

THE FORGOTTEN VETERANS



Hal Barker, far right, was drawn to the lives of numerous Korean war veterans when he found more questions than answers in the military file of his father, Edward Lee Barker, a highly decorated helicopter pilot, shown above in dress uniform and during active duty in Korea.

They fought in a war that was not called a war. They were not the sort to protest. Many suffer today from post-traumatic stress, a syndrome that has only been recognized since Vietnam. The Korean war veterans have a champion in Boulder County. He's lobbying for "his" veterans to have their own memorial in Washington, D.C.

By BRUCE LANGER

Dear Hal,

I saw your request in the DAV magazine of April.

I was with the 2nd Division and attached as a medic to the 37th Field Artillery E Battery during the Big Road Block in late November and December of 1950. I was wounded then and taken prisoner for a period of time. I had my feet frozen when the Chinese took my boots.

My problem is, I don't know how long I was a prisoner, how I returned to our lines and anything else. I don't remember leaving Korea, Japan or

San Francisco or how I traveled home for over 3,000 miles until I was hitchhiking the last seven miles home. My mind opened up at that point, but I don't even remember arriving at my home.

I've had a rough time physically and mentally and am totally disabled. I would like to find out if you know anyone who went through the road-block and anyone who was with the 37 FAB. If I can help you with anything, I will.

Thanks.

Tony Zdanavage.

HAL BARKER, newly appointed president of the Colorado Steering Committee for the Korean War Memorial, has been receiving letters from men like Tony Zdanavage for almost four years. He has thousands of them stored in light-brown file cabinets in the second floor office of his South Boulder town house. Yet this man who is so deeply concerned about recognition for Korean veterans has never seen combat,

BRUCE LANGER is a Daily Camera staff writer.

never even worn the uniform of his country's armed forces.

Barker's position, and his involvement in the lives of the men he is trying to commemorate, grew from a simple interest in the military career of his father — a career the elder Barker would never discuss with his son.

A carpenter by trade, the younger Barker says he first got interested in his father's fighting history when he read "The Great Santini," the story of a tough Marine jet pilot who felt alive only when he was in the air. Santini would not let his family into his world

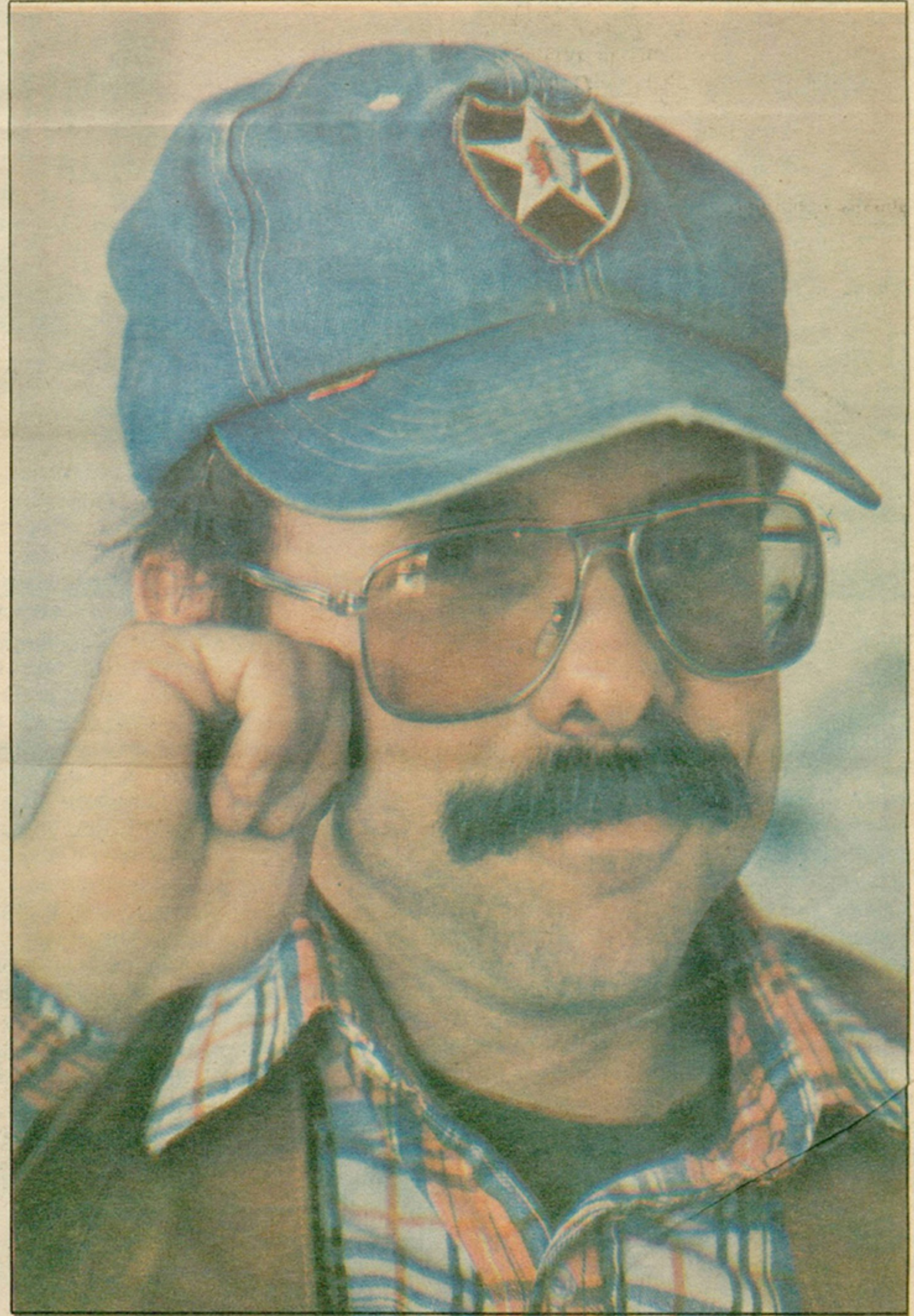


Photo by Julie Sotomura

and could not be happy in theirs.

"No story could come closer to portraying my life," Barker says. Something in the book sparked a need in him, a need to know what his father, a highly decorated veteran of Korea, had been through.

"After 31 years around this person, I realized I didn't know a thing about him," Barker says. "I wanted to see if I could find out what made him tick."

He sent a letter to the U.S. Marine Corps asking about his father's medals. He figured a look at his father's service record would answer some questions. But the materials the U.S. Marine Corps sent created more questions

than they answered.

For example: "What had Major Edward Lee Barker done to earn the silver star at the battle of Heartbreak Ridge on Oct. 7, 1951?"

Major Barker, who retired in 1965 as a lieutenant colonel, was one of the first combat helicopter pilots to fly rescue missions in battle conditions. He flew more than 200 missions in Korea, and his distinguished career spanned three decades.

At the time he won the silver star, he was flying in support of the U.S. Army 2nd Division at Heartbreak Ridge, a month-long battle that took the lives of 5,000 Americans.

Barker, who is writing a book on

the battle, describes it as one of the bloodiest ever. American and French troops had to fight their way up a ridge against heavily entrenched enemy forces. Casualties, both physical and mental, came in droves.

Researching government records about the battle, Barker put ads in veterans' publications, asking survivors of this battle to contact him. He took a particular interest in the 23rd Battalion of the 2nd Division, because they had been fighting directly under his father's flight path on the day he won the silver star.

What he learned shocked and angered him.

UNLIKE VETERANS of World War II before and Vietnam after, Korean veterans had been largely forgotten. Many had never received medals earned or benefits accrued. Some, like Tony Zdanavage, had more serious problems. Hal Barker believes veterans of Korea were left holding the bag for a war that was nearly as unpopular as Vietnam, but far less popularly opposed.

The veterans of Korea did not have protests to join when they came back, and they were not the type to protest, anyway, Barker says.

They could not cry or complain or ask for help. Mental problems were not recognized as legitimate war injuries. Post-traumatic stress syndrome has only been recognized since the Vietnam War.

"In those days, as you surely know, a person might just as well have had the plague as have a mental problem. Even I would not accept it or seek treatment," Tony Zdanavage wrote to Barker. "It was shameful and unheard of in our family."

Barker doesn't appear strained by the weight of his emotionally trying avocation, but his voice will sometimes break while reading a letter aloud. Like his father, he is loathe to discuss his reaction to the letters in any but the most general terms. When questioned about the negative impact of his undertaking, he looks down and shakes his head.

Yet after all his research, Hal Barker has a new respect for his father. And a bit more understanding for his reticence about his record.

"He would volunteer for every mission," his son says.

"But he said he just wanted the R&R's you got for every 20 missions." That flip, macho, "A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do" attitude extended to all of Lee's wartime experiences. "I got paid to do it," Lee would say. "It was my job."

On Oct. 7, 1951, his son learned, his father's "job" meant flying his chopper into withering enemy fire in an attempt to rescue a downed pilot. He never made it to the pilot, but his willingness to fly into heavy fire again and again is what earned him the silver star.

Lee was shot down himself a number of times — on his first mission, in fact — but was never wounded or captured. After the war, he "got into jets" and spent a year as a jet instructor.

During the late 1950s and early '60s, he was away from home regularly. He was assigned to G-2 — intelligence work.

Barker knows his father spent a great deal of time during that period in the Far East, but information on that portion of his career has not been made available by the government.

HAL BARKER now corresponds with more than 200 men, and the list is growing. He also spends hours on the phone, sometimes in the middle of the night, talking with veterans about life after war.

When they came back from Korea, "nobody wanted to know what happened to them," he says. Many have told him they had never discussed their experiences and how they felt about them with anyone — until Barker got in touch.

For Tony Zdanavage, Barker's interest and the information his research has provided have stirred lost memories.

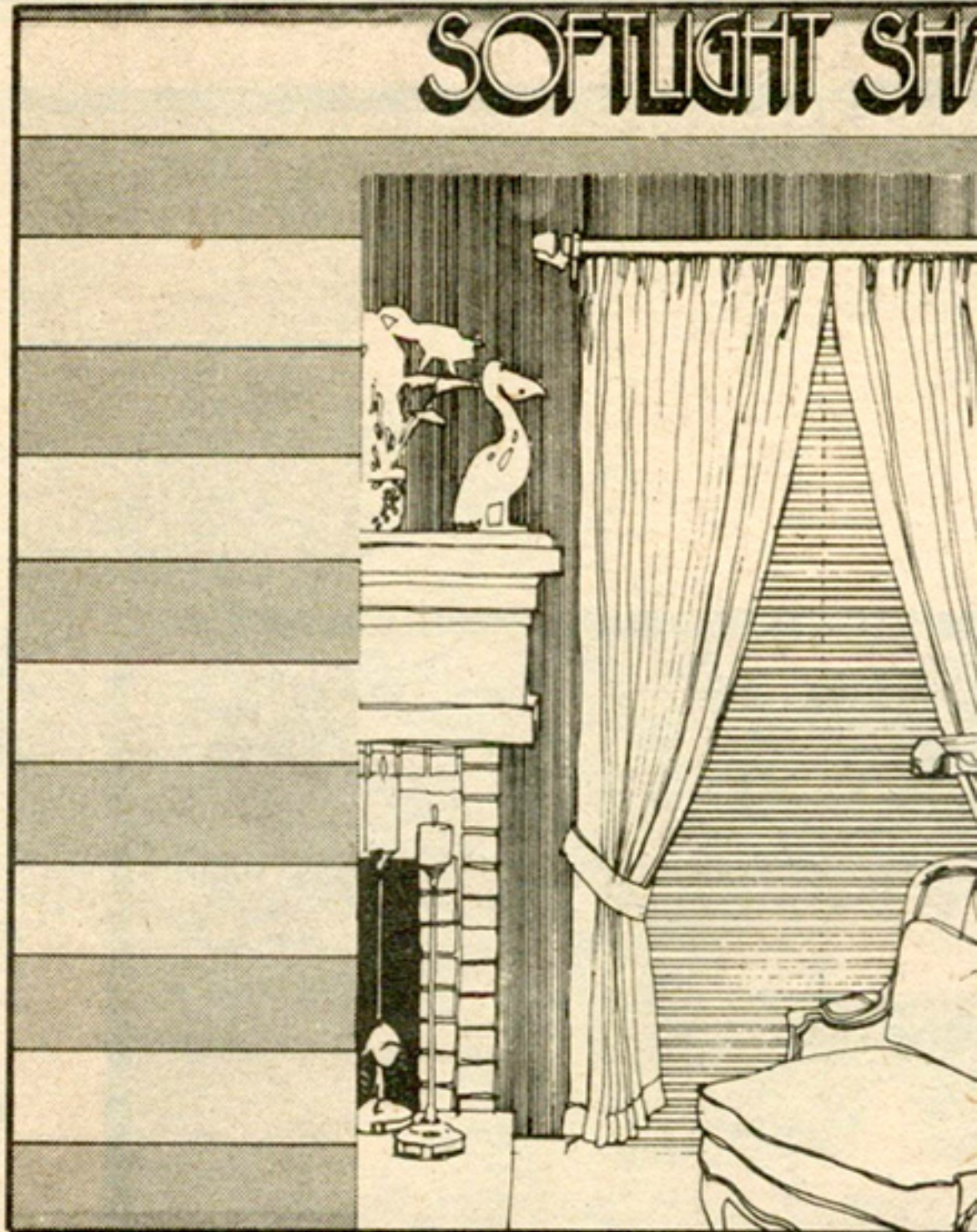
According to Tony's letters, he was 15 when he joined the army. He received medical training at Fort Lewis and assignment with the 1st M.A.S.H. before being sent to Korea in August 1950 for duty with the 2nd Division.

His baptism of fire came shortly thereafter, when a mortar shell landed in his foxhole. "This was my first lesson of war and what was really expected of me, when a shell landed in my foxhole just as another guy did. It made a million pieces of him, and I had my first cleanup

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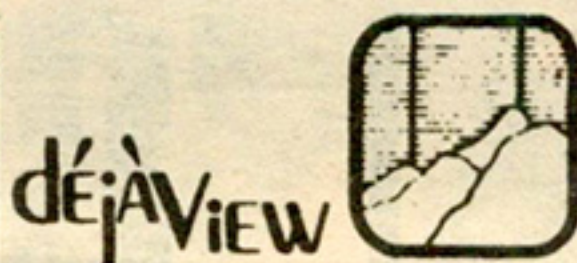


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THE SUNDAY

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job with a shovel and poncho and then covering of the hole with what was left of him."

His personal crisis came when his unit was surrounded and received orders to pull out. A column of trucks — with Tony in an ambulance bringing up the rear — had to pass through a Chinese roadblock 10 miles long.

The column was hit by mortar fire and halted; Tony had orders to leave the wounded and to kill the enemy.

"I crawled out from under the truck, and my hand landed on a rifle. (I didn't know for sure if I knew how to work it, because I hadn't seen a weapon since Basic). The Chinese were still coming over the slight bank, everyone was mowing them down as fast as they came. I

started firing. Even at the time, I was hating myself for shooting a human. I emptied the rifle and threw it down. I didn't even realize what was going on around me. I was loaded with guilt.

"First I left the wounded, now I shot human beings."

After taking a piece of shrapnel in the head, Tony blanked out for an unknown time. The next thing he remembers is walking down a road: "I don't even know now which direction I was going in. I guess it didn't matter to me."

Tony was captured by the Chinese, and in the bitter cold, had his boots taken. Fortunately, he was allowed to walk away from his captors; but he froze his feet in the process.

His memory of events after that comes in patches. He remembers getting a ride in a



The treacherous terrain of Heartbreak Ridge would make for exciting climbing, but it proved fatal for 5,000 Americans fighting their way uphill into heavy enemy fire in the fall of 1951 in Korea.

truck, remembers having a stomach problem aboard a ship, remembers picking up a cigarette somewhere.

"The next thing I remember was hitchhiking within seven miles of home when a

car stopped, asking me if I was me by name. He talked to me while we were riding, but I don't know what was said because I was trying to figure out how I got to that place."

Tony related his story in an 11-page handwritten letter to Barker.

"I'm really sorry for this long letter," he wrote. "But this is the first time I've ever gone into detail about things.

