Interview with Robert Kirby

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is Friday, the 8th of October 2010. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. And today I'm in Mason City in the afternoon, a gorgeous October afternoon, and I have the honor to sit down and chat with Robert Kirby. But you go by Bob, don't you?

Kirby: Yes. Yes, I do.

DePue: Okay. Bob, why don't you tell us—well, this is going to be a story about your experiences during the Korean War. You have a very interesting story to tell that's not the typical story that I've had the opportunity to discuss, so I'm looking forward to this. Why don't you tell us when and where you were born?

Kirby: I was born in Lincoln, Illinois, at the hospital, in 1931 in August 15, 1931.

DePue: Did you grow up in Lincoln?

Kirby: No, I grew up in a farm on Route Ten, west of New Holland, Illinois, and that's where I was before I went to service.

DePue: How big a farm did your parents have?

Kirby: It was a rather small farm. It was only around a hundred acres.

DePue: What kind of farm?

Kirby: We raised some chickens and cows, and they had milk cows. We also raised crops of corn and beans and, of course, hay for the cattle.

DePue: In other words, a pretty standard farm for this part of the country.

Kirby: Yes. We weren't a large farm, but we managed it. My dad managed to raise four of us kids, so. (laughs)

DePue: Have any other boys in the family?

Kirby: No, there wasn't. I had three sisters.

DePue: And where did you come in the mix?

Kirby: I'm the second, second one that was born.

DePue: Now, farmers always want to have boys so they can have help with the chores.

Kirby: Yeah, right.

DePue: I assume you had your hands full of chores?

Kirby: Oh, yes. Milking was probably my first job. Dad had me hand-milking at that time. I was, oh, I would say around seven years old, six or seven years old, when I started milking by hand. And we done that morning and night.

DePue: That's getting towards the end of the Depression. At that age did you have an understanding that times were tough? Were they tough for your dad?

Kirby: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, there were. I can remember us being very cautious about where we went and spent any money. We went to New Holland on Saturday night, and I generally got my wages for what I did at that time. Helping Dad was fifteen cents.

DePue: Fifteen cents an hour?

Kirby: No, fifteen cents for the week. (laughter)

DePue: I didn't think it was an hour.

Kirby: Yeah. (laughs) I'd spend it very cautiously. I would buy an ice cream cone—I think at that time was a nickel if I remember right—and the rest of it I spent in penny candy so that it was something to last me through the week.

DePue: Did your dad have any farm machinery?

Kirby: Oh, yes. We had at that time a Fordson tractor, a small one, which is small. It only pulled two fourteens, I think it was, plow. And anyway, it was sufficient for the acreage that we had, I think.

DePue: Where'd you go to school when you first got started?

Kirby: I went to Pollock School, which is about three miles from my house, and—

DePue: Is this the classic one-room school house in the country?

Kirby: Yes. In the country. Yes, it was.

DePue: How'd you get there? Three miles is quite a distance.

Kirby: Well, most of the time my mother took me and my sisters, of course, were all going too sometimes, when they got to the age. We would start out walking when we got out of school. We'd walk down the country road, and sometimes my mother would come and get us. If she wasn't right on time, we walked quite a ways. We never did, only two or three times, walk the full distance to home.

DePue: How many years did you go to that school?

Kirby: I went there eight years.

DePue: What was it like? Do you think you got a decent education in that one-room schoolhouse?

Kirby: Oh, yes. Well, I think so. It was very good. The teachers were very good. I think I had eight different teachers in the eight years that I was there, and some of them were not all—just changed every year. But one year one of them got sick and then we had to find a replacement to finish out the year.

DePue: Were they all women teachers?

Kirby: No. I had one man teacher, and he was one of them that finished out a year.

DePue: When you go to a school like that, were there certain chores that you had to do even at school?

Kirby: Oh, yeah. Later, in my seventh and eighth grade, I had the chore of firing the furnace, and then before I left, to bank it back in, because it was just throwing in lumps of coal and wood to keep it so it would have a little fire yet in the morning.

DePue: When you got up to the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade, were you expected to help out some of the younger kids with their studies as well?

Kirby: Not really. (coughs) Excuse me. I don't think I was in that category. Maybe they didn't (coughs) excuse me. But anyway, I wasn't asked to do that. (coughs) Sorry about that.

DePue: You need to get a drink of water or something here?

Kirby: Yeah.

(pause in recording)

DePue: I'll get us started. Okay, we took a very quick break. What I wanted to ask you about next here, Bob, is if you remember when you got electricity? Because you told me initially that the house didn't have electricity, the farm didn't.

Kirby: No, it didn't. I think it was around '39, '38 or '39, 1938, '39.

DePue: What was that like, getting electricity after all those years?

Kirby: Well, it was different. (laughs) Didn't have to have lanterns and taking care of lanterns, that kind of stuff, which was a good asset. But electricity, you also had to do some wiring for electricity in the house and so forth. And it was different, very different.

DePue: Were there some conveniences that came along with that inside the house?

Kirby: Oh, yeah. We finally had a radio, and I can remember sitting listening to Joe Louis fight. I can't remember the guy, but I remember listening and had it on the radio.

DePue: How about indoor plumbing? Did you have that?

Kirby: No, not until after I got out of service.

DePue: Did folks in the city, the big city of Mason City (laughs) or places like that, did they have indoor plumbing usually?

Kirby: Well, yes. In the city I noticed that there were lots of houses that had indoor plumbing.

DePue: Well, I got a note here I'm supposed to ask you about the prefabricated house.

Kirby: Yes. Dad and I helped put that up. Dad bought that house in 1958. It was brought to our place in sides and so forth, you know, eight-foot sections. We backed up the truck and it all come off that truck, and as it came off the truck, we set it on the foundation. Me and my dad had already dug the basement and already laid the foundation. They gave us that measurement. So the house come right off the truck and was put up.

DePue: This is obviously the house that you finally had indoor plumbing in.

Kirby: Yes.

DePue: I'm sure it's hard for some people to comprehend that even after World War II, even after you came back from Korea, you still had another four or five years without indoor plumbing, even.

Kirby: Yes.

DePue: Which do you think was a bigger change for the family? Was it the getting electricity or getting indoor plumbing?

Kirby: I don't know. I think my parents enjoyed that electricity. They were a little curious about it, I think, at the beginning, but they eventually liked it very much. But later on, my mother, I know, was very happy to have indoor plumbing.

DePue: And it doesn't take much to figure out why, does it?

Kirby: No. (laughs)

DePue: Okay, let's get you back to the late 1930s and early forties. I want to ask you if 1941, December 7th, if you remember Pearl Harbor, and how you heard the news.

Kirby: Yes. Yes, I remember that. I think my dad went to New Holland, and he come back—I don't know, went for some groceries, I believe. Anyway, he come back, he come in the house, and he said something "We got to turn on the radio." And turned on the radio and listened, that Pearl Harbor had been bombed by the Japanese. It was being broadcast and discussed and so forth.

DePue: Now, you had to be all of ten years old at the time. Did you have an appreciation for any of that?

Kirby: Yes. I was very curious about it, but I didn't know all the facility about it at that time, being ten years old. Very curious. Eventually, though, I was always glad to read something about it. My uncle, Arthur Hank, was taken into the service, World War II, and he was on Adac Island in Alaska.

DePue: In the Aleutian chain?

Kirby: Aleutians, yes. He left his *Life* magazine prescription with my mother. I always was very glad to get that magazine (laughs) when it came, because there were pictures in there about World War II and everything.

DePue: So that's how you kept track of the war?

Kirby: Yes.

DePue: Was there any part of you that said, Boy, I wish I was a few years older?

Kirby: Well, (laughs) no, I don't know if I really wished that I—but I did seem to be very interested in the way things were doing, you know, the way the war was run. It was a new era for me.

DePue: Do you have any memories that are associated with things like ration stamps?

Kirby: Oh, yes. I know Dad had the—at times he was wanting some new tires for the car and he didn't have enough stamps, so he had to do the best he could patching up

tires. Some of the tires, (laughs) I think had too many patches on them, the tubes in them. But he made it go until he got enough stamps to buy tires.

DePue: Did either your father or mother get work during the war?

Kirby: No. No, they didn't work or anything like that during the war. They did all—just stuck around with the farm right there.

DePue: I imagine those were good years for farmers, though. They're finally making a little bit of a profit, I would think.

Kirby: Yeah. In fact, the price, I think, if I remember right, the price was a little better because of World War II, grain price and so forth.

DePue: How about things like aluminum drives or rubber drives or anything like that? Did you help them out with some of that?

Kirby: Yeah. The one thing I remember, when I was in school, I went to school and they said, "Bring your gunny-sack with you." I brought a gunny sack, and I couldn't imagine what we were going to do. So teacher says that we're going to go walk down this country road because there's some milkweed pods that have these very fuzzy pods that got a lot of light stuff in it. The seeds is really what they are. And she said, "We're going to collect them for the war." For the life of me, I couldn't figure out what they were going to be using them for. Well, come to find out they told me they were being used for life preservers, put in the life preservers, and those kind of things. So we picked quite a few milkweed pods. (laughs)

DePue: Did you get a chance to go to the movie theaters ever, check on the newsreels?

Kirby: Yes. Yes, I did. The newsreels already had some information about the war, how it was doing and everything, and it was pretty interesting to me. I was glad to see that.

DePue: Do you remember anything about the end of the war? Which now we're talking about May in Europe and August in 1945 for the Pacific.

Kirby: Yeah. I think—I can't remember too many details about it, but I think I remember the celebrations in big cities, people celebrating out in the streets and so forth.

DePue: Well, let's get you into high school, then. And where did you end up going to high school?

Kirby: I ended up right here in Mason City. That would have been nineteen forty… I graduated in 1949, so I started four years before that.

DePue: Forty-five.

Kirby: Yeah, '45.

DePue: Were you working still on the farm during all that time?

Kirby: Yes. I would help Dad quite a bit at that time.

DePue: Did you know in high school what you wanted to do with your life?

Kirby: No, I didn't know, have any specific plans about where I was going to work or… But I can remember after getting out of high school that I always looked for some extra jobs. We got into hay baling in different places, and I worked at a garage here in town for a while as an oil changer and body shop work, mostly sanding body—cars and so forth. But anyway, it was work and it made some money. You know, I had some spending money.

DePue: You like to work with your hands, then?

Kirby: Oh, yeah. Yes.

DePue: Did you have any thoughts about the military service at that time?

Kirby: No, I wasn't really thinking about it, unh-uh.

DePue: But all this time you were also working on the farm while you were doing some of these other jobs?

Kirby: Yeah. Whenever Dad needed some help, then he'd let me know that he needed some help. But most of the time we'd get caught up in his work and he'd tell me that "You can go out and look for something if you want to, can find another job, and maybe it's a part-time job, and that'd be fine."

DePue: Well, about a year after the time you graduated from high school, the North Koreans invaded the South. That was June 25, 1950. So this is just about one year after you graduated. Do you remember that?

Kirby: Yeah. Yes, I do. I remember that, and I—at that time I was working at Caterpillar. I got a job at Caterpillar, I don't know, it must have been about three or four months before that. They come down the aisle and said something about a war that broke out in the—I think they mentioned Korea, and I'd never heard of it, never had any idea where it was. Some of the guys I was working with, I asked them, "Where is Korea?" They didn't know either. But wait a minute, I think I know a guy over here that knows that. Well, he went over and talked to him, and he came back and he says, "It's over in the Pacific, out in the Pacific. It's probably near China." And that's all I knew at that time.

DePue: When you guys first heard the news, did you think to yourselves, Okay, I'm draft age; this might have some implications for me?

Kirby: Well, I didn't really think about it then, but I remembered after about two months after that I told that I knew about Korea. I was still working at Caterpillar, and

Caterpillar went on strike. I came home and I went to work for a farmer east of me, and he needed some help, so I was over there working, and I got a notice, oh, a month or so after I started with him. I got a notice from the government. Uncle Sam wanted to see me. (laughter) I got a notice to go for a physical in St. Louis, which I did. I come back out of that. Then another month or two after that, they inducted me.

DePue: What did your parents think about that?

Kirby: Dad had an idea, I think, that things were going to come to that, but Mom was a little hesitant, being she had a brother that was in World War II, and there were things she wasn't very happy about that. So.

DePue: You ended up in the Army, I know. Was that your choice?

Kirby: Well, no. I just was inducted and went into the Army. That's all there was to it.

DePue: Bob, did you have a girlfriend at the time?

Kirby: No, I didn't. No.

DePue: So that makes it a little bit simpler for you, maybe.

Kirby: Yeah.

DePue: Tell us about basic training, then. Where did you go, and when did you get there?

Kirby: Basic training, I went there—let's see. I was inducted in July, and—

DePue: July of '52?

Kirby: Yeah, and soon after I was inducted, I took my physical—you know, I went to St. Louis. Rode a train to…I can't think about these names.

DePue: Well, I know where you ended up. You ended up at Fort Gordon, Georgia for basic, didn't you?

Kirby: Yes. Yes, I did. I took my testing up in Battle Creek Michigan, for testing.

DePue: A lot of guys in this part of the country ended up going to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Why did you go to Fort Gordon?

Kirby: I have no idea. They always told me that it all depends on what your test came out with, and what my test read, I have no idea yet today.

DePue: Do you remember anything about basic training? Was it hard for a country boy like yourself?

Kirby: Oh, not really. I know of some of them that were in my group that probably were a little—thought it was a little harder than the usual, but for me, I was already been very active and working here and there, so I was in pretty good shape.

DePue: Did you attend advanced individual training in Fort Gordon as well?

Kirby: Yes, MP training.

DePue: Okay, MP being military police.

Kirby: Yes.

DePue: Was that something that you had tested for, or was that just—

Kirby: Evidently, because this whole company I was in, almost all of us were MPs.

DePue: What kind of training did you get to be an MP?

Kirby: We learned a lot of things about laws, some laws you—how to handle things and people and different types of people, and some things you can do and you can't do. It was pretty interesting. We learned how to judo and those kind of things.

DePue: Now, we know what's going to happen to you once you get to Korea. Did you get any training while you were at Fort Gordon in how to work with prisoners of war?

Kirby: Very little. We had no training about different languages, about how the different people reacted to orders or whatever.

DePue: Do you think that the Army could have done a better job to prepare you for what you're going to end up doing?

Kirby: I think so. It would have been—at that time would have been better, because it's—it was all new ballgames to me when we landed in Korea.

DePue: Okay. Now, there's lots of different places in the Army in 1952 that you could have been sent to. There's certainly tens of thousands of Americans stationed in Germany, in Panama, in Alaska, all over the continental United States. When did you find out that you were heading to Korea?

Kirby: Well, I think when I graduated at Fort Gordon, I went to the bulletin board and looked, and it said my name was to go to FECOM, and I didn't know what FECOM was at that time, (laughs) but somebody told me right there soon and said it's Far East Command. That's around Japan, so forth, yeah, Korea, yes. So I knew I was going to go that direction, where I was going to—some of them that were with me on that trip did stay in Japan. Some of us went on to Korea.

DePue: Where and when did you ship out, then?

Kirby: Oh, that date—I can't give you a date.

DePue: Well, I know you were in Korea by December of '52, so it must have been roughly late November or December timeframe.

Kirby: I would say it's, yeah, eighteen weeks of—from July eighth, eight weeks of—to sixteen weeks of MP training in the boot camp just to come out with somewhere around December.

DePue: Did you ship out from Seattle, then?

Kirby: Yeah, Fort Lewis, Washington.

DePue: What kind of ship were you on?

Kirby: I was on a big troop ship, the [USS] *Walton Walker* ship was the name of it.

DePue: Luxurious?

Kirby: Not really. (laughs) We did pretty good for a while until we run into a storm and then got pretty heavy waves and so forth. And come to find out there was quite a few of them sick, troops on there. (laughs) I had a buddy there, Jim, he went through boot camp with me and MP training, and he was really deathly sick. He was down in the hold, and he wouldn't eat. I would eat, and it didn't seem to bother me. (laughs) I took him some food once and he said, "I can't eat any," and I said, "Well, you got to eat something." Well, I went back up—I said, "My buddy don't want to eat this." The cook says, "Well, wait a minute, I'll fix him something light. If he throws that up, well, it won't be so bad." I think it was some pudding or something. So I took that down there, and I said, "Here, eat some of this." Well, he took a bite of it, and he says, "Well, I might be able to hold that," but pretty soon it all come back up again. (laughs) Anyway, I finally got him to eat something, and he got something down and kind of held it. The storm kind of leveled out and wasn't so bad.

DePue: Did you decide by the end of that trip that you were glad you weren't in the Navy?

Kirby: Well, yes. I wasn't particularly sick or anything about it, but I was getting kind of tired of going with all the ship movement. (laughs) But we had a pretty good storm. They give me a job on that ship. They said, "Being you got a good, strong stomach, you can go in there and take care of the garbage deal". When we have to dump the garbage out in the tube and it goes out into the ocean. So that was my job for the rest of the trip. (laughter)

DePue: Not the best of jobs either, was it?

Kirby: No, it wasn't, but at least I got the job done.

DePue: Where did you land in Japan?

Kirby: Oh, Yokohama.

DePue: Were you there very long?

Kirby: No. We were there about two or three days.

DePue: And then they shipped you right out to Korea, I would assume.

Kirby: Yeah, yeah. The second day they said, "Get a rifle at the office over there and go over to firing range and zero it in." I knew I was (laughs) heading for something different.

DePue: But you didn't know at that time what your final unit of assignment was going to be?

Kirby: No, I didn't. I didn't know where I was going. I knew I was going to Korea, but I didn't know where, what I was going to be doing. Had no idea.

DePue: How'd you end up getting to Korea, then?

Kirby: Well, we rode an LST[1]. I think that took three days.

DePue: Now, going on a troop ship is a lot less than luxurious. LST even worse than a troop ship?

Kirby: Oh, worse, yeah. You were just in a boat that's made for running several things, you know, trucks and tanks and whatever, you know. But I rode that over to Inchon. We debarked at Inchon, and I was a little surprised. I thought, Well, we'll pull right up and get off at the dock, but we didn't.

DePue: Well, I wanted to—several times now for the rest of this conversation about your time in Korea, I want to refer to something that you had written. And this is a pretty major effort. This is about twelve, thirteen pages single-spaced of some reminiscences that you had. When did you write this?

Kirby: Probably about two months ago.

DePue: Oh, this is fairly recent, then?

Kirby: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: Very recent.

[1] LST: Landing Ship Tank is an open ocean ship for landing tanks and personnel on a contested shore; a drop-down bow allows vehicles to debark directly onto the beach or intended landing place.

Kirby: I made a start on it probably a year or two ago, (laughs) and I laid it down and then left it, and eventually I get to thinking about something about it and then I think, Well, maybe I can pick it up and write it again.

DePue: Why did you write it?

Kirby: Why? I don't know. I thought that my age, I think if I was going to ever write anything, I'd better start getting something down.

DePue: Okay. We might trade back and forth here, but there are several different passages as we continue to talk that I'd like to have read in. I'm going to let you read the first one, and I've highlighted the stuff that I'd like to have you read in here on this first page.

Kirby: Ok. "We were about a half-mile out from shore to Inchon Harbor, and we boarded a landing craft for a ride to shore. And I could see the faint outline of a hill on my left. I had visions of us stepping out on the mainland on a pier but found out we were to wade ashore on a beach because of low tide. The water was icy cold and come up to our knees. Once ashore, our feet were wet and cold. And soon the corporal led us to a tent where we were issued new Arctic boots. We sat down. Still wondering what was next, we were marched to a train about half a mile away. We were loaded on the train in passenger cars with no seats and no heat. Most of us lay on our duffle bags and tried to sleep a little, since it was about two o'clock in the morning. I fell asleep, only to waken sometime in the morning by men shuffling around and daylight coming in a window. I looked out the window to see what kind of place I was in. Sort of rough terrain, hills, mountains, and I guess rice paddies on every area capable. Few roads, no trees, and occasional vehicles. They were short people whom all seemed to look alike—black hair, slanted eyes, clothing of peculiar nature, and occasionally recognizable items of GI dress."

DePue: Okay. Go ahead and leave it there for a little bit. We'll come back to this. You've got a very good memory for all the detail after all these years.

Kirby: Well, once I get started on it, more things come to me that I almost forgot about, and it does bring back my memory as I started on it.

DePue: Once you got on this train, then, where did you get shipped?

Kirby: I went to Pusan, and Jim and I stayed in a retro area, they called it.

DePue: Well, here's the obvious question, and you brought it up when you wrote this. You get shipped all the way to the western side of Korea, all the way north, close to Seoul, and dropped off at Inchon, and then you head back all the way to the southern part. Why wouldn't they have just dropped you off at Pusan to begin with?

Kirby: We never did ever find that out, why. (laughter) I'm sure, like I think I stated here, I'm sure the Army has their reasons, and whether they're sufficient reasons, I don't know yet.

DePue: But they weren't bothering to ask or tell you, were they?

Kirby: No, no. In fact, any time you are being moved, by boat or by airplane or anything, you don't know where you're going in the Army.

DePue: Did you know what your unit of assignment was when you were on that train?

Kirby: No.

DePue: So you had no idea what you were going to end up doing, even.

Kirby: No, I didn't. Not a thing. I didn't have no idea.

DePue: When did you find out, then?

Kirby: Well, I arrived at Pusan, and they sent Jim and I to a little prison camp right outside of Pusan, and we thought, Well, we're going to be in charge of prisoners. Well, I was given a job at the motor pool with supervising about four or five prisoners that handled fuel and barrels and so forth, those kind of things, and that's all I did for a few days, maybe a week.

DePue: What's Jim's name, last name?

Kirby: Landreath.

DePue: Landreth?

Kirby: Landreath, d-r-e-a-t-h.

DePue: Okay. So your buddy that you hooked up with back at Fort Gordon?

Kirby: Oh, yes, yes.

DePue: Went through basic and AIT [Advanced Individual Training] with you?

Kirby: Yeah. He was from Mason City also, or not Mason City, but right close to Mason City.

DePue: Had the two of you enlisted—or, excuse me, been drafted at the same time?

Kirby: Yes, pretty well.

DePue: Well, the Army was at least nice enough to send you over with your buddy, huh?

Kirby: (laughs) Yeah, and Jim and I both were glad that each of us were together, but…

DePue: Okay, I've got a very short passage I wanted to read in next about this initial camp that you're at. "The compound that held these prisoners was right beside our camp and held approximately 250 prisoners. We found out that these were not hardened communist prisoners but a variety of Koreans who were suspected to be collaborating with the communists during the frequent changes of the area in which the people lived." Explain to us what exactly you mean in terms of these folks who were kind of picked up during the early days of the war.

Kirby: Yeah, the movement of the line had been greatly changing, as I understood, and whenever you move you're also going into habitats of people, living areas and so forth, and as they told me that a lot of them were—the North Korean Army would ask—make the male people that would make good soldiers to join in with them and to fight for the North Koreans. Sometimes they were forced to do it, as I understand it. So they didn't have any choice, I think, because most of the time they would kill them if they didn't and those kind of deals. So they were forced to join that group. Then when they were captured by the U.S., well, we had no idea who they, what they were, just non-communists or communists. Well, they subjected them all to be communists until proven different. Eventually they did sort out a few of them, and that's where these were at Pusan. They said these were appropriately non-communist people; they were just subjected into the communist army and never had any choice.

DePue: And did you understand that at the time?

Kirby: No, I didn't quite understand the whole thing, but I had some feelings of what I was getting into. (laughs)

DePue: Okay. But apparently that particular group at that camp did not pose much of a threat, then.

Kirby: No. No, in fact, the prisoners I had working there were very subtle people. They didn't seem to want to cause any trouble at all.

DePue: You described this in the text here as Prison Camp Number Nine. What was your unit of assignment?

Kirby: What do you mean, unit of assignment?

DePue: Your unit that you were assigned to.

Kirby: Oh, I don't know. I don't know if we ever heard the unit at that place.

DePue: Well, I got from someplace here, Bob, that you were in the 8137th Military Police Group. Does that sound familiar?

Kirby: That would not be on Pusan.

DePue: That was once you got to Koje-do?

Kirby: Koje-do, yes.

DePue: Okay, okay, well, I'm jumping a little bit ahead, then.

Kirby: Yeah.

DePue: At this initial camp, then, what was your specific job there?

Kirby: Actually, I was in the motor pool where I was assigned I remember finally I got a black captain that came into the motor pool to oversee things, I think, in the motor pool. He asked me one day, he says, "I got a job for you. I want you to sit down and type up these requisitions for parts, and I'll be back in about two hours and pick them up, and I want to mail them in for a requisition to get more parts for our Jeeps and so forth." I told him, I said, "Sir, I cannot type. I hunt and peck, yes, and I don't know whether I'll have them done by two hours." Well, I didn't. (laughs) And he was quite mad. He was one of these that—black captain that had been in World War II and had a wooden leg on one leg. He was very short with me. (laughs) He got pretty heated, and so he grabbed up the papers and said, "I'll find somebody else." But anyway, I thought I must have made a boo-boo there.

DePue: It sounds like you didn't stay at that camp for very long, though.

Kirby: No, I didn't. Probably in another week or something like that I was called to the offices down there, and they said, "Yeah, go get your bags and baggage and come back here in the morning, and you're going to be shipped out to Pusan. Go on down to the dock. Okay. Of course, they don't tell you where you're going. Well, we got down there and found out there was, oh, there was about seven or eight other GIs that were there, and we boarded the landing boat, landing craft, and we took off in it. None of us knew, and you asked the driver, and he won't tell you. (laughs) `So. Anyway, so you ride for, I don't know, probably an hour, two hours, maybe two and a half, I don't know—you don't remember the distance that we traveled in that thing. But we finally got to this island out there, and we unboarded there, and they had lunch or had something to eat. We got in, got to eat in there, and we come back out, and he says, "Well, all you guys come over here to the landing craft, and some of you are going to a different place and some of you are going to stay here."

DePue: Now, "here" being Koje-do?

Kirby: Yeah.

DePue: Which is—"do" I think in Korean is "island," so Koje Island, basically.

Kirby: Yes. They didn't call my name to board the craft or to stay there—the ones that stayed there—I was back on the boat, and I didn't know where I was going from there, but I found out later, afterwards, that I was still going to be on that same island, only on the other side of it. We rode for at least a good half-hour or more and got around to it and undocked there. There was another man with me. We

undocked right there, and we took our bags in and reported to the officer in charge, and he said, "Yeah," he says, "I'll assign you to bunk down here and you can go in there and go on down." We were—

DePue: This place then is Chogu-ri? Is that where you ended up?

Kirby: Chogu-ri, yes.

DePue: Was Jim Landreath still with you?

Kirby: No.

DePue: So you finally got split up from your buddy.

Kirby: Yeah. I lost him at the Camp Nine.

DePue: Okay.

Kirby: He was still there when I left.

DePue: Was there a big prison camp or a prison compound, then, at Chogu-ri, where you ended up?

Kirby: Yes. There was one enclosure that I know of, and each enclosure houses probably about four or five compounds in it, and in each compound in there is around 550 prisoners.

DePue: Were these compounds adjacent to each other? Was one fence the same as the next fence, or are they separated some?

Kirby: No, no. They tried that in the beginning, somebody told me, one of the GIs that were there. He explained to me that we had to have them spread apart enough so that they couldn't communicate with each other from compound to compound. So they were separated at a distance.

DePue: Who was it was in these compounds? Was it North Koreans or Chinese or both?

Kirby: At this, Chogu-ri, there was all North Koreans, all of them.

DePue: Were these the same kind of prisoners you had when you were near Pusan at Camp Nine?

Kirby: No, no. No, they weren't. These were communist prisoners, and the ones at Camp Nine were mostly non-communists, I'd say.

DePue: What had you heard about these communist prisoners when you got there? Because there's plenty of time for scuttlebutt back and forth when you're, you know, junior enlisted and they're not telling you anything.

Kirby: Yeah. I had heard that there had been some rioting and some very harsh things, you know, and fighting and so forth, and killing. I wondered also at that time, I said, "Well, what about the GIs?" Well, some of them had been hurt, one of them had been killed in an ambush or whatever at the prison, and things like that.

DePue: Can I interject here a little bit and give a little bit more background?

Kirby: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: What you're talking about here is a pretty well-known incident, at least at that time. Now, it's been rather obscure in history ever since, I think. But Koje-do Island, as you rightfully mentioned, was the place where they had housed all of these North Koreans who were hardened communists. But when they initially did this, they mixed the hardened communists in with the ones who were non-communists, and in the peace negotiations, the truce negotiations on Panmunjom, they got stuck on the issue of what to do with prisoners of war. And the war, at least I think, lasted another year and a half longer because the negotiators could not settle on what to do with the prisoners of war. And the big question was whether or not to force repatriation of these prisoners you were talking about at Camp Nine and others in these North Korean and Chinese camps who had no intentions of ever going back to North Korea or China. That ended up being the sticking point. Well, in early 1952, things were really getting very tense because now the United Nations is trying to sort these people out, separate the people who are non-communists from the people who are hardened communists, in these huge compounds. You had mentioned early on, they had people in these compounds, but there was no distance, there was no separation between one compound and the next, so information was flowing back and forth.

Kirby: Correct. It was.

DePue: In the spring of '52, then, things got so bad that basically the prison guards stopped going into the prisons; the prisoners themselves, the communists, took over the prisons; and it all really came to a head when I think it was General [Francis] Dodd—

Kirby: Dodge.

DePue: —Dodd who was captured by the North Koreans and held captive inside the compound itself.

Kirby: Yeah.

DePue: And a few days later they negotiated his release. It was an incredible embarrassment because the communists were trying to get as much propaganda value out of it as they possibly could. And then the 187th, I think, Airborne Regiment came in and a couple other frontline infantry battalions and regiments came in and reestablished control over this whole mess; then, as you mentioned, they started to divide them up and put them into these smaller compounds so that

they could control them better. But it still sounded like a seething cauldron of resentment and hatred and tension that was going on. This is the situation you found yourself in, probably without a whole lot of explanation of all of that I just mentioned. Would that be a fair assessment?

Kirby: Yes. Yes, it would. Yeah, I really was—you know, they take a farm boy (laughs) that comes off the farm and goes into something like this and you're seeing all different kinds of people, and all the sudden you're in a quagmire type of situation, and you begin to wonder what you've got yourself into.

DePue: Can you paint us a picture of what the compound looked like where you were assigned?

Kirby: Well, it's a barbed wire structure, double barbed wire structure around the whole enclosure. Then also in your compound you have double barbed wire around the compound. So all these POWs are inside there, and most of the time they're subtle and quiet, but at some times, any little thing that would cause disruption or something that they wanted to make trouble with, why, they can, they do it. You don't know when. You don't know when things like that were going to happen. The communist soldier, just because he's captured and a POW, he's not giving up on his duties. He still has duties to do for his communists, and so he would—they figure that anything they could do to the U.S. or the ROK [Republic of Korea soldier] group, anything to cause trouble, would be a tribute for the communist people. So he's doing his duty. You don't know what they're going to do. You don't know when. You have no idea.

DePue: How much did you understand at that time about what communism was, what the war was actually all about?

Kirby: I didn't understand communism that much at all at that time. I just figured it was maybe something that was going to happen here for a year or two or something and then it would wash out and be done with whatever it was. But after a while, you figure that it is a little more than that. I couldn't really define what it was at that time.

DePue: Okay. Did you have the belief at that time that whatever their system was, whatever communism was, that what you'd grown up in the United States was better?

Kirby: I would think so, yes, yes.

DePue: Did you believe in what you were fighting for over there?

Kirby: I don't know whether you believed in it. I think, yeah, you know, you belong to the Army and you try to do the best job you can, and that's it.

DePue: Okay. What I wanted to do here is to get you to read the next passage. It starts at the bottom of page four, but almost all of it here is on page five, and we're going

to include this into the record here so people can see this themselves. It's the part that's highlighted in blue there.

Kirby: Okay, okay.

DePue: No, right down here, up in blue.

Kirby: "He then told me"—

DePue: "He" being…let me see there. A corporal. Okay.

Kirby: Yeah, this is…

DePue: This is the incident where you're talking about a corporal who was showing you the ropes, basically, when you first got there.

Kirby: All right. (pause) "I was to go in the compound to take head count every morning and night. This was a tremendous blow to my nerves, for I had no thought of coming in contact with these prisoners without a weapon of some kind. When I told him that, he said not to worry, that he would go in with me the first couple times. This had no effect on my nerves, as I was about to come apart with previous stories I had heard about them. He sensed I was having a hard time, so he took me in this little shack and reached inside his shirt and pulled out a flask. He said, "Here, have a little bracer to stiffen your knees." I took about three good slugs of some kind of whiskey, and I could swear I felt it clear to my toes. He laughed and took a swig himself. He said for me to stick close behind him. Soon a whistle blew inside and all prisoners moved. The corporal turned to me and said, "Let's go." It felt like my legs were weakening again, but decided this could not go on forever, so I stepped out behind him. He unlocked the first gate, and we went through, locking the first gate and then unlocking the second gate. We went through the second gate and into the courtyard and locked the second gate behind us. We were now in with the prisoners. The towers had the machine guns pointed in our direction. We walked down an aisle left by them, counting the groups as we went. I noticed that they seemed to stare at me, and they would say something in a low voice to each other and sort of grin and laugh. I felt a little more at ease as we headed for a hut to count the sick ones. We opened the door and counted them, and the corporal said, 'Just right, 542 of them. That's what we are supposed to have.'"

DePue: Okay. That's a pretty good picture, as you read through that, of what it was like, at least for that first time. Did it take you a few times to get comfortable with the notion of going in there?

Kirby: Yeah, it did. It was getting better each time, but I don't know why the first time, I just couldn't imagine. What I had heard about these before, some of the guys had voiced that in my barracks, and I thought, What have I got into? Just going in there amongst them without any weapons and protect yourself. When we went in, I said something to that corporal, I says, "What do we do if they jump us in

there?" "Oh," he said, "don't worry about that." He says, "You got these machine guns in the tower; they're watching you." And I said, "How are they going to protect us?" "Well, they fire with the machine gun all around us; they won't fire in our direction, but they will fire in the area around us, hoping that they'll turn us loose." I thought, I don't know how that's going to… (laughs) It sounds like to me that if they fired, all these prisoners are going to jump up on top of us (laughter) for protection, but maybe that wasn't going to be the case. I eventually got in my head that I think maybe that, you know, there hadn't been that many GIs that I had heard about that had been killed here on this island, so maybe I might not be killed, but I might be injured or something like that.

DePue: Why did you have no weapons when you went in there?

Kirby: Well, the Geneva Convention, anybody that is giving rulings or in command of POWs may not have a weapon at all, of any kind. I had the chain that I used to blouse my pants, you know, to make them look neater, and the first time I walked into the main compound gate, the sergeant in there says, "You got to take them chains out and leave them here. You cannot walk in there with a weapon of any kind." And I said, "Well, okay." So I took the chains out of my… You could not wear even chains in the blouse of your pants.

DePue: Had you heard stories about the prisoners fabricating their own weapons?

Kirby: Yeah, I had heard some stories about that, and even afterwards—I didn't know that much about it then, but I had read afterwards that one of the compound commanders or the generals that were there had put—give them materials and tools to make things, thinking that would calm some of the harshness or something of the prisoners. But they made certain things with tools and everything. I thought, My God, what have they got still that stuff in there? Well, we don't know.

DePue: Yeah, it was the policy early on by these U.N. camps that they were going to teach these people new trades, so they had schools teaching them different languages, they had woodworking shops, they had metalworking shops. I'm sure that's what you're talking about, because—

Kirby: Yeah, that's right.

DePue: —there's few things more innovative than a desperate prisoner.

Kirby: Yeah, that's right.

DePue: Did you think these prisoners knew that you were green and new to this business?

Kirby: Oh, yes, they knew. The first time I walked in by myself, I knew that they were checking me out. The corporal had already told me, "Whatever you do, don't let them see your emotions. If you're feared of them, don't let them know it." And it's pretty hard sometimes. (laughs)

DePue: Were they trying to intimidate you, you think?

Kirby: Oh, yes.

DePue: And how would they do that?

Kirby: Well, their eyes were watching every move that you make, and you've got a thousand eyes there just watching you. They're also kind of muttering to each other and grinning and looking, watching me. I knew that they were checking me out, you know, to see how I'm going to react. So I tried to stay just as straight as I could, stiff, and not be jerking around or anything like that, you know. And it's not easy.

DePue: The guards that were on the machine guns, were those Americans as well?

Kirby: Yes, and sometime later they had ROK, R-O-K people, in there.

DePue: Republic of Korean soldiers there.

Kirby: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: Well, I'm going to go through a list of questions here to try to again, paint a picture of what life was like on a daily routine in these camps. First of all, they got to eat, so how were you getting food to them?

Kirby: Well, as they told me, the ships, barges come in from Japan, and a lot of food comes from Japan. They bring it in and unload it at the dock, and store it, and then when we come time for us to have food, more food, why, I get a group of fifteen or so out of the prison camp, and we march down to the main warehouse and pick up our food.

DePue: Did you have a weapon then?

Kirby: No, I'm not allowed to carry a weapon.

DePue: Even when you're taking prisoners out of the camp?

Kirby: Yeah, yeah. I'm not. I got my guard with me.

DePue: And he has a weapon.

Kirby: That's it. Yeah, he has a weapon. He's my bodyguard. He's to protect me, period.

DePue: Well, it sounds like the prisoners are picking up their food. Are they preparing the food themselves?

Kirby: Yes, yes, they prepare it in their own kitchen. Each one has a kitchen, and they do their own preparation.

DePue: Don't they have to have knives and other metal utensils to do that?

Kirby: Yes, yes. And we know that.

DePue: What kind of a diet were they on, then?

Kirby: Mostly seaweed. I'd seen a lot of seaweed and some kind of a turnip or something in that nature, and—

DePue: The large, white turnips?

Kirby: Yeah. And—

DePue: I assume rice?

Kirby: Rice. Yes, rice. A lot of rice.

DePue: Did you then provide them the fuel to cook this as well?

Kirby: Yes, we had wood, wood stove, wood stove.

DePue: How about showers and latrine facilities?

Kirby: They had their own water in each compound, and I didn't go in and check all that kind of stuff. It was only if they said something was wrong or something, they couldn't get water or something, then they would let me know. When I was there, they didn't ever have me to anything about that. So I never went into their buildings. You're not to go in a building in that compound out of sight of the people in the guard towers.

DePue: Okay. Being somebody who grew up watching World War II movies and watching, you know, "the goons," quote-unquote "goons," go in and inspect the barracks where the POWs are sleeping all the time, no one came into their—do they have wooden barracks?

Kirby: Yes, wooden barracks.

DePue: But nobody goes into those buildings to check on what's going on in there?

Kirby: Well, the only time that you're to go in there is if you go in to run everybody out, and then you can go in and search around.

DePue: Why would they run everybody out?

Kirby: Well, that way—we generally had I think surprise raids. They would go in quickly and then run everybody out so they couldn't hide certain things if they wanted to. That way you may find some weapons that they fabricated.

DePue: Were there any escape attempts while you were there?

Kirby: Yes. I mean, you know, there's lots of people in that compound—not a lot, I don't know how many, but there's several in there that are not communists and not intending to be communists, and if their repatriation, if they're not going to go back to communism, if their desire to stay in South Korea, and those communist people in there will not stand for that. They will kill them if they know that you're a non-communist.

DePue: Well, this would probably be a good time to have you read the next passage here, and I've got this one highlighted in yellow here in the middle of page eight, so starting right here.

Kirby: "In the next month I learned that we have several prisoners in our compound that are anticommunist but will not divulge themselves because they will be dead. This came hard to me one morning as I prepared to take head count. I waved to the tower and proceeded to open the first gate. I moved and opened the second gate to be confronted immediately by a prisoner, grabbing me around my legs, squatting low and yelling something I didn't understand. In a second, I looked up to see several POWs running towards me. I was frantically trying to move with the prisoner around my leg, grasping for the gate. Two POWs grabbed the prisoner around the legs and were tugging him and beating him with their feet. My guard leveled his rifle at us and yelled some words in Korean. I noticed a letup in the skirmish and that the rest of the POWs held back. This gave me ample time to get myself and the prisoner out of the gate and under the protection of my guard. The major sent a reinforcement to rescue the situation and the prisoner. He would be taken to a secluded place for questioning as to his wishes of turncoating. I soon learned that this wasn't out of the ordinary. They had had these before and worse incidents, including suicide squads jumping GIs in unexpected and opportune times to harass troops and keep us on edge."

DePue: Well, that had to be a terrifying experience and kind of confusing at the same time, trying to sort the friend and foe out of the whole situation.

Kirby: That's right. You had no idea, and they will not divulge themselves unless they got some very heavy protection and they can get out of there.

DePue: What did you think about the ones who—the term you used here was a turncoat. What did you personally think about those guys?

Kirby: Well, I thought that they were people that had been manually persuaded into their army, their communist army, and they had no other choice but to go along with it until they could find some way to get out if they wanted to. Those situations don't come very handily because these communist prisoners that are very hard communists will kill them any way they can, even if they just got bare hands.

DePue: Does that mean that the hardened communists were terrorizing the rest of the prison population?

Kirby: Well, that's the only way that they could honor their leader. The first thing they think about is "honoring our leader."

DePue: When you say "our leader," somebody in the camp or…?

Kirby: No, the Nam Il or whatever his name is.

DePue: Kim Il-Sung?

Kirby: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Yeah, the leader of North Korea.

Kirby: In other words, I had heard some of those prisoners that were communist said, "Oh, I'd just as well kill myself if I can't go back to North Korea." They just said, "I have to honor my leader."

DePue: Did you understand that level of devotion that they had?

Kirby: No. (laughs) No, I didn't. I understood what he was trying to tell me, but I didn't really want to let that boggle my mind. (laughs)

DePue: These prisoners are in these compounds all day long. How do they keep themselves busy, then?

Kirby: I think they used things in there like that.

DePue: Now you're handing me something here.

Kirby: Yeah, it's a book that I took off of some POWs in a search.

DePue: Now, on the cover it looks like it's got the red star, the communist red star with the wreath around it.

Kirby: Yeah. I wouldn't handle this. I'd wash my hands after I did. These things are—they give schooling on weapons, generally.

DePue: Wow, it's very detailed drawings, that they had done within the camp itself?

Kirby: Yes.

DePue: I'm looking right now at colored—there's three or four different colors—drawings of hand grenades, both interior views and exterior views, very detailed stuff.

Kirby: There's schooling. I would suggest this was some type of class that they had to train people or something in that nature.

DePue: Well, Bob, correct me if I'm wrong here, and I don't mean to be insulting at all, but it sounds like they very much had control of what happened inside the camp; you guys had—

Kirby: Yes. We did not go into the… Once night would fall, there was no one went in them camps, in the compounds, until morning. They're in there all night and all day by themselves.

DePue: Were there spotlights on the inside of the camp, roaming the camp all the time?

Kirby: Yeah, there's lights all around the enclosure.

DePue: Now, was there a hospital, or what happens when there is somebody who needed some medical care?

Kirby: I can't recall that I had any problem with any medical care, but I would imagine they would have somebody in the camp. I didn't know if there was—

DePue: So one of the prisoners would have been a doctor.

Kirby: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: There were no Americans or South Koreans who were providing medical care.

Kirby: Not that I know of, no.

DePue: Okay. One of the things that I have read about, especially this situation I was talking about earlier, in 1952, when you had this major uprising within the compound, that the communists had managed to have people who were captured and infiltrate into the camps themselves so they could organize their fellow prisoners. Do you know of any way that the communists were able to communicate with their own people within the camps?

Kirby: Yes. I never observed it, but I had been informed several times that there had been at night, people had come up in the dark from wherever the woods are. There's no habitat around near the enclosures, so they have to come from a good ways by travel, by walking, to get there, and those come up at night and they transfer messages by paper written on rock to tie it to a rock and throw it over in the compound. They get their word there if it's come—it could even be message come from Nam Il, or—back in whatever it is, you know—

DePue: Nam Il was the North Korean general?

Kirby: Yeah. Those (laugh) things happened that we didn't know about. But we knew that they were getting messages somehow, but as far as nailing it down and, you know, taking care of, no, we didn't.

DePue: Just from what you've described here, Bob, I would think the most dangerous time was when you were taking details out of the compound to go to places like the port to get food or maybe some of the other things that were going on. And yet you'd have ten or fifteen prisoners and yourself and one guard who would do this?

Kirby: Um huh, that's the most vulnerable time that we're at any problem there, because you haven't got that much firepower or anything with you in that case. But so far as I know, as long as I was there, there was no problems. We would come down and… And they didn't seem to bother the GI. Sometimes there was problems with the ROK group with the prisoners.

DePue: Problems in what way?

Kirby: Well, sometimes they figured that the guards figured, the ROK guards figured that the prisoners were getting better food than they were. So they would gripe about that and that kind of stuff. Of course they would satisfy that thing but be done with it.

DePue: Weren't you walking among South Korean civilians all along that path as well?

Kirby: Yes, but—

DePue: And I would imagine the South Korean civilians knew that the prisoners were getting better food than they were getting.

Kirby: Yes, I think they knew that.

DePue: I mean, those were very desperate times for South Koreans.

Kirby: Yes, it was.

DePue: What was your impression of the South Korean countryside that you saw and the South Korean people themselves?

Kirby: I thought they were very, you know, people that probably had not near the customs that we have here in the States or anything like that. They don't have the frivolity things at all. They live a very harsh life of having enough food, rice, and so forth, but they seemed to be happy, and they were the most desired people I ever seen that wanted to learn something. They would do anything to go to school, and they enjoyed the school, they were anxious to go to school.

DePue: Did you have many dealings with the South Korean people?

Kirby: Not so much. The only time when I'd walk down through Pusan or Inchon, the city of Inchon, you better carry your camera very close. I had one buddy that was next to me, and he carried his camera on his strap around his shoulder and it hanging here, and—

DePue: Right on his hip.

Kirby: Well, we have what we call Skippy Honchos, which is little orphan boys that don't have any place to stay, and they steal. They usually steal whatever they can to survive. They'd have a razor blade. They'd cut the strap, on the leather strap, and they'd cut the leather strap and take the camera. (laughs) And he'd run through the crowd. You'd never catch him. (laughs) They're very fast. I think you asked me once the other time about orphanage.

DePue: Yes.

Kirby: I didn't know—I had some kids that stayed—probably they were Skippy Honchos, but they were the ones that steal and all that. But when I was in the Inchon after the war, I pulled gate duty on where the port—come into the port. In the wintertime, I would be out at that gate. Why, I'd get my supper. The Jeep comes along and gives me my meal for supper; I'm on duty. Always those boys—I have about four boys that would come up and stay in my shack. There was a guard shack. They would get in there because it's warm in there. They have a little—what they call a little charcoal stove, to keep warm. They'd sleep in there that night. But they'd come in—they knew when I got my food. Well, it's pretty hard to sit there and eat in front of them and not (laughs)… So I always asked that guy, I said, "Give me a little extra share, would you?" "Yeah, I know. I'll give it to you." So he gives me a little extra for them guys and the kids. So I always had somebody (laughs) keep me company over the night period there.

DePue: Let's go back to the compound. How often did, you guys, the guards go in and actually count the prisoners?

Kirby: Oh. We would go night and morning.

DePue: In the dark or right before dark?

Kirby: Oh, no, before dark.

DePue: Okay. Another one of the things that—life goes on—they've got latrines, I would imagine. There's no—the only running water is these spigots they got?

Kirby: Yeah.

DePue: How did they empty out the latrines?

Kirby: Well, they were half-barrels, the latrines are, and—

DePue: Fifty-five–gallon drums?

Kirby: Yeah, fifty-five, and they have a wire that loops up, and they stick a wooden pole between that, under that, through that wire, so that it takes two of those prisoners to pick that up on each end of that pole. Then they walk and carry that fifty-five,

half a barrel of waste there. We have—I think there's probably ten or twelve of those barrels, half-barrels.

DePue: Within that 550-man compound?

Kirby: Yeah, mm-hmm.

DePue: Were there any women in the compound?

Kirby: No. We had no women.

DePue: Not at your compound, at least. I know there were some women who were captured.

Kirby: There was. There was, but not in mine. I don't know of anybody in the enclosure, women, no women.

DePue: Where did the prisoners take these honey buckets, then, when they had them filled up?

Kirby: Well, we hauled them outside of the compound and the enclosure, all the way outside. There was a hole in the ground out a ways from the hole there, and the farmer next—had some rice paddies around. He would use that waste for his fertilizer for the rice paddies. So we just dumped it in the hole and he would dip it out of there as he needed it.

DePue: Now, Americans always are appalled by the notion of using human waste for fertilizer.

Kirby: I know.

DePue: And you're a farmer. Did it bother you to be thinking of that?

Kirby: Well, yes. Yeah, yeah.

DePue: Was there ever an occasion where the count didn't come out right?

Kirby: Yes. Yeah, I had taken head count, and I got to the last thing I do is go into the sick bay and open that door and look in. Of course, you never step in. You can't do that. You're out of the sight of your protection in the tower. So I opened the door and I counted the figures, and I come out one short. So I thought, Maybe I missed something. I went back, went back and counted all the—they're still sitting on their haunches out there. I went quickly out there and did it and come back, and I got the same count. And I thought, what in the world happened? Well, anyway, I reported it to the compound commander and he says, "Well, he got to be somewhere. He got to be escaped or something. What happened?" "I don't know." Well, we looked around and couldn't find anything, I know, in the compound and this kind of stuff. One of the guards says, "Maybe you ought to

check the waste buckets." So I did, went and stirred them with a stick. Well, we found a hand and part of a leg and a foot and so forth. So we knew where we found—where he went.

DePue: That's kind of a gruesome detail.

Kirby: Yeah. From then on we had to stir the buckets. Had to stir the buckets before we dumped them.

DePue: What's your speculation all these many years later of why that prisoner was dismembered, killed like that?

Kirby: Well, turncoat. Turncoat. Just like the one that grabbed me around the legs. The first thing I thought was, My God, they're coming after—those guys coming out over there, they were coming after me. But they weren't. They didn't bother me right then. They were grabbing him is who they were after. They were going to kill him, right there. They'd do it.

DePue: We're going to take a very brief pause here because we've got somebody with a weed whacker out in the back that I think is competing with us.

(pause in recording)

DePue: Okay, let's go ahead and start again. Well, Bob, you've been painting a pretty vivid picture of life inside that compound and what it was like to be a guard there. Did you ever know of any occasions where the communist prisoners were trying to escape, to sneak out of the compound?

Kirby: No, I didn't.

DePue: Why do you think that was the case?

Kirby: I think there was officers in these compounds that were intentionally put there.

DePue: You're talking about North Korean officers.

Kirby: Yes. And they ruled how it was to be in there. They got there by—they were sent there by manually having them captured.

DePue: Deliberately being captured.

Kirby: Deliberately, yes. And, of course, they came in, and you didn't know they were an officer, because they were already intentionally going to be dressed as a plebe person.

DePue: Enlisted man. Okay. I would assume you got to this particular camp—and this is where you're assigned to the 8137th Military Police Group, either December, or January of 1953. So we're getting towards the end of the war. I wanted to ask you

about what you knew in terms of what was going on, what was being discussed up at Panmunjom at the armistice talks.

Kirby: I was not really fed too much of what was going on at the time. We knew that there was arbitration between the two in size and that things weren't always coming out the way we wanted it. We knew that, but we didn't know how close we were. Sometimes we'd hear something, but it didn't prove out, you know; it was fabricated or something. But sometimes we thought it was getting very close. One time we knew that we were getting close is when they told us not to harm the POWs and make any scars on them or anything like that, whereby we knew that means we don't want to send them back with scars on them or anything like that wouldn't be a very good proposition.

DePue: I don't know if you remember this one, but I suspect you heard a lot. As the peace talks were beginning to ramp down—

Kirby: (unintelligible)

DePue: Yeah, June eighteenth, Syngman Rhee, who was the president of South Korea, made the decision for all these compounds that were in South Korea itself—not on Koje-do Island, but South Korea—and one evening, they just—the South Korean guards opened the gates and let twenty-seven thousand North Koreans just kind of filter into the countryside. You heard about that right away?

Kirby: Yes, yeah, we—

DePue: How did that go down for you?

Kirby: Well, we were boosted out of our bunks pretty rashly and quickly and told to get out with your rifles, and we're going into the compounds up at the area, and we're getting a bunch of ROK guards also out, to make sure that none of the prisoners are going to escape or whatever. We didn't know what was happening at the time, but we soon found out that Syngman Rhee—they called him Syngman Rhee, but his name is reversed; Rhee Syngman is the way you say it, his real name. But anyway, we got out at night, and we had guards everywhere around the prison camp, and we stayed there till morning.

DePue: What did you think about that?

Kirby: Well, I thought, what is going—How can he have that much power, you know, to do that? But I thought, Maybe this is going to really shake things up with the communists. But evidently it didn't.

DePue: Well, of course the prisoners that were being released were the North Koreans who had already sworn that they had no intention of going back to the North.

Kirby: That's right.

DePue: And that's a huge number.

Kirby: Yeah. Yes, it is. And Camp Nine was one of them, where I was to begin with.

DePue: I was wondering about that. So a lot of these guys were South Koreans who were just trying to mind their own business, got caught up at the beginning of the war, captured by the North Koreans, and pressed into North Korean service, and then captured by the Americans.

Kirby: Then captured by the Americans.

DePue: Gives you a picture of how messy that war was to begin with, then.

Kirby: Yes, yes, it was. (laughs)

DePue: Well, it's just about one month later, a month and ten days later, that the armistice is finally signed. I always want to say "peace treaty," but they still don't have a peace treaty there.

Kirby: No, they—

DePue: What was your reaction to hearing that news?

Kirby: Oh, I thought it was very good. I was ready to get off the island. (laughter) It was kind of a relief, and we all were kind of celebrate. And the prisoners, you know, I can't understand them. They seemed very steady, just the way they were. They didn't celebrate, they didn't say, Good, or anything or nothing. It wasn't no different. The prisoners just, you know, the same old stuff.

DePue: You think maybe they didn't believe you, believe the Americans, when they were told that?

Kirby: Well, I don't know. I never did find out whether they did or not. But I thought that they were just people that didn't really care, you know, or something. (laughs)

DePue: What happened to the prisoners after that, and what were you involved with in terms of their repatriation?

Kirby: Well, we had to process them through a line before they were shipped out on an LST. Some of this was done at night, which I didn't really care about. You're going up to a compound, and it don't have to be your compound. They take the compound commanders and they assign you thirty POWs, and you've got their papers. You've got each—their papers—and you walk ahead of them and lead them to the processing area. The guard, my guard, is trailing those thirty. Sometimes we were walking through some dark areas because it was happening at night and we were loading that LST at night. You're out of the lights pretty good. I was a little bit leery about that. We got to the processing area, and the first

groups that we put through that, we'd take off their hat and turn it inside out and look and see if there's any contraband or anything whatsoever that we didn't want sending back to North Korea or anything like that. So the first guy kind of tears the things apart, and the lining inside, and looks, feels around inside if anything's in there. The hat is just as much as a gold star for a general to them. This star here is not that much as the hat is.

DePue: In terms of the value they placed on it, you mean?

Kirby: Yeah. The hat is more of a signifier of communism.

DePue: Because it had that red star on it?

Kirby: You got the flat bill and it's got the red star here. The way it's made… Now, we didn't issue that to them. You issue them blankets. They take pieces of the blanket and make the hat. And they made the hats. Everybody had one, communists; all of the prisoners had the hat. So the guy tore the hat. This guy threw his feet up in the air and flopped on the ground and yelled and said he wasn't going. He tore his hat. They wasn't going to let him have the cap. They took the star off and put it in his hand. That's what they would do for a GI if you give him his badge back, but he wouldn't take his hat. But the prisoner, you do that to them, the hat was more precious than the star. So. (laughs)

DePue: Did you understand why?

Kirby: I didn't. I didn't at the time, no.

DePue: What do you think it is now?

Kirby: Well, I think, just like us, the badge is more to us than the hat.

DePue: It's like something like the way we would respect the flag, you mean?

Kirby: Yeah. I think they don't respect the flag, I don't think. I don't know that much about them.

DePue: At this point in their captivity, were they still wearing communist uniforms, or were they wearing uniforms that you guys had issued to them?

Kirby: They were wearing what we issued.

DePue: Did you go on the LST with these prisoners?

Kirby: No, no. I was to run my group of thirty through and then make sure they're all with me and we head for the boat down at the dock. We get to the LST, I hand my papers over to one of the GIs there, and he counts them and all and everything, and—

DePue: Who was accepting them? Was it Navy personnel, Marines, or Army?

Kirby: It was Army, Army personnel.

DePue: U.S. Army.

Kirby: Yeah, U.S. Army.

DePue: Okay. Did you do that routine several times, then, taking thirty at a time?

Kirby: Yes, yes.

DePue: Happy to see them go?

Kirby: Well, yeah, I was happy to get rid of them.

DePue: Do you know how long after the armistice was signed that you actually did that exchange? Was that in August or September? Was it still in July?

Kirby: I think it was in August, in August. Because, see, the truce was signed July twenty-seventh, if I recall right.

DePue: What happened with your unit, then yourself, after that, after all the prisoners had been shipped out?

Kirby: We tore down some of the barbed wiring and was in the process of redoing several things in the compound there. But before I got to anything drastic about the buildings—I think most the buildings were still there when I left—they shipped me out, back to Inchon.

DePue: What did you do in Inchon?

Kirby: I was pulling gate MP duty. I was always in the fatigues in Koje-do, and now I had to be in fatigues, but I had to be a little more MPish.

DePue: So you had the brassard with MP emblazoned on it, and…?

Kirby: Yeah, yeah. MP on your helmet, MP in…

DePue: GIs love MPs. (laughter) No, maybe not so much, huh?

Kirby: No. I don't know, I never wrote about some of these things in Inchon, but we had a corporal on the MP duty, and he told me, he says, "You're going with me tonight. We're going to be pulling duty on Inchon, in the city, and you can ride with me in the Jeep." Okay. We did. There was a curfew time for all GIs; I think it was around twelve o'clock. We got going downtown in Inchon, and this corporal says, "Oh, back up." He backed up the Jeep. And I said, "What's the matter." He says, "There's a party going on upstairs in this building." I said, "Well, yeah, so what?" (laughs) He says, "I think there's some GIs in there.

They're supposed to be back at the barracks." Well, we got up there. We opened that door, and I looked in there, and there was all Marines. And boy, and they were having a good time with the beer and everything, and there were some girls in there. I said, "We better get a little help if we're going to tell these guys they're going to go back." (DePue laughs) And he said, "Nah, come on in. Come in. Pull your club." So I pulled the club out and walked in there. He said something to one Marine, and that Marine turned around and yelled something to somebody else, and another one, and pretty soon there was about four of them there, Marines. I pulled on this corporal and I said, "Let's go." And he said, "Naw," he says, "stick right here. We'll get them." The next thing I knew, that corporal was hit in the head with something, I don't know what it was, but… (laughs) It might have been one of them guys' fists. But I said, "Well, I'm getting out of here," and before I ever got out of here I got hit in the head, back of the head, with something. I think it was part of a chair. I ain't sure. (laughs) But these guys weren't going to go, I could tell that. And anyway, I got hit in the head. The next thing I know, I was laying on my back and the brightest light I'd ever seen. I opened my eyes and I said, "Gee whiz, it's bright," and my head hurt. (laughs) I found out I was in an infirmary, laying on a bed. How I got there, I had no idea.

DePue: A Korean infirmary?

Kirby: Well, I don't know. No, it was one to do with Army. Yeah. How I got there, I still don't know.

DePue: But you got there a few years early, didn't you?

Kirby: Yeah. (laughter) Anyway… I suppose you'll want to know about the coal yard.

DePue: The coal yard? Well, now that you mention it, of course I do.

Kirby: Well, I had duty one night on the coal yard. It's a pile of coal on the ground that's unloaded from a ship, and—

DePue: This was up in Inchon again?

Kirby: Inchon, yes. So I was to guard it. I read my orders on the post over there, got it under frame and everything. It says here to holler "halt" three times before you fire. You don't carry a rifle, you carry a sawed-off shotgun for that. We—here comes my wife—and I said, Well. I walked around that coal yard and looked at it a couple of times and said, "Eh, it's pretty quiet." Well, the train come backing in through the gate, and it backed into the gate and come in, and I don't know what—he was going to pick up something, I guess, a car or something. But anyway, he got in there and stopped, and a bunch of people piled out. I thought, I don't know, maybe he's got something he needs to do there. I don't know. So I walked on around somewhere else and stood around there a little bit.

I heard a lot of talking. I said, "I better go back around, see what's going on." Well, all these civilian people were loading up, had their gunny sacks, and

they were filling them up with coal. Well, I don't think that's the way they wanted things to go. (laughter) So I says, Well. I hollered "halt," and of course no difference. In fact, it speeded up their shoveling the coal. I hollered "halt" two more times and didn't get any answer. And anyway, I said, "Well, I'll have to go and shoot them or something," I said. I thought, Well, I'm quite a ways from them. I'll just fire a round, you know, and a pellet, you know, won't hurt them that far. It probably isn't going fast with a sawed-off shotgun. So I did. Boy, I caught a woman on the side like this, up along here, and she had several pellets in her, I guess, and she went down.

I had to call my supervisor, and I called and tell him. And he did. And he come around with a Jeep and he said, "What did you do?" I said, "Well," I told him what I did. He said, "Yeah, you did it right, but," he says, "damn it, these people are civilians. You guys coming off that island down there and you think you can kill everybody." (laugh) He said, "You don't do that here." (laughs) Okay. So I was threatened and that, I was about months from going home, and he said, "You may be held over for a court-martial." And I said, "Well, I hope not. Well, about fifteen days before I get to go home, I got the word from them. They said, yes, they only took about four pellets out of her, and she's doing fine. (laughs) Whew. (laughter) That was close.

DePue: When did you go back home, then?

Kirby: Let's see. I arrived home in May fourteenth.

DePue: May 14, 1954, then.

Kirby: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: So you got close to a year and a half you were in Korea, then.

Kirby: Yeah. They ask me all the time, "Well, how come you didn't serve two years." I said, "Well, you get points for being overseas."

DePue: You were immediately released, then, when you came back home?

Kirby: Yeah.

DePue: Do you remember much about the homecoming? First of all, how did you get back to the States? Did they ship you back?

Kirby: I rode a boat back. I think it was *General Walker* I rode back. Landed at Fort Lewis, and rode a train from there to Chicago. I can't remember that camp that's outside Chicago.

DePue: Fort Sheridan, maybe?

Kirby: Fort Sheridan, yeah. Then I rode a little car—the guy told me, he said, "You got some money. You're taking cash here you saved in your savings during the time you were in service, so…" I said, "Yeah, I didn't even spend all the money I had, because I didn't have nowhere to spend it, really, on the island." (laughs) So he said, "Well, you're going to ride this train into Chicago, in Union Station." He said, "Put some in your boot and some in your shoe and some in your belt. You're going to ride that train in." He said, "You never know what's going to happen. These people know you're carrying money." So I did. (laughs) And got into Union Station and headed home and got into Lincoln, Illinois. I had stopped in Chicago. When I stopped there, I called the folks and told them I would be in Lincoln at a certain time, I don't remember what time. But anyway, they said they'd be there. Well, I got there and there wasn't nobody there. So I sat there on a bench for a good while. They said, "Yeah, well, we had a flat tire," and they had to fix it (laughter) before they'd get… I said, "Okay." And that was the end of my duties.

DePue: Okay. I'd like to ask you a couple more questions about while you were there. What do you think was the toughest part of your service while you were in Korea?

Kirby: Probably going into the first time in the compound.

DePue: Didn't like that.

Kirby: No.

DePue: You'd already mentioned there was one black officer you encountered when you first got to Korea. This is shortly after, a few years after, the Army was integrated. Did you have duty with blacks?

Kirby: In boot camp we had duty… There was a couple of colored boys.

DePue: Were there any problems that you recall?

Kirby: Yes. We had a Tennessee boy with kind of reddish hair, and he had already expressed that he didn't like blacks **period**. One day when we're standing in line out there in the street and standing at attention, and then Corporal Butler, he'd give us parade rest or at ease, and he went and talked to somebody, and while he was gone, this Tennessean just butted him in the back of the head with (laughs) a rifle butt. It was kind of a shock to me. I didn't know that there was that much hate in things like that, but there was.

DePue: What happened to him after that?

Kirby: Well, that Tennessean was moved to a different place. He was moved out of this company.

DePue: Do you know if he got any punishment?

Kirby: I don't know. I don't know.

DePue: What did you think about the rest of the soldiers you served with over in Korea?

Kirby: Oh, they were okay. I didn't have that much connection with too many different ones.

DePue: Did you work with some South Korean troops? It sounds like you had.

Kirby: Yeah.

DePue: Were these KATUSAs [Korean Augmentees to the U.S. Army], or are these separate South Korean units?

Kirby: They weren't KATUSAs, they were South Koreans.

DePue: What'd you think of them?

Kirby: I seen some of them, the training of that, and I'll tell you, their training is different than ours. It's very harsh. They train them with almost being whipped.

DePue: Now, you saw both these: at Camp Nine you saw one kind of prisoner, and then you saw the hardened communist once you got to Koje-do Island. What did you think about those soldiers?

Kirby: Those hardened communists? I thought they were very brainwashed. I couldn't realize how much power—-communism with brainwashing and then mandatory over than by fear is how they handled, control by fear.

DePue: Were they disciplined, do you think?

Kirby: Well, they were disciplined in their fashion.

DePue: Did you respect them?

Kirby: I wasn't that close enough to them to know that much about them, but I really couldn't communicate with them.

DePue: Okay. Here's a different question altogether. Were you able to keep in touch with your family back in the States?

Kirby: In the States? I did very slim. I didn't do as good as a lot of people did.

DePue: You mean you weren't writing as many letters they might have wanted to?

Kirby: Yeah, that's probably right. Yes. I was—

DePue: Were you receiving mail on a regular basis?

Kirby: Some, but not on a regular basis.

DePue: Now, a lot of times you hear soldiers talk about American entertainers coming over to Korea. Did you have any experiences in that regard?

Kirby: Yes. When I was on Koje-do, we had a group that was flown in there on helicopters, and we had no idea that they were even coming. They didn't even forecast it or anything yet. It was far enough away from the compound that you—but we were instantly told that they were going to come in, you know, and… Well, at least we did see a stateside woman, and—

DePue: Remember who it was?

Kirby: No. I didn't even recognize who she was. But she sang a song or two, and a lot of guys was trying to get close enough to her. But there was MPs all around them with shotguns. (laughter) So we couldn't get close enough to do anything.

DePue: Did you get a mid-tour leave while you were there?

Kirby: Get what?

DePue: A mid-tour leave or R&R?

Kirby: Yes. After the truce was signed, I got an R&R to go to Kobe, Japan.

DePue: Did you have some fun?

Kirby: Yeah.

DePue: What'd you end up doing in Kobe?

Kirby: Oh, drinking.

DePue: See the sights at all in Japan?

Kirby: Oh, yeah.

DePue: Compare what you saw in Japan versus what you had been living in Korea.

Kirby: Oh, it don't compare.

DePue: Well, this is just a few years after the Second World War for Japan, but it was…

Kirby: Yeah, but it was entirely different. It was more like our cities. It was a great area.

DePue: You'd grown up in the middle of the Depression. You were awfully young then. But, you know, growing up on a farm, I assume you had plenty to eat growing up, but otherwise you guys were not wealthy at all.

Kirby: No.

DePue: But the kind of experience you had growing up in the States versus what you saw the people in South Korea, was there any comparison there either?

Kirby: South Korea, I think they were more destitute about food. There was always somebody walking with what they call a rickshaw or—not a rickshaw, but a—

DePue: An A-frame on the back?

Kirby: —an A-frame on the back, carrying things and food and all that kind of stuff. It's manual labor.

DePue: Well, we've covered a lot of territory. Anything else about your experiences in Korea that we need to talk about?

Kirby: Uh, I don't know, I pretty well covered everything. I don't know of—oh, there might be some other things that happened after the truce was signed that wasn't very good, very many news of anything of interest of any kind.

DePue: Well, just—I'd like to have you just spend about two or three minutes talking about what you did with the rest of your life when you came back to the States.

Kirby: Oh, I'd been getting jobs, and eventually I got a bus, school bus-driving job. And sooner or later they said they needed a janitor, and I got the job being a janitor and a bus driver.

DePue: Where was this for?

Kirby: At Illini Central School here in Mason City. Then so after several years of that, they said they needed a head maintenance man to supervise the janitors and also take care of buildings. I took care of two buildings, three buildings here, and then we also took in Easton School and also St. Joseph's School. So I had three buildings here, two in St. Joe's and one in Easton, to take care of. (laughs)

DePue: In other words, by the time you got to that point in your life, you were a busy guy.

Kirby: Yes, I was. It was busy.

DePue: Okay. Let's go ahead and just ask a couple wrap-up questions here for you and to kind of reflect on the bigger picture, if you will. Do you think that experience of going over to Korea and doing what you did, did that change you?

Kirby: I sometimes think it did in some fashion. Some people have asked me that, and I said, "Well, yeah, it may have in some fashion." But for me to pinpoint how it did, I can't really come up with a theory of how it changes. But I believe that

being around these type of people and seeing how communism works kind of makes me put up a guard in some ways.

DePue: Are you proud of your service in Korea?

Kirby: Oh, yeah. I'm very satisfied with what I did.

DePue: Would you recommend young people today to go into the military?

Kirby: Oh, yeah. Like I have said before, it's not an experience that I'd like to do again, but I wouldn't trade the experience I've had for anything. It's an experience that I think a lot of people need to go through.

DePue: Well, you've got the opportunity here to tell people now about this experience. What are one or two things that you would really want people today to understand about what you experienced and what was going on in the war in Korea?

Kirby: I would think that telling them—I don't know how to say this—but those… (pause) I think the people who—I don't know. I don't know how to say that. What did you ask me now, how…?

DePue: What you would want Americans today to understand about what you did.

Kirby: That I served and did the duty, and that's about it.

DePue: What advice would you give to the next generation?

Kirby: Oh… I don't know. Try to avoid wars, avoid it.

DePue: That's pretty good advice to close on. Well, Bob, it's been a real pleasure to talk to you. You've really illustrated a chapter of the Korean War that almost nobody hears about anymore, in terms of what was going on in these prison camps and Koje-do Island especially, and it's important that people do know about it. So I thank you for the opportunity. Any final words for us?

Kirby: No. I'm glad that something like this that you're doing is good, and I appreciate it.

DePue: Well, thank you.

(end of interview)