Interview with Ken Hersemann

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Interview # 1: December 31, 2007

Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is December 31, 2007—the last day of the year. I'm here with Kenneth Hersemann, who is a Korean War Veteran and a close friend of mine. He goes to the same church I do. It's an honor for me today, Kenny, to talk to you. We're just going to listen to your stories and experiences about the Korean War. I always start with this: when and where were you born?

Hersemann: I was born in East Peoria, Illinois, Tazewell County on June 7, 1929.

DePue: Wow, so six months later the bottom fell out of the bucket then? The Depression started right after you were born.

Hersemann: Right. I was a Depression baby and I can't remember much of the Depression. I couldn't remember too much clear up to about going to school at six, going into the first grade. I don't remember much of my life during that particular time. I know things were pretty tough.

DePue: What was your dad doing?

Hersemann: My dad, at that particular time, was very fortunate to have a job at the Avery Company in East Peoria that made tractors. Later it became Caterpillar Tractor Company. He worked for them all his life until he retired.

DePue: They were able to sell enough tractors during the Depression to keep going, huh?

Hersemann: I imagine so because they didn't have what you call a great big workforce. But he was very fortunate to keep a job. I mean the salaries were very minimal.

DePue: That is surprising, because agriculture was probably as hard hit as any sector in the economy.

Hersemann: I remember one time my mom told me that the neighbors that lived right around the neighborhood—three of them, counting my folks—had a New Year's Eve party. They had fried eggs and dill pickle sandwiches for their New Year's Eve celebration that particular year.

DePue: (laughs)

Hersemann: I remember her telling me that. Things weren't very [af]fluent at that particular time.

DePue: You were eleven years old when Pearl Harbor happened; is that about right?

Hersemann: Nineteen forty-one.

DePue: December '41.

Hersemann: I was born in '29, so I was about twelve.

DePue: Twelve.

Hersemann: Twelve years old, yeah.

DePue: Do you remember it?

Hersemann: Yes, I remember hearing it on the radio. You didn't have TV or anything. I heard that speech that FDR made when he said that…

DePue: The day of infamy speech?

Hersemann: Yeah, right.

DePue: Did you have any understanding of what that meant to the country or what that meant to you and your family?

Hersemann: I didn't realize that it would be such an extensive big thing that it really was when they went to war. How long it would last and how many people would be killed and things like that, because you just can't visualize all that kind of thing, I don't feel, in your life.

DePue: Did you have any older brothers?

Hersemann: Yes, I had an older brother, two years older than I am.

DePue: Okay. But not old enough to have been drafted right away?

Hersemann: He enlisted right at the tail end of World War II in United States Navy and he served in there several years on a LS—what is it—landing ship tank.

DePue: LST.

Hersemann: LST, right. He was over off the coast of China where he more or less served his time over there.

DePue: Do you remember what it was like growing up during the war, because those are the years you probably remember pretty well from growing up?

Hersemann: Well, I can remember working on farms. I worked on a farm most of the time when I was younger, in my early teens, and…

DePue: But you were living in the city at the time?

Hersemann: Where we lived for quite a while wasn't in the city limits of East Peoria. It was just right on the outside of city limits. The road was Springfield Road and there were houses sporadically along, clear out to Mueller Road. On the southeast corner of that intersection, that's where the farm was where I went and helped that guy. This happened to be my uncle's brother that ran that farm. I put up hay and disced cornfields and fed the cattle and all kinds of different things until I was about fourteen years old. Then I was looking for a job.

My mom came home and she said that the lumberyard had a sign in the window for a boy wanted. She said, "I'll take you down there and we'll see what you can do." She took me down there and I went in and talked to the gentleman. I was just a skinny ninety-seven pound weakling at that time, I guess. He said no. He said, "This job entails unloading box cars of wood and shingles and things and I just don't think you could handle that." So with that, she took me over to the A & P Store. My cousin had worked there. I went in and saw the manager, Chet Wheeler. By golly, he gave me a job. I was fourteen years old. This was in May and I was going to turn fifteen in June.

DePue: That would have been '43?

Hersemann: Yeah.

DePue: Okay.

Hersemann: One day he came by there and he asked me how old I was. I told him I was only fourteen. He said, "Well, when are you going to be fifteen?" I said, "June 7." He said, "Well I guess I can hide you for a couple more weeks on the records." Anyway, I worked there all through high school except one year. I went to a summer job at Caterpillar. I worked in Caterpillar for the summer of one year; it must have been my junior year that I worked down there.

DePue: So it was Caterpillar by then?

Hersemann: Yeah. So I graduated in 1947 from East Peoria Community High School. I went back to A & P. I still worked there. I stayed with A & P for 37 years. In 1984, they closed down the St. Louis, Indianapolis and Chicago divisions. So then in 1984, that's when I went to work for Shop n' Save. That's a…

(bird chirping in room)

DePue: Yeah, we'll pick that up on the interview Kenny. That will provide some interest.

Hersemann: Yeah, that's a bird clock. So anyway, I worked until '84 for A & P. Then I went to work for Shop n' Save and I worked for them for thirteen years. So I had fifty years of grocery business.

DePue: You had a great career then. You got in at a time when there was a real labor shortage back in the States. Probably young kids could find some good employment at the time.

Hersemann: Yeah, job opportunities were really great if you wanted to work. It's just like today: if you want to work there are jobs available. But if you don't want to work, you're not going to work regardless.

DePue: We're hearing all kinds of chiming here.

Hersemann: That's my grandfather clock.

DePue: So you finished high school from East Peoria, I would assume.

Hersemann: Yes, right.

DePue: And your intentions at that time—this would have been what year?

Hersemann: When I graduated it was 1947.

DePue: Okay, and your intentions at that time were to go right back into the A & P and work full-time?

Hersemann: Yes.

DePue: And that's what you did?

Hersemann: That's what I did.

DePue: Let's get up to June 1950. Did you have any steady girlfriend by that time?

Hersemann: I did have a pretty steady girlfriend, yes. Her name was Charlene Terpenting.

DePue: How do you spell her last name?

Hersemann: T-e-r-p-e-n-t-i-n-g; Terpenting.

DePue: Go ahead.

Hersemann: I went with her not a year. I don't know what happened. We just quit going together.

DePue: Had you been drafted? Were you in the National Guard?

Hersemann: No. I probably got my notice to register for the draft prior to that, but I was drafted in 1951. January 17, 1951 I went into the Army.

DePue: I want to back up just a little bit. Remember June 1950 when the North Koreans invaded the South?

Hersemann: Yeah.

DePue: What were your thoughts then?

Hersemann: I felt that they were going to take us and win the whole thing because once they got to the Yalu River, the Chinese came in there and they had like a half a million troops up there on the Manchurian border. They just came down through there and really pushed us back.

DePue: When did you start figuring this might have something to do with your life?

Hersemann: I never did.

DePue: Oh, you didn't?

Hersemann: I never did; nope. I never did think that that would affect me.

DePue: Because you had good steady employment?

Hersemann: No, I just, I don't know. I just never did feel that I was going.

DePue: You were busy working at the A & P.

Hersemann: Yeah.

DePue: When were you drafted again?

Hersemann: January 17, 1951.

DePue: Okay. What happened to you after that?

Hersemann: After 1951?

DePue: Yeah. Basic training?

Hersemann: I went to Fort Leonard Wood for basic training. I took six weeks of combat infantry training there. Once we finished that, we moved over to the Fifteenth Medium Tank Battalion barracks –it was the Sixth Army Division –and took

combat engineer training. I took combat engineer training maybe about fourteen weeks, I imagine.

DePue: Did you have the option to become an engineer?

Hersemann: No.

DePue: This was the Army's idea?

Hersemann: I figured like, what I can remember back in the Army, back then—and maybe even now because I haven't been in the Army—you didn't have any options. You do what they told you to do. If they wanted you to be a combat engineer… It's just like when I went overseas. I didn't have any option to go and stay a combat engineer. They put me in the artillery. You don't have any options. You just do what they say. It's just like the government is today; don't do as I do, do as I say.

DePue: It's not like there has to be any rationale to this?

Hersemann: No.

DePue: What were your parents' reactions to your being drafted when it looked like you might be heading to Korea?

Hersemann: I feel that they were like anybody else. They hated to see their son go and be in danger and think of losing their son because of war, which I feel today is uncalled for.

DePue: You would have been drafted January 1951; that was about the low point in the war for the Americans.

Hersemann: It was. Right it was. It was a bleak time of the Korean War.

DePue: Very bad.

Hersemann: Yeah, and they needed troops to sustain what we had over there. It just so happened back then they didn't have the National Guard like they have today where they put these poor guys over there in the National Guard and just make them keep tour of duty, tour of duty, tour of duty. I feel that they should have a draft. Everybody would have the opportunity to protect their country and fight for what they deserved to fight for.

DePue: You went through basic at Fort Leonard Wood. Were you in engineering training at Fort Leonard Wood as well?

Hersemann: Yeah.

DePue: This must have taken you up through about the middle of 1951, and when did you ship over to Korea then?

Hersemann: I shipped over in Korea the first part in June. Let's see.

DePue: When did you find out you were headed to Korea?

Hersemann: When I came home from basic training.

DePue: You had a little bit of a leave after basic training? Came back?

Hersemann: Yeah, I had thirty day leave. I finished basic training down there during the last part of March. I came home for thirty day leave. I was to report to Chicago on May 20 to go to Fort Lawton, Washington to go over to Korea.

DePue: You were at home on leave when you found out you were going to Korea?

Hersemann: I knew where I was going before I had gotten home.

DePue: That's an interesting thirty days, knowing that you had to go.

Hersemann: Yeah, I knew I was going to go over there. Yeah, right, yeah.

DePue: Was that kind of in the back of your mind all the time when you were trying to relax?

Hersemann: Nope. I didn't think about it at one bit.

DePue: Do you remember anything from basic or even this engineering training that sticks with you?

Hersemann: Yeah, I can remember one thing: we didn't have the proper equipment. Back then, just like some of the people did over in Iraq today, I didn't have any gloves; I didn't have any field jacket. We were out there on the rifle range and my hands were so cold I couldn't get the clip in my M-1 rifle. I said, "If I get over into Korea and I have to protect myself, what am I going to do? I don't have the equipment to fight with." It was cold. My hands were so cold I couldn't put the clip in my rifle. I didn't have any gloves; I didn't have any jacket. They gave us these great big horse-blanket overcoats back then. They hung down to your ankles; I think they would, but anyway.

DePue: You would have thought they would have had a ton of surplus World War II stuff then.

Hersemann: They didn't.

DePue: How about the NCOs [Non-Commissioned Officers], the training NCOs? Were these guys all World War II veterans?

Hersemann: Yes, they were. Yeah, right. I would say 99 percent of them were.

DePue: Besides the lack of equipment, which aggravated you and puzzled you at the same time, do you think the training you got in basic and advance was pretty good?

Hersemann: I feel it was adequate to learn how to shoot machine guns and throw hand grenades and shoot the M-1 rifle. Then when I got into engineer training, most of that was more or less building roads and building Bailey bridges [modular steel members quickly assembled on site to fit local situations] and heavy revetments and things like that. Things that you need to know to build roads and so forth wherever you were going to be.

DePue: So it sounds like your training in the engineering was as a combat engineer?

Hersemann: Yeah.

DePue: Okay, so let's talk then about heading overseas. You left from leave and then you headed where?

Hersemann: My folks took me to Chicago. I had to report there on the twentieth at Chicago to catch a troop train to go to Fort Lawton, Washington to go over to Korea. I arrived there on May 25 at 5:00AM and I stayed at Fort Lawton until about May 30, when we boarded the Marine Lynx ship to go to Tokyo, Japan.

DePue: That was the name of the ship?

Hersemann: Yeah, Marine Lynx—L-y-n-x.

DePue: Okay, most people have a memory about what their time on the shipboard was.

Hersemann: Unfortunately when they started to load on, I was on an advance party—poor sucker advance party—to go down there and be on KP and do all of the garbage work. We went down there and did that and then we were waiting for the troops to come on. I said to this kid who was with me, "You know what? They don't have our names, so when they call people to come out there again, we just won't go. We won't show up," and we didn't. Nothing happened. I didn't have to pull KP any more the rest of the time. I just milled around for the whole trip overseas.

DePue: You went straight from Washington to Tokyo, or Japan?

Hersemann: Yeah.

DePue: Smooth sailing was it?

Hersemann: Yeah, we didn't have any real rough weather. It was bouncing around, but I didn't get seasick. I spent a lot of time in my bunk on the ship going over, rather

than being out on the deck and watching the waves and stuff like that. At one particular point, the ship got a message on the radio that there was a ship somewhere that somebody was sick on and they didn't have any medical attention. Our ship made a right hand turn and went some place and met this other ship. Some crewmen off our ship got into a pretty big lifeboat and rowed over there to get that guy and bring him back. They didn't make it over there. They had to come back because it was too bad. Those guys came back and their hands were actually raw from rowing that boat. They got close enough and they shot some kind of a line across and they brought him across on a breeches buoy or something like that, they called it.

DePue: They evacuated this fellow…

Hersemann: Onto our ship. Yeah, right. As we continued on, we crossed the International Dateline. My birthday was on the seventh of June, and as you can see on this piece of paper here was our travel time. You can see where we were from the sixth to the eighth. [I went to bed on the sixth, woke up and it was Friday the eighth.] I lost my twenty-first birthday there.

DePue: You crossed the International Dateline and so much for your birthday, huh?

Hersemann: I never turned twenty-one.

DePue: You look older than twenty-one though, Kenny. You can't fool me.

Hersemann: Right, yeah, I look like I'm sixty-nine.

DePue: You've done your homework here.

Hersemann: Yeah. This shows the route we went from Seattle, straight across, over and down to Tokyo.

DePue: Did you spend much time in Japan?

Hersemann: No. I'd say totally we were there maybe five days by the time we went over there and processed. We took the train ride all the way from Tokyo down to Sasebo, Japan. Took the train down; went through Hiroshima. Boy it was all blown apart; just leveled.

DePue: There was still nothing that had been reconstructed?

Hersemann: No, nothing. It was just a bunch of rubble.

DePue: Was there anybody living there that you could tell?

Hersemann: I couldn't tell, no, because it was kind of dark when we went through there late in the day. When we went through there you could see that it was really blown apart.

DePue: But you're just basically moving across to the other side of the country so you could embark there?

Hersemann: Yes, right. That was our trip to Sasebo to get on a ship to go over to Pusan, Korea to come up to get reassigned down there.

DePue: During this time, do you know where you're headed? What unit of assignments you're going to have?

Hersemann: What unit of assignment?

DePue: Yeah.

Hersemann: No. From Camp Drake we went to Sasebo. [a port city at the southern tip of Japan] Then, we boarded on a ship on June 18 for Pusan, Korea. Then we arrived in Pusan and we processed. We were taken to a replacement center, which was the Seventh Replacement Depot for the Seventh Infantry Division. I knew then that I was going to be in the Seventh Division someplace, but what unit, was it infantry or what, I didn't know at that particular time. I spent five or six days there and every day they called us out for assignment. My name wasn't called and I said, "Oh my gosh." I was really in suspense wanting to know where I was going to go.

DePue: This is the middle of June by this time of 1951. So the front line has stabilized somewhat, but it was still a dangerous place.

Hersemann: Right, yeah. It was stabilized then, right.

DePue: You're trained as a combat engineer?

Hersemann: Yeah, combat engineer. I was at that replacement depot for, like I said, five or six days waiting to get an assignment. The one day finally arrived. They assigned me to the Forty-ninth Field Artillery Division in the Seventh Division on Battery A, which, when it came to field artillery, I didn't know beans about anything.

DePue: Okay. You say the Forty-ninth Field Artillery Division but that's probably Forty-ninth Field Artillery Regiment?

Hersemann: Yeah.

DePue: Okay.

Hersemann: Forty-ninth Field Artillery Regiment.

DePue: They're part of the Seventh Infantry Division.

Hersemann: Right.

DePue: What was the size of the guns you had?

Hersemann: One-o-five Howitzers. That's the smallest one of the Howitzers. There were six of them to a firing battery.

DePue: Were you assigned as a cannon crewman?

Hersemann: I was assigned to the crew of one of those Howitzers, yes.

DePue: In Battery B?

Hersemann: Battery A. A Battery.

DePue: Okay, I'm sorry.

Hersemann: I didn't know a thing about them. We had on the job training.

DePue: After you got to the unit. Where was the unit when you joined up with them?

Hersemann: It was north of Chungchon. It was up by some reservoir where they had a real tremendous fight. There was a multitude of people killed there. You could still smell the reek of the bodies that had been killed and buried there.

DePue: I'm guessing that you were at the Chongjin'Gang Reservoir. I think that's how you pronounce it. Or north of there. Was the Seventh in reserves at that time?

Hersemann: No, we were up firing for the Sixth ROK Division.

DePue: We're looking at the maps now here to see where they are.

Hersemann: We were right there. Sixth ROK Division. When we first went in, we were up there fighting. We were firing for that ROK [Republic of Korea] Division.

DePue: Was that because the Seventh Infantry Division was out of the line at that time?

Hersemann: I think they were in reserve then too.

DePue: Field artillery, no need for that?

Hersemann: We fired for the Seventeenth Infantry Division—Regiment—of the Seventh Division.

DePue: Seventeenth Infantry Regiment. That was my other question here, okay.

Hersemann: That's who we fired for all the time.

DePue: You were in what they would call direct support to the Seventeenth Infantry Regiment. The other two regiments were the Thirty-first and the Thirty-second?

Hersemann: Right over there.

DePue: For the Seventh Division?

Hersemann: I don't know that. I did read someplace I was going through; there was the Thirty-first or something like that. It was in the thirties.

DePue: And most of these divisions would have three regiments, but an organization like this Battery A would have been assigned specifically to one of the regiments. Your first couple days up in the front lines, you're a few kilometers back. But not very far because you're in action already. You're learning how to do the job by firing to support the ROKs.

Hersemann: They're in grid coordinates, and what different terms were, and things like that, and how to set the pitch and the arch of the firing thing.

DePue: Deflection and the quadrant.

Hersemann: Yeah, on the weapons, yeah.

DePue: Do you remember your first day? What were your impressions on that first day?

Hersemann: We got in there late at night at the replacement depot. We went up there by truck and we slept in the tent that they called the orderly room where the First Sergeant was and stuff like that. But anyway, the next day I got up to get ready to go eat chow and went through the mess hall. Up front they said, "How do you want your eggs fried?" I said, "What do you mean how do I want my eggs fried?" Didn't have scrambled eggs, they had fried eggs. I couldn't believe how the food was when we got over there; that we had such good food.

DePue: They had fresh eggs they were able to serve.

Hersemann: Yeah. They were fresh eggs fried.

DePue: You're thinking, "Well maybe this war is not going to be so bad after all."

Hersemann: I thought maybe the food was going to be good, but as far as war, honestly I never did worry about anything while I was over there. I didn't worry about anything. I don't know if I felt that the good Lord was going to take care of me or what, but I never did think of anything happening to me. I just got up every day and did what I was supposed to do and that was it. I went through the whole war that way.

DePue: While you were working on the gun line, did your battery ever take incoming fire?

Hersemann: No, never did. We never did have any rounds come in or any kind of fire.

DePue: Any time you were on the line, were you firing on that day, most every day?

Hersemann: No, not always. They would skip days and so forth.

DePue: What did you think of the terrain and the environment you were in?

Hersemann: You get back down around Chungchon and those areas and the ground is very more or less flat. I found wherever there was a town in Korea that was more level land. Most of the other ground was all hills and valleys and stuff like that. One place we were that was the Punchbowl [so named as a battle location] where we sat all winter long, from last part of October through the whole winter Well, I must have rotated out of there too. It was nothing but surrounded by mountains. As we went into that Punchbowl, they were cutting the roads in at that particular time. In fact we had to wait at different times for bulldozers to get out of the way so they could let us get through when we moved into the Punchbowl.

DePue: They did have combat engineers doing the work.

Hersemann: They were doing her. I drove a deuce-and-a-half [two and a half ton truck] for the kitchen mess hall. In fact, the lieutenant who was in charge of the motor pool and the mess hall wouldn't ride down that mountain pass with me because he felt that the brakes would give out or something like that. He didn't want to get hurt. So he wouldn't ride down the hill with me.

DePue: I know you didn't stay in line because you just mentioned that you drove a deuce-and-a-half for the mess hall. How did you get from being just the average old gun bunny [crew working on an artillery piece] on a gun line to a different position?

Hersemann: I was in the crew of the Howitzers there. One day this mess sergeant came down there and because three guys were rotating out –when we got over they were rotating people out finally –there were three guys who were going to rotate out of the mess hall. He came down and wanted to know if I'd want to be a cook in the mess hall. I told him I would. I wouldn't have to stand guard or anything like that anymore and have a good place to sleep.

DePue: Why did he come looking for you?

Hersemann: I don't know. I guess God sent him.

DePue: He must have seen something in you, Kenny.

Hersemann: I don't know what he saw, but anyway I told him I would do that. He said, "Well, I'll go up and see the commanding officer and see what he says." Anyway a couple days later he came and told me that I was supposed to report up to the mess hall. I went up there and I had to take all my gear and stuff up. I slept in the mess tent with the rest of the cooks and stuff like that.

DePue: Did this happen just a couple of weeks after you got there?

Hersemann: Oh, no. I would say it was probably a month and a half or something like that.

DePue: But still pretty early in the time.

Hersemann: Yeah, pretty early in time I was over there, right.

DePue: Why did you say yes?

Hersemann: Why did I say yes? You didn't have to stand out in the cold on a firing battery around a Howitzer. You didn't have to stand guard or anything like that and you had a bigger tent to sleep in. When you're out there on the crew you had nothing but a pup tent to sleep in, more or less. I thought it was a lot better move for me to do that. So I did.

DePue: You didn't mind waking up early morning?

Hersemann: No, no.

DePue: Didn't mind the hard work that goes along with being in the mess hall?

Hersemann: In fact, I enjoyed cooking when I was over there and stuff like that. We got good food rations and things like that. We'd get like Thanksgiving turkeys and Christmas hams and stuff. We had turkeys and then most generally we'd get a lot of ground beef and steaks. We had to cut big hunks of beef for steaks. We'd have bacon and eggs and all that kind of stuff.

DePue: You went from starting as infantry, which just about everybody did in their training, to training as a combat engineer to get into Korea and finding yourself being a field artillery crewman, and now you're a cook. So where in this process did you learn how to be a cook?

Hersemann: Well…

DePue: Was that more OJT [on the job training]?

Hersemann: When I first went in there, the guys who were already there would tell you what to do and show you what to do while you were in there to cook. You had these field ranges that you had to cook on. I enjoyed cooking and so forth. The guys liked the food we put out. The guy who was the mess sergeant was a young guy from Philadelphia—Jake .Markusy –he was just a young guy. He was very very knowledgeable about the whole thing.

DePue: He kind of took you under his wing and trained you?

Hersemann: Right, yeah. Then when Jake rotated back, a guy by the name of Job—I don't know what his last name was—Job, J-o-b, took over as mess sergeant. He

wasn't as good as Jake. I mean he drank too much. He was quite a drinker. But anyway, they made him mess sergeant. Then when –I would say it was maybe two months –he was mess sergeant. Then after Job rotated out, they made me a staff sergeant. I took over the mess hall at that particular time.

DePue: You moved up pretty darn quick then.

Hersemann: Right. I made private first class on July 22, 1951. A lot of the promotions and stuff over there was due to the fact that a lot of the guys were rotating back and they had the ranks and so forth. It was pretty relevant that they needed people to fill those jobs. So they came by and gave you the rank. I made corporal in October 16, 1951. At that particular time the pay was $130.60.

DePue: Where was that going?

Hersemann: Most of it I sent home. I sent most of my money home. On that particular day, on October 16, 1951, our battery was supporting First Cav [Cavalry] Infantry. We fired twenty eight hundred rounds that particular day with six weapons. That was quite a few. In fact our ammo trucks were running constantly all day long.

DePue: First Cav must have been into some pretty heavy fighting at that time.

Hersemann: Right. They were trying to take some hill over there.

DePue: The 105's have a range of, I don't know, twelve to thirteen kilometers? Not that far.

Hersemann: About five or six miles at the most, yeah. They're not too long weapons.

DePue: You're pretty darn close to the front lines.

Hersemann: We could've been killed easily, but we were lucky that the North Koreans and those people didn't have airplanes. They didn't have the weapons that we had or as many as we had—Howitzers or field artillery and different things like that – to shoot back at us. The only time that I can remember that there was really a lot of fire that came from any place north of us was on New Year's Eve. We were in the Punchbowl. They really lambasted that front line, because we had stationed along the front line and on top of that Punchbowl. That's where our troops were along.

DePue: I'm trying to envision this. I know roughly where the Punchbowl is. Were you guys on the south rim of the Punchbowl then?

Hersemann: We sat right about in the middle of it.

DePue: Right in the valley? Oh really?

Hersemann: Yeah. Where we were it was all level.

DePue: That's where the Howitzers were, so maybe the infantry were on the northern rim?

Hersemann: They were on the rim, yes, on the backside of the rim. Right, yeah. That's where the infantry was. Yeah, up there. It was cold over there too, I'm telling you something.

DePue: Were you already a mess sergeant by that time you got to the Punchbowl?

Hersemann: Yeah.

DePue: Well, tell me about the cold.

Hersemann: It was so cold that one time they put out a directive that they knew it was going on, that everybody was taking gasoline and mixing it. You were only supposed to use diesel oil or whatever you call it—kerosene or whatever it is –not highly inflammable stuff. So the stoves would go out and that stuff wouldn't run through the little tube. It was only about a half-inch tube with about maybe less than three-eighths inch inside diameter.

DePue: What they call the Yukon stoves, is that what they were?

Hersemann: They were round, oh, about…

DePue: Kind of a potbelly stove kind of a deal?

Hersemann: They were only about so high. They were only about two feet high and about maybe two and a half feet in diameter across. They had a burner in the center. The line would run into that, and then the stove pipe would come out on one side of it and go up through the top of the tent. A tent had a tin thing that was fitted into the top roof of the tent. I've seen those stoves get so hot that they would be red all the way to the top of that.

But anyway, the directive came out that that nobody should mix gas with their fuel oil that they were burning because of the thing about burning the tents down. I told Kim, the Korean ROK guy who took care of ours, "I want to tell you something. You keep doing what you're doing. I'm not going to freeze to death for anybody. I'm going to protect my men. You keep mixing the oil and gas together so that…" That's exactly what I said.

The other thing was, it was so cold over there that in the daytime, if it warmed up a little bit, it would get muddy. We had to park all of our motor vehicles on platforms that we made out of the boxes that the ammo came in to keep them. so if you had to move out real fast you wouldn't want to be stuck to the ground. We had to make sure we put them all on top of these boards it was so cold.

DePue: Did you have a deuce-and-a-half for your mess truck then?

Hersemann: Yes.

DePue: Did you ever cook out of the mess truck?

Hersemann: One time we did. Do you mean in the back of the mess truck?

DePue: Yeah.

Hersemann: No, no, no. Never did that. One time we cooked outside of a tent was when we were on a march order moving to another position. We cooked out in the open field because we didn't set up the tents or anything for the mess hall. We just cooked like that and everybody slept outside. It was warm weather at that particular time.

DePue: How many people in your mess section then?

Hersemann: There was like sixteen.

DePue: Sixteen? How big was the battery then?

Hersemann: About 160.

DePue: Wow, that's a big unit then.

Hersemann: Yeah. We cooked for about 150 people.

DePue: And how many of those were Koreans in your section?

Hersemann: In my section alone?

DePue: Yeah.

Hersemann: Six or seven.

DePue: So a sizeable percentage of them were Koreans? Were ROK soldiers?

Hersemann: No, the sixteen I was talking about were Americans. The six were the other guys. So there would have been about twenty-three all together.

DePue: How many meals were you cooking a day then?

Hersemann: Three.

DePue: You were cooking three meals? There was no C ration or K ration? [ration packets with a canned meat dish]

Hersemann: The only time I had C rations or K rations was when we made a move and we were going to get there in one day. We wouldn't set up. We cooked breakfast, and then we'd move and have C rations or K rations during the daytime at lunch. I would get back in there and have set our tents back up and cook the meal again that night.

DePue: As the mess sergeant, a lot of your time is spent on procuring rations and that kind of stuff?

Hersemann: Right. A lot of times we'd take a truck or a jeep and go out and hit different units and see what they had to spare. We'd pick up food from some of these different places. They would have –like peanut butter, and different cans of coffee or scrambled eggs that used to come in a tin—that we'd get some when you were on a move or something. You'd have to have something like that.

DePue: By the time you ended up in the mess section, did you ever have periods of time where you were short on food?

Hersemann: Never, never that I recall that we ever were short on food.

DePue: Did you have any folks in your unit who remembered the battle days when they were moving so fast that everything was chaotic?

Hersemann: Yeah, when I first got over there we had. I would say at least 40 percent of them were guys that were pushed back from way up north and came back down through that area. I would say like maybe 40 percent of them are people from…

DePue: Did they tell you the stories?

Hersemann: They told some, but not too many.

DePue: They kept to themselves pretty much?

Hersemann: Right, they did.

DePue: Did you understand why they kind of kept to themselves?

Hersemann: I feel that, with new replacements coming in and stuff like that, they didn't want to tell you things that were going to make you worry and feel that you were going to get hurt and injured or something like that. I think that was the main reason they kept to themselves.

DePue: The whole time you're there, you're seeing people coming and going all the time?

Hersemann: Right, yeah. After I was over there for maybe six or seven months, the amount of people that were coming into your unit kind of slowed down because most of the people have rotated out then. So all the guys that were coming over there,

like me, were only supposed to serve nine months. Nine months was the most you were supposed to spend.

DePue: If you're in combat?

Hersemann: Yes.

DePue: Is that because you're, what, four points per month if you're in combat zone?

Hersemann: I don't know what it was, but that was the stipulation, that it was nine months time if you were in combat that you stayed over. It's not like today that they bring you home and send you back over there. That's wrong. That's wrong as heck.

DePue: What's wrong as heck?

Hersemann: Today, the way they're treating our troops going over to Iraq and stuff.

DePue: That they send them over as units instead of as individuals?

Hersemann: No, they send a person over there and he serves time over and he comes home for two or three weeks and they send him back. I mean that's wrong. They should have other fresh people to send back over there.

DePue: So they shouldn't give people leaves for anytime while they're in combat zone?

Hersemann: What do you mean?

DePue: Well, that's what I think what you're talking about, is people go over to Iraq…

Hersemann: It's sort of like being on R and R or something like that. When I was over there, I went on R and R to Osaka for so many days. I went over there for that.

DePue: Are you talking about repeated rotations?

Hersemann: Repeated rotations.

DePue: Okay.

Hersemann: Repeated rotations, yeah.

DePue: Talk a little bit more about the cold. I mean how did you cook when it was so cold?

Hersemann: Kim, this guy who took care of the stove, would get those lit up and stuff. Once they got those stoves burning, that mess tent where we cooked really stayed warm. You could work in there without a coat on or anything like that, but it was cold outside.

DePue: Did the troops come into the mess hall to get their food or was the chow line outside?

Hersemann: Yeah, they came through the mess hall to get their food and so forth. Then we had two great big squad tents set up that had table-like things that we build out of ammo boxes for them to eat on. They had to eat pretty fast because, if they didn't, the food would get real cold.

DePue: Kenny, here's a tough question for you. I want you to run through a daily menu from breakfast through supper. What would a typical breakfast consist of?

Hersemann: A typical breakfast would consist of either bread, which we toasted; eggs, either scrambled or fresh; some type of meat, whether it be bacon or some ham or spam meat that we fried up; and maybe oatmeal. We'd have that. That would be a typical breakfast. Lunch would be more or less something hot in the way of soup and a sandwich and something hot to drink or something like that in the wintertime. In the summertime we'd make iced tea or something like that for them to drink. Then at night we'd have some type of a potato, a vegetable, and we had steak quite a bit of time. We had a lot of steak come to us.

DePue: Delivered to you frozen?

Hersemann: Yeah, it came in frozen. The thing of it is we got rations practically every day because we didn't have anything to keep it in. In wintertime it wouldn't make any difference, but in summertime you had to use it up because it wouldn't keep. We got rations practically every day. They would come through and deliver stuff to us.

DePue: So somebody was pushing the rations forward to you? You weren't required to go back?

Hersemann: No, they had ration trucks bring it through all the time.

DePue: This really was a pretty stable condition in that respect.

Hersemann: Yeah, it was pretty stable.

DePue: It sounds like the troops were eating pretty well.

Hersemann: I tell you what, they were. That's one thing that amazed me. In fact, one time they even brought ice cream up from the back. We had ice cream up there on the front line, too. The bread was baked some place south. They had a bakery some place. We'd get loaves of bread but we had to slice them ourselves.

DePue: So a U.S. Army bakery though?

Hersemann: Right, yeah.

DePue: This might sound like a stretch, but did you have anything to do with shuttling people back and forth for shower runs or anything like that?

Hersemann: No.

DePue: It was more than enough to try to feed 160 people.

Hersemann: Yeah, in fact just occasionally we got to go back and get a shower. It wasn't too often that we went back to get a shower. They'd take a truckload of people back and get a shower and bring them back up here. I think that maybe once or twice a month was the most that you ever got to go back there. A lot of times in the summertime there were rivers running through there. We'd go down and go in the river and get washed up or take a bath or something in the river.

DePue: So were the troops eating out of their mess kits all the time?

Hersemann: Yeah, right, yeah.

DePue: That's not necessarily something that's designed to keep your food hot or cold.

Hersemann: No, those were metal. When I was the mess sergeant; I scrounged up some of these immersion heaters and some extra G.I. barrels, which were tins. I fixed them up and put water in them and got those immersion heaters going. Then when the troops came through, before they went through the chow line, they could dip that mess gear down in that water and get them hot before they went through the line.

DePue: So both sterilizes it and gets it hot before they get the food.

Hersemann: Yeah, got to keep it warm so the guys wouldn't have cold mess gear to put their stuff in.

DePue: A good mess sergeant. There's not a soul in the unit that doesn't appreciate a good mess sergeant.

Hersemann: Before I made mess sergeant, we got a new battery commander, and he came out of the South. It just so happened that particular morning I had to bake biscuits. So I got up early and I baked all these biscuits and stuff like that. Captain Fuller was his name. He came in and sat down. He always ate in a mess tent. He said, "I'd like to know who made these biscuits." The mess sergeant said "Corporal Hersemann made those biscuits." He said, "I'll tell you one thing. Those are mighty fine biscuits." I thought he was going to say something else. But anyway he said, "Those are mighty..(pronounced mahty)." He had a southern drawl and he said, "Those are mighty fine biscuits." So that made me feel good.

DePue: Sounds like it. An army fights on its stomach, doesn't it? How about all the Koreans that were with you? I'm really curious if you didn't see many Korean

civilians. The United States Army, by the time you're there, was eating a whole lot better than the average Korean civilian is.

Hersemann: Yeah, they ate just the same as we did.

DePue: The ROKs that were working.

Hersemann: Yeah, the ROKs that worked for us. I think there was one ROK assigned to every firing battery and then I had six or seven in the kitchen.

DePue: When you say, you mean every gun?

Hersemann: Yeah.

DePue: You said firing batteries. So one Korean at every gun position?

Hersemann: Yeah. We had several who worked in the motor pool and several that helped with the ammo. I don't know where he came from, but when I got there we had a little Korean boy whose name was Chi Son Gup. Chi Son Gup was his name. I have a picture of him here too. We all chipped in and would buy him…

DePue: Is this a little orphan boy or something?

Hersemann: What's that?

DePue: Little orphan boy?

Hersemann: I guess he must have been because…

DePue: How old was he? Do you know?

Hersemann: I would say he was probably eight or nine.

DePue: He was a young kid then.

Hersemann: There's a picture of him right there in the center. We took up collections and sent and got him all that American gear—coats, hats, boots, socks and all that stuff you can see. He's got that hat on. We all pitched in and got that for him. Yeah, we ordered that and had it sent back. He stayed with us all the time. He'd stay at the mess hall.

DePue: He adopted you more than vice versa.

Hersemann: Yeah, right. I would say that was probably true, yeah.

DePue: Did you see many other Korean civilians?

Hersemann: No.

DePue: Because my impression is that the Korean civilian population was desperate at this point.

Hersemann: Yeah, we didn't see hardly anybody when we were up in the front and moving around. Most times we ever saw any people was when we went to Seoul. We were on a march order. We went through the town of Seoul up to the north there to fire with the First Cavalry. As we went through there, there were quite a few people there. They had a lot of stuff set up along the roads. It was all black market stuff. They had whiskey and everything that an American guy would want to spend his money on.

I was driving a truck going through Seoul with this guy—his name was Buell—from up around Jackson, Michigan. We stopped some place as the convoy was moving through and he said, "Hersemann, the next place I see where they got some booze, you drop back and you see they're there. I'll holler. I'm going to jump off and grab a bottle of that booze and when I say 'go,' you give her the gas and go." So we did that. He jumped off and he grabbed the bottle of some kind of booze. I don't know what it was, and he said, "Go." Man, I goosed the old truck and run up there. They never did catch us. So he pilfered a bottle of booze. If you were a sergeant or anything like that, you got beer rations and whiskey rations every…

DePue: Oh really?

Hersemann: …once a month, yeah. I would sell mine to somebody because there were a lot of people that weren't sergeants. They wanted something to drink. I never drank the stuff, so I would sell it to these guys. Then I'd take the money and send it home. When I got home from out of the Army, I had enough money to buy a car when I got back—a used car, not a new one. I bought a '49 Ford.

DePue: But you didn't have much need to spend money while you were there, did you?

Hersemann: No, golly, no. You didn't have the need to spend anything. In fact, this guy Buell said, "If you have anything you want to sell, I'll take it with me and I'll sell it over in Japan." I had a watch. It was just a cheap thing. He took it over and he came back and he gave me $50.

DePue: For a watch?

Hersemann: Yeah.

DePue: That's a heck of a watch then.

Hersemann: Yeah. Anyway, I wrote home and told my mom to buy up some cheap watches and send them over to me. She never did do it.

DePue: Do you recall any other incidents that really stick with you of your time over there? I recall you telling me one time about an incident that involved a truck that almost…

Hersemann: Oh yeah, we were in this one place there –it rains a lot over there –anyway, there were rice paddies and stuff. We went in to this one position and set up. We needed sand to put in the floor of the mess tent and the squad eating tents. So me and a couple other guys went back to the river and loaded up this deuce-and-a-half. I drove it up and along. We came along the rice paddies; the road was right along the edge of them and it was wet and soft. My truck started to slide down into the next rice paddy. It was going about a thirty-five or forty degree angle sitting there ready to tip over. We all jumped out.

Dick Koonz was the guy in charge of motor pool from Goodfield, Illinois. That's one thing. I met a lot of guys over there who I went to school with and some from Illinois, right close to where I lived at home. Anyway, he was the motor pool sergeant. I walked up and told him, "Dick, I've got a problem. I was coming along the rice paddy with a load of sand and the truck slid down. She's about ready to tip over." He said, "Man, we've got a problem." I said, "What's that?" He said, "Well, I've only got one deuce-and-a-half with a winch on it that works. The other one's on a three-quarter- ton truck. We'll go down and see what we can do."

We went down there and they hooked the winch on from the deuce-and-a-half on the front. They took and wrapped the cable around the body of my truck that was on an angle to that three-quarter-ton truck. They got it all hooked up. Dick said, "Will you get in there again and guide her out of there?" I said, "No way. I'm not going to get in that thing." So he got on a running board and stood there. He didn't get in it. He just stood on a running board and got hold of the steering wheel.

DePue: Try to steer it out.

Hersemann: To steer it. He said, "Okay, everybody go." As he said that, that little old three-quarter-ton started his winch. That just pulled him. He didn't have enough weight. It just pulled him forward.

DePue: You said you had a load of sand with you?

Hersemann: Yeah, right. Anyway, they got it out all right, but it didn't tip over. I guess that three-quarter-ton had enough leverage. Just enough to keep it from going on over. So they got it out all right.

DePue: But in the meantime everybody's getting a lesson in physics, aren't they?

Hersemann: Yeah, right. (laughs) That was something.

DePue: Any other incidents that really stick with you?

Hersemann: Yeah, when I was rotating back, I think then I was scared worse than I was any other time when I served over there. We started out in the middle of the night—about four o'clock –to go to Inchon. Man, it was blacker than collie's hind end. All we had was the little slit lights through on the front, and you couldn't hardly see anything. All of a sudden, man, you would go shhhhooo; your truck would dip down and go through some water, because the bridges were out. It would go down through there and back up and get back on MSR [main supply route] and go down the road. We did that about three times. Man, I was scared to death. Boy, I had spent all this time over here and nothing happened. I said I get killed going home. But that's probably about the only time I was really scared.

DePue: Why do you think that was while you were up in the front lines you were never really that concerned about things?

Hersemann: I don't know. I don't know.

DePue: Didn't take any fire or maybe you're just so darn busy all the time.

Hersemann: You mean rounds coming in or something?

DePue: Yeah.

Hersemann: No, we never did get shelled. No, never did. We had a lot of big 155 self-propelled and stationary long toms staged in and around us that fired over the top of us, but nothing. Once in a while the rotating band would come loose on one of those shells going out and the guys that were… One night we were sitting there in the mess tent and we just got paid. The guys were playing poker. One of those shells were going out from one of those long toms and it made a whistling noise. Everybody got down under the tables and anything they could get under. They thought it was a shell coming in but it was one going out off of one of those long toms behind us.

DePue: From what I've heard about this period of the Korean War, it very much became an artillery war. I would guess—tell me if I'm wrong—your artillery battery was pretty busy most of the time?

Hersemann: Yeah, they were. At the time I told you they fired on October 16, 1951 –that's when they fired all those twenty eight hundred rounds. But at that particular day they celebrated shooting two hundred thousand rounds of the Korean War. That's how many they had fired: two hundred thousand.

DePue: From the beginning of the war?

Hersemann: Yeah.

DePue: Of course this particular unit was part of the Seventh ID [Infantry Division] that landed at Inchon, that landed at Wonsan, which was at the Chosin Reservoir, and then, obviously, they did that whole retreat back from the Chosin Reservoir.

Hersemann: See, when they were retreating back they couldn't fire because they couldn't get set up fast enough to do any firing. So they just pulled back as far as they could go until they got it stabilized, and then they finally set up and started shooting again.

DePue: I think they got back in the line after they were evacuated from Wonsan or wherever it was, probably around January '51. I'm guessing the bulk of those two hundred thousand rounds were from January '51 on.

Hersemann: Right, I would say so. Right from the first of the year on up to October there: two hundred. That was just our firing battery.

DePue: They didn't stop then, did they?

Hersemann: No, no, nope.

DePue: An artillery guy would say, "You're going to wear out the tube life after a while." Do you remember them changing tubes out or any major maintenance?

Hersemann: Nothing. The only thing I know: when they fired that one day, they rotated the weapons because they got too hot. They were getting too hot.

DePue: What would you say was the toughest part about serving in Korea while you were there—for you personally?

Hersemann: I think just going over there was the toughest part. When I was over there, I can't really say that anything was really tough, other than you get up in the morning and do your job and take care of yourself and do what you had to do. I never did question anybody why I was sent over there because that's what they wanted me to do. But I really didn't have any bad times over there myself that I was in jeopardy or too cold, because I took care of myself and things like that.

DePue: You were in the military at a time when it had recently integrated. Blacks and Whites working together in the same units, were still somewhat of an experiment. Did you see any problems with any of that?

Hersemann: We didn't have an overabundance of black in our outfit. We had some. I didn't have any in the kitchen—not one. I would say the most we had in our whole battery was less than, I would say, fifteen.

DePue: But no friction or no problems with integration?

Hersemann: No. The most friction we had was between them. One night, like I said, we got whiskey rations in there. Some of the black guys bought it, and they were sitting there talking. They got talking about their wives and bad things and stuff like that. They got mad and they started shooting at each other. Yeah, and they ran outside. Anyway, they took them away and I don't know what they did with them. They hauled them off someplace. Never did see them again.

DePue: But as far as you can see, otherwise it was very much a success of the integration?

Hersemann: I think it was, yeah.

DePue: Okay. How about the NCOs that you work with? Especially being the mess sergeant, you would have seen the supply sergeant quite a bit and especially the first sergeant a lot I would think

Hersemann: I think the total relationship with all the NCOs… Myself, I never had any problems with anybody. I mean I took care of myself. I didn't try to create any problems or anything. I just took care of myself. But I didn't see many instances where things were bad with the non-commissioned officers and the commissioned officers.

DePue: Would you say the leaders that you saw over there were good?

Hersemann: Yeah. I think the reason was because most of the people were career men in the Army who were serving at that particular time. There wasn't anybody there. I mean this all came up and they had to go and that's all they had. They were old-time people.

DePue: I would think that somebody like the first sergeant would be a World War II veteran, for example.

Hersemann: Yeah.

DePue: Was that the case?

Hersemann: Yeah. I only had one instance when I was –this was when I came back from overseas –I was down at Fort Riley, Kansas, and they wanted to put me in charge of a mess hall in OCS [officer candidate school] over there at Camp Forsyth. I told this Captain Davis, "I don't want anything to do with any GI stuff the rest of the time I'm in the Army. I don't want it. I just don't want it." He said, "What do you want to do?" I said, "Put me in S-4." [staffing for logistics] So he sent me down to the bivouac pool. I worked down there taking care of the stuff that the OCS students took on bivouac with them—the immersion heaters, garbage cans, pup tents and shoulder pads –anything that they had to use out there, we had to keep it up to snuff.

DePue: This was at Fort Riley?

Hersemann: Yeah, right, so anyway.

DePue: I've stayed in some of those buildings.

Hersemann: I was down there for a while doing that. Then one day the first sergeant called me over and he said, "You're supposed to go see Colonel Moon." I didn't know

what was up. I went over to see Colonel Moon. He wanted to know if I'd take care of the maintenance of the OCS grounds over there—mowing the grass and keeping the fields good so the OCS boys had parade grounds and the bleachers were all taken care of and stuff. They had a bungalow there that had to be maintained that was for the OCS boys if their folks came down there. They had a place to take them and visit and stuff like that.

I must have had about twenty or twenty-five guys under me down there. Anyway, this one particular day, the guys got the bungalow cleaned up. We were supposed to have a bunch of OCS come in for graduation and a bunch of their folks were coming. Sometime during the night, lo and behold, somebody got in that bungalow and messed it up. We were supposed to stand inspection the next morning. We found out that they did that. So I had to send some troops down there to clean it back up again.

I went to the first sergeant and I said, "I'm going to have to have my men excused from inspection today because of this." He said, "No way. They'll stand inspection regardless." I said, "Okay." I just walked away from him. I called up Colonel Moon and told him the story. He got hold of that first sergeant. Pretty soon that first sergeant comes and said, "Sergeant Hersemann, your men won't have to stand inspection today." I said, "Thanks." That's the last time that guy ever spoke to me. I put him in his place, which he should have been reasonable enough to know what was going on. That was about the only time.

DePue: But that was, obviously, well after you had returned back to the States?

Hersemann: Yeah, that was after I came back over here. But when I was over there I never did. Only see that first sergeant –or the master sergeant over there was in charge of the thing –when he came to chow. That's the only time I'd see him. I never did see him.

DePue: He must not have been bothering you because he knew you were doing your job.

Hersemann: Right. He was getting good food.

DePue: That's the bottom line.

Hersemann: Right, ten-four on that.

DePue: So you had the opportunity to see almost everybody rotating through the chow line three times a day. How would you describe the morale of your unit?

Hersemann: I tell you what, the morale was good. The guys always had good humor and joked around and things like that. I think it was the fact that, like I said, I didn't feel I was in too much danger at any time. I think they felt the same way. We had good times together. We'd play ball and stuff out in places we had to

play—football, baseball, or softball and stuff like that. Then at Christmastime –I don't know where we got all the stuff –we got an old tree and built a fence around it and had all kinds of stuff and made a sign that said, "Merry Christmas" and had lights on it and everything.

DePue: What was the Christmas menu or the Thanksgiving menu?

Hersemann: It was turkey and dressing and mashed potatoes and gravy and some type of vegetable. I couldn't tell you if it was corn or beans or what, and bread, rolls.

DePue: Were you able to make pies?

Hersemann: Yeah, yeah, yeah. We had a guy by the name of Lou Stinson, and he went to a confirmary—what do they call the cooking school in the Army?

DePue: Commissary?

Hersemann: Commissary Cooking School. He went to that; Lou did. He would bake the pies and a lot of stuff—different things –have fresh baked stuff. One time he had sweet potato pies. We didn't have pumpkin, but we had sweet potato pies and stuff like that. We had good Christmas and Thanksgiving. We had about the same menus for both times.

DePue: Do you recall anything really humorous that happened while you were over there? Lots of little things, I'm sure.

Hersemann: Oh, yeah. This one mess sergeant we had before I took over, this Jake Markusy I told you about, he was quite a drinker too. Young kid who liked to drink. He and I were out one day trying to round up some rations from different outfits over there. We were going down the MSR [main supply route], and there was a sign there that said "Korean liquor blinds." He said to me, just jokingly, "What does that sign say over there?" It's just like he was blind.

DePue: Okay. I saw that you had a shoebox stuffed with letters. I always ask people how they manage to keep in touch. You obviously were writing an awful lot of letters.

Hersemann: I wrote practically every day.

DePue: Did you receive letters as well?

Hersemann: Yeah. I imagine I have letters here from the time I went in all the way through.

DePue: Were you saving the letters you received then?

Hersemann: No. I don't know what happened to them. These are my mom's.

DePue: So your mother was saving all these to your folks back home.

Hersemann: Yeah, she had them in a box. They were all day-by-day, the day they were received.

DePue: Were you getting letters practically every day?

Hersemann: I say I received letters most generally every day. I had a lot of people writing to me other than my folks.

DePue: Who else was writing to you?

Hersemann: Oh, a couple of my buddies and a guy I used to work for. Then when I got to Fort Riley, Donna was writing to me practically every day and I was writing her practically every day. In fact she still has my letters.

DePue: We should mention on tape, Donna is your wife of fifty-five years?

Hersemann: Will be on February 8, fifty-five years.

DePue: But you told me earlier you didn't have a girlfriend when you first went over there.

Hersemann: I didn't. I really didn't.

DePue: This was afterwards.

Hersemann: This was afterwards. She met me when I came home on my leave from being overseas, when I came home.

DePue: Okay. I'm assuming that getting those letters every day was one of the high points of the day?

Hersemann: It sure was. We waited for mail call, yeah.

DePue: When was mail call, typically?

Hersemann: Usually had it about 10:30 in the morning. They had mail call about 10:30 every morning. If you didn't get a letter, that was one of your dumpy days.

DePue: Did they have it seven days a week?

Hersemann: I can't recall that. I would say they probably did, but I can't recall if they did or not.

DePue: I would also guess that Saturdays and Sundays didn't mean a whole lot to you.

Hersemann: No. You didn't get to go out and celebrate unless you had the beer rations come in on a Saturday or something like that.

DePue: Did you have chaplains come visit the unit occasionally?

Hersemann: Yeah, we had chaplains. They'd come and have a service. In fact, here's one. When I went to Osaka, here's the Osaka Army Hospital Chapel Protestant service. Then they had the Catholic Mass and stuff like that.

DePue: Osaka, so was that when you were on R and R?

Hersemann: Yeah, that's when I went on R and R.

DePue: Tell me a little bit about that. When did it happen, and how long did you get?

Hersemann: I think I went over there for about five days. I think it was five days. When I was scheduled going on the R and R to Osaka… You had a choice to pick out where you want to go. I talked to some of the guys prior, and they said Osaka was a nice place to go, so I picked Osaka. We went by truck down to Chungchon to catch the plane to go over to Osaka. We got there and we loaded on this plane and taxied down into the runway. They started revving up the motors and stuff like that, and never did move and so forth like that. They came by and said that the one motor wasn't revving up good enough that they wouldn't fly it over with it that way. We had to go back to the taxi area and they pulled the cowlings off of the motor and looked and did something to it. They felt that maybe they got it fixed. We stayed on the plane while they were doing that. After we got that done, they thought the fuel pressure lines weren't working right. We went back down to take off again, and the guy revved the motors and it wouldn't rev up.

Anyway, they said, "We're not going to fly you over there. You're going to have to go back and bunk up here for the night." We went back up there. While I was there I met a kid there who I went to school with. He was stationed there—Luke Spinder. Then there was another guy there by name of Fred Fry; he was a little bit older than I was. They both went to East Peoria High School at the same time I did. But anyway, we stayed there overnight, and there was some colonel and the plane crew. They flew that airplane back to Japan.

DePue: Anything you particularly remember about R and R, or just kind of a chance to relax a little bit?

Hersemann: We were looking for a place to eat this night. All the taxi drivers over there had to do is to go down the street and toot their horns. So we were looking for a place where we could get some American food. There were about five or six of us in that taxi. One of them said, "There's a place right across the street over there. Turn around." So that guy whipped around right in the middle of the street. There wasn't that much traffic. But he whipped that car right around in the middle of the street and pulled over. We went in and had an American meal. I think we all had steak that night when we were over there.

DePue: You could have been eating more steak in Korea than you were back in the States.

Hersemann: Right. But anyway, then it was the normal thing of looking at stuff to buy to send home and things like that. In fact, I have here, the cards… They gave you a declaration that you could send back. I sent a robe, a jacket, a couple ashtrays, a glass set, two pajama sets for my nieces, a spoon and forks to the United States to these people.

DePue: All back to your folks, I take it? Is this sent all back to your parents?

Hersemann: Yeah. Like the robe cost twelve hundred yen and the jacket was twenty three hundred. The ashtrays together were twenty four hundred yen and the glass set was fifteen hundred. The pajamas were thirty three hundred and the spoon and fork set was fifteen hundred. How much that related to in American currency, I couldn't tell you. At that particular time I was a corporal.

DePue: I had asked you when we talked earlier if you had any letters that you thought you might like to read. Do you have any letters?

Hersemann: I've got a few here.

DePue: Just to kind of get a flavor of what it was like when you were writing back home.

Hersemann: Here's one here. I wrote this December twenty-fifth, Christmas night at seven o'clock. It says: "Dear Mom and Dad, Well, here it is Christmas and you couldn't want a more beautiful day. It started snowing around ten and has been the rest of the day. I was off today, but I had to help the boys with dinner. I got up at 10 and worked the rest of the day until about 3:30. We had about the same thing for Christmas dinner as we did Thanksgiving: turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy, vegetable. I don't know how it happened, but I got your Christmas card yesterday, which was the day before. It couldn't have come at a better time. Then the night I got Vernie's [my brother] with this picture in it. They were all real nice and made me get a little bit homesick. I think it does a fellow good to get a little homesick once in a while just so it isn't all the time." (crying)

DePue: It's a great letter, Ken, and it goes on and on, it looks like.

Hersemann: It says he sent me a picture of my brother. I got it and cut it down and put it in my billfold, right next to my mom and dad, that way we'll be looking at each other.

DePue: You were writing long letters.

Hersemann: Yeah. Once in a while, I don't know where I got them, but I had some postcards that I would use.

DePue: Got another one here?

Hersemann: This is when we moved over. You said something about the type of ground and so forth. "Well, here we are all moved and all about settled down. We're all just about pooped out and haven't gotten rested up yet. The first morning I got up at 2:30 and loaded up and moved to the bivouac area. Then the next morning we got up at 2 and fed the chow and were hauled up, loaded up and ready to roll at 4:45AM. I drove all the way and we got here about 10:45, and we rested until 12. Then back to work again. We put up our tents and moved everything in and started to cook supper. I had another cold and didn't feel worth two cents, but I still work right along with the rest of the guys. In fact I did more than most of the cooks did.

"We were in bunkers and they were pretty nice and easy to heat. The ones we had aren't too nice and enough room for four men, so today I moved in with Don Seager at the ammo section. They have a good size one and it was pretty nice. So that leaves a little bit more room for the cooks to sleep. The other outfit had bunkers built just like had bunk beds. The one I am in now reminds me of a log cabin. The roof is made of logs and the bunks are made of logs, all except the boards that you lay on.

"We are about six miles behind the line, so just because we are sleeping in bunkers don't mean we are in danger. In fact we have to fire charge seven to hit the front lines. All in all it's a pretty nice position. The weather wasn't too cold when we moved. We ran into snow, but didn't make the roads slick. Then last night and this morning it snowed quite a bit—about four inches. Then this morning the sun came up and melted it quite a bit. We had a chief of section meeting today, and the Captain said they were 120 men leaving the battery next…" (pause)

DePue: I think you've got two pages there. Here you go.

Hersemann: "…next month, so I have a pretty good chance of getting out of here next month. Two more men are going home the twenty-fifth, so that leaves me about eighteen on the battery list. I'm sure in heck hope so I get out next month."

DePue: So this was mid-February or late February?

Hersemann: February 22.

DePue: And you're coming up to your nine months in combat here pretty soon.

Hersemann: Right.

DePue: So when did you get sent back?

Hersemann: I left the Forty-ninth Field Artillery on March 29 at 4:00AM to rotate to the U.S.A. Went through Inchon. Went from Inchon to Sasebo, Japan on a ship named *General Gaffey*. We were really happy. We thought we were going to go all the way on this nice ship back to the United States. But they just took us to

Sasebo, Japan. We processed in Sasebo, Japan and we boarded the ship *Marine Phoenix* to go to Seattle, Washington. We left Sasebo, Japan Easter morning April 13, 1952. We arrived in Seattle on April 28. Processed out and went to Fort Sheridan, Illinois. Processed again and I took the Rock Island Rocket home to Peoria. I was home for thirty days and was assigned to Fort Riley, Kansas. While at Fort Riley was at OCS school. I worked in supply and then was assigned to be in charge of maintenance of Camp Forsyth.

DePue: Camp Forsyth is a subcamp of Fort Riley.

Hersemann: Right. There were three different camps. There was one on both sides and then the main Fort Riley is on the hill.

DePue: I remember that piece of terrain very well because you're down kind of in a valley at Camp Forsyth. There's quite a bluff that you're looking at, isn't there?

Hersemann: Yeah.

DePue: I'm guessing that you don't see your family until you get back to East Peoria.

Hersemann: That's right, yeah.

DePue: Do you remember that reunion—getting back to the family?

Hersemann: (crying) Yeah. My brothers were there and their two kids. They had two girls and my young brother. That's about all that was there. It was really a joyous time.

DePue: For everybody involved.

Hersemann: It just so happened when I was over there my Dad bought a new car. He had bought a new Ford while I was over in Korea.

DePue: You saw your parents then, too.

Hersemann: Yeah, my parents and all of them were there. Then I was home for thirty days. That's when I left to go to Fort Riley, but I'll tell you what. When I knew that I was going to go to Fort Riley, Kansas, I hated that more than going overseas. I guess because I was over there and came home for a while and was with my parents and stuff. I cried quite a bit at the time going out to Fort Riley, Kansas when I drove out there.

DePue: Was it because you appreciated it so much more—what it was like being back with the family?

Hersemann: Right, yeah.

DePue: So it would be a safe guess to say that Ken Hersemann, at that time, had absolutely no intention of making a career of the Army?

Hersemann: That's for sure. (laughs) They wanted me to stay on, but I said, "No way." They offered me different deals, you know how they do that, and I said, "No way."

DePue: Did you have a two-year hitch since you were drafted?

Hersemann: Do what?

DePue: Did you have just two years total?

Hersemann: It wasn't a full two years. It was about twenty-one months I think total.

DePue: Okay. I think we've gone through the entire war. I've got a few questions I'd like to ask about meeting Donna for the first time. Tell us a little bit more about how that happened. Was that during the time you were back from leave from Korea?

Hersemann: I was home on my leave from Korea. Wayne Gablehouser was going with a girl that Donna worked with down there in Caterpillar. Her name was Velma Cooke. They set me up on the date with Donna.

DePue: What was her maiden name?

Hersemann: Cordes.

DePue: Cordes?

Hersemann: C-o-r-d-e-s.

DePue: Okay.

Hersemann: I don't know. It seemed like we kind of hit it off pretty good. Then we had a time when we had a reunion or something, when we went up to Woody's house for dinner? Yeah, that's when she first met me. Fourth of July. It just seemed like everything hit it off—three girls and—

Hersemann: I remember going home and telling my mother. My father died when I was just a teenager.

Hersemann: She must have had a good…

Hersemann: I…

DePue: I hope we're picking some of this up on the microphones. I assume we're picking it up in the background.

Hersemann: She must have made a good impression on me. I liked her very much or something because I can remember sometimes when I went home from her house, I don't remember even go through some of the towns that I went through.

DePue: You were in a hurry to get there then, huh?

Hersemann: No, I was going home.

DePue: Oh, okay.

Hersemann: I was going home.

DePue: Let me ask you some more general questions at the end here. Did you get involved in any veterans organizations when you came back?

Hersemann: I did for a while. I was in a VFW, and I was in a position I guess, too busy or something, but I didn't attend too many of the meetings. I felt that if I wasn't active in the thing and so forth, there was no sense for me to belong to it. That was the only time I ever did. I get a lot of things in the mail to join American Legion and stuff like that, but I just don't do it.

DePue: You made a long and sounds like a very successful career in A & P and just working in grocery stores in general.

Hersemann: Right.

DePue: You're the most knowledgeable guy I know when it comes to that. You know the price of everything.

Hersemann: I try to keep up on it as much as I can.

(unintelligible)

Hersemann: I was in the sales department and so forth. Then I was in charge of the bakery, all the candy that was bought and sold, and all the hand-made, private label, A & P private labeled products and so forth like that. I set up sales programs and pricing and so forth with what we would do for Christmas or any other general.

DePue: I'm going to ask you a couple questions, take you to the big picture and tie into the Korean War experience again. Spent a year over there. Things were beginning to look up a little bit for the Americans when you got there. Do you think your particular sacrifice, your experience, was justified?

Hersemann: I would say a new thing. They finally got the Thirty-eighth Parallel established and so forth. But I can't feel that it's been 100 percent success because we still have troops sitting over there trying to… I don't know if they're trying to stabilize the conditions over there or what.

DePue: Did the war make sense to you at the time?

Hersemann: No. It still doesn't.

DePue: What it was about in the first place or why we were fighting over there?

Hersemann: They still say that we're fighting for our freedoms, and I think right today I said, "The way a lot of our freedoms are," that they are sort of screwed down by limitations of what you can do. They say freedom of speech, I mean you just can't go out there and belittle somebody. That's not freedom. That is slander and so forth and a lot of that is what's going on. People say things in the paper about President Bush that he's stupid, idiotic and things like that in the letters to the editor and stuff. I don't feel that that is the right way to talk about people.

DePue: That's our American definition of freedom of speech.

Hersemann: But that's a freedom. I mean I don't care for President Bush, but I'm not going to tell you that he's ignorant or something like that because that's wrong. That's a transgression against his particular life.

DePue: How do you think your experience in the Korean War changed you or did it?

Hersemann: I don't think it did. I don't think it did. I think the way that I was brought up in my life and so forth, the way I lived and did before I ever went, is what really regulated my life. Is to do things the right way and work hard and try to be successful in whatever thing you did. That's just the way I've been all my life. When I got out of school and stuff like that, I made up my mind that I wasn't going to depend on anybody to support me—that I was going to see my life through the way I wanted to do it and be self-sufficient.

DePue: You've obviously done a very good job of that.

Hersemann: The jobs I had, up to a certain point, weren't very good paying jobs, but I had a wife that was very understanding and took care of the home front. (crying) She was a good woman. In fact, she was the one more or less responsible for my kids being the way they are—that they knew right from wrong and did things that they should do.

DePue: I'm sure they pick some of that up from you too.

Hersemann: Oh, I wasn't home that much. I was gone working all the time. That's one thing. I devoted most of my life to my jobs I guess.

DePue: There was hard work that you were doing right from the time before you were out of high school. You were working in the A &, P and I'm sure you were working hard. You got to Korea and one thing you can say about a mess sergeant, some people might say well they're out of harm's way. But you were probably working eighteen hour days over there.

Hersemann: Yeah, a long time. You were always working over there.

DePue: Six or seven days a week.

Hersemann: Up early in the morning and was there all day long. You had to see that things got done after you were the last thing. Then you had to prepare for tomorrow.

DePue: The Korean War in American memory is the war that seems to be forgotten. In fact that's the name for it.

Hersemann: That's the way it is because right today, I mean most of the thing is Vietnam War veterans and stuff is the most stuff that you see about today. I mean even they have put that in a pretense above the World War II veterans I think, in a lot of senses.

DePue: You're sandwiched between those two. When I was growing up World War II always got all the attention. Then Vietnam grasped everybody's imagination because of how horribly things were going there sometimes. Korea was just kind of forgotten then and has been ever since. Has that bothered you?

Hersemann: It does when some people try to put too much emphasis on different things that have been happening and different things like that.

DePue: What would it be about your experience or about the Korean War that you would want Americans to understand a little bit more?

Hersemann: When I got back from Korea, I think we got like… I've got a record here some place. I think right here it does, it had an MOP. Do you know what MOP is?

DePue: I'm not familiar with that.

Hersemann: Mustering out pay. When I come out of the Army from the Korean War, I got $300. At that particular time, whoever was the governor of the State of Illinois, they gave us $100. But now they think that everybody should get millions of dollars. Like the guys that fight over in Iraq, when they get killed, whether people get $10,000?

DePue: They have the insurance; they get a lot more than that.

Hersemann: I had insurance too, but I cancelled it out after a period of time. But I think Army insurance pays $10,000. I think that is a mere token from the United States that is asking people to go over there and fight for our freedoms. That they pay them $10,000 if they get killed. Do you know that after 9-11 when the towers came down, those survivors and the people that got killed in there got over millions of dollars? Here we're letting our boys go over there and getting killed, which they shouldn't have to do, and we're paying them $10,000 for their life.

DePue: They are very strongly encouraged to take life insurance because it's very, very cheap. It's a minimum of $200,000; it might be a lot more than that now. Anyway, what else would you want them to remember about your experiences in Korea that we should understand about it? Anything else that strikes you?

Hersemann: The only thing I'm going to say is the fact that everybody, whatever you do and wherever you go, if you're in the Army or National Guard or Navy, if everybody works together and harmonizes together, they're going to be more successful in accomplishing their goals or what they want to do.

DePue: That sounds like very good advice. Is there anything else you want to say in conclusion here, Kenny?

Hersemann: No. I'm not sorry I went to Korea. Like I said, I was never afraid over there or that I was going to lose my life or anything like that. The best thing you can do in life is more or less follow what the good Lord wants you to do and that's to work hard and do everything right.

DePue: Your life is an example of exactly that, I think.

Hersemann: What I have I worked hard for, and my wife helped me.

DePue: I think you're a true gentleman. This has been a real pleasure to talk to you, and I hope you enjoyed it as much as I have. There are lessons to be learned.

Hersemann: There are a lot of things that since I started this process of going through that I remember more of what happened now then what I did before because I never did think about it during the course of my life.

DePue: How many times have you had opportunities to talk to your kids about your experiences?

Hersemann: Many times, but I never did. I never have.

DePue: Because they weren't asking or because…?

Hersemann: They never did ask.

DePue: I hope sometime they'll listen to your story because it's worth listening to.

Hersemann: No, they never did ask.

DePue: Final words, then Ken?

Hersemann: Yeah, that's it.

DePue: Okay, thanks very much. It's been a pleasure.

(end of interview)