

PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS FROM THE YEARS OF THE KOREAN WAR
By J. David Griffin

The month of October, 2007, has just rolled in and I find myself in a reminiscing mood. That, perhaps, is par for the course for one who will turn seventy-eight before the month is out. I was thinking of Mack Ray Barnes of the Concord community near Newville and Headland, AL. His life, sad to say, was cut short all too soon by what many have called the Korean "Conflict". At that time we were not as accustomed to undeclared wars as we have become during the fifty-seven years that have followed. Those directly involved with Korea did not suffer the lack of appreciation and the indignities of those who fought in Viet Nam; on the other hand, they did not enjoy the accolades of the World War II veterans.

Although Mack Ray was a year ahead of me at Newville High School, we became friends in Mr. Lucas' Vocational Agriculture class while digging for a septic tank installation at the Ag Building. Nearby, in the shade of the building, we played horseshoes when we had the chance. Neither of us, nor anyone else in that class, would have dreamed that in three or four short years our nation would be involved in a deadly war and that Mack Ray would lose his life on the Korean peninsula, thousands of miles from Henry County. Who can explain why I am still here and have had a good life while he died before his life had really begun? Though I lived, that "Conflict" certainly changed the course of my life.

By going to summer school in Dothan in 1947 I got out of high school one year early, the same year as Mack Ray. I went off to college in the fall and lost touch with my friend from Mr. Lucas' class and I do not think I saw him again after high school. By August 1950, I had completed my work for an A. B. degree in history at Howard College (now Samford University). The war in Korea was underway and the Conscription Laws (the draft) were in effect. I had just begun to teach in the Birmingham city schools when the call came for me to be inducted into Uncle Sam's Army on January 25, 1951. So, when Christmas holidays arrived in December I was given leave from my job and I had every intention of returning to the Birmingham I loved after my service time was completed. I never went back there to live and have visited my alma mater only a few times; nor was I destined ever again to make Alabama my home.

Without a doubt the course of my life, and that of millions of other Americans, was changed forever by Korean-related events. I spent one month at home before my draft date and the only person who let me see her weep at my leaving was my beloved grandmother, Callie Autman Griffin. Well before daylight on January 25, 1951 (a date I never forget) my father, Lucious Griffin, drove me to the draft board in Abbeville where I boarded a bus headed for Montgomery. I was so thankful to see among the draftees on that bus two former Newville schoolmates to share my misery, Marvin Brannon and Dewey Tate. Once we arrived at Maxwell Field all kinds of things, some humiliating, were done to us. Shots and more shots were administered, including my first smallpox vaccination. Now, I would have to put up with that festering sore all through six weeks of basic training.

We took various written aptitude tests and were issued shoes, uniforms, etc. When it was almost sundown we boarded a train whose destination would be Camp Chaffee, near the city of Ft. Smith, Arkansas. Eventually, we were assigned sleeping places in a Pullman car. I have never spent a lonelier, more homesick night, magnified by the periodic blowing of the train's mournful whistle, as we moved north and west.

When breakfast time came, we got off the train at the massive terminal station in Memphis - well, it seemed massive compared to Newville's depot. I recall the mountains of scrambled eggs from which we were served. Shortly, we were back on the train, crossing the mighty Mississippi, moving farther and farther away from God's Country (aka Henry County, AL). Nearly everyone in our car seemed to be playing blackjack for pennies. This recreation went on virtually all day as the train circled northward into the southern edge of Missouri and then moved back southwestward toward our destination. I saw my first rice fields as we moved through the rice-growing area of Arkansas.

Just as another sad sundown approached, we reached Ft. Smith, grabbed our gear, got off the train, and were loaded onto buses headed the few miles to Camp Chaffee. The weather was turning very cold by the time we were assigned to a two-story wood framed barrack with coal furnaces down under the first floor. Among other items that were issued that night were M-1 rifles that apparently needed cleaning. After being given brief instructions, we were told to clean the weapon and then take it for inspection to the sergeant seated at the end of the long room of double-decker bunks. Over and over until after midnight that sergeant said, "It ain't clean; do it again!" At the time, I did not understand for I knew the rifle was clean. In short order, however, I was to learn that the army had many forms of discipline, harassment being a favorite.

By the time we were allowed to go to bed it was bitterly cold. We had been issued long-johns and I put on two pairs, a fatigue suit over them, and a field jacket. Then I got into my top bunk under my two wool blankets and was still cold! Morning came all too soon and we were ordered to scrub down the floors with warm soapy water. Well, when that water was spread around the floor it froze to the wood before it could be mopped up! Shortly, I learned that the temperature was nine degrees below zero and snow was all over that Arkansas ground. Misery was not my middle name; it was my first name! I had seen snow once in Newville, back in 1942, but zero temperature, never. No matter the weather, the onerous tasks of six-weeks of basic training from well before sunrise until after sunset began immediately. There was, however, one bright ray of sunshine: our M-1 rifles were taken from us and replaced with the much smaller, less heavy carbine. The reason was that after six weeks of basic training we would be assigned to the Field Artillery, not to the Infantry. Oh, Happy Day!

Only once during those six weeks did we get passes to town, but I did not go. Instead, I went to the PX, bought a whole box of Hershey bars, and went to a double feature - momentary escape from reality - at one of the post theatres. I was starved for energy and during those six weeks added fifteen pounds to my very thin frame; that was the only time in my life I would eat anything, even liver.

March found us finished with the first six weeks of basic and we were hauled back to the train station for a journey to Ft. Sill, at Lawton in southwestern Oklahoma. Marvin Brannon, Dewey Tate, and I were still together. Ft. Sill turned out to be my favorite post during almost three years in the army. The first day there saw me temporarily assigned to a barrack where Bobby Bowden, an acquaintance at Howard College and longtime football coach at FSU, was also assigned; however, we were together for only a couple of days and I have no idea where he wound up.

The Field Artillery Survey School would keep me very busy for the next eight weeks. The course work was hard and I was thankful that in college I had minored in mathematics for my knowledge of trigonometry really came in handy. Spring came not long after getting to Ft. Sill

and being outside in good weather, learning to survey in our howitzers, to bracket targets, and to call in artillery fire on the ranges there in the shadows of the Wichita Mountains, was very nice. I could actually sleep at night whereas at Camp Chaffee a dozen men seemed to cough all night long for the whole six weeks. The daily sick call there had been long, but I determined, though suffering from pleurisy, never to go on sick call that might result in extending my basic training.

If the editors of our Orator agree, I would enjoy continuing the recollections of my time in the army during the Korean "Conflict". For the sake of good young men like Mack Ray Barnes, who gave his life in that fight and now lies buried in the Concord Baptist Church Cemetery, we need to keep these memories alive.