Interview with Stan Nikulski

VRK-A-L-2007-038

Interview date: December 18, 2007

Interviewer: Mark DePue

A Note to the Reader

This transcript is based on an interview recorded by the ALPL Oral History Program. Readers are reminded that the interview of record is the original video or audio file, and are encouraged to listen to portions of the original recording to get a better sense of the interviewee's personality and state of mind. The interview has been transcribed in near-verbatim format, then edited for clarity and readability, and reviewed by the interviewee. For many interviews, the ALPL Oral History Program retains substantial files with further information about the interviewee and the interview itself. Please contact us for information about accessing these materials.

DePue: Today is Tuesday, December 18, 2007. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. We're here with Stanley Nikulski. I'm sure you prefer to be called Stan.

Nikulski: Stan, yes sir.

DePue: First Sergeant, Retired, Stan Nikulski. We are here today to talk with Stan about his experiences during the Korean War. Now Stan, I know that you also are a Vietnam War vet. We might pick this up later on. But I did want to focus strictly on Korea today. You have a most unique story to tell and I'm excited about getting into that. So we have to start with where you started. Tell us where and when you were born.

Nikulski: I was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. March 2, 1932.

DePue: Okay. What were your parents doing for a living at that time?

Nikulski: Well, my father was a steel worker. He worked in the steel mill in Pittsburgh. And my mother was a home keeper. We had five of us—four of us at the time. Four boys, all young'uns.

DePue: Were you the fourth, the first?

Nikulski: I am number two. I 'm second oldest.

DePue: Okay, well working in the steel mill in 1932 was a darn good job considering what was going on in America at the time.

Nikulski: That's right.

DePue: So was he able to provide for the family? You remember anything about the Depression years at all?

Nikulski: Nope. I really don't, because that was my younger years. I do know my father worked in a mill and he was on a night shift. I guess I was about six or seven years old… Well, really, I don't know how old I was at that time. I had a newsstand right across from the mill, and everybody couldn't wait when they got out of work to grab the newspapers off the stand without paying. You know? We'll pay you later, pay you later, pay you later. Well, okay. But everybody took care of me because it was at night, and I was too young to be out by myself. So I don't know how I made it, but many nights I was scared. A lot of them guys come out of there drunk, or go in. (laughter) The old workers go in for a beer and places were open or not opened, they were drinking away.

But I grew up in a rough neighborhood, went to a Catholic school. It didn't have a kindergarten in it. It had first grade. You went in the first grade. Had a rough life. Unfortunately, my father was a drinker, and I guess the years went on. Twelve years old, OK, twelve years old, and my father left. We had it pretty rough growing up without a father there in Pittsburgh. When I turned fifteen, I talked my mother into letting me quit school. I didn't even graduate high school. I dropped out of school and got various jobs.

DePue: That would have been '47?

Nikulski: About '47, yeah, 1947. Got a job in a hotel and the grocery department in a delicatessen—Shenley Delicatessen –right across from Forbes Field, if anybody knows where Forbes Field is.

DePue: I've certainly heard the name.

Nikulski: And grew up around the stadium, the ball field. I didn't work there too long, but I convinced my mother that I was going to join the Army when I was 17, you know?

DePue: Let's back up just a little bit. You were pretty young at this time. Do you remember Pearl Harbor or anything about that day?

Nikulski: No, I was too young. I was too young.

DePue: Do you remember anything about growing up during the Second World War?

Nikulski: Well, no. No, as a juvenile, no, I didn't think about that. But my mother was concerned because she had four boys. She didn't know how long this was going to

go on. I was too young. The war ended and I joined the Army in '49. So later on in our conversation, you'll see the attitude I have against WWII. Yeah. Being a career man, I have mixed feelings about the greater generation and their attitude towards the Korean Vets, Vietnam Vets, and the other vets, this military in general.

DePue: Well, I certainly do want to get to those feelings toward the tail end of the interview today. '47 to '49: you said you dropped out of high school in '47. What were you doing in between that time?

Nikulski: I had part-time jobs. I worked at a barber shop as a shoe shine boy. That was educational, and I was there for a little while. Then I got a job in a delicatessen, Shenley Delicatessen. I worked there for about four or five months, then I got out of there and I went to become a soda jerk at a soda fountain,[1] East Liberty. I've got to laugh because it was an enjoyable part of my life, too, growing up and growing out of puberty. (laughter) I started noticing girls. Loved to dance, loved to dance. A group of guys that loafed together, we formed a little so-called gang in the hip hop days. We used to sponsor dances and put on our suits and go dancing, and this is when we'd start thinking about, somewhere along the line there's got to be something better than this, you know? And actually, growing up in a big city is pretty rough. It's pretty rough, because it's different now. Let me explain.

It's different now. It's rougher because there was nothing. You had no field houses to go to. Especially education. Nothing was organized for kids, youths, growing up. You had to jump over the fence in Forbes Field to get in. You want to play baseball, you had to go to the big parking lot, play baseball if no cars were there. There was no recreation centers. And that was pretty unrealistic, per se. I spent most of my summer when I was fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, the summer months at Forbes Field shagging balls for the Pittsburgh Pirates, you know, for something to do. I fell in love with baseball. The professional ball players at that time, they would take you under their wing, try and teach you the game. You know? And like I did, I enjoyed my youth to a certain extent without a father, you know?

DePue: What was your mother doing?

Nikulski: She worked for Clark Candy Company. Clark Candy Company. And all my aunts did the same. She had three sisters, four sisters, and they all worked at Clark Candy Company, so they got one another a job there. And we had all the candy we wanted.

DePue: What kind of candy did they make?

[1] Soft drinks, milkshakes and ice cream sodas were served at soda fountains which were often in drug stores. The preparers, mostly young men, were called soda jerks, probably because they pulled down levers to make the sodas.

Nikulski: Clark Candy Bars. Clark Candy. And they still make them, or they're still being made by somebody. I don't know who. (laughter)

DePue: Well you see, I'm drawing a blank. Clark Candy Bars.[2]

Nikulski: Zagnuts.

DePue: Okay, yeah, yeah.

Nikulski: Made those.

DePue: Okay. Why the Army, then? What caused you to be interested in joining the Army?

Nikulski: Well, I had one uncle, two uncles—three uncles that were in the Army.

DePue: World War II vets?

Nikulski: World War II vets. Uncle Eddie served in the Pacific. Uncle Harry, he was in Europe, but he got killed over there in Europe.

DePue: Was he in the infantry?

Nikulski: He was in the infantry. My Uncle Ed, he was in the infantry but he made it back. But he had—

(cell phone ringing; break in audio)

DePue: OK, we're on again. You were talking about why you had joined the Army at that age.

Nikulski: Well, we'd discuss it amongst the members of the so-called group, gang. This was one was going to go to the Air Force, this one was going to go to the Navy, this one was going to go to the Army. And I'm going to go to the Army, okay, because I had uncles in the Army. Fortunately, we all did. Over a period of time, one, Paul Greenway went to the Air Force; he graduated from Pitt University when he got out. Jimmy Walsh, he graduated—no, he didn't graduate. He went to California after he got out of the service. But most of us, we got together and we said, "We're going to go join the service and do something different."

DePue: But there was a draft then anyway, was there not?

Nikulski: Yeah. But we joined. Yeah, we all joined.

DePue: Where'd you end up going to basic training?

Nikulski: Fort Knox, Kentucky.

[2] They were simply called Clark Bars – a crunchy center covered with chocolate.

DePue: Okay, and backing up just a little bit, what did your mother think about your joining the Army?

Nikulski: She said it's either that or get a job. (laughter)

DePue: So in peacetime it sounded like a good, steady employment, huh?

Nikulski: Yeah. And we were going to see the world. That's what we thought.

DePue: Little did she know you were going to see some exotic places she had never heard of before.

Nikulski: Right.

DePue: Fort Knox, Kentucky for basic, you said?

Nikulski: For basic training.

DePue: I know that's the Armor School.

Nikulski: I was in the 86th Heavy Tank Battalion. Had no idea what, it was just strictly basic infantry. But that was the unit designation. And from there, after I got out of basic, I went to Fort Benning, Georgia to the 15th Infantry Regiment, Third Division. I was assigned to Company B, and stayed there until I guess about six months later when, just prior to the Korean War starting in June, I requested to be shipped out to Japan.

Me and six other guys from Pennsylvania, we got tired of the South because we didn't understand anybody, the way they talked. No, it was pretty humorous. We did. And I went in and I talked to the First Sergeant and said, "We want to get some overseas duty." And he said, "Where do you think you'd like to go?" I said, "Well, we'd like to go to Japan." He says, "You ain't going nowhere. You're not going anywhere. Go back out to training." And we had very, very minor training. We were ill-trained in the peacetime before we went to Korea. The Korean War started. OK. We had little to no training prior to going to Korea.

DePue: Before that time you wanted to go to Japan. Why did you want to go to Japan?

Nikulski: The Orient. Just something different. No specific reason.

DePue: And my guess is, at the time it had a reputation of being pretty good duty, an occupation army.

Nikulski: We did occupation duty, yeah.

DePue: OK, go ahead.

Nikulski: We waited around two or three weeks, whatever, and the Korean War started. We were the first seven people on orders. (laughter) First seven people on orders.

Ten-day leave, put us in a Pan-American airliner in khakis, they shipped us to Japan.

DePue: So you flew to Japan?

Nikulski: We flew to Japan. We stopped in Hawaii, refueled, into Japan. And we stayed there three days.

DePue: Do you know where in Japan that was?

Nikulski: Camp Drake.

DePue: Did you have any idea at that time – or did you find out at Camp Drake – where exactly you were headed, what unit you were going to be assigned to?

Nikulski: No, they didn't. No, no. Once we got to Drake, they says, "You're going over to the Repo Depot over there," and—

DePue: Over there being Korea?

Nikulski: In Korea, yeah. And then they said, "You go here, you go here, you go here, here, here, here."

DePue: So it wasn't until you got to Pusan that you found out?

Nikulski: That's right.

DePue: When you first heard the news about North Korea invading the South, what went through your mind?

Nikulski: I had no idea where it was, who they were, any idea at all. And I didn't know if I was going, I didn't know. It was just one big question mark, like where is this place? I had no idea. They said, "Well, it's near Japan." Well, that's where I wanted to go, you know, to begin with. And they said, "No, you're going over there and it won't be long. You'll be out." Yeah.

DePue: What did they mean when they said it won't be long?

Nikulski: They didn't expect a long war. They didn't expect any of that. That was all a surprise.

DePue: These are your NCOs and officers who are telling this?

Nikulski: Yeah. Oh yeah.

DePue: The same ones who didn't give you any good training?

Nikulski: That's absolutely right. Because when I got there in the foxhole in the 35th, Company F, they says, "You're the BAR [Browning Automatic Rifle] man." What

are you talking about? They says, "You're the BAR man." I said, "I don't even know what you're talking about. What is it?" I had no idea what a BAR was. I'd never seen one. He says, "Well, you've got an assistant right here. He's the ammo man for you." I said, "But what is a BAR?" And it was dark as dark can be.

DePue: Were you in the front lines at this time?

Nikulski: This was the front lines. This is the front lines, and they said, "You are the BAR man. Now, stay awake." I stayed awake. I am so scared, I have no idea where I'm at. I have no idea where anybody is, because you couldn't see your hand in front of your face it was so dark. "Well, watch the guy on your left." Where? Where is the front, where's, where's—where is what? I had no idea where what was. During the daylight, I got approximately one hour's sleep at intervals. At intervals, mind you. Ten minutes here, sleep for twenty. I'm up for two hours and then I'd sleep for twenty minutes, up for two hours, until daylight. I said, "What time is it?" He says, "It's nine o'clock." I said, "Nine o'clock? It can't be." He says, "Your watch says nine o'clock." I says, "The sun ain't even up yet." You know? Well, the guy was changing, he was there longer than I had in the hole, so he, yeah, he slept for ten minutes, that's good enough. So by the time daylight comes it was nine o'clock. I said, "What time does the sun come up?" "About four, five o'clock." Okay, you got me this time but you ain't getting me again.

DePue: So he was playing with his watch just so you'd have a longer shift than he would, huh?

Nikulski: That's absolutely right.

DePue: I want to have you talk through, if you can remember this, from the time you guys landed at Pusan –I assume that you took a ship into Pusan –.

Nikulski: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: –until you got assigned to the 35th and ended up in the front line. Was that just a couple of days?

Nikulski: I really don't remember. I honestly, truly don't remember. I know it was a Japanese boat, a flat-bottom boat. It wasn't no big ship or anything, it was a flat-bottom thing that—there was no chairs, tables, or anything on that.

DePue: Do you remember the specific date you got to Korea?

Nikulski: One August.

DePue: Well, I can't remember the specific date, but I'm sure you know, the 24th Infantry was the first division that got there. They had been on occupation duty in Japan. The 25th came in there, I think, about the same time you got there. So maybe they arrived and you were assigned to the unit at the same time everybody else was arriving there.

Nikulski: That's when I got there.

DePue: Some of them had been in Hawaii, right?

Nikulski: Yup, absolutely. That's home base. That was the main base. I've never been stationed in Hawaii, and I served two wars with them people. Never been in Hawaii.

DePue: Well, that's a heck of a note.

Nikulski: I know. I'm in their history book, though. I'm in their history book.

DePue: So just a couple days in from the time you arrived in Pusan to the time you were assigned to Company F with the 35th Regiment, 25th Division, you guys are on the southern perimeter of the Pusan Perimeter, close to Masan it looks like.

Nikulski: Yeah.

DePue: Do you remember any of your first action then?

Nikulski: It was that first day. That first day, I shot somebody. I don't know who, how, or why.

DePue: So you got there in the middle of the night the next day?

Nikulski: Yeah. The next day they told me to be sure I could see the enemy before I shot, because the flash of the rifle would give your position away. Well, naturally I'm scared and I don't know, but I'd seen a white circle out there, and that was a Gook North Korean wearing the white handkerchief on his head – looked looked a bulls-eye. He was crawling up to the position. As I pulled my buddy in the hole, I said, "Give me your rifle. I see something out there." He said, "Don't use the BAR. Use the rifle if you have to shoot in the air and scare him off." “I seen him moving out there.” He said, "Well, shoot it." That was my first night there in combat. And I didn’t realize that I hit anything. There was no more movement.

DePue: Was this an M1 rifle?

Nikulski: M1 rifle, yeah. So in the morning when the sun came up and I looked up to see where I was, to try and locate myself. I went, "There's somebody over here. There's the foxhole – where there's the foxhole over there." Oh my God, you know, and realizing what had happened I said, "This is Korea." I'm dumbfounded. You know, and then I looked over in the vicinity, what I thought, and there was somebody. Whether I shot him or not. But I shot at that circle, I have no idea why.

DePue: So that first evening, first night, you heard other people shooting as well occasionally?

Nikulski: Oh yeah. Often flanks. And I didn't know who was doing the shooting, but there was sporadic fire.

DePue: I can't imagine how disorienting that is. I've been in the field artillery. You're occupying a position at night, and you have this notion in your mind how it's supposed to look. Then it gets daylight and it's always a lot different.

Nikulski: Absolutely, absolutely. And the terrain – it's so dark and it's not flat like you'd think it would be; it's hilly. And if you think it's hilly, it's flat and wide, with bushes here, the terrain dips. And I realized this later on in my career. You have to set up that way. You've got to be in a plus factor with terrain, the higher ground. Okay. Now, when you set up a defensive position, well this—I guess this is getting off the track.

DePue: Go ahead.

Nikulski: But you learn through experience, I guess. Years and years and years go on, and then the higher in grade, the more experience you get. You actually have to go out when you're training to examine your own position. If you're setting up a defensive position, you go out in front of your position and look to find out if that's the best position for that gun, for that sniper, for that machine gun or rifle. How would you get through there if you were the enemy, into your position? You know you're going to be covering that gully down there with mortars. Mortars are going to cover that spot. Artillery's going to cover further out. You get air cover. And you learn all this. But when you know absolutely nothing about warfare, you're just constantly scared. Adrenaline going all the time. And that's the way it was in Korea. And when I came back from the hospital—

DePue: Do you need to let that cat back in? I hear him yelling outside.

Nikulski: Is he still out there?

(break in audio)

Nikulski: —proficient.

DePue: Oh my…

Nikulski: OK, write that down. (laughter) No.

DePue: Well, it's going to be on the tape here. I forgot to turn the darn thing on again. I think I made a mistake there. OK, I'm going to rehash some of the things you were talking about, and then I'm going to ask you to talk about it again because I think it's going to be important. I apologize for that. I made a mistake when we let the cat in, I think. But we were talking about you got there one August. You were stringing wire because…?

Nikulski: The North Koreans were building an underwater bridge with sandbags. Just building up the (unintelligible) so they could come across. And we did that for about two weeks. I think that was about two weeks, because it was relatively quiet.

DePue: Again, you're with the 25th, you're near Masan, and the North Koreans are just on the other side of the—

Nikulski: Naktong River.

DePue: Naktong River. Why don't you talk very briefly about – well I'll just go through it – that when they told you to string the wire, you didn't even know what they were talking about.

Nikulski: Absolutely had no idea what barbed wire was.

DePue: And I also probably didn't record the story about taking friendly fire from the Second Division folks on the other side of the ravine, right?

Nikulski: Yes. They were unaware that we were coming out that far to the river. We started here, put one up here, and diagonally. It wasn't a straight line.

DePue: So were these guys watching a couple guys out in the front line stringing wire and they thought it was the Koreans?

Nikulski: (laughter) Unfortunately for me, yes. Had a few rounds come pretty close. And there was a short burst on the machine gun from a tank. That I know. It was somebody sitting there with a tank, seen this movement and they just threw a burst over at us. It wasn't too good a shot, unfortunately for him.

DePue: Anyway, when you got there on the first of August, you were stringing wire for a couple weeks in this interim period. You and your buddy had obviously learned how to use the BAR, with which you became proficient. But you mentioned it was pretty darn heavy; it was like twenty-something pounds, which is—

Nikulski: Yes, it was.

DePue: —about three times as heavy as an ordinary rifle, wasn't it?

Nikulski: Yeah.

DePue: And you know, that doesn't sound like much unless you're trying to hump that thing, does it?

Nikulski: Up and down the hills.

DePue: Now, where I would like to have you pick this up again – I feel bad that we lost some of this – but you had talked about that one night that they thought the enemy

was going to attack after they built this underground, underwater bridge. They put a lot of sandbags.

Nikulski: Underwater bridge, yeah.

DePue: So why don't you pick it up at that point again?

Nikulski: Okay, we were up for two days. Woke up in the morning at—

DePue: You were up for two days straight?

Nikulski: Two days straight. No sleep. We were on observation, waiting for the shit to hit the fan, you know. And they says, "Okay, one man can sleep. They're not going to cross now. One man out. One man sleep, one man awake. You can get out of your foxhole but get on the reverse slope if you're going to do any sleeping." Okay, the reverse slope is on the other side behind you. I'll tell you something. Them foxholes ain't the biggest and the best. You can be there all your life, you'll improve them. But you don't know how long you're going to be there, and that ground is not soft over there. That's mountains; you're in the mountains, digging into rock and it is not easy. When I went to bed, I finally got completely exhausted. Went over, my turn to get out of the foxhole and go to sleep, take a nap, whatever I wanted to do. I just passed out over by this one bush. There was this one little bush there and I covered it with a poncho to keep the dew off. All of a sudden, I heard airplanes. I heard airplanes. Heard rockets. I heard somebody screaming my name. I just jumped up from the poncho, jumped up and stood up, said, "What's going on?" Had a P51 coming right at me shooting. They'd already knocked out our CP. [Command Post]

DePue: The North Koreans had?

DePue: I don't know whose plane it was. I had no idea whose plane it was. This is daylight.

DePue: So this airplane had knocked out your CP?

Nikulski: Airplane knocked out our CP, hit two positions that I recall, and was strafing us. Now, I have no idea whose plane it was. I recognized it as a P51. Now, be that as it may, South Koreans were flying them or not, or our pilot, I don't know.

DePue: But it wasn't North Koreans?

Nikulski: I don't know. I honestly till this day don't know. And I can't get any indication from anybody that I talk to. Whose plane was it? But they were firing rockets and they were firing the fifty calibers, because that's what I got hit with. I got hit with a ricochet fifty caliber in my leg. Didn't know it. They were screaming my name, "Stan, Stan, get in the hole! Get in the hole!" I jumped up and I seen this plane coming right at me, and I dove. As I hit the foxhole, got in the foxhole, my right leg, lower shin, hit the guy's steel helmet and knocked his head away from the

bank of the foxhole. We were head to toe. When I landed in there, I hit his head with my foot and my head hit his foot. But I hit his head with my leg and a fifty caliber slug landed right in the bank where his head was. I said, "What's happening?" He says, "We're being strafed. We were already rocketed, and you slept through that. How did you sleep? How could you possibly sleep through that?" I says, "I was completely exhausted!" And I didn't even know I was hit.

DePue: How badly were you hit?

Nikulski: They had to dig the slug out of my leg. Sent me back.

DePue: You're lucky it ricocheted before it hit the leg.

Nikulski: Absolutely. Absolutely. Didn't break a bone. It chipped it, split the nerve in my leg right around my knee cap all way down to my foot. I had to be carried down the hill; I couldn't walk. They put me on a stretcher. But anyway, I said, "I don't know, I was tired." Then when the plane left, the only thing I heard was, "Our markers are on. Don't they know which direction to shoot?" You know, you've got the markers, air markers, air panels. The medic kept saying, "Anybody hurt over here?" And I said no. The guy I was in the hole with says, "You're bleeding on me." "Yeah, what happened to my leg? My leg's numb." They tore my pant leg up, opened it and says, "Oh God, you got the bullet still in you." The slug went in here – just a ricochet – went in there, a big lump right over there.

DePue: One side of the skin, and a lump on the other side of the skin. This was right below which knee?

Nikulski: Right. No, it's above my right knee. It's on my right thigh, yeah. And I says, "Oh yeah, just a little bit higher, something else would have happened." All I remember is being evacuated back to the Battalion Aid Station, and woke up in a hospital in Japan. And that's when all the excitement started.

DePue: That's when the North Koreans attacked, or your excitement?

Nikulski: My excitement. Because I missed the whole Inchon landing. Shortly after – well, one September when I got evacuated, 1950 – shortly after that they had the Inchon landing and they made the big push up.

DePue: Yeah, that was about two weeks after that.

Nikulski: And I was in a hospital in Japan, in Kyoto.

DePue: In where?

Nikulski: Kyoto. K-y-o-t-o. That was called 35th Station Hospital.

DePue: Coincidence.

Nikulski: Coincidence, yeah. 35th Infantry, 35th Station Hospital.

DePue: How did they get you over there? Did they fly you?

Nikulski: I don't know. I really don't know.

DePue: Did they put you under for a while, then?

Nikulski: Yeah. I woke up in a hospital in Kyoto, Japan. They'd already done the operation. Where they did it, I don't know if it was in Korea, Japan, or what. I woke up in 35th Station Hospital. That's all I remember. Didn't know where I was, didn't know how I got there, and I didn't even know I was wounded. I just woke up, got out of my bed, and fell down because my leg was still numb, bandaged already. They come, pick me back up, put me in the bed.

DePue: This is an Army hospital you were in?

Nikulski: It was an Army hospital in Japan, yeah.

DePue: How long did you stay there?

Nikulski: Well, I wasn't supposed to be there very long. This is when all the excitement happened to me. They made an announcement. Be prepared to be rotated back to CONUS, Continental United States. “Ships, planes, all available, taking all Med evacs back to the states. Check the manifest. If you're name's on a manifest, be prepared to move on. Check them three times a day.” Check them three times a day, every manifest for planes, trains, anything. Check all manifests three times a day. Did so. Then in a matter of a week or two, there's only seven of us left in the hospital. Seven of us left in the hospital! And the last boat left, last plane left, us seven were in the hospital. And they says, "What are you doing here?" I come in to get my bandaged changed, you know.

DePue: They weren't receiving any new casualties at all?

Nikulski: No. I don't know where they went or what they were doing or why.

DePue: Because there was still plenty of action in Korea to create more casualties.

Nikulski: Absolutely, absolutely. This wasn't really a hospital. This was a –I don't know what they would call it at the time – a station hospital. It wasn't a hospital per se, as we know hospitals. It was—I don't know.

DePue: Kind of a holding area until you got sent back to the States where you got real medical care, maybe?

Nikulski: Recuperation. I don't know.

DePue: But you did see doctors and nurses there?

Nikulski: Yes.

DePue: And they took good care of you?

Nikulski: Yes, yes. That's what the doctor asked me when he seen me when the last boat left and the last plane left. "What are you doing here?" Well, I wasn't the only one. There was six other guys behind me. We were going in, daily checkup.

DePue: Had you had a chance to notify your mother at this time?

Nikulski: The Army notified her.

DePue: But you didn't have a chance to call her or write to her?

Nikulski: No. I wrote, though that took so long. But we didn't call. That facility wasn't there for—

DePue: Yeah, okay. I'm ahead of my time here. Was she able to get any letters or anything to you, or did the Army just kind of misplace you?

Nikulski: That was, I think, about the first three weeks. Because I was in the Pittsburgh Press for being wounded in action. The Army already notified our high school, wounded in action. And I didn't. I wrote. It took so long to get a letter to the hospital. I don't know why, but she was worried. Well, naturally she was worried because they don't tell her much. Wounded in action on such and such a date in Korea, blah, blah, blah, doing well in hospital. And that was it. She didn't know if I was serious or what. But when she got my letter, she had called American Red Cross and the Red Cross sent the letter, send the information back to them saying that I was in the hospital and I'm doing fine. Seriously wounded in the leg, but recovering. So I was actually supposed to come back to the States. My name never appeared on the manifest, on any of the manifests. And I was there.

Now, where the fun part comes in is that I didn't get paid yet for August, you know, at the end of the month, because I got shot in Korea and now they're gone. I didn't get paid. The following three months as I was in the hospital, I didn't get paid. I had no money, I had nothing. I had whatever the Army wanted to give me, ten dollars, ten dollars, ten dollars. A quick ten, they call it. And I turned around and they said, "Well, your finance records ain't here. Your records ain't here." Well take my medical record. "Well, we'll make a temporary record." Okay, I'm recuperating.

DePue: Now, where were your finance records supposed to be? In the regiment?

Nikulski: No. Those were already sent back to the states.

DePue: Okay, so your records got sent back?

Nikulski: Records got sent back to the States. Nobody would make a temporary anything. Finance records, 201, medical records, nothing. So I had no finance records, no medical records, not a 201. I was there in the hospital. Now, the time comes. Shortly before Thanksgiving 1950, the doctor says, "You're well enough. Report back to your unit. You're well enough; report back to your unit. Fit for duty." Okay, yes sir. How do I get there? "Well, we don't have no records out here." I says, "Well, I haven't been paid." "Well, just report back to your unit; they'll take care of you." I said, "Okay, where's my orders?" "You don't need any orders, you're a returnee." "Well, where do I go?" I'm a PFC. I don't know anything. You know? How do I do that? How do I get back there? This is in Kyoto, Japan, and he says, "Report back to your unit in Korea." "How do I do this?" "Well, get on that truck there and they'll take you to Repo Depot. They'll take you here, they'll take you there." No guidance, no nothing. The only thing that I got out of anybody's head was report back to your unit. With no orders, no nothing. Nothing in writing that says that I was there. I report back. I finally made it back. I can't tell you how I did it or what. I don't know how I did it. Somebody would say. "Get on that truck, head back. Get here, head back." And when I got back, right before Thanksgiving—

DePue: Go ahead.

Nikulski: –I reported back to the 35th Repo Depot. The 35th Personnel Officer says, "Are you a returnee?" I said, "Yes sir." He says, "Where's your records?" I says, "You tell me." He says, "What do you mean? Where's your orders?" I had no orders, I had no records. "How'd you get here?" I says, "I'm telling you just like the doctor told me. You're a returnee; you don't need orders."

DePue: Do you remember where this 35th Regiment Repo Depot would have been? Was that way close to the front lines?

Nikulski: Relatively close. I don't know. I really don't know. Because they wanted to send me to A Company. This Personnel Captain says, "Well, we're going to put you in A Company." I said, "No, you ain't. I was in F Company. I'm going back to F Company." He says, "You don't tell me what to do. I'm sending you to A Company." I say, "Captain, I'm not going back to A Company. I'm a returnee. I was in a hospital for three months, almost three months, and I'm going back to my company." "Well, who's your Company Commander?" I said, "I don't know who the Company Commander is now." In fact, I even forgot who the Company Commander was when I left. I didn't have a chance to meet anybody. I said, "But I was in F Company." Now, it just so happens that two people carried me down the hill when I got wounded, one September. There was a BAR man – his name was Ray Noon – and our Company Personnel Clerk carried me down the hill, because I sat out at his position when they carried me down the hill, and I ran into him. He sees me and the first question he asked me is, "What are you doing here?" He says, "We all thought you went back to the States. Well, are you ready to go?" I said, "No, the Captain wants to send me to A Company because they have no records." And the Captain asked him, he says, "Do you know this guy?"

He says, "Yeah, I carried him down the hill, Captain." "Well, he was in your company?" He says, "Yeah." "Get your ass back. You're in F Company, go to F Company." I got back to the Company and they had a new Company Commander, Captain Holliday.

DePue: Holloway?

Nikulski: Holliday. Two "L's." And I haven't had the opportunity to introduce myself to him, you know, as a returnee. I just reported back to my platoon, continued my work shortly after that. In the meantime, I'm not completely recuperated on my leg. They said, "You have a tendency to baby it." And I said, "Baby it? We'll see." It did, and I did baby it going up and down them hills.

DePue: Well it's – correct me if I'm wrong here, but you would have gotten back towards the end of November.

Nikulski: Yes.

DePue: Was it before Thanksgiving or after?

Nikulski: Before Thanksgiving.

DePue: This is just about the time that the Chinese came in and the shit hit the fan. So you're no longer in the Pusan Perimeter. The 35th Regiment is way up north of Pyongyang. Right here, which is not too far from the Yalu River, in fact.) DePue and Nikulski are looking at a map.)

Nikulski: That's right. Now, I can tell you. From here until the day that I left, actual spots and locations I cannot. I can tell you all the activity and all the shit that we went through, but names I don't have.

DePue: I can't imagine how anybody can keep track of that, because basically it was retrograde or retreat, whatever you want to call it, for the next two months, wasn't it?

Nikulski: Yeah, that's true. Put pause on.

(break in audio)

DePue: It's just too tempting sitting there. OK, you have just given me *Up and Down Korea* by Sam C. Holliday, your Company Commander.

Nikulski: My Company Commander, yes. He sent me this. I come in contact with him after a period of time, fifty years. After fifty years, I contacted him through one of my Korean buddies over here. They had access to advanced education with a computer. Jerry Quinn got me his address and telephone number. We've tried different avenues to contact him. I wanted to personally contact this guy, my Company Commander, because I hold so much respect for the individual. I

thought he was one good officer. As a PFC, I had very little respect for officers, but this guy here, he was a tactician. We had the least amount of casualties in any Company in the Battalion, any Company in the Battalion. The guy was tactically sound, and I had so much respect for him – as I got older, I spent my time in the military, told him so – so much respect for this guy. He and I, he hurt his right leg over there. That was before. He was wounded a couple times, but he actually hurt his leg at a rest area that we had. They finally pulled us off the line after I don't know how many straight weeks of fighting. Pulled us back for a rest for one day. This guy here, playing football in the rice paddy with the company. Just for morale purposes. Well, the guy got tackled. I couldn't play because I was sitting on the hill with a bum leg. He'd tackle everybody, let everybody tackle him and everything else. I seen him when he hurt his leg. He sprained his knee in a rice paddy playing football. I told him that over the telephone when I talked to him. I said, "How's your leg?" First thing he wanted to know when I talked to him was, ”How's your health?” I says, "I am fine." And I asked him, "How is your right leg? I know how you hurt your leg. You hurt your leg playing football in a rice paddy." And I heard a gasp from him. "How did you know that?" I says, "Well, I was sitting on the top of the hill with my bum leg. We were the only two in the company from then on hopping along on one leg. He says, "Why did you call me?" I says, "I called you and I told you that I had, before I died, apologized for you. I hated when you wanted me to extend over there, when you finally,"—well, let me back up a little bit.

There's a story that I hold in so high a regard for this individual. He called me after we made one of the attacks up a big Yama (?) and came back. He sent the Company runner over to get me and wanted to know why I was writing General McArthur a letter. “Because every payday I'd report for pay. " ”You're not on payroll." “Why am I not on the payroll?” "Haven't found your finance records." So my mother wrote General McArthur a letter, and he gets a stack of letters, it's a stack about that thick.

DePue: About a quarter, half an inch thick.

Nikulski: From General McArthur's headquarters, everybody endorses in the chain of command and wants to know why. Because my mother threatened to write President Truman. If they can't find my records, send me home. She'll keep me until they draft me. And when he got the letter and he had to reply by endorsement as Company Commander why I am there and why there is no record of me being there. He asked me in no uncertain terms what gave me the right to write General McArthur a letter. I told him, "Captain, you must be sick or something, because I'm only a PFC. I don’t write General McArthur letters, you know." And he says, "Are you sure?" Then he handed me the whole stack and he says, "Read the letter. Is that your handwriting? Do you recognize that handwriting?" And I said, "That ain't my handwriting, Captain. It's my mother's. It's my mother's handwriting." "You see what she says?" "Yes." Then I started shaking. I was scared. I didn’t know what the hell was going to happen to me. He says, "You can't do a thing in this Army. Your mother can. Now, you go find your

records. We're not authorized to make new records for you people." "Okay, Captain." You know, whatever. I said, "Now, can I go back in my foxhole?" (laughter) He says, "Well, take care of this."

Then about two months later, I'm sitting in the foxhole. Company Commander comes up to this guy Holliday, brand new Second Lieutenant in starched fatigues, and says, "Are you Sidney Nikulski?" I says, "My name ain't Sidney." He says, "Well, wait a minute, wait a minute." He opens it up, he says, "Is this your records?" I said, "Yeah, these are my records. Where were they?" "Are you sure they're your records?" I said yeah. Captain says, "Lieutenant, those are his records. Anything else?" "Yes. Soldier, you've got to sit down and write your mother a letter right now, and I've got to hand carry it back to the States." And I says, "What am I going to say? Yeah, Ma, I got the records. Everything's OK." Then he wanted me to extend over there, this Captain wanted me to extend when my time was up. He says, "I'd like you to extend for thirty days." I said, "Captain, I hate the Army. I hate your Army. They screwed over me all the while I was over here. People are dying over here. I don't want to spend another day over here, and that's God's truth." He says, "Well, I want to promote you. I want to get you promoted, get your pay squared away." I says, "Captain, I came here as a PFC and I can leave here, but I want to leave here."

I told him that, too. I says, "Remember, I told you that?" He says, "Let me tell you something." It's been fifty years. He's a full Colonel now, full Colonel, and I'm talking to him like I'm talking to you. I said, "Goddamnit, what the hell did you do? I'm waiting to see your picture in the Army Times making four star General." He says, "Well, what did you do with your life?" I said, "Well, this is what I'm telling you Colonel, Captain, whatever you want me to call you." He says he's got a doctorate degree now, and he says, "Call me Sam." I said, "No, I'll never call you Sam. You don't mind if I call you Colonel," and he said be my guest. But he said, "I retired from the Army full Colonel." I say, "Well, what are you doing now?" He says, "I have my own organization, a business. Historian, political historian." And some other things he does. And that's what's in here, that's what he got. Political history. And we could communicate, and—

DePue: Was Holliday a World War II veteran?

Nikulski: No, because he graduated—the only way we could find him, he graduated in '97 at West Point.

DePue: '47, you mean?

Nikulski: Yeah, '47.

DePue: West Point. That was my next question, where he got his commission.

Nikulski: West Point. That's the only way we could find him. We tried telephone book, records. The only place I found him is through West Point. Jerry Quinn got it for me.

DePue: Okay, I know Jerry. I wonder if we could back up here. I If you're willing to and if you can remember, I want you to tell me what it was like from the time the Chinese hit when you were so far north. Remember, talk through that process of retreating back south.

Nikulski: Yeah. That was an experience that you can't forget. It's mind-boggling. When you're outnumbered sixteen to one, and you se… Well, yeah. To back up, we were set up in an area that I was required to go down and be security for the tanks that were down there. So it had to be an open area. We were surrounded twice – our whole regiment was just surrounded – twice. with the Turks on our left, South Koreans on our right. And both times after we attacked, the Turks attacked, and the South Koreans withdrew. They withdrew, exposing our whole right flank. Exposing our whole regiment's right flank. Yeah, we were pulling up, they were pulling back. Chinese came around, that's the __(??) in between the Turks.

DePue: The Turks were on your left?

Nikulski: Turks were always on our left. We were always the divider for the South Koreans, us, then the Turks. We used to see them fighting over here. Not too much firing. Light firing.

DePue: The Turks, you're talking about.

Nikulski: Light firing for the Turks to fire back. They did all their attacking with knives. And this is a fact. They didn't like to shoot; they liked to knife. So the Chinese, they came between us, at the gap and just crushing our whole regiment, 35th regiment. In a matter of two days, we were almost completely surrounded. Then we got the word to pull back. Now, we were in a draw. We were on one side of the hill, and I was just reading that in here, this is the whole plan. See this guy's plans in there? I was reading that this morning just to refresh my memory. One of the members of our Company—the whole regiment was mixed. There was not just one Company, the whole regiment was just like this, pulling back, withdrawing. And they said, Head south, head south. That's the command you got. Head south. There's no Command and Control. There was no time for it. They thought 30,000 men up against a regiment –our regiment was not 30,000. They put 30,000 against you, they were jumping on tanks, they're jumping in foxholes. They captured people, killing people, hand-to-hand.

DePue: Now before you started this, were there any direct assaults on your position while you guys were dug in?

Nikulski: Oh yeah. That's where we got—okay. This is just prior to, yeah, just prior to our attack. Because we pulled in and set up here, then we pulled back, then we attacked and we hit all the way back.

DePue: Okay, so what you're describing, if I can understand it correctly, is you're in this serious retrograde action but oftentimes you guys were told to counterattack?

Nikulski: Yes.

DePue: Just to make enough space between you and the enemy?

Nikulski: Absolutely This type of action.

DePue: Back and forth.

Nikulski: Back and forth.

DePue: Did you have to fight your way through some roadblocks the Chinese had put behind the lines?

Nikulski: We couldn't distinguish roadblocks. The only word that we got, we had to fight our way back and get back the best we could without any direction. They say we've got to head south. Well, which way's south? That way. Head that way. The best way you can.

DePue: Did you generally stay in the valleys, then, on your way back south?

Nikulski: Well, we always stayed—they'd say, "Stay out of the moonlight. Reverse slope. Get off the high light, top of the hill. Stay down." And not in the valley, you can't be in a valley.

DePue: But you don't want to be on the crest of the hill, either.

Nikulski: Absolutely. You skirt the crest of the hill, yup.

DePue: When you first joined the unit, it is right before the Chinese attack. What would you say is the company's strength at that time? Do you have any feel for that? Generally it would have been about 150 to 200-something, in that neighborhood.

Nikulski: Yeah, yeah, it was pretty—

DePue: Full strength company, then?

Nikulski: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: I assume as you're doing this retrograde, you're steadily losing people as well.

Nikulski: Yeah, well, there were wounded. . You never knew until you finally ended up where these people dropped off or what. You actually never knew till you stopped the next day. Actually, there was some time in this period that we had to withdraw along the road about seven o'clock in the evening, at dusk. We didn't stop withdrawing until we hit thirty-six miles. Thirty-six miles until we stopped.

DePue: And you're on foot?

Nikulski: We're on foot. We were the last – because I remember, that's when I got rid of my BAR because I couldn't carry it no more. We were withdrawing, and the First Sergeant came by with a trailer, says, "All excess equipment. No bodies. Nobody can get on the trailer or the jeep. I put the goddamn BAR on the trailer. I couldn't carry it no more. Nobody else could carry it. You couldn't carry anything. We were exhausted. Thirty-six miles to walk from seven at night straight through. You're walking up the hill, you're falling asleep while you're walking and everything else. Now, people can't believe, they don't believe that an individual can do that. We walked thirty-six miles from seven o'clock at night – at night. It was scarce that you'd have a break for about two minutes, we'd stop. Because if you stopped any longer, you'd fall asleep or you dozed off. You'd be left. Nobody was behind – we were the last element on that road. They said, "Don't stop. Keep going, unless you want to eat Chinese food the next day." We believed them.

DePue: Were you leaving some equipment behind as well?

Nikulski: Absolutely. I don't know. It's hard to imagine, because we ended up back, thirty-five miles later, with almost nothing. I had no belt, no pack, no nothing. They'd ask me what happened to it. Nobody knows. But nobody had anything. We were lucky we even had weapons.

DePue: You did have your weapon, though?

Nikulski: I didn't have my BAR. I had a carbine.

DePue: A carbine?

Nikulski: I ended up with a carbine.

DePue: Now in the history books, this is the term I've heard and I understand it's the term that the GI's had for it at that time: the *Big Bug Out.* Does that ring a bell to you?

Nikulski: Yeah, that rings a bell.

DePue: That's what you guys were calling what was going on?

Nikulski: Absolutely. We never knew why we were there. Did you ever hear somebody say, "If anybody asks you, here's what you tell them. Why you're here. You're here to defend democracy for the South Koreans." Now, that means absolutely nothing to a GI. That means absolutely nothing. You can keep this for record or anything else. People in uniform are fighting to stay alive. Politics means absolutely nothing. The ground trooper doesn't care. The ground trooper wants to stay alive. Self-preservation. Once you're in uniform in a foxhole and fighting – and I feel sorry for all the troops over in Iraq – you're over there whether you want to be or not. Self-preservation. You've got to stay alive somehow so you can go back home. Now, a case like Vietnam, that's a different ball game. That's a different ball game altogether. It's attitude.

DePue: Now you talked about how proud you were and how much respect you had for Captain Holliday, and I assume that attitude permeated the entire Fox Company, F Company.

Nikulski: Absolutely, absolutely.

DePue: That made a difference that you were in F Company; you had pride that you were going to stay together as a Company coming back?

Nikulski: Absolutely, absolutely. You get that brotherly –white, black, green – we didn't care about anything. We were in F Company. You had comrades. It's just something that happens. You protect me, I protect you. You're my buddy, I'm his buddy. Everybody. Whether you want it or not, it's there. You get it by training together, by doing, by eating dirt together, sloshing around in the mud, whatever. It's just that camaraderie you get. And it's natural.

DePue: Now you're doing all of – the retreat, let's call it what it is – that retreat.

Nikulski: Yeah, a retreat.

DePue: This is the dead of winter, too. How did you survive that?

Nikulski: Well, this is another thing that I'm in dispute with the so-called historians. They say we were well-equipped. Well, that's a downright lie. We weren't equipped. We weren't trained to go there and do any kind of fighting. We didn't have any proper training. We didn't have the proper equipment. I'm still suffering from frostbite. Not frostbite, I can't call it frostbite because I've still got my fingers, I've still got my toes. But I have a cold weather injury. You're talking about cold weather. We weren't equipped to survive in that kind of winter, that '50 winter. Forty below zero. Now dammit, I never—when somebody hands me historical book that says, "Here's what the uniforms were that they had. They were best equipped army in the world. They had this, this, this, and this." Well, this, this, this, and this we did not have. We had no supply, a chain of command for supply, distribution, location, anything else. There was nothing there for it. And we had got to do without supply. I had on six layers of clothes. I had no liner for my field jacket. They couldn't get me one. They didn't have any of these tanker coats that you see, with lamb lining. They were giving their eye teeth for one of those things. Gloves? What? The Army didn't issue you gloves for that. Boots, thermal boots? I had a pair of combat boots on.

DePue: And so did everybody else, from what I understand.

Nikulski: Absolutely. I mean, I wasn't the only one who was cold. No heat! My mother said something to me when I first got back. "Why don't you sit still for long and quit messing around with that light switch? Every time you get up, you flip the light switch." I said, "I didn't know I did that." She says, "Oh yeah, why is it you walk by the sink and the spigot you flip it on, get water out of it?" "I didn't know I did that, Ma." She said, "Oh yeah. Another thing, you limp." I says, "Ma!" She says,

"You're not the same guy I had, you're not the same kid that left, that went there with." I said, "What are you talking about?" I says, "Well, first of all, Mother, you know when I left here I was a kid. I'm not a kid no more. I'm eighteen. I'm not allowed to vote, I'm not allowed to drink, I'm not allowed to do anything." I said, "But I understand one thing. Everything I take for granted, this roof, this house I live in, that water coming out of that spigot, you turn that little knob, and that light switch. Turn it on and off, you get lights. Now, if you had that taken away from you for about three or four weeks at a time, the heat, the water, electricity, and a roof over your head…" I says, "I miss that. I sat in a hole so cold on top of this hill, looking down over this rice paddy at the one house that was left standing out there in the field. Forty degrees below zero, and I can't think of nothing else but to be inside that house. I didn't care what happened to me. Whatever happened to me, I just wanted to get into that house. No heat in there but I didn't care. I wanted to have in a roof over my head. Now, that may sound stupid, but you'd be on the line some time and be so cold and so hungry and so thirsty, and feel, There's absolutely nothing I can do about that. I can't solve that problem." She says, "Well, was it really that bad?" I said, "Well, it's hard to explain, and people don't understand that." She says, "Well, you ain't supposed to understand it either." I says, "Well, I don't. I don't. I just can't, I can't be without that stuff now because I was without it before." Well, I don't know.

DePue: Are there any particular engagements, actions, firefights, that you especially remember that you can talk about during that retreat?

Nikulski: No, I really can't. One guy got—he said he got shot. One of my buddies. We were moving traversing crosses, yeah.

DePue: Moving what?

Nikulski: Traversing crosses.

DePue: Traversing crosses?

Nikulski: Yeah. And it's dark. The moon's out. Basically a full moon, so they can see anything that'd be running up and down there. You had to be on the inside. And firing going on around you. That's when they had us tied in. And he says, "I'm hit." Where? He says, "In the mouth." And he grabbed his mouth, and I guess he got woozy. I guess he was going into shock or something. He says, "I don't know." I said, "Well, we ain't going to leave you here." He just wrapped his arm around me and I put my arm around his waist and carried him alongside this hill. There's snipers shooting at you. How you going to get out of this thing? Where in the hell are we going to go? We're heading south. And we basically made it, made it out. Come to find out, "The bullet's coming out!" "Bullet? Let me see!" It's a rock. And I said, "I carried you for five miles you son of a bitch, and then you get hit with a rock?" He says, "How do I know? But it hurt so bad and it still hurts!" But pulled it out and it's a rock. He got a ricochet rock come up and hit him in the mouth, and I'm carrying him! (laughter)

But no, and the rest, I don't, honestly, truly. Because the Company Commander pulled me off the line once he got my records, says, "Now, you've got to understand something. Without your records, we don't know you're here." I said, "What are you trying to tell me, Captain?" He says, "If we don't physically have your records, how are we going to ship your body back? We don't know you're here. You're not on a daily report." Now, that's official stuff. He says, "We don't know you're here." I says, "How do you correct that?" And he says, "Hey, I don't know." I said, "But it's all taken care of, I'm not even on your records?" He said, "No, you're not on my records." Somehow they justified – I was carried as a deserter back in the states."

DePue: During all of this time?

Nikulski: Yeah. And my mother says, "The FBI was here looking for you." I says, "What for?" "They wanted to know where you were. I told them where you were, you were in Korea!"

DePue: You'd invite them to come join you!

Nikulski: Yeah. She says, "They said you jumped ship." She says, "Well, where do you think my son is?" "Well, he jumped ship in Japan." She says, "I'm getting letters from Korea, and he's telling me he ain't getting paid or anything!" Holliday says, "Well, they voided all that out." And then he says, "It was just recently, four or five years ago, I got my 201 file, you should check that out." I says, "Now, how did they justify that period? Because in one portion of my 201 file, it says I landed in Seattle. And the following day I departed Seattle to return to my unit." Now how the hell do you do that?

DePue: When you departed from Japan, I would think the normal policy was that – and you're going on a ship back to the United States – you're supposed to be carrying your records with you?

Nikulski: Yeah. Yeah.

DePue: So how could the records have come back all by themselves? That's what it sounds like.

Nikulski: Yup. Somebody wasn't really doing their job. I know now. After all this time and all the education I've got staying in and learning, promotion and all the other stuff. It was my firm belief, really, that whatever happened to me I surely don't want to happen to somebody else. Basically, you've got to do your job. You've got the responsibility to do it. You know? I've learned a lot.

DePue: So going through the experience you did – especially retreating all the way back – being pretty close to the Yalu River and then having your butts kicked

Nikulski: All the way back.

DePue: —all the way past Seoul. That's a horrendous experience for anybody to go through. But was it maybe even tougher because in the back of your mind you're thinking, "Well shit, the Army forgot about me. They lost me. They don't even know where I am or care about me." Is that going on in your mind?

Nikulski: That was pretty well constant. Immediately after payday, they say they haven't gotten my records yet. But when the Captain made me aware that you have to find your records. We've got to pull you off the line and put you in Company Headquarters. Well, that ain't far back off the line, either, you know?

DePue: When you're moving through five miles in one day.

Nikulski: Yeah. I said, ”What are we going to do?” He says, "Well, I've got to keep you alive somehow. Keep you out of harm's way." I said, "Harm's way? I don't even know what that means," you know, at that time. “We don't know what to do with you.” I says, "Really? There must be something. I mean, I'm here. What do you want me to do?" But he did. When they finally got my records, he says, "You've got your points in, Stan. And you've got enough points, you're going to rotate. But I want you to extend for thirty days. “No!”

DePue: So when the records finally caught up with you, you guys have gone all the way from the very northern part of North Korea down past Seoul. Then I assume that you all fought your way north of Seoul again before you left.

Nikulski: We fought through Seoul three times. And Seoul, from the time… Jesus Christ, you brought up Seoul. Well, we went through Seoul three times. We fought our way through, withdrew. Fought our way through, withdrew. Fought our way through, and withdrew. Now, we never could figure out why the hell we were fighting, why we were withdrawing and had to go back in. And this is constant. Same philosophy they did in Vietnam. Same philosophy. Now, you talk about philosophies. Somebody's not getting the word that we already took the hit. Somebody's not getting that word. Now, I can understand when your flank is exposed, you've got to pull back – make the adjustment. I understand that. But not to completely pull of the hill, set up a defensive position while they're pulling back on top. Then you go back up and knock them back off the hill. But you don't hold the terrain, and you turn around and come right back down. What kind of war are we fighting? Well, we developed a philosophy, it's you get synced with South Korea and she's got to watch flank. It's different there today. Don't get me wrong. But that particular time, they didn't really have an army. That particular time.

DePue: Well, they were building an army from the ground up.

Nikulski: Absolutely, absolutely.

DePue: Do you remember any specific things about the combat around Seoul itself?

Nikulski: That was a little new to us, too. You're starting the street fighting. That's a different type of fighting. Basically what they're doing over there now, door to door. The whole philosophy now, you're talking about—you know who your enemy is. You know who your enemy is so you don't care about collateral damage because they hold ground, they hold buildings, they hold the terrain. They're there. You know who they are. You go in, you put maximum effort in there. Big guns, little guns, indirect fire, and so on. You're going to destroy them because that's what your job is: defeat the enemy. You go through and really the basic soldier sixty years ago, we weren't trained to fight in the buildings. We were fighting on the ground, fight on the ground, not in buildings. That was something new to us. But you go in, take it, blow up half the buildings, come back. Go in again, blow up a little more of the buildings, go in. Then you go and hide. You've got to go back in again, fight again. Knock out buildings, you know. You're knocking out buildings and not people, and it makes you wonder, "Why are we here? What are we doing this for? We're not politicians." The military is not politicians. We don't think about politics, you know. But a lot of it, it just gets numb after a while. You don't think about it. You don't think about any of this stuff anymore.

DePue: I'm going to get to some more general things here then. You earned a Purple Heart. Did you earn any other medals?

Nikulski: Bronze Star. I call it my empty badge. But I don't think about that anymore. Never have. There's a difference. You get awarded a Bronze Star. You can either get it for just being there, basically, but not for valor. There's two different types of Bronze Stars, OK? And being in Korea, I had no records. The only thing I can probably account for is a Purple Heart; it's on my 214: the Purple Heat and the Combat Infantry Badge and National Defense Service Medal.

DePue: Of all these things that you went through, what do you think was the toughest part about being in Korea?

Nikulski: I think the weather. The winter. The winters were serious. A lack of equipment, and really the supply system. We had no supply system at the beginning of that war because you lost it all, you know? They had no way of knowing what kind of weather we were going to fight in, so they didn't plan on it. Piss poor planning.

DePue: You kind of mentioned this before. This was the first time the United States had ever been in a war with an integrated military.

Nikulski: Yes.

DePue: Do you think that was a success?

Nikulski: I did. I do. The reason I say that – this is all after the fact – but they'd done a good job. We've heard that the unit integrity, if they were Negro, Hispanic, or whatever they were, they had an attitude that we are one. Basically we are one, and they really want to be integrated. But it was a tough thing to swallow because we didn't

have it in the United States yet. Units in the United States themselves weren't integrated, but integrated over there. As a unit, they weren't good. Don't ask me why. I couldn't understand it. The unit as a whole—

DePue: Well, I know the 24th Infantry Regiment was one of the last black regiments, and they had a very tough time in the Pusan Perimeter.

Nikulski: That's it, you know?

DePue: But they were like everybody else. Coming over from Japan and had been on stevedore duty or everything except being infantry.

Nikulski: That's right, they did. And I never read it anywhere, but I heard that somebody had lost [their] colors.[3] A Negro unit lost the colors; they integrated into units within the 25th Division. I don't know.

DePue: But the ones who were with you, when you were on retrograde like you said, you don't have time to worry about anything but—

Nikulski: Oh yeah. It never bothered us; it never bothered us at all. They were just as good as we were. We were all in the same shit. (laughter)

DePue: Your opinion of your fellow soldiers, then?

Nikulski: Initially, ill-trained. We had to learn everything on-the-job training. You had to learn as you go, and that's what made us so good, too. We were acceptable to change. We got to learn to trust one another, you know, who to trust or who could do this and who could do that better than this guy. Who's the best we got? I thought it was good, it was good. I had no problems with that.

DePue: Did you have any Koreans integrated into your unit, the KATUSA's? [Korean Augmentees to The United States Army]

Nikulski: Yes. We had a couple KATUSA's. Okay, yeah.

DePue: How did they do? What'd you think of them?

Nikulski: We had interpreters; they were good. Yeah, they were good. That's about all I can say. Yeah, I had no problem with them at all.

DePue: Okay. How about the NCO's[4] and officers? You've talked quite a bit about Captain Holliday. Are there other officers that you served with? Were they up to muster? Were the other NCO's up to muster?

Nikulski: I know of no one—nothing derogatory at all from any of them. After I was gone, I heard that there was a couple NCO's and one officer, one officer – I didn't learn

[3] A unit's 'colors' refers to the flag or guidon which symbolizes the unit's lineage and heritage.
[4] Non-Commissioned Officers, ie, those below rank of 2nd Lieutenant.

this until after I came back from the hospital – once they started to push in September, landing, going out.

DePue: Pushing up north.

Nikulski: Yeah, up north. One officer, yeah, one officer. I can't verify it: Somebody shot them self in the foot to get out of combat. I says, "Well, who was it?" And I can't verify any of that so I'd rather not even—

DePue: Okay, okay.

Nikulski: I don't really know.

DePue: You said you rotated out on the point system.

Nikulski: On the point system, yeah.

DePue: How did that work for you?

Nikulski: Well, it was fine. It just got me home a little bit earlier—well, later. If I would have got on the manifest or on the ship, gone back to the States, I'd have been there one month in Korea, one month. But I had to spend nine, ten months. Ten months there.

DePue: When did you finally rotate back, then?

Nikulski: I have it written down on my—pause it.

DePue: Okay.

(break in audio)

DePue: Okay, we're on again. So the question was, when you got sent back.

Nikulski: Yeah, June 15, 1951, I went to Sasebo.

DePue: Sasebo, Japan.

Nikulski: Yeah.

DePue: Was it the policy then that if you were in combat you received a certain number of points per month?

Nikulski: Yeah, I don't recall what it was, but it was, yeah, fifty—I don't remember now.

DePue: So was it three or points per month in combat?

Nikulski: I think so.

DePue: Thirty-six points? I know they tinkered with that equation over the years. What did you think about the policy of sending people back and receiving troops as individual replacements?

Nikulski: I didn't like that. I didn't like that at all. You've got to keep unit integrity for a better equipped and better trained unit.

DePue: Now that envelope you're sliding that in has Lane Evans' embossment on there too, huh?

Nikulski: Oh yes, oh yes.

DePue: So he was the one that helped you sort through these things – what? – fifty something years after the fact?

Nikulski: After the fact. I figured I've got to get it done sooner or later, you know? I'd like to get this thing cleared up in my mind. What was I there for?

DePue: So you asked your Congressman for your records.

Nikulski: I said, "Congressman Lane Evans, I need my personal 201 for active duty and I need my medical records." Okay. And he got me both.

DePue: Well, let's go back to the rotation and points and the unit integrity issue. Why do you think it was much better to do unit rotations than individual rotations? Because that is exactly the opposite of what your experience has been.

Nikulski: Yeah, that's true. It's true. Maybe at that particular time,that was my attitude then, that we get the hell out of there. Because they kept dictating our purpose of being there. Our purpose of being there. Democracy, politics. Well, that's not what we're about. We don't pick the wars we want to fight. We pick the wars that we have to fight, you know? And I'm relating a lot of this stuff now to what's happening today, which isn't right. I've learned so much since then about the military and how it's supposed to work, why things are happening that are happening. There's no defense, what's happening, we're not trained to fight that way. Our whole philosophy of fighting is not the same. I read in there something about theory of warfare. I'm concerned about my great-grandchildren's future. What the hell are we going to be doing? Are we preparing the troops today, this one Army that we have, a volunteer Army? Not millions of people. We've got less than a million on active duty for—well, this is way out of the line.

DePue: Well, you kind of touched something that's always been very curious to me, and that's the motivation of the average soldier, some PFC, who's pretty darn average up there. And you've mentioned a couple times they were telling you what you're there for, but apparently you're seeing that in as, "Okay, well that's not much motivation for me." So what was your motivation when you were up with your buddies on the front lines fighting?

Nikulski: Survival. That's the main concern we had, the main concern we had.

DePue: Not just survival for yourself but your buddies as well?

Nikulski: Absolutely. Self and the buddies. I don't know, it's an unwritten rule, that you watch my back, I watch your back.

DePue: Well, I suspect that Captain Holliday had occasion to give your Platoon Sergeant, your Platoon leader, your squad leaders some orders that were pretty dangerous orders.

Nikulski: Oh yeah.

DePue: And you did it.

Nikulski: Yup. Not that we wanted to or we felt we… Well, we felt we had to do it. If I didn't do it, he'd have to do it. If they didn't do it, I'd have to do it. You know, you're called upon to do your duties. You don't realize that at first, you don't realize it at first. They say, OK, let's take that squad and go on patrol. Well, who's in charge of the squad? The squad leader. Now this squad leader is better than that squad leader because he can read a map better than that squad leader can. Or this Sergeant can be a better point man than he is a compass man. Or something about this guy can do something better than this, so you put them in charge and you do it. And you'll follow this guy quicker than you'll follow that guy. But yet you follow. You follow.

DePue: And the good leader, then, is the one who can pick up the strengths in the people he's got underneath him?

Nikulski: (____(??); overlapping dialogue) and weaknesses, absolutely. Yeah.

DePue: Let's talk about getting you back to the States. Did you go from Korea and then to Japan when you rotated back?

Nikulski: No, I really don't know offhand. I was on a ship.

DePue: Okay, you shipped back?

Nikulski: I shipped back, yeah.

DePue: And you said you flew over.

Nikulski: I flew over.

DePue: Do you remember anything about being shipped back home?

Nikulski: No, I really don't. I really don't.

DePue: Okay. If you can, just in a couple or three minutes here, tell me what happened once you got back.

Nikulski: Now that was surprising, because we were loaded up on a cattle car – no canvas on it, just the sidings on this eighteen-wheeler – loaded up, taken to camp. If I'm not mistaken, there was a so-called street parade, people lining up. But we were like cattle, we were like cattle and you got some boo's, some hi's. Mostly hi's, I guess. And that was it, and you got home. I got all the way back to Pittsburgh. Now, that's a different ballgame, that's a different ballgame. In Pittsburgh, my mother and family there. I could ride on a streetcar in uniform, no charge. Streetcars, trains, buses, no charge. Do anything you want, you're a Korean vet. You're a Korean vet. I was treated better in my hometown in Pittsburgh, big as it is, treated better there than I was when I came back from Vietnam, in San Francisco.

DePue: What happened to you when you hit San Francisco after Vietnam?

Nikulski: Tore the uniform off right away and didn't let anybody know I was in the Army. We got absolutely no recognition at all.

DePue: But you took the uniform off because you were expecting to be roughed up or ill-treated?

Nikulski: Ill-treated, yeah. Well, we were so shell-shocked, too. That's a different war altogether. As soon as we hit Seattle, we changed clothes, didn't travel in uniform, when they suggested. Now, when you say they, who are they? Well, that's Catch-22 there. They said, "Don't wear a uniform. Don't go off the post in uniform." Okay, got civilian clothes on, didn't let anybody know that we were in the military.

DePue: And this is when you came back from Vietnam.

Nikulski: Vietnam, yeah.

DePue: When you came back from Korea, at that time did you think you were going to stay in the Army, or what were your intentions?

Nikulski: Well, I knew I had a year to go, a little over a year to go on my enlistment. I had a three-year hitch. They asked me where I wanted to go. "You're asking me where I want to go?" They said, "You're from Pennsylvania, aren't you?" I said, "Yes I am. I want to go to radio school." The Repo assignment person says, "We've got just the place for you. We're going to send you—you're from Pennsylvania?" I said, "Yes, I am." "We're going to send you to the best radio school there is. Harrisburg. Indiantown Gap Military Reservation." The best radio school? I said okay. And I had thirty days leave. After thirty days, went to Indiantown Gap. I lived Pittsburgh, Harrisburg. Okay, Midwest, east coast. Okay. Harrisburg, I drove across the Pennsylvania Turnpike, arrive in the wrong post in uniform, followed by an MP. He stopped me, pulled me over, and says, "What are you

looking for, soldier?" I says, "I am looking for this building number." It was written right on my orders, where to report. Building number so and so. I says, "I'm looking for this radio school I'm going to." "Let me see your orders." Pulled out my orders. “There's the building right there.” I said, "Building right there?" Went over there, opened the door. It ain't a radio school at all; there ain't a radio school within 500 miles of Harrisburg. And the guy in charge, CQ on duty, says, "Just go over there and find the first bunk you got. Report over to the First Sergeant in the morning." Gave me company orders. Gave me orders. Went in there, fell asleep, got up in the morning, reported to the First Sergeant in the morning. He said, "Are you the new guy?" I says, "First Sergeant, here's my orders – I’ve got another copy of my orders – I was told I was going to radio school." "Does this look like a radio school to you?" "No, First Sergeant." Got that little stripe up there, one PFC stripe. He says, "You belong to me." "What do you do, First Sergeant?" And he says, "You have any idea where you at?" I says, "Yeah, Indiantown Gap." He says, "This is C Company, First of the Tenth Infantry. We're a basic training outfit. You're my new Platoon Sergeant." I said, "First Sergeant, I'm only a PFC." He says, "You're my new Platoon Sergeant. That's your barracks right there. You're in charge of everything in it." I said, "What do we do?" He said, "We're basic training. Did you take basic training?" I said yes I did, and he says, "Well, you're in charge of the basic training outfit now. You’re a Platoon Sergeant." I said, "I don't know shit. I don't know nothing. How am I going to train somebody to be something I hate? I don't want to be here." Of course, you know, he got a little irate. "Nobody asked you if you wanted to be here. You're here, and you are going to be a Platoon Sergeant. Don't shake your head. Pick your bag up and calm down. That room on the top floor is yours." I come down, he says, "Come down, I want to see you. You know, you're a PFC." I said, "Yes sir." "You're going to be the best drill sergeant I got, you know that?" I said, "I don't think so." He said, "Oh yes you are." I said, "First Sergeant, I don't really think so because I know absolutely nothing. Everything I did in Korea—" He said, "You're a combat vet. Attitude. Attitude." I said, "Yeah, but I didn't do anything that was ever taught to me. Everything was on-the-job training, everything I did there. Nothing I was trained for did I do in Korea." He says, "You made it back, didn't you?" "Yes." First class I had to give was unbelievable, because he says, "You're a combat veteran." I said, ”Yes I am if that's what you want to call me.” Now I know you know what this means.” It was the five-paragraph field order.

DePue: Yeah, the operations order.

Nikulski: He says, "That's your first class. You've got to teach them what that is." "I don't know what you're talking about." "You're still here?" I said, ”Yes. I never heard of a five-paragraph field order." He says, "You went on patrol, didn't you?" I said, ”Yes.” "You went on the packs (?)?" “Yes.” "You've got the order, now break it down. I’m going to teach you how to teach." I says, "First Sergeant, I never went to high school. How the hell am I going to be a teacher when I hated school?" Well he says, "I’m going to tell you one more time. You're going to be the best Field Sergeant I've got." I said, "How many times have I got to tell you First

Sergeant, I'm a PFC!" Yup. But he taught me how to teach. He taught me. From him on, I promised myself if I ever decided to stay in this thing, I'm going to be a First Sergeant. And I learned so much from him, you know. But it was an experience that I'll never forget.

DePue: So what caused you to make that decision to stay in? Because the Army up to this point hadn't been treating you real well.

Nikulski: No they hadn't, they really hadn't. And they continued to do the same type—no, I figured I liked what I was doing. I'd seen some progress made. Because shortly after that, by then I had graduated, I think, two classes of recruits. And one of them recruits, I must have did something right for him or something. I had no idea what. I moved up to staff, to Battalion Headquarters as Operation Sergeant, from Platoon Sergeant to Operation Sergeant. I made Corporal at Sergeant. One of these guys I gave basic to became a personnel classification assignment. He called me up when I was Operation Sergeant and he says, "Sergeant Nikulski, you know who this?" I said. "No I don't." He said, "I was in your Platoon; you gave me my basic training." I said, "I did?" He says, "Yes. I've got a golden opportunity for you." I said, "What's that?" He said, "We're looking for a guy with an 1840 MOS, [Military Occupational Specialty] Operation Sergeant, and you have one. Special assignment." I says, "Why are you asking me? Why are you calling me?" He says, "You were fair to me, you'd done a good job." "Don't butter me up or anything. What are you talking about?" He said, "I've got a good assignment coming up and I'd sure like to offer it to you in fairness. I think I owe you something." I said, "Well, I don't know what you owe me." He says, "I've got a special request from the United States Headquarters in Austria for assignment for an Operations Sergeant, by MOS. Would you be interested in volunteering for it?" "I don't know, what?" He said, "It's an outstanding assignment. It's for headquarters." So after I agreed, "Okay, I'll do it," he says, "You might have to re-enlist, but it's worth it." I said, "What do you mean, it's worth it?" He says, "It's a beautiful place. Austria is a beautiful place." I said, "Well, I don't know where Austria is but all right, okay."

So I did. I volunteered to go and got my orders. Get over there. The job's full, I mean, it's filled already. So here I am, an extra Operations Sergeant in the command. They said, "Well, we'll assign you to G4." I said, "What do I know about G4? What do I know about supply? I'm Operations, that's my MOS." And the Colonel – I'll never forget the guy, and this is ironic, because I only met him for five minutes and I'll remember him the rest of my life – he says to me, "Where the hell do you think you are? Look at the name plate! It's infantry! I'm up here, sitting here, G4. What makes you think you're going to escape from—what the hell's the matter with you, Sergeant?" And I said, "You've got to be shitting me, Colonel." I said, "Really, Colonel, I don't want the job because I don't want to put you or put myself in jeopardy. I want to go 350th Infantry over there." And the more I fought to get into the 350th, the infantry, to get into something that I know, Operations, the harder it was. I couldn't get the infantry. They says, "We're going to send you out to the Dependent Housing section." I said, "What the hell is

Dependent Housing section? What's that got to do with infantry?" The Chief Administrator. I'm an Operations Sergeant. What the...I stayed there a year, Dependent Housing section, assigning government quarters. Like what do I care? I'm not even married, man! You know? I wasn't married then.

DePue: That must have been about a couple years after you'd gotten back to the States, then. By the time you got over to Austria?

Nikulski: Yes, yes.

DePue: And it was a beautiful place, I take it.

Nikulski: It was the best duty I had.

DePue: I want to ask you some closing questions here, because you might not be aware of it. We're already past two hours here, and that's—

Nikulski: Oh my God.

DePue: And that's with that little glitch we had where it wasn't recording for a little while. Thinking back to the Korean War, you like so many other people I talk to, especially the young kids who find themselves over there as privates, hardly knew where Korea was to begin with. And then you went through hell for that first year.

Nikulski: It was hell. It was.

DePue: Do you think it was worth it now, looking back fifty years later?

Nikulski: Well, I wouldn't have missed it for the world, and I'm being serious about it. We realize now we were sent there, we realize now that I have learned from that. I have learned from that in more ways than one. We got a little more experience in leadership, and a whole different attitude about life..

DePue: How was it different? How would that change it?

Nikulski: Know more about what is right than wrong. What's essential, what isn't essential. You know? Stuff like this. I can do without that. No, you try to convince yourself – yes you can. You can do without that. And you can do something that you think you can't do. Because that's happened to me more than once. Don't underestimate myself. Don't underestimate your capability to physically do it.

DePue: You mentioned at the very beginning of this interview about World War II versus the Korea War Vets and the Vietnam Vets. I want you to elaborate a little bit more on that.

Nikulski: Yeah. I formed this opinion in 1951. 1951, it started, and each year it just improved – it confirmed what my feelings were – that the WWII active duty people and reservists and so on, their attitude was, "That was our war. That's the

only war we've ever fought. And yours wasn't a war." And I said, "What makes you think that?" "It wasn't the big war." Well, what's the difference between a big and a small war? People are dying. You're sent there not because you want to go, you're sent there to do the bidding of the politicians, what our policy says. Blah, blah, blah. And because you've got 100% rally around everything you do for WWII, this is for the United States because we're never going to be bombed and blah, blah, blah, your whole attitude is. And this goes from year to year to year, and it gets worse. And you might have a lull. Now you're fighting over there in Afghanistan. Well, they're trying to get over Vietnam. Number one, it wasn't a popular war like Korea was. And it just keeps getting worse. Now this is even worse. We have no reason to be there. Pull them back out. Why? Why did we send them there in the first place? There's a philosophy for it, whether you realize it or not.

DePue: Now, you're talking about in Iraq?

Nikulski: I'm talking about Iraq. The whole remnant of the thing, it started at Korea. Like you put a year in. You're a year in combat. This is fact, it was told to me by a Commander with the VFW. "You've been in two wars, you've been in two conflicts. You've got two strikes against you, you lost both of them." "Well now, you're getting personal. It wasn't my war. I was in Korea. I didn't start that war and I wasn't the only one there. I was in Vietnam. That wasn't my war, I didn't want to be there. But I went there by myself. But you were in for the duration of the war." This is their framed thought, their mind thought. Duration of the war. What does that mean? That was my question. "What does that mean, duration of the war? Were you there at 1941, December seventh, till the end of the war. And today's date, were you there for the duration? What does that mean?" "Well, I was in for the duration of the war, that was our big war." "Well, I fought under the same flag as you did; I wore the same uniform as you did."

DePue: Certainly World War II is very big in American memory, and so is the Vietnam War. But you can't say that about Korea. Does it bug you that hardly anyone knows or remembers or cares to remember anything about the Korean War?

Nikulski: They don't know about it. They don't really know about it.

DePue: Does that bother you?

Nikulski: No, not really. I don't know why, but it doesn't. Maybe because I know more about the military. But I don't understand.

To change the subject, my granddaughter knocked on my door and came in and says, "Grandpa, Ma tells me you were in Korea." I says, "Yeah, why? Your mother told you that?" She says, "Yeah." "Well, why would she say that?" "I was watching a Korea movie on TV – the guys on the History Channel. And I didn't know you were in Korea." I said, "Didn't your mother tell you?" "No." And I get it from all my kids. I've got an older son who retired out of the Army. My oldest

son retired out of the Army. He's in Colorado now. And doesn't that—no? My daughter says, "She never asked." I asked my granddaughter, "Why all of a sudden are you asking me if I was in Korea or not?" She says, "I don't know, Grandpa, but I heard something about Korea and you actually went through that stuff and did that?" I said, "Is that hard to believe? You know, that's why these veteran organizations go to high schools and go to schools, to tell you about this."

DePue: What would you want the American people to remember or understand about your experiences in Korea, about the Korean War?

Nikulski: I just want them to understand what the soldiers in uniform are doing in any particular war.

DePue: On their behalf.

Nikulski: On their behalf, yeah.

DePue: And what wisdom or advice would you pass on to that granddaughter or anybody else who might be listening to this in the future?

Nikulski: Well, I'd want them to understand, there is a difference between reality and fiction. And when somebody comes up and tells you—what you see in the movies or see on disc or on TV or whatever, ask: Can this happen? Can this be true? And I honestly, truly, when the granddaughter asked, "What was it like? Was it really cold over there?" I says, "You ain't never understood." I said, "We can be cold here, we can have the same temperature here. We can have the same temperature here as in Alaska, but if you're not dressed for it, it's vicious. Now if you're not prepared for it, it can be vicious. Anybody can survive anything if you understand and prepare it." Are you done?

DePue: Well, pretty much. I just want to give you one opportunity to make any final comments if you'd like.

Nikulski: No. I may have a bias on some things, being a career man. You know, I base what we did in Korea, Vietnam, what the kids are going through over here in Afghanistan and Iraq and so on, and further on down the line, who the hell knows who we're going to be fighting next? I'm saying this as a professional soldier. We've got to be prepared. We've got to train. We can't keep cutting everything. The budget is not that… We have money for everybody except ourselves. We've got all this foreign aid that's out there we hand out to everybody, but we don't have enough for our own. And that's our problem. And the military itself, we've got to have a one-track mind – and I'm a firm believer in this – it's that the Army must at least consider training for all aspects of fighting. Not just sporadic training, doing sporadic fighting. Now, our next enemy might be China. It might be Russia again, it might be Russia. It might be Korea again. And that's a whole different ballgame. If you're not trained for this shit… We weren't trained to go in Afghanistan.

DePue: What do you think about the way the Korean War ended with a stalemate?

Nikulski: Yeah, stalemate. Well, I never give it much thought on the stalemate, because we should have never stopped when we hit the Yalu. McArthur was right. You can ask any firm believer of the military. The decision was wrong to stop. I understand Truman was afraid that China would start World War III. I understand that, history will tell you that. He was right; he didn't want to start World War III. But he should have accepted the fact that the situation would be the same, like it's been for fifty, sixty years. All that shit that's over there, the stalemate, and they start other shit. I said, "What happens if the…" I says, Look, people talk about…" Are we on?

DePue: Yeah, we're still on.

Nikulski: People talk about – we're talking about atomic bombs being dropped here. But they've got to accept the fact that we are so worried about collateral damage that our politics won't let us use atomic bombs. So we can have a stockpile over there, but we'll never use another one unless, unless God forbid, heaven forbid, if somebody dropped one on us. Then you might as well say, ___(?). Now, we're never going to use one until somebody uses it here.

DePue: Well Stan, thank you very much. It's been fascinating to listen to your story. It's a different kind of story than we sometimes hear. But you were there in the toughest year of the Korean War.

Nikulski: It was rough, it was rough.

DePue: And listening to your stories and having read plenty of military history, World War II, Vietnam, Korea, World War I, what you guys experienced that first year in Korea is as tough as it gets in United States military history, I think. It's a shame that it's oftentimes overlooked. So thank you very much, Stan. It's been a pleasure.

Nikulski: Pleasure's been mine.

(end of interview)