

Murphy recalls camaraderie, resourcefulness of soldiers in Korea

By AMANDA NICHOLS
Era Reporter
a.nichols@bradfordera.com

Sgt. Cornelius Murphy, 83, of Bradford, recalls much from his time in combat and later as a typist during the Korean War — including the death of a good friend and the resourcefulness of soldiers on the front lines.

Murphy said his years in Korea were not easy, but the camaraderie of his fellow servicemen helped him get through it all — from the ever-present danger of constant gunfire to the “awful food” and “horrible cold.”

“You ever see M.A.S.H.? That’s just about what it was like over there. That is the best (television) program of Korea that I know of,” Murphy said.

Murphy was put in the infantry division in 1952, along with his friends Bruce Sherwin and Dick Taylor, who had graduated together from Bradford Area High School just a few short years earlier.

“We were just 21 when we were drafted, and Dick and I were together nearly the whole time,” he recalled. “But, he got killed the day before the war ended. Just awful.”

Murphy had been on the front lines with Taylor for much of his service in Korea, but was eventually chosen to serve as a typist and was separated from his buddy.

“We were together all the time up until a month or so before it ended. I’d heard of a cushy job as a typist and I took it,” he said. “That got me back off of the front lines and into a tent.

“It’s just whatever they want to do with you,” Murphy explained. “We did pretty good right up until the end, and he almost made it.”

In that month before the end of the war, it was Murphy’s job to type up the reports of who had died, been wounded or gone missing from each company.

“I didn’t have Dick’s company that morning, so I missed it when it first came through, and it was two days before I found out,” he said.

“The night that the war ended, the shells were going back and forth and then all of a sudden you had utter silence. It was just silent, and we had no idea that’s what it was until the next day when we found out they had signed the armistice,” Murphy said. “Tell you the truth, we all got kind of drunk.”

It was difficult to celebrate, though, after learning of his friend’s death, he said.



Beer was one luxury soldiers were afforded to help them get through during the war, according to Murphy.

“We were allowed two beers a day. It was mainly all Pabst Blue Ribbon, and they would warm. So, we dug a hole underneath my bed and we’d put our beer cans in there, then put the ammo case over top for a floor,” Murphy recalled.

“That was as cold a beer as you could get. We’d save them up that way, and then we’d have our party.”

Murphy said the food was even worse, though after the war it got better.

“We had an awful lot of C-rations (canned, pre-cooked food),” he said. “The cook would have a big 55 gallon drum of hot water and put the cans in there. You were liable to get anything — Lord only knows, just whatever he pulled off the rack, that’s what you got.

“The pork and beans in the can wasn’t too bad, but the rest of it was terrible. Especially the beef patties, it just turns my stomach to think about it,” Murphy continued.

The best meal he remembers was one he wrangled up for himself.

“One time I used a shotgun from the service club and went hunting Chinese pheasant and I got one,” he said happily. “I had some Lipton soup that I used for seasoning, and I cooked it in my steel helmet — we cooked everything in those helmets. It taste good, it came out really good. God, anything was better than the canned stuff.”

Murphy confirmed that war is not a life of comfort, and Korea was no exception.

“There wasn’t too many nice things to be said about Korea,” he said. “You could smell that country 50 miles before you got to it. They fertilized their rice paddies with human waste. It was raw.

“And, that was the coldest place. I was never so cold in my life,” Murphy went on. “I thought Bradford was the coldest, but that Korea is the coldest place there is. I had a tent and we were lucky to have that, especially if it had any heat in it.”

He remembered having to heat the typewriters in the morning so they would work — not that they got much sleep during the nights.

“During the war, you had your artillery shells going over, and the Chinese coming our way,” Murphy said. “Even the small arms rifles, you could just watch the tracers go back and forth. It would go on every night. Every once in a while, they’d send up a flare and it was as bright as day light.

“You took in rest a little bit at a time,” he explained. “Whenever you get a chance, you’d grab 15 to 20 minutes. You didn’t sleep very much at night — you slept more during the day, and then you had to take turns with your buddy.”

During the night, if they were able or trying to sleep, they’d set out old cans on strings to act as booby traps, Murphy said. “This was after the war, but we’d stretch them out so the Koreans couldn’t come steal from us. If they crawled in our tents at night, they’d rattle the cans and we’d get them.”

Murphy got back home in May of 1954 to his wife and daughter.

“When I left my wife, she was eight months pregnant and my daughter was born when I was in transit on the way over. It took them almost a month to find me to tell me,” he said. “She was 15 months old before I ever saw her. When I got back, the little snot wouldn’t come to me. Her Daddy was a picture that she had of me.”

Murphy readjusted to domestic life and had two more children and later, seven grandchildren.

“It was a good life,” he said, noting he would endure it all again for the good of the country.

“This is our country and it was worth it,” Murphy said. “I’d probably think twice about some of the things I did, but other than that, I’d do it over again.”