A Macedon vet looks back 50 years in a frank, often bitter Internet memoir

By Jim Memmott
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(June 24, 2000) -- Long after Korea, the nightmares continued.

In the worst, the enemies Seymour "Hoppy" Harris killed would rise up from their graves, seeking revenge.

A forgotten veteran of what has been called the Forgotten War, Harris struggled with these ghosts for years.

JAY CAPERS

Seymour "Hoppy" Harris reads one of his Korean War stories that are part of an Internet collection.

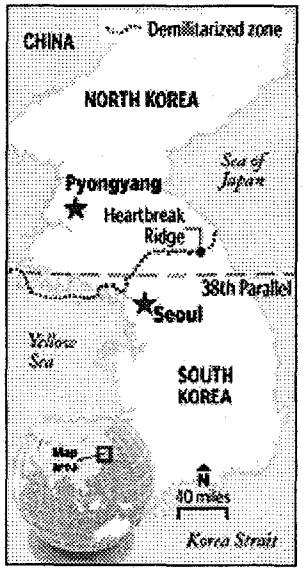
They were the bitter legacy of his service in Korea, the site of a frustrating conflict that began 50 years ago Sunday.

But Harris, who lives in Macedon, Wayne County, has another legacy now.

Untrained as a writer -- he left school as soon as he could -- Harris has produced a searing and detailed account of his Korean service and his rocky readjustment to peacetime.

The narrative -- actually a series of letters -- has been published on the Internet, forming the centerpiece of a growing collection of Korean War memories.

Hal Barker of Dallas, the compiler of the letters and the proprietor with his brother of the Korean War Project Web site, estimates that as many as 30,000 people have read Harris' letters.



STAFF GRAPHIC

"He can put things into words," says Barker, who credits Harris with inspiring him to lead the successful effort to create a Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington. "Here he is nearing the end of his life, almost 50 years after he fought, and he is finally getting some attention."

Harris, who turned 74 on Thursday, has lived a loner's life for decades. He and his wife, Mary, are longtime residents of the Shamrock Manor trailer park in Macedon.

A U.S. flag flies outside the Harris' lime-green trailer. Inside, Mary, 75, listens intently as her husband talks about the war.

"I'm able to remember so much," Seymour Harris says, his expression implying that this kind of recall can as much be a curse as it is a blessing.

He was born in 1926 in Penn Yan, Yates County, the third of eight children. Harris stopped school after the eighth grade in Gorham, Ontario County. In 1943, with World War II raging, he enlisted in the Navy at 17 and served in the Pacific.

After he returned home in 1946, Harris found a variety of work, including jobs in the sauerkraut factories of Ontario County. When he wasn't working, he played town-team baseball, drank heavily, and got into fights.

"Violence. It seems to follow me wherever I go," he writes of this time. "If I go into a saloon, and somebody is inside raring to go, he will head right for me. And I will not back up."

On June 25, 1950, war broke out when Communist North Korea invaded South Korea. The United States soon joined the United Nations forces that came to South Korea's aid.

In August, Harris decided to enlist in the Army, more or less of his own volition.

"I was looking for a little excitement," he says. "I was bored with life. And I got on the wrong side of a county judge. 'Get back to the service,' he told me. 'You're a bully, you're a sadist.' "

Barker doesn't use words like "bully," but he agrees that Harris was better at war than peace.

"He was the quintessential combat soldier," Barker says. "Once he's in combat nobody tells him what to do, and everybody asks his help. He was a machinegunner, they want the best possible killer on that gun. Seymour Harris was in his element."

On to Heartbreak

Arriving in Korea in February 1951, Harris was assigned to Company H, 2nd Battalion, 23rd Regiment, 2nd Division. He wasn't entirely sure then, he isn't entirely sure now, whether the U.S. troops should have been in Korea.

"We never really got into that," he says. "We were there to stop the flow of Communism. That's one thing I knew."

Harris experienced immediate and almost uninterrupted battle.

"He saw as much, if not more, heavy intensive ground combat as anybody I have ever run into who fought in the Korean War," says Bill Temple, 68, a Korean War veteran who lives in Philadelphia and has corresponded with Harris for years. "With the exception of the early part of the war, he caught the most excruciating battles."

In April 1951, Harris was blown into the air by a shell. Debris rained down upon him when he hit the ground. He was temporarily paralyzed.

" 'They sure made you skinny, but they made you tough,' " said the physician who told him he would be OK. Unable to move, Harris cried with relief. A nurse wiped his tears. Harris was back in combat by the middle of May.

By September, the U.N. troops had reached Heartbreak Ridge, a series of rocky hills held by the North Koreans. The Battle of Heartbreak Ridge began on Sept. 13, 1951, and ended on Oct. 15. It changed Harris' life, for he overdosed on death and on his own second-guessing about his time in combat.

"Heartbreak Ridge was worse than any place I'd ever seen," he wrote. "It seemed there was nowhere you could get where you weren't subject to enemy fire of some sort. No matter where you were you could be shot."

Harris broke down once during the battle, screaming out for God, clawing the dirt until his fingers bled. But at all other times Harris, who was a sergeant first class, kept his composure.

The ultimate victory at Heartbreak Ridge for the U.N. troops was costly -- more than 400 soldiers were killed and thousands were hurt. In defeat, more than 7,000 North Korean and Chinese forces died. After Heartbreak Ridge -- the last major battle of the war -- both sides dug in. A truce was finally signed in July 1953.

A lonely homecoming

Harris was transferred out of Korea after Heartbreak Ridge -- he had served his 180 days in battle. Back in the United States, where support for the war had waned, he felt like an odd man out.

"When I got back from Korea, it was like I had done something wrong," he says. "On leave, I took the train to Rochester and got off at the Central Avenue depot. I walked through the waiting room and felt like the loneliest man in the world. I looked around and thought, 'I've just got out of hell and you couldn't care less.' "

This sort of indifferent, and sometimes hostile, reception, was common, says Temple, who was wounded three times in Korea: "We soon learned: Get the uniform off as quickly as possible. And don't go around telling people you're a Korean War veteran. People just weren't interested."

Harris' years after Korea were filled with difficulties compounded by heavy drinking and frequent fighting.

By the time he left the Army in 1954, he had been in a troubled marriage, a union that ended on Christmas Day 1953 when his wife, who had had two miscarriages, killed herself.

Harris tried suicide twice and spent time in a locked ward of a veterans hospital, where he was treated for post-traumatic stress syndrome.

He had several low-paying jobs before he stopped working in 1977 because of heart problems, going on medical disability. A pacemaker regulates his heart now, but he often has trouble breathing.

Harris can point to his second marriage with pride. He and Mary, who have no children, were wed in 1956, having met in Rochester. And Harris has been sober for 27 years, having stopped drinking to keep a promise to a fatally ill sister.

Finding relief

In 1982, Harris was reading a veterans magazine and saw Barker's call for Korean War memories.

Each of Harris' letters on the Internet site contains the warning, "Strong language, pejorative terms, and honesty." Men are killed as they speak. Soldiers trip over decomposing bodies in the night. The stench of death rises like mist. And the harsh words of the time are used again.

"I wanted it to sound like a regular guy, just a regular GI," said Harris.

Temple believes that Harris' directness gives his prose power. "He talks right to you," Temple says. "Some of us try to be too fancy. We try to show how clever we are. He uses simple sentences, like Hemingway."

When he began the letters, Harris was frozen in time, stuck in Korea. But the process of writing helped bring a kind of thaw.

"Life has some meaning to it," Harris writes in one of his last letters. "Where before it was like looking into a dark tunnel and not seeing the other end."

By the end of the letters, Harris comes to believe that he and his fellow soldiers had done well at Heartbreak Ridge. "The more I think of it, the more proud I am of the American soldier," he writes.

In part, the letters inspired Barker to travel to Korea himself in 1989, where he retraced the Battle of Heartbreak Ridge, ceremoniously leaving Harris' Purple Heart behind. Harris had sent Barker the medal in a fit of anger at what he saw as the nation's neglect of Korean War veterans. At the time, Barker was working hard to create a monument in Washington to Korean War veterans, an effort that didn't pay off until 1995.

Harris sees the memorial as a first step, but only a first step. A lover of old-fashioned country music and straightforward Western movies, he doesn't forgive and he doesn't forget. Though he has made his own peace with war, he remembers his lonely homecoming from battle as if it were yesterday.

"For the next three years, Korea will be in the spotlight," he says. "But it's hard not to forget that people ignored us for so long."

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