

## A POIGNANT REMINDER OF A FORGOTTEN WAR

By Bill Ellingson

Fewer than five years after WWII ended, on June 25, 1950, North Korea took the world by surprise when it launched an all-out invasion of South Korea. Its intention was to unify Korea under the communist regime of the North. President Truman understood how serious and effective the initial attack was and quickly concluded that, “to sit by while Korea is overrun by an unprovoked armed attack would start a disastrous chain of events leading most probably to world war.” It was a flagrant violation of the United Nations charter. Within a week of the invasion, American ground troops were sent in; it was none too soon. In less than two months, from late June to the end of August, 1950, North Koreans pushed South Korean, American, and other allied troops all the way to the “Pusan Perimeter” in the far southeast corner of Korea.

An almost desperate call went out for more troops. Some who fought in WWII and happily returned to their civilian lives were called back into action. New draftees were herded into combat units and rushed to Korea without much training. Among them was Kenneth W. Rahn.

For nearly seventy years, Kenny Rahn was one of the most visible reminders of the toll of that war as he moved about in his hometown in southeastern South Dakota. When he got home from Korea in 1952, he could be seen walking on one leg, using a crutch in place of his right one which he lost on a hill near the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel in Korea. For the rest of his 93 years, whenever seen around town, his impairment unconsciously called attention to the otherwise “Forgotten War.” When asked in recent years about his experience in Korea, Kenny related the following:

*I was 24 years old at the time of my injury and already had quite a life's journey. I turned 18 on May 10, 1945, my senior year in high school, but I missed graduation. Pearl Harbor was bombed by Japan in December of my freshman year and throughout the rest of high school, WW II was on our minds. I registered for the draft right after my birthday and was classified 1-A. I expected to be drafted but didn't necessarily want to be in the Army. My first choice was to join the Navy. Soon after turning 18, I attempted to enlist expecting to go on active duty shortly after graduation. I was rejected by the Navy because of my eyesight. The Merchant Marines was also recruiting heavily and I signed with them. By May 19, I was on my way to Sheepshead Bay, New York for training. My high school graduation ceremony was the next week.*

As a Mariner, Kenny served through the rest of WWII. He left San Francisco on a Liberty Ship in July of 1945, bound for the Philippines “zigging and zagging the entire trip to confuse enemy submarines.” The war had ended by the time they dropped anchor in Manila. After a year with the Merchant Marines, by May 1946, he was back home contemplating his next role as a civilian. He didn't have to wait long for the decision to be made for him. Kenny was drafted on September 25, 1946, in an effort by the Army to replace some of the thousands discharged at the end of WWII. His service in the Army at that time was relatively short.

*I was discharged from the Army in May 1947 after eight months active duty. Upon returning home, I enrolled at South Dakota State College. But, before I could finish and get my degree, I was drafted again, exactly four years after the first time, on September 25, 1950. Since the Merchant Marines is not a branch of the United States Military, I was not given credit for my service as a Mariner even though the ships I was on were in support of the military. I was in Korea by the end of December. Before shipping out, Betty and I were married on November 18, in a double ceremony with my best friend and Betty's sister.*

Kenny and his unit were dropped off at Pusan, South Korea, at the end of December 1950. From there his company traveled hundreds of miles, mostly on foot, to catch up to allied forces as they were pushing the enemy north. Soldiers in Korea during the winter of 1950-51 experienced record setting bitter cold temperatures. Between that and the mountainous terrain common throughout the country, conditions for them were miserable. Along the way Kenny froze his feet and was sent to a hospital ship to recover, after which he returned to his unit. His first taste of combat was an ambush. “We dove into the ditch single file, then ran across the road at intervals to get cover.” Shortly after that, Kenny said his luck ran out on a “hill number 30—something-or-other.”

*On May 24, 1951, just before noon, as I and the rest of Charlie Company were moving up a steep hill under intense enemy fire, a grenade exploded to my right. I didn't see it but I remember getting hit and rolling down the hill. Luckily, a medic was close by. It was a steep hill and he had to prop me up against a tree stump to keep me from rolling further. My right leg had been shattered by the grenade fragments, broken every two or three inches, and my main artery was severed. He applied a tourniquet and probably saved my life. I was carried on a stretcher to a jeep and taken to the 8225<sup>th</sup> MASH unit. One buddy died enroute. Upon arrival, a surgeon came down the line of the wounded, examined my leg, and said he'd try to save it. At the time I didn't really care what he did. I considered myself lucky to be alive. As I was coming out of surgery, I vaguely recall being introduced to a visiting movie star but all I remember is seeing a female in army fatigues. I was told later it was Jennifer Jones.*

Kenny's leg had to be removed very close to his hip joint. What was left was too little to comfortably serve as a base for a prosthesis. Recovery was long and arduous—17 months of medical care and rehabilitation. Betty was able to be with him most of that time once he returned to the states. Regarding the loss of his leg, Kenny says he is not bitter or sad in the least. “I was in a hospital with 1,500 others who had lost arms and legs, and I know of only one who was bitter.”

When the armistice was reached and the fighting stopped for the most part, there was no surrender, no declared victors, no peace treaty, and no celebrations back home. Some believed the sacrifices in Korea were for naught and characterized it as – “die for a tie.” But, 10 years ago at the time of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armistice, President Obama said to a crowd, many of whom were Korean War veterans: “Here today, we can say with confidence, that war was no tie. Korea was a victory. When 50 million South Koreans live in freedom – a vibrant democracy, one of the world's most dynamic economies, in stark contrast to the repression and poverty of the North – that is a victory; that's your legacy,” and concluded, “Your lives are an inspiration. . . Your service will never be forgotten.”

In the fall of 1953, Kenny enrolled at the University of Denver and graduated in June 1955. He and Betty returned to Flandreau and bought a house where they raised three children. It remained their home for the rest of their lives. Watching Kenny mow his lawn with a push mower was a testament to his grit and positive can-do attitude. He maintained a successful insurance business and was very active in the community. His proudest accomplishment was serving as president of the Flandreau Athletic Booster Club when it led the construction of a football stadium in 1970, mostly with voluntary help and paid for with private donations.

This year, 2023, marks the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Korean War Armistice. Kenny's silhouette, with one leg and a crutch, will be missed as a reminder of incalculable sacrifices made in that war by so many, in varying degrees, and will not be forgotten, at least for a time, by a couple of generations who knew him.

*\*This story is written for Kenneth W. Rahn who died at age 93 before it was finished. Much of the information regarding his military experience in this article is taken from the author's visits with Kenny in the years shortly before his passing, as well as an interview by Chuck Cecil of the Moody County Enterprise in 1989.*