it was no problem anticipating and avoiding them." He pauses, "It was really an interesting time in my life. A couple times I had to fly three missions in a day and that was pretty tiring. I'd do some rolls with full bomb racks just to stay awake and get some inevitable official crap when I landed, but other than that it was just as I say, 'A big, violent, poorly designed video game.'"

Although Chapman doesn't elicit any symptoms of PTSD, he did spend a few years more or less camping out at Lolo Hot Springs, not feeling equal to the challenge of living in the midst of the society that sent him to Vietnam only to revile him and his fellow veterans upon their return.

The 60's and 70's were chaotic and transformational era in American history. Racial strife in the U.S. seemed endemic; the riots, the burning of African American churches and killing

African American leaders and denying black children equal educational and employment opportunities were common. Young black men, too impoverished to attend college and be deferred from the draft, were sent to Vietnam by the thousands. So were many Native Americans and Hispanics. Vietnam mirrored the racial tensions, and magnified them like lenses starting fires.

Most disturbingly, yet with a glimmer of hope for raw humanity, **Tom Camel**, who is half African-American and half Salish-Kootenai, tells of how he came home, a young medic in Vietnam, missing a leg. An all too often occurrence, but Camel's story is at once complex, heartbreaking, and instructive.

Camel went to basic training and then spent several months learning to be a frontline medic. He was also an Army-sponsored Golden Gloves boxer. But he signed up, not to perform in the ring, but to serve in Vietnam. He knew he was a world-class athlete, but while training as a prize fighter he felt he was missing the training he'd need as a competent medic in Vietnam, where he always knew he'd end up. "I wasn't gung-ho," he recalls, "it was a war fought mainly by poor people; guys from ghettos and barrios and reservations. It wasn't poverty or a lack of choices that made me go. We're a warrior society and this was a way to express my heritage in a real war. There aren't many paths to status on the Reservation, but coming home from a war conferred status as a warrior."

His fourth day "in country," before he'd gotten an assignment to a base camp he was riding in a convoy and the lead vehicle was blown apart by a land mine. As one of the few medics in the convoy, he got his baptism by fire doing triage on the worst of the wounded, none of whom had a chance, as he puts it. He wound up based in Bin Dinh province and going out on search-and-destroy missions with ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) platoons.

He wound up in a Vietnamese village one day and while the ARVN commander was napping in a hammock, a woman and her little boy somehow secretly placed a claymore mine where it would eventually blow up under the ARVN commander. Camel attended to the remains of the commander. There was no question of saving him, but he "packaged" him for the helo ride home. The woman and her son were beaten with rifle butts and summarily taken away from their village in another helo, never to be seen again.

Camel, having grown up on the Reservation wistfully recalls that his Salish/Kootenai heritage, his Native American spirituality and culture, were closer to what he knew of the Vietnamese villagers he observed than the "values and mores" of the country that sent him to Southeast Asia. "I didn't go to Vietnam to kill Vietnamese people," he says. "Once I had two VC in my sights but they looked like Indians to me and I couldn't shoot them. I was just a couple generations from a people who had been invaded and now I was the invader." He pauses, "I hope those guys I passed on never killed anyone from my tribe, my platoon."

"My feelings were ambivalent. I was 22 and working with 18-year-old kids who'd been browbeaten into trained killers and sent overseas. Kids who grew up racist." He expounds, "Being biracial, I'm half African American and half Native American, I avoided all the cliques and ethnic groups that formed over there, which carried on their own racial war that had nothing to do with the war we were in. I was the platoon medic and didn't want to leave the impression that I favored any gang or whatever you want to call the groups that formed. They

all sort of banded together in ethnic groups. I stayed to myself. It was lonely, but I felt safer that way.”

“Fragging”, or rolling a grenade into an officer’s tent or quarters was reserved for those officers and NCOs who foolishly ordered their men to certain death. Leaders who misled were fragged. “A lot of this was covered up,” Camel states plainly. In Vietnam American racial groups were murdering and maiming each other in a sort of amplified version of what was happening back in the “World.”

Racial tensions were peaking. **Bernie Azure**, who served in ’69-70, another Salish Kootenai, relates a story about an African American man murdered by a white soldier for playing Soul music too loudly. “I can tell you stories about that stuff all night,” he says.

After about nine months in the field Camel was promoted from E-4 to E-5, which required a trip behind the lines to acknowledge this field promotion. Upon his return from the firebase a white sergeant invited him to the NCO club for a couple beers, an indulgence he’d never been allowed, but now he was an E-5 and eligible. So, for his first time in Vietnam he abandoned his neutrality and accompanied this white sergeant to the club. At “Blackout” they headed back to their bunker and as they passed the latrine two black infantrymen accosted them. “The whole deal took about 60 seconds, and changed my life forever,” Camel recalls. “They started beating on the sergeant and I stepped in and started trying break it up, one guy hit me in the head with his rifle butt and when I went to my knees, he started kicking me. I drew a straight blade razor from my boot and showed it to him and he backed off. I turned to leave and heard him say, “Whitey lover,” then an explosion and I heard the guys running off and then realized my leg was almost blown off point blank, and someone started hollering “They shot Doc.”

“I fantasized about finding the guy who did this and blowing his leg off. Then, after about ten years of drowning my sorrow in the bars on the Rez, I wanted to figure out why the guy didn’t just shoot me in the chest or head. “I would have preferred to have been killed by a Vietcong than have another American shoot me like that.” He ads, tucking into himself and looking smaller, “It was interesting that they didn’t shoot the white sergeant.” Camel recalls that he knew of and heard of many incidents like his. “Tom’s story was not uncommon,” Azure adds. “Within a couple weeks there were five or six retaliation killings at the base.” Azure, who is a reporter for the Salish Kootenai tribal newspaper adds, “They covered up these incidents very well.”

After ten years and much PTSD counseling Tom Camel finally partook of a Native American ceremony in which he made a blood offering to his assailant that would allow him to forgive him. “I offered him my leg to transform the violence. In that one ceremony I found release from years of anger and resentment and revenge fantasies.” He pauses and adds, “I don’t want to reinforce this idea that African Americans are violent. Everyone has his or her demons. Forgive others and forgive yourself. The Vietnamese have a way of framing their experience in a healthy way. Culturally and spiritually, they are closer to the Native American experience than the powers that sent me there. But no matter how bad your experiences, no matter how badly people treat you, your response can transform what happened.”

Tom Camel spends a lot of time counseling other veterans from subsequent wars. He says for a long time he wanted to hunt down the guy who shot him. Now, he says, he can almost put

himself in his assailant's place. He believes the higher incidence of PTSD compared to Korea isn't necessarily due to more diagnosis, but the fact that unlike Korea and blazing away in the dark, in Vietnam you looked directly at your enemy in broad daylight and made the decision to kill him.

Bernie Azure, who was a field radio operator in 69-70 went back to tour Vietnam and met many former Vietcong in 2009. He observed that the culture is organized much like a reservation, with respected elders and mentors and solid family units. But the most profound revelation is that there is very little PTSD amongst former Vietcong. "They were protecting themselves and feel less conflicted about killing people. The American invaders have a residue of guilt that haunts them," Azure believes. "The Vietnamese don't let suffering rule their lives. It's like 'Let it be. We miss the ones we lost, but we had no choice.'"

In 1987, with the reorganization of the MTNG the **163<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry** was transformed into a Heavy Separate Armored Brigade: 27 separate units around the State trained for wartime missions and peacetime emergencies. But with the demise of the Soviet Union, in 1991, **Major General Blair**, Montana's adjutant general, was told that the 163<sup>rd</sup> Armored Brigade would be deactivated as early as September. The state's forces would be reduced by 83 percent, leaving only MTNG units in Helena and the Air National Guard in Great Falls,

**General Gene Prendergast** drilled for a ground war in Europe war 72 times a year in the late 60's, but, as he puts it, "we were preparing for peace."

That the Montana National Guard never got called to serve in Vietnam as a unit was a political decision, a "PR move," as Prendergast puts it, made by then Secretary of War, Robert McNamara. Prendergast knew that McNamara was worried that if an entire battalion from Montana despite its relatively small size, was wiped out, the repercussions would have further inflamed anti-war passions in a state that had not elicited any overt sentiments against the war. "I kept my opinions to myself and obeyed my commander-in-chief, and we kept training. "he says. "I served under ten presidents and nine governors and, of course we did not question our orders, but privately we were all absolutely disappointed that we didn't go to Vietnam as a unit."

**Ken Rosenbaum** flew helicopters for one year in Vietnam and Cambodia. He regards himself and his fellow pilots as "God's own lunatics," but he also declares that every time he lifted off, even after 28 years of flying he felt exhilaration like nothing else ever provided. Less than a week after graduating from high school in 1967 he was in the Army and after stints at a couple bases and 110 hours of pilot school he was shipped to Vietnam feeling, he says, "real incompetent."

He flew 500 hours in his yearlong deployment in Vietnam and flew as a pilot instructor stateside for years then wound up a career as an oft-decorated pilot flying helos in Bosnia.

The Combat assault unit to which he was attached in Vietnam put in long days in some of the deadliest conditions any pilot ever faces, although the missions were common to all of God's own lunatics. "I never once returned from action at a combat LZ without taking fire." He went down five times, only once due to mechanical failure.

It is emotionally draining to churn up the memories but as “Rosy” says, “If you don’t know history, you’re doomed to repeat it,” and he willingly discusses the most traumatic episodes he still carries around with him. The place where he drew the line was in Washington D.C. when he was on the mall and couldn’t get himself to approach the Vietnam Memorial Wall. “I got about 300 yards away and just couldn’t do it,” he says, fighting off a wave of grief.

Casualties amongst aviators in Vietnam were heavy but Rosenbaum says the burden of imminent death didn’t occur to most guys until they were a couple months from the end of their tour. “You had the feeling that your luck must be running short, but didn’t talk about it, just marked time.”

At his base near Pleiku he became inured to the mortar attacks at night. “There were maybe 4-5 nights during that year that we didn’t take some incoming,” he recalls. “We drank heavily to just come down from the crap we’d been through that day. A fifth of Crown Royal cost about a dollar and a half and I’d put one away every night. Sometimes we’d climb up on our Quonset hut at night and watch the mortar rounds coming in like a fireworks show.”

The pilot’s days were planned around hangovers. “We’d do the ‘ash and trash’ runs in the mornings; picking up bodies, delivering supplies and fresh ammo and such, then in the afternoons, once our senses and skills were peaking, we’d go do the dangerous stuff.” He continues, “Combat memories aren’t as negative to me as other things I witnessed. Handling KIA bodies was always terrible. I didn’t imagine killing civilians when I signed up, but I know we did.”

“**Diane Carlson Evans**, who spent much of her tour of duty as a nurse at Pleiku should hold the rank of a three-and-a-half-star General,” **Colonel Ray Read** says. Carlson Evans grew up on a dairy farm in Minnesota and by 1966, when she was one year from graduating from nursing school, she became concerned about all the local farm boys who couldn’t get a draft deferment who were coming back from Vietnam in coffins or ruined for life with emotional and physical wounds. Without her parents’ knowledge she walked into a Minneapolis recruiter’s office and that day signed up for the Army.

The government paid her a stipend to finish her last year of nursing school and within a few months of graduation she wound up in Pleiku as head nurse in a 45-bed evacuation hospital where wounded came directly off the battlefield. “Our job was emergency room triage, surgery, or other life-saving measures and stabilizing the wounded and sick; then evacuating them to other in-country or stateside hospitals depending on the severity of the wounds.” Carlson Evans says and adds, “I never cried, never had time to and it would not have helped my patients,” She had her hands on literally thousands of wounded soldiers during her year in Vietnam.

“We didn’t know it going in,” she says looking as if she’s back in Vietnam, “But we also treated hundreds of Vietnamese women and children, people who’d been napalmed or otherwise wounded in the crossfires of war. They showed up with snakebites, typhoid, cholera, tuberculosis, you name it. We treated innocent farmers and children who stepped on booby traps and land mines in paddies and fields.” She adds, “The mortality rate for children who came through was 75 percent.”

During her year in Vietnam, spanning 1968-69, the horrors she witnessed, with Pleiku being something of an epicenter for the conflict, taught her to be an astute observer of humanity, and her devotion carried over and took her farther than she imagined. "On the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial Wall in Washington more than 35,000 names were inscribed from the period spanning 1968-1969." She says: "We could never do enough to ease the pain our patients were in, and that, of course includes the emotional trauma." She quotes an old aphorism from Argentine philosopher Jose Narosky: "There are no unwounded soldiers during wartime."

All nurses were in imminent danger; in Vietnam there were no front lines and no safe areas.

Upon her discharge she worked for three weeks as a civilian nurse, but couldn't practice the healing arts at which she excelled in Vietnam, nor were her hard won battlefield skills acknowledged. "I was unhappy, I couldn't practice what I'd learned in Vietnam." She resigned and headed to Fort Lewis, Washington in 1970 and given her wartime experience she was immediately made head nurse in a surgical unit. "Actually, I was hiding out. The military felt safer than being out in a civilian world that could never understand what I'd seen and was apathetic or hostile to us."

And out there in that world the Vietnam Memorial Wall was erected. Diane Carlson Evans became aware that there were more than 100 war memorials placed around the nation's capital, and not one depicted a woman. "That wall would be much taller and longer had it not been for the thousands of women who voluntarily served in Vietnam as nurses and other critical roles," she says with the unassailable conviction that carried her through ten years of efforts to have a memorial erected on the ground dedicated for the Wall that honors the women who served. "There's only one place to honor the women who served alongside their brother soldiers and that's at the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial Wall. We belong at that sacred place physically and emotionally." Eight military nurses and 56 civilian nurses died during the Vietnam War.

The memorial, sculpted by Glenna Goodacre depicts three women and a wounded soldier. The Vietnam Women's Memorial was the first in American history honoring women to be placed on the mall.

The Women's Vietnam War Memorial was installed on Veteran's Day in 1993, after a ten-year-long struggle against beltway insiders and a nation still hostile to Vietnam Veterans. One insensitive director of fine arts complained that if they put up a sculpture of women it would "ghettoize" hallowed ground and next they'd be honoring the canine corps, perhaps the most egregious contention, but certainly only one of many. Carlson Evans, with the conviction of a Minnesota dairy farmer persisted and Ronald Reagan eventually signed a law that the Women's Vietnam Veteran's Memorial be installed.

Operation Desert Storm

Gennady Strekalov is a Russian cosmonaut who has spent more than one-and-a-half years in space, including a flight with U.S. Astronaut Norm Thagard, the first American to ride a Soyuz rocket to go orbit in the Mir Space Station. When Desert Storm began Strekalov was aware that a war was breaking out in the Middle East but was, "Absolutely shocked at the enormity of it." Through one window of the Mir Space station, he could simultaneously see the night-lights of the capitals of Ireland, England, Spain, and France, and Germany, a distance of more than 700 miles.

When the retreating Iraqi troops set fire to the Kuwaiti oil fields the resultant black smudge of smoke was bigger than Texas. He could not see the entire plume through his space station window. From his omniscient view he says it just broke his heart to see the beautiful little blue planet blackened by another war.

Strekalov might have been chagrined at the foxholes Missoula's **Sergeant Kermit Edmonds** explored on his way past the destruction the U.S. Air Force wrought upon the retreating army columns of ragtag conscriptees in their "rice burners" and Soviet built (which is to say unreliable) military transports. Saddam invaded Iraq to claim it as his country's 19th province, but mostly to sell the oil Kuwait purveyed to the world. His grand plan would have put his war debts aside, from his eight-year conflict with Iran, and given him control of 20 percent of the world's oil supply.

On August 2, 1990 Iraqi Republican Guards invaded Kuwait. Within five days, at Saudi Arabia's behest, 48 F-15 fighter jets and a brigade of 2,300 soldiers from the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division arrived on the Saudi peninsula. Terrance Young, one of the 13 members of the MTNG 103<sup>rd</sup> Public Affairs Detachment, recalls that Major Hermanson figured the chance of the 103<sup>rd</sup> PAD going to the Gulf was about like the odds of winning the lottery. That was on November 1<sup>st</sup>. By Thanksgiving Day the detachment was called and "celebrated" Christmas at Cement City, which was, as Roy Caldwell recalls a big, flat place with water, 200 tents, and cement dust ankle deep.

By November 29<sup>th</sup> the U.N. Security Council approved use of force to expel Iraqi troops if they hadn't withdrawn by January 15, 1991. By Federal order the **MTARNG's 103<sup>rd</sup> Public Affairs Detachment**, a.k.a. "Brave Cameras," was preparing for deployment. **Major Patrick Hermanson**, the C.O. recalls being over strength and having the luxury of selecting the most highly qualified personnel.

The 13-person unit included: **Major Hermanson, Captain Patrick Mohan, Captain Kareene Ostermiller, Captain David Thomas, Master Sergeant Jodie L. Yelton, Sergeant First Class David G. Sayre, Staff Sergeant Kermit Edmonds, Staff Sergeant Charles "Milo" McLeod, Staff Sergeant Terrance H. Young, Sergeant Todd Buhmiller, Sergeant Roy A. Caldwell, Sergeant Greg A. Fox, and Sergeant Andy L. Johnson.**

Major Hermanson divided the PAD's duties as print journalism, community relations, and broadcasting. The unit was to publish a weekly newspaper for the troops, and send home human-interest stories.

The unit shipped out to Ft. Lewis, Washington and Staff Sergeant Kermit Edmonds, after spending a few days practicing on the firing range recalls, "Now this had a sharp edge of immediate application." Portentously, they also trained for many hours on their nuclear, biologic, and chemical weapons protective gear.

When McLeod first got the inkling that he was headed back to war he was, of course, a little nervous. "I didn't think it would be like Vietnam, with enemies you couldn't identify in plain sight. I was afraid that it'd be another Korea, a few skirmishes, some big battles, peace talks while we fought for leverage, then waiting a couple years or more for an armistice while still fighting."

The detachment left for Saudi Arabia on December 21<sup>st</sup> and ended up in a tent city where any amenities beyond sleeping bags, gas masks, and class "B" rations had to be scrounged. **SFC David Sayre** described the abandoned concrete plant where they set up initially in Saudi Arabia as a "huge parking lot of tents and dirt and sand and filth and pestilence. And a lot of soldiers."

Then came the unwelcome news that the Montanans were to be split up into two groups, one covering the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry from Fort Bliss Texas, and the other with the XVIII Airborne Corps Artillery, from Fort Bragg, North Carolina. One example of the issues that arose from this splitting up of the Montana unit, which would not be reunited for nearly six months, was the PAD cell wasn't included in the 3<sup>rd</sup> ACR's supply plan. **Terrance Young** recalls that the Armored Cavalry had no idea how to use a public affairs unit, nor did they have any tents or supplies for them. They often went without support items, including the Desert Cammies. They sort of stood out, or apart in their darker Woodland Camo uniforms. Although Terrance Young, a master scrounger did obtain the desert Cammies, as well as acquiring a pickup truck upon which he constructed a mobile darkroom made of plywood tent flooring and plastic covering to keep the dust out. "Between myself, Terry Young, Milo, and Greg Fox we processed thousands of photos in the back of that truck." Caldwell says acknowledging Sergeant Young's ability to scrounge for anything the group needed. "Thank goodness we brought along a box of carpenter's tools," he adds. "By the end of the war we had more vehicles than we needed," Caldwell recalls, ascribing much of their success in taking charge of an untenable situation to Terrance Young's ingenuity.

"Finally, everyone figured out that we could escort all the media types who were kind of floating around," Young recalls. They escorted some luminaries from the media world such as Lucien Perkins, a Pulitzer Prize winning photographer, Bob Martin, a CBS stringer, and Scott Pelly of 60 Minutes fame.

When Iraq refused to withdraw on January 15, 1991 the air war began. The threat of Iraqi SCUD missiles bearing bio/chem agents or explosives was constant. Even the shower stalls had nails for hanging gas masks.

The coalition ground war to drive the Iraqis out of Kuwait began on February 24<sup>th</sup>. Milo McLeod, a Vietnam vet, says the comparisons between the two wars were inevitable. "In

Vietnam the army of conscriptees was barely disciplined. In Desert Storm there was no alcohol and a 'Go, Go' attitude."

"When it was time for the ground war to begin, we drove in from the west and the first night we'd just gotten our fighting positions dug and sandbags filled when we were told to empty the bags and move forward. Then we headed to within 20 miles of the Euphrates and dug in again. The front line was about three miles ahead, we could hear artillery almost continuously," McLeod recalls.

Iraqis had retreated towards home leaving a trail of burned vehicles and bodies. "Kermit took a lot of rather macabre photos," Milo McLeod says, "But he's an historian and doesn't look away from the most grotesque remains." Among Edmond's photos are shots of Iraqi dead wrapped in Soviet bio/chem ponchos, laid on their backs with their hands exposed, palms open to the sky with a book or some memento in hand which would readily lead to their identification.

Staff Sergeant Kermit Edmonds was selected for the 13-member group from the Montana National Guard, the 103<sup>rd</sup> Public Affairs Detachment partly for his widely recognized penchant for history. He even met a former history student from Missoula's Hellgate High in Saudi Arabia. The main occupation for the 103<sup>rd</sup> P.A.D. was to escort civilian reporters, but Edmonds took many roles of film and gathered artifacts abandoned by the retreating Iraqis. Most of the artifacts Edmonds brought home he "liberated" in his historian's role. He more or less explored the persona of the average Iraqi infantryman from abandoned artifacts as he could, upgrading objects as he found more intact or accurate representative pieces.

As his oldest pal, Charles, "Milo" McLeod describes it: "It was mostly Soviet junk, little plastic mud boots and all these Soviet "bio/chem" ponchos, some abandoned cigarettes, bullets for AK 47's and other stuff." To even enter an abandoned Iraqi foxhole was to risk setting off a booby trap, so Edmonds would dangle the webbing strap from his rifle down the roughly shoveled stairs hoping not to trip a hidden wire.

Kermit Edmonds, from his historian's perspective believes that the long term strategy was to leave Saddam Hussein as a countervailing power for Iran, "He'd already kept them pretty well occupied for a eight years," Edmonds recalls. "Then we pull our stuff out of Kuwait, maintain a presence in Saudi Arabia, and impose the no-fly zone to the north and south of Iran" "Simple," McLeod agrees, "Contain an enemy and let him hassle our mutual antagonist." Both Edmonds and McLeod were told on the evening of March 2nd that the next day they should be prepared for the biggest tank battle of all time. They were camped a couple miles from the front, near the Euphrates River. "We were up at around 5A.M. and preparing for the battle to begin, waiting for orders and then we were told the war was over. In 100 hours, we'd routed what was left of the ragtag civilians who'd been conscripted. Hundreds surrendered in their threadbare, mismatched uniforms and they looked like they hadn't had a square meal in months. They were relieved," McLeod says.

**Roy Caldwell** recalls an eerie sight, when about 72 hours before the ground assault was to begin a group of Bedouins camped about 3,000 yards behind their position. "We didn't know how they got their intelligence," Caldwell says. In his capacity as a babysitter for the media

folks who were sent to the war zone, he says there were only three things the news hounds weren't allowed to report: the troop numbers, locations, and movements. "Other than that, we never censored anything they sent home." The cooperation between the civilian reporters and their military "minders" went well, they had to forge relationships and trust because there was always the lurking fear that this war could go on for as long as two years.

"It was a huge relief for us too. General Powell just said, 'Enough's enough. We've driven the Iraqi's out of Kuwait. We're done.'" McLeod says. "We withdrew after one incident in which an American helicopter was shot down over an Iraqi base so we obliterated the base that fired on us. The poor ground troops had been told that they'd be shot if they retreated."

Upon their return and reunion the 103<sup>rd</sup> PAD unit felt replete knowing they'd kept the American public informed and they had done the MTARNG proud. And Kermit Edmonds collected a trove of artifacts and photographs that are an invaluable documentation that tells the story of both sides of the short conflict.

As **Brigadier General Hal Stearns (Retired)** puts it "History is really story. It has drama, tragedy, highlights, miscues, heroes, leaders and followers, individuals who have dreams and aspirations. It is life itself. Military history, on the other hand, is 'for keeps.' It is the story of men and women who leave home, train hard, and put their very lives on the line for a cause. Some volunteer, some are conscripted, but all share a common love and devotion to country." The Montana Military Museum is dedicated to all the Montanans who served in innumerable capacities, in countless conflicts and emergencies, and who without fail, gave selflessly to their fellow citizens and their country.