

Interview with Ken Hanson
Interview # VRK-A-L-2007-035
Interview Date: October 20, 2007
Interviewer: Mark R. DePue

COPYRIGHT

The following material can be used for educational and other non-commercial purposes without the written permission of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. "Fair use" criteria of Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976 must be followed. These materials are not to be deposited in other repositories, nor used for resale or commercial purposes without the authorization from the Audio-Visual Curator at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, 112 N. 6th Street, Springfield, Illinois 62701. Telephone (217) 785-7955

DePue: Today is Saturday, the twentieth of October, 2007. My name is Mark DePue; I'm the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today, it is my pleasure and honor to talk to Ken Hanson, from Bloomington, Minnesota who is a Korean War veteran and also has the unfortunate distinction—I guess we can put it that way—of being a Prisoner of War during the Korean War. That's obviously one of the things that I definitely want to talk about with you today. So Ken, we usually start with a little bit of background: when and where you were born.

Hanson: I was born in North Dakota, at a small town of Brinsmade. And I was born on November 23rd, 1931.

DePue: Did you grow up in Brinsmade?

Hanson: Pretty much so. My father lost the farm that we had there during the Depression, so we moved into the small town nearby of Harlow, North Dakota. We lived there for another three years while my dad was out looking for work.

DePue: So you were born right at the depth of the Depression...

Hanson: Yes.

DePue: ...and were a very young child during those early Depression years. Do you remember much about that?

Hanson: No. Nothing really registered with me until my father had to auction off all the farm equipment and animals. And then we knew that something wasn't right.

DePue: When did he finally find work? And what did find work in?

Hanson: He went to Minnesota and found work in the ammunition plant at New Brighton, Minnesota.

DePue: When was that?

Hanson: That was in 1941, when he found work there.

DePue: So were there lots of tough years for him in the depth of the Depression?

Hanson: Yes. Very tough. He had worked for awhile, and he got a home established, and then he sent for us to come out there to Minnesota.

DePue: Okay. Well, having a name like Hanson, and being in North Dakota, and farming there, to begin with, at least, I suspect a Swedish or Norwegian background?

Hanson: My mother is full-blooded Norwegian, and my dad is mostly Norwegian, a little bit of Swedish.

DePue: Does that make you a Lutheran as well?

Hanson: Yes.

DePue: Okay. Well, you're in good company then, Ken. Do you remember Pearl Harbor?

Hanson: Yes, I certainly do.

DePue: What do you recall about that?

Hanson: I remember we were in school one day, and we were just ready to go in the front door of the school. Somebody mentioned that Pearl Harbor got bombed, and my first impression was, Where in the world is Pearl Harbor?

DePue: You were ten at that time?

Hanson: Yes. And of course, we knew exactly what had happened, as far as the bombing and all that. We understood all of that.

DePue: But did it make much of an impression on you beyond that?

Hanson: It made me—I don't—a scared feeling or a sorry feeling, or something like that. I guess I felt sorry for the people that were getting killed.

DePue: I know you mentioned before, but where was your father working? Which ammunition plant?

Hanson: In New Brighton. It's a federal cartridge plant there in New Brighton.

DePue: So it was making small arms?

Hanson: Yes. I think they made 30 caliber ammunition.

DePue: Oh, Okay.

Hanson: Machine guns and rifles.

DePue: Okay. You didn't know at the time you might have some use for that later on.

Hanson: No, I didn't. Whatever time I'd pick up a clip of ammo when I was in the Korean War, I'd wonder, Now did my dad have something to do with this?

DePue: Oh, that's neat. During the time you were growing up, just reaching your teen years during the Second World War, were you and your friends paying attention to that pretty closely?

Hanson: Yes. In particular, our local newspaper, *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, would put a map of France on the front page every morning, and they'd have a dark line showing where the front lines were. And one morning, all of the sudden, that line started moving backwards, and we thought, Oh, no, don't tell me they're going to lose that war now, after fighting so hard to get in there. That little bulge turned out to be bigger, with the Battle of the Bulge.

DePue: I would suspect, and I don't want to put words in your mouth here, but that kind of develops a certain attitude about, or expectation, about military service and the military. Would you say you grew up with a strong interest in the military?

Hanson: Yes, because my dad was in World War I, and my oldest brother was in World War II, and me and my next youngest brother were in Korea. In fact, my next youngest brother came to Korea and served a full hitch in the Marines there, and I didn't even know he was there.

DePue: Wow.

Hanson: He'd served and gone home by the time I got out of prison camp, so I didn't know that he had been in Korea until I got home.

DePue: Wow. When did you graduate from high school?

Hanson: I didn't graduate. I was a dropout around eleventh grade or so. But I did later –when I was stationed in West Germany –I did go into the education office and get the GED test for high school.

DePue: What were you doing then when you dropped out?

Hanson: I was working in a theater, and more or less just hanging around bumming.

DePue: That was about 1948?

Hanson: Yeah. Yeah.

DePue: And when and how did you get into the military, then?

Hanson: I enlisted about six months after South Korea was invaded.

DePue: Okay. Let's back up just a little bit then. You obviously recall that news: when you heard about North Korea invading the South.

Hanson: Again, there was a big headline, "North Korea Invades South Korea," and we were wondering where was Korea.

DePue: So you had to check the map again.

Hanson: Yeah. Well, there was explanations about it, where it was like a peninsula hanging off the China coast, or Manchurian coast.

DePue: That would have been June 25th, 1950.

Hanson: Exactly.

DePue: Did it have any implications to you at that time? Did you think this would have something to do with your future?

Hanson: No. I didn't think so. I didn't have any thoughts one way or the other in that regard. But then after they fought so hard at the Chosin Reservoir and everything, and I figured, well, I should be over there helping.

DePue: Were you thinking you were going to be drafted or enlist? Either one?

Hanson: Either one. I figured maybe I'd go and enlist before I got drafted.

DePue: Okay. And you decided to enlist in the Army.

Hanson: Yup.

DePue: Why did you decide the Army? Because the Chosin Reservoir, of course, was the Marine Corps stand.

Hanson: Yeah. I don't know why I chose the Army exactly. I guess because my dad and my brother had been in it.

DePue: Where did you go to basic training?

Hanson: Fort Riley, Kansas.

DePue: When did you go to basic?

Hanson: I entered the service on the ninth day of January in 1951, and we went right to Fort Riley from there. I started basic with one company, and just about the time we were going to bivouac, which is about the sixth week of basic, I came down with viral

pneumonia, and had to spend about three weeks in the hospital with that. And when I got out of the hospital, they put me in a different company that was in that process of basic training at that time.

DePue: Did you know at the beginning what branch or what specialty you would have?

Hanson: No. I figured it was going to be infantry, because they were really routing everybody into the infantry at that time.

DePue: And you were right about that.

Hanson: Yes.

DePue: Did you go to any special training beyond basic training?

Hanson: No.

DePue: What happened to you after basic training?

Hanson: I had two weeks leave; I went home to Minneapolis, and then went to Seattle, Washington, for transport to the Far East.

DePue: What were your parents' feelings about that. They had to know by that time you were heading over to Korea and potential danger?

Hanson: For sure, when I came home on leave, yes.

DePue: What were their feelings at that time?

Hanson: I don't know; my dad didn't ever say much. I didn't think he felt too good about it; he worried and stuff. Because my sister told me, when he got the telegram that I was missing in action –he was sitting in an easy chair –and my sister went and got the telegram and handed it to him. He read, and his arms just dropped down, like that.

DePue: Just dropped to the side.

Hanson: Just dropped down to the side of the chair.

DePue: Had he seen some combat in France in World War I?

Hanson: Oh, yes.

DePue: What unit was he with? Do you recall?

Hanson: Rainbow Division.

DePue: Oh, he was?

Hanson: Yeah.

DePue: MacArthur's.

Hanson: Yep.

DePue: That was MacArthur's division. And they saw plenty of combat. So he had an understanding of what you were going through.

Hanson: Yes, he did. And he knew what I was heading into.

DePue: Your mom?

Hanson: My mother: she went with my dad, and whatever he did was fine and stuff. I know she worried.

DePue: So you went from basic training. Did you arrive in Korea? Did you know when you were heading to Korea that you were going to be assigned to the 25th Division?

Hanson: No. No. The way that happened was, we sailed into Yokohama, and we got on a train at Tokyo, and they took us up to a place called Gotemba, Japan. That was near Camp Zama. They told us that we were going to be joining an outfit that had been wiped out in Korea:, the 34th Regiment of the 24th Division. So we joined that there, and while we were in Japan, we were the 34th Regiment of the 24th Division, and I took training with them for another month or so.

DePue: Just being assigned to a unit that was just wiped out in Korea has to catch your attention.

Hanson: Yeah. It's really scary. And then when we got over to Korea, we found out that our designation was changed to the 14th Regiment of the 25th Division. We took a couple more weeks of training there behind the lines, and we moved up on the front lines on a Sunday morning. We walked over behind some positions there, and the people in those positions came out offering us loaves of bread. And we thought, Boy, people must go kooky after they've been up here awhile, because we couldn't tell what they were, they had our uniforms on.

DePue: But they were Orientals, or...?

Hanson: No, Turkish. And I was glad they were on our side. Then when we got to the place where we started to replace people, people would come out of their bunkers and we'd move in. We went over and asked a lieutenant there what kind of an outfit that was, and he says, "That's an all black outfit. It's the last segregated unit in the Army, and now you guys are replacing it. So you're historical in that manner, too."

DePue: Was that the 24th Regiment?

Hanson: 24th Regiment of the 25th Division.

DePue: So you're in the 14th Regiment of the 25th Division. Was that a reconstituted regiment, or were you arriving as an individual replacement?

Hanson: No, it was reconstituted in Japan.

DePue: So the whole group that you thought was going to be the 34th ended up being the 14th?

Hanson: Yeah. We went to Korea as a regiment, but when we got there, our designation was changed.

DePue: So that's significant, because most of the replacements that were done in Korea were individual replacements being sent up.

Hanson: Yeah.

DePue: Did you have a good, solid, established chain of command, then, as well?

Hanson: Yeah.

DePue: The leadership structure?

Hanson: Yeah. Oh, yes.

DePue: Were a lot of those already Korean War veterans?

Hanson: Yeah. That's what they did in Japan. If people got wounded and were put in a hospital in Tokyo, when they got out of the hospital, they put them in this regiment too. And then they took raw recruits coming from the States like us, and they made it a mixture.

DePue: That's an interesting combination: a bunch of recovered casualties and new recruits.

Hanson: Yep. But I don't know. There might have been other categories that also were put in there.

DePue: What was your first experience, then? Do you remember that first day being up in the lines?

Hanson: Yeah. We were surprised because nothing essential was happening. There was no shooting going on right there at that time or anything.

DePue: When was this?

Hanson: We moved up on the front lines about the tenth of September, 1951. We'd arrived in Korea on the twenty-fifth of August, and then we took several more weeks of training there, right behind the front lines, before we moved up to the line.

DePue: Isn't this about the time they started the peace talks?

Hanson: Yes. The peace talks started when I was on the ship going overseas; we heard about it there.

DePue: So at that time, were you thinking, "Well, this thing is going to be over in the next few months?"

Hanson: Yeah, I can remember thinking that. Maybe it won't last very long anymore. But being a Communistic government that we were fighting there, they managed to drag it out for a year and a half.

DePue: Can you recall, then, that first day that you got to the bunkers and were in the front lines?

Hanson: Not a whole lot about just being there.

DePue: How would you describe where you were in the front lines? What kind of combat were you seeing there?

Hanson: Just patrol activity. We would go out on patrols.

DePue: What was the terrain like?

Hanson: Right there, it was pretty smooth. But we had a few hills there, and...

DePue: Right there would be where? Any terrain features? Hanson: When we moved up on the line, we moved into Kumwha.

DePue: The Kumwha Valley?

Hanson: Yeah. And that's where we were replacing that 24th Regiment right there.

DePue: And that is the base of what they call the Iron Triangle, right?

Hanson: Yes. And that's why it wasn't quite as hilly there.

DePue: Okay. Did you have continuous trench lines there? Or just a series of outposts?

Hanson: Yeah. And there was a railroad running right in front of our line.

DePue: Parallel to the lines?

Hanson: Yep. We went out there, and we dug positions under that railroad track. We took the ties down from the bottom and put them on top.

DePue: And so you're building your bunkers out of the rail line.

Hanson: And we felt safe there.

DePue: So you went on a series of patrols? That was the nature of your that experience?

Hanson: Yeah. And I remember one; we lost our BAR [Browning automatic rifle] man. He got killed that day on one of them. That was on about the seventh of October, '51. We lost him; he was a kid from eastern Kentucky, in the hills there. And he had a wife and family.

DePue: How did you lose him?

Hanson: I think he panicked. You know, our training is to stay low. Well, they were trying to spring an ambush on us, and we sensed that, so we started getting out of there. They had a machine gun set up there, and if you stayed low, you were all right, because there was a ditch there, but he was running straight up, and he got hit right in the chest.

DePue: They, being the Chinese at this time?

Hanson: These were Chinese we were opposing there.

DePue: So you're there in the lines through the height of winter of '51, '52. What was it like to be in the lines in the dead of Korean winter?

Hanson: Pretty nasty. Of course, being out in the weather, just going from fall into winter, your system becomes somewhat accustomed to it. And so we were cold, sure, but it wasn't as if we had been taken out of a warm climate and thrown right in there. That would have been devastating.

DePue: What was a typical day like for you?

Hanson: Work. Digging positions and stuff like that.

DePue: You got three cold meals a day?

Hanson: The kitchen would bring one hot meal a day up to the front lines for us. That was always the evening meal.

DePue: Did you have a series of bunkers? That was basically your existence: living in bunkers?

Hanson: Yes.

DePue: And how many to a bunker?

Hanson: Two.

DePue: Who was your bunker mate, then?

Hanson: Oh, gee. I can't remember him.

DePue: Were you a standard rifleman?

Hanson: Yeah.

DePue: In what company?

Hanson: Company I.

DePue: And there was A through K?

Hanson: Yeah. I think. No, there was an M company, too.

DePue: Okay.

Hanson: As I remember, that was a mortar company. And that's all they did.

DePue: Were you able to have fires in your bunkers?

Hanson: No. We had charcoal, and that's what we used to cook our C-rations on.

DePue: Korean-style charcoal?

Hanson: It didn't give any smoke, I know. And I remember just little briquettes or something.

DePue: Did it keep you warm at all?

Hanson: No. It helped, I'm sure.

DePue: But you're living in these bunkers twenty-four hours a day, except when you're going out and doing patrols?

Hanson: Yeah.

DePue: Taking a shave and a sponge bath in your helmet?

Hanson: Yeah. That was our existence. Then once in awhile, they'd bring a shower unit up behind the front lines, and we'd go back there. One person from each position would go back and get their shower, and they'd give us clean clothes, and we'd go back to our position, and the other person would go.

DePue: Yeah. Well, let's move forward, then. Do you remember any significant combat incident, prior to the time you got captured? You mentioned this one where this one BAR man was killed.

Hanson: Yeah. And that's probably the worst, in the terms of his death. Another time, we were out on patrol out there in the Kumwha Valley, and I was the scout on the patrol. I came upon a house sitting up there; we were moving kind of through a little ravine, and I saw a house, so I called a halt to the patrol. The platoon sergeant came up, and we went up and were investigating that house. We looked in the door and there was a skeleton in a bed there. It looked like he was trying to get out of bed

when he got killed, because the blanket was kind of folded back. As we were looking at that, machine gun fire came down through that house, and we took cover up close to the base of hill where they were firing from. I told the platoon sergeant, Give me a hand grenade and I'll go up and get that nest. So I took a hand grenade up the hill, and I found the nest up there where they were firing at our troops. I pulled the pin on that grenade, and counted to three, and flipped it in there.

DePue: How close were you to the nest when you did this?

Hanson: Oh, about from here to that window.

DePue: Fifteen feet or so.

Hanson: Yeah. See, the hill that they were on was full of trees and stuff, so they couldn't see me creeping up over around the other side. We got that machine gun nest, and then we made it back to our patrol. When we got back there, I found that one of our guys got hit in the arm from that machine gun.

DePue: Did you get a citation for doing that?

Hanson: No.

DePue: They were too busy to write it up, huh?

Hanson: I suppose.

DePue: OK. Well, let's fast-forward to the time when you were actually captured. I'd like to have as much detail as you can remember. Talk about the experience of being captured.

Hanson: Can I talk about the two guys I was captured with?

DePue: Oh, absolutely. Please do.

Hanson: Okay. We were at Heartbreak Ridge at this point.

DePue: So this is much farther east.

Hanson: Yes. That's east of where we were in Kumwha.

DePue: And much more mountainous terrain?

Hanson: Yeah. Yes, much more. And from our positions there on Heartbreak, we could see the hill where the Koreans were. You could see a trench had been dug all around that hill. Well, we had a listening post down on the east slope of Heartbreak Ridge. This one night was our time to go down and pull duty on this listening post. The fellows that were with me were a National Guardsman from Minnesota, and a corporal from Los Angeles, California. The corporal had been a cook in the kitchen, but he got kicked out of the kitchen because he punched the mess sergeant out.

They put him in one platoon, and they didn't want him there, so they kicked him out and put him in my platoon. And the fellow from Minnesota, when he reported there, he said, "I'm a cook," and the company personnel thought, Oh, that's great; we just lost a couple of guys out of the kitchen for rotation. So they said, We'll put you back there, and they put him back there and they found out he didn't know how to boil water or break eggs. So they put him on K.P. [kitchen police, helper work] One day, the mess sergeant came into the K.P. tent, and caught him urinating in one of the mermite liners. A mermite liner is an aluminum can that's about six inches square...

DePue: It's basically an insulated box for food.

Hanson: No, the liner itself was just a plain aluminum can kind of thing, and they put different foods in each one of these liners, and then they'd put it in a chest and keep it warm until they got it up to the front line. They caught him doing that, so they kicked him out of the kitchen altogether, and they made an ammo bearer for a machine gun crew out of him. We got in a big fight with the Chinese, and called back for more ammo, and he refused to bring it up. So the assistant gunner had to go back and grab a couple cans and keep the gun going. So they kicked him out of there and they put him in a rifle squad, the most dangerous place for any person like that, or anybody, really, and so he was in my squad. That night, me and those two guys got sent out to that listening post. We just got down there and replaced the other three guys that were coming off, and we no more than sat down to our guard duty when the artillery rounds started coming in. The first one almost landed right on us, so we took cover, and we stayed there until the artillery stopped. The minute the artillery stopped, I looked out, and there was the North Korean patrol coming up behind us. And the guy from Minneapolis, he started crying like a little baby, and curled up in the bottom of the hole. By doing that, he probably saved our lives, because when I looked down to see what was restricting the movement of my feet, I saw a live hand grenade sparking in the bottom of the hole. So I dropped right down on top of him and I scooped that hand grenade out in one motion and threw it out. A piece of the shrapnel came back and hit me in the eyebrow. It must have stunned me or something, because the next thing I knew, there was all kinds of North Korean soldiers around our hole, with their burp guns pointed down at us. I thought, Don't start spraying those now. Making matters worse –and could have got help earlier – but this corporal was on the telephone to the CP, and he told them that it was our own patrol coming back. And I said, "You fool, our own patrol doesn't come back in a line of skirmishes on our position." So I grabbed the phone away from him, and I said, "Open up with everything you got. This is the North Koreans coming." And sure enough, the flares starting coming down, and then they captured us. I was the last one out of the hole, and about—

DePue: One of these people with you was this one that you were talking about that had been in the mess hall, and then been in the ammo section?

Hanson: Yep.

DePue: OK. That was the gentleman from Minneapolis?

Hanson: Mm-hmm.

DePue: OK.

Hanson: And the other one was the cook, and he didn't know our troops from theirs. So I was the last one coming out of the hole, and five North Korean soldiers grabbed me and hauled me to the ground, and the sixth one started beating me with the stock of his burp-gun. I thought they were never going to stop that.

DePue: Where were they hitting you?

Hanson: Mostly in the legs. Once in awhile, I'd get my left leg free, and I'd put the sole of my foot up there and block some of them. But he caught me with a few good blows. Finally, they thought they'd better get the heck out of there, so they started dragging me down the hill. We got on down in the valley, and another flare came over us. Then our own machine-gunner could see me, because they started shooting right at me. I could see these tracers coming down the mountain. So I just dropped to the ground like I was dead, and then they stopped firing at me. Then we got up, and they took us across a stream –it was frozen at the time –but we went across there. And when we got across there, all hell broke loose. The artillery and mortars and other things started falling around us.

DePue: By this time, you're talking about American artillery and American mortars. What date was this?

Hanson: This was March 1st, 1953 at about 10:30 at night. The fellow that had been a cook in the kitchen –got kicked out –he got hit on the side of his head with a piece of shrapnel; it's lucky that he had his pile cap on, and just a small piece went through and lodged in a blood vessel in his temple. All the time he was in the POW camp, he had blood coursing past that piece of shrapnel. He came to our reunion that I held in Bloomington, Minnesota for the Korean POWs, and I asked him if he got that piece of shrapnel out of his temple. He goes, "Oh, yeah." That's the first thing they did. And so he was all right there.

We were separated on our journey back to their lines. They had me in a bunker, and then they brought these other two guys in, and he was all bloody from the front of his coat, and everything was all bloody. I asked him what happened, and he told me about the piece of shrapnel. This piece of shrapnel that was in my eyebrow that I didn't even know I had, because it was seared.

DePue: So you weren't bleeding.

Hanson: No. I wasn't bleeding at that point. And then a little later on, the Korean medics pulled it out, and then the blood started coming. They put a bandage on it, and they stuffed something into my eye, and then wrapped a dirty bandage around my head.

That pretty well stopped the bleeding, even though once in awhile you'd see a drop fall.

DePue: Were you sore from the beating you got when you were first captured?

Hanson: You know, I think I was too scared to get sore.

DePue: What was going on in your mind—that moment when you realized, "I'm a POW."

Hanson: Oh, just a sinking feeling. It felt like I was all by myself in the whole world, even though there was probably a couple dozen enemy soldiers around me. And, boy, it was a lost feeling, really.

DePue: I would assume that you had heard stories and rumors about what the North Koreans and the Chinese did to prisoners while you were lying in the bunkers, and before all of this. What had you heard?

Hanson: Well, we knew that they massacred groups of POWs when they had to move away. In fact, a buddy of mine –he was living in St. Paul at the time –he was in the 34th Regiment that we joined in Japan. He had been captured early—about the fifteenth of July of 1950. He was on a death march from Taejon up to the capital of Pyongyang; he said one day a flight of Marine Corps Corsairs [fighter planes] came over. They were peeling off to come down and strafe them, but they'd just come down close to them, and they pull off without firing a shot at them, because they were just marching along the road. Later on, he met that pilot, because he was from the Twin Cities Marine Air Reserve, and he came to our Korean chapter to give a talk on all of that. This fellow went up to him, and he says, "Did you ever hear of a Marine Corps pilot talking about diving down on a bunch of marching people, and never firing a shot?" And he says, "That was me. And I didn't fire, because something told me that there was something awry here, because you guys didn't break for the cover, the ditches and stuff. So we just pulled off.. When we got closer it looked like the guys were wearing G.I. clothing and stuff. So we just pulled up and went up and shot up something else."

DePue: So all that you'd heard is flashing through your mind at that moment when you're captured as well.

Hanson: Oh, yes.

DePue: Had you heard about differences in treatment between what the North Koreans and the Chinese were doing, and how they were treating prisoners?

Hanson: No, because everything I'd heard from people that were captured at that time was that the Chinese were just as brutal as the North Koreans when they first came in. I know a Lieutenant Funches –he lives in Clemson, South Carolina –he was with the 24th Division. He said one day he started seeing some different uniforms on the enemy, and all of the sudden, there was a whole swarm of them came in and started firing at him and stuff. He said he was trying to get away when they shot him in the

foot. They grabbed him and was dragging him behind them through this valley. He had these wounded guys laying there in this valley, and he said he turned around and the Chinese soldiers were shooting the wounded guys on the ground.

DePue: When would this have been, roughly?

Hanson: That was—well, when the Chinese came in, it must have been November of '50—

DePue: Was that well before the time you were captured.

Hanson: Oh, yes. But he told me all about that. So he told me about a lot of atrocities that the Chinese did too.

DePue: Let's take it back to that time when you're just captured, and they get you back to their lines, what happened at that point?

Hanson: As I told you, from our lines we could see a trench around the top of their hill. We had a set of Quad .50s—that's four 50 caliber machine guns sitting there—and then a big one. They had big spotlights; they would sit there all night long with that spotlight shining on that hill, and then they'd fire those Quad .50s into the spotlight. They took us up there. After they collected us in a bunker up there, they took us out and marched us through that trench, and we went right through that spotlight. But our side had found out that three guys were missing out there, so they ceased all fire. And so they weren't firing anything out there.

DePue: Do you think this whole incident, where you were actually captured, was designed to pick up American prisoners?

Hanson: It seemed that way to me, because when they got to us, and they overpowered us, they just turned around and took us back. And they all left.

DePue: Did you get any initial interrogation?

Hanson: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

DePue: Can you talk about that a little bit?

Hanson: Well, after marching all night that night to their rear area, we came to what must have been their division headquarters. They took us into a bunker there and handed us a sheet of paper, a questionnaire; all I wrote was name, rank, and serial number, and I filled that out and handed mine back. I don't know what those other two guys put on it, but they took them away out of the bunker again and kept me there. This interrogator sat there interrogating me all day long. He would occasionally take out a pistol from his back and point it at my temple, and once in awhile hit me on the crown of the head with it, or the side of the head. That went on all day long and into the night. Then finally, he must have got tired and wanted to go to sleep, so I just laid back where they were interrogating me and tried to sleep. I couldn't sleep a wink, because it was too cold in there. Then in the morning, when we got up, they

took me to another bunker in that compound there, and it must have been the commanding general of that division was interrogating me all that day. He would slug me and torture me and everything else all day long.

DePue: Were these both North Koreans?

Hanson: Yes.

DePue: And they both spoke English?

Hanson: No, just the fellow who was interrogating me the first day, because he went with me to this general's bunker and was the interpreter.

DePue: What kind of questions was he asking? What was he looking for?

Hanson: All about my division, the position of certain elements. I remember one time when I guess I really asked for it—see, I can read maps—he asked me where our artillery was stationed, and I pointed to a point on a map where no artillery could have possibly been because of the sheer cliff.

DePue: The lines were way too close together for artillery, huh.

Hanson: Yeah. Oh, he looked at that, and he looked at me, and then he started punching me.

DePue: So you were answering questions, but trying to deceive them?

Hanson: Well, yes.

DePue: I can't imagine what it was like, having the experience of that. What were you thinking while this is going on? Or are you even thinking?

Hanson: I'm pretty concerned about my future. I didn't really know what was going to happen, because we'd heard the stories of atrocities, and this outright murder and stuff. But later on, I found out that, at this point, they were actually trying to keep people alive, because the peace talks in Pyongyang and Panmunjom are going on. They finally got the two sides to agree to exchange lists of POWs being held by their side. Our side turned over the names of 130,000 Chinese and North Koreans that we were holding, and they could only come up with 1,200 names of Americans, which really reflected atrocities. When these figures hit the world, world opinion came down on them very heavily. They were also talking prisoner exchange at Panmunjom at this point too. It was actually the prisoner exchange topic that held the talks up from proceeding for over a year.

DePue: Did you know anything about all of this controversy?

Hanson: I knew about the exchange of POW lists, because that had happened in, I think, November or December of '51.

DePue: Before you were captured.

Hanson: Yeah.

DePue: Had you received some training on what to do if you were captured?

Hanson: No. None that I remember.

DePue: Other than name, rank, and serial number.

Hanson: Name, rank, and serial number is what we had been told.

DePue: So you knew that you were not supposed to divulge any information beyond that.

Hanson: Unless it was false.

DePue: Was that just one of those things that the guys talked about in the bunkers: what would you do if you're captured? Or is that an official thing, that you were informed?

Hanson: I don't think... Nobody ever expects to be captured, and I don't think I ever heard the topic discussed on the front line. I don't even think the matter of POWs was ever discussed much.

DePue: What was your rank at the time?

Hanson: I was a PFC.

DePue: A PFC isn't necessarily the most informed man in the Army, is it?

Hanson: No.

DePue: Were the other two gentlemen also privates?

Hanson: Yeah, the cook had been promoted to corporal already.

DePue: You have any idea what happened to them after they were separated from you?

Hanson: Yeah, because after that general beat me and tortured me all day, it was getting late evening when they took me off and started marching me again all night. This time there was a foot and a half of snow on the ground; we went through the snow, and it seemed like all night. Finally we came to a house that seemed to be in the middle of nowhere, sitting there all by itself, and the guards were going around checking doors. They finally came around and opened this one door, and somebody on the inside says, "Shut the blankety-blank door, you blankety-blank Gooks," and I knew it was those other two guys.

DePue: At that moment, did you feel not quite as alone?

Hanson: Yeah. And then they put me in that house. I can't remember if I was in the same room as those other two guys, but I do remember sitting there in the corner sleeping, and I could hear myself snoring, just like somebody else was there snoring, but I knew it was me.

DePue: I want you to go back, if you're willing to talk about this, and describe how they tortured you.

Hanson: Yes. Besides beating me with his fist—

DePue: In the face?

Hanson: Yeah. I'd go rolling over into a corner. See, this guy was a big guy; he must have been this wide at the shoulders. I don't know if he was, but those epaulets on his shoulders probably made it seem that way. But he was a big man. And he was a left-hander, too, so he'd come around like that and hit me, and I'd go rolling over.

DePue: So like a hook punch.

Hanson: Yeah. And he was sitting there, and then he had me sit there with my legs crossed, you know, Korean-style.

DePue: Were you sitting on the floor during all of this.

Hanson: Yeah. Well, Oriental custom is to take your shoes off before you go into living quarters, and I had left my boots outside on the step kind of out there, outside this door. Then at one point, he took one of the copper spoons, and he put the handle up through like that, and held the fingers together at the tips, like—and then he turned that spoon handle in there...

DePue: Did he put the spoon between your fingers?

Hanson: The handle. The edges of these spoons are very sharp, because they're just stamped out of a piece of copper. He was twisting that in there like this, you know, and I could just hear the ligaments and stuff being scraped in my finger. To this day, I have trouble with that, because I guess the blood vessels break very easily in there, and it gets black...

DePue: Right at the base of the joint between the index and the middle finger there?

Hanson: Yeah, right here. The blood vessels break, and it gets black and blue.

DePue: Well, that must have been excruciating, because there's nowhere in the body that has more nerve endings than in the hands.

Hanson: Right, fingers and... yeah. And another time, he had me stand up; then the interpreter pulled my pant leg up to the knee, and he had a piece of tree bark there that he'd taken all the bark off too, so he had just the piece of sappy fiber, and he

would slap me on the calves with the piece of fiber. I looked down once, and I could see blood bubbles standing out on my calves.

DePue: On the back of your legs, you were talking about.

Hanson: Yeah. Well, he would slap from the front, and then it would whip around and hit me in the back of the leg, yeah.

DePue: Okay. Do you think they were doing all this torture just to break you and get the information? Was it just for the purpose of torture?

Hanson: I had the feeling that he was just getting his jollies doing that, because he sat there for a long time slapping those calves. He did it on both calves. And that was excruciating, too, because that wet sap would sting to heck, and...

DePue: Do you know how he managed to learn English?

Hanson: He didn't, the general didn't know how. He had this interpreter there. The interpreter was the same guy that questioned me all the day before.

DePue: So most of this torture you're talking about is what the general did?

Hanson: Yeah.

DePue: That's what general officers in the North Korean Army did.

Hanson: Yeah.

DePue: And do you have any idea about where this interpreter had learned his English?

Hanson: No. I wasn't about to socialize with him and ask him.

DePue: And he wasn't volunteering it himself.

Hanson: No.

DePue: Did he have an accent, a pretty heavy accent?

Hanson: Oh, yes. They always do. As I remember, he didn't speak all that great English, so I wouldn't understand him on a question, and I'd say, "I don't know what you're talking about." **Whack.**

DePue: That wasn't the right answer either, was it?

Hanson: No.

DePue: How long was it from the time you got captured to the time you got any kind of water or any kind of food?

Hanson: It must have been several days, because one day, we were in one place, and I know they brought me a little bit of rice and some kind of soup that was kind of a brownish-colored soup; when I put my spoon in it to pick it up, I picked up a dried fish, head and all, in there. Anyhow, when the general finished with me, I told you we went to that house. We met the other two guys, and the North Korean major was in charge there. He had previously lived in Los Angeles, California. And of course, the one guy that was captured was from Los Angeles, so they kind of hit it off, having this in common. He was a very gentle person. He never bothered us or anything. I know he had me come into his place there one day, and he was asking me questions about my family, where my family lived and all that, how many brothers and sisters I had, and all that kind of stuff. Of course, I didn't tell him any truths. I had my folks living in Des Moines, Iowa, and my siblings were also living there with him; I sure wasn't going to tell him that I had a brother in the Marine Corps.

DePue: Yeah. I can understand that. Well, Ken, I know that we don't have too much more time here, and I have a lot more questions. But let's do this. I'll give you some options of what you think would be more pertinent for me to hear: whether we want to talk about what it was like when you finally got to the permanent prisoner of war camp, or what it was like to be repatriated. I'll give you a choice of which one you think is more pertinent to your story.

Hanson: I was in a prison camp with some great guys; they were mostly officers; they had fighter pilots and stuff like that that had been shot down. I think that's where I got my education, because I would sit around, and I just loved listening to these guys talk. I think I got a full education from them, because when I was in Germany, I told you, I went and took the GED test for high school; the education officer called me over and he said, "You had one of the highest scores come through here on that test that we've ever seen." And I said, "Well, what else you got?" And he said, "We've got a one year of college," and I said, "Give me that too," and I took it, and passed everything but the science, and then given a couple more tries on that, I passed that too.

DePue: That's awesome.

Hanson: I think I can thank those officers that I was with for that.

DePue: What was the camp you were at, once you finally got settled?

Hanson: I was in Camp Two Annex, and they had—boy, I couldn't tell you where it is on here—it must have been close to Camp Two. Camp Five was at Pyoktong.

DePue: Okay. We're looking on a map here, and that's why he mentioned that.

Hanson: Yeah. My camp must have been closer to Camp Two, because it was Two Annex. Two was the officers' camp, because by this time they had segregated the POWs by rank: they had a sergeants' camp, and other enlisted men, and then they had an officers' camp, and they also had a camp for blacks. But in my camp, we had all

sorts of ranks and services in there. Everything from a Marine Corps major to an Army private.

DePue: But strictly Americans.

Hanson: Yeah. No, we had an Englishman and a South African in there too. And I remember the Englishman had a very thick brogue. He'd come over to me and start chattering away, and I'd say, "Damn it, Jimmy, speak English." He said, "But, mate, I am speaking English." So we weren't segregated. And we had a black man in our camp. He had been captured about a week after I was, but he was in the 2nd Division. He had been wounded in his arm, right between the bicep and the ball, and it shattered the bone in there. He had passed out because of that wound, and the Chinese found out he was still alive, so they were dragging him by his feet on his face through the snow and ice and stuff, and he said he came to just when that wounded arm got caught in a piece of brush, and they just kept tugging at him and his arm came right off.

DePue: Oh, wow.

Hanson: And he had, you know, the thermal boots on...

DePue: Yes. What they call the Mickey Mouse boots.

Hanson: Yup. And they're fine if you keep moving. He said they marched him through a stream, and he got his boots full of water; then they made him lay still for a long period of time, and he got frostbite in his toes, and every one of his toes dropped off.

DePue: This camp that you ended up in for many months, was that Chinese-run or North Korean?

Hanson: Yeah. Chinese. The Chinese insisted on taking charge of all the United Nations POWs.

DePue: And again, did you get a lot of propaganda while you were there?

Hanson: Not a whole lot. They came up at one point with a history book, but it was strictly history from their point of view. They had the Russians defeating the Japanese and all that kind of stuff. Of course we had some of these pilots in our group; there were World War II guys also, and they just kept running everything back down his throat. One day, he just slammed his book closed and took off, and we never heard any more from him with that book.

DePue: Well, what would you like to say in conclusion here about your experience?

Hanson: Our release, I guess, is probably the big thing. We pretty well knew by the actions of the Chinese that something big was breaking. And so one day, they finally fall us out in formation. The Marine Corps major was in charge of our group, and he says,

"Now, if they tell us that the war is over, and they release us, everybody just turn around and walk away as if nothing had happened. We don't want these people to think they're doing us a big favor." So sure enough, they call us out, and the Chinaman said, "The war is over. You will be going home soon." And so we just turned around and walked away. Glanced back at him, and he's just standing there gaping, maw's gaping open, you know, and eyes big. We waited until we got back into our quarters before we did any kind of celebrating, and we just slapped hands, you know.

DePue: Yeah. But no satisfaction to the captain or the people who were holding you prisoner.

Hanson: No. So it wasn't very long after that, they brought some trucks in there to haul us out. This is nature torturing us now. They got those trucks in there, and we're getting ready to go over and jump on them and take off, and we had a monsoon. That truck had to ford a stream in order to get back out of that town we were in; that stream just swelled up like a river, so the trucks weren't able to get out of there. So we were delayed another day or two to get out of there. Finally, they put us on the trucks and hauled us out. We went over the same road that we went over coming in there; it was a mountain range with all of these s-curves and all of these tight curves and stuff. And finally we got over to a railhead, and we stopped there. It was only a little bit of time, though, a train came by, and they loaded us on that train, and it was cattle cars; they put us in cattle cars and had straw on the floor, and we jumped on those trains. It seemed like it took us forever to get to Pyongyang, their capital city. Then when we finally got to Pyongyang, they took us off the train and put us back on trucks and hauled us down to Kaesong, where they had a bunch of tents set up there, and they put us in those tents for a few days. Then finally, one day they called our compound out, and told us that they were going to separate the officers from the enlisted men: officers, move over to the other side. There was a little dirt path going through there: officers, move over to the side of the path, and the enlisted men stay where you are. So I stood there, and these two fighter pilots line up across the way from me –one big guy from Texas and a little guy from Indianapolis –and the big guy says, "Kenny, who are we going to get to harass us, now that we're being separated?" I said, "Try that little dink standing next to you." Then they took us over and put us in kind of a barracks, and we stayed there overnight. In the morning, we ate and got back on trucks and headed for Panmunjom. That was a long, long ride; it was only a few miles, but...

DePue: But maybe the best moment of your life up to that point?

Hanson: Yeah, you bet.

DePue: OK. Well, I hate to say that we're going to have to end it at this point, but it's been a pleasure to talk with you.

Female: I'm not a nasty person; I'm pretty peaceful. But I will fight like a tiger for his health.

DePue: To protect him. I can understand that.

Female: You bet I will. And it is just time to leave; he has got his story from one coast to the other. Everybody wants his story.

Hanson: Well, I hope that was pretty much what you were looking for.

DePue: Well, absolutely. And I think I'll go ahead and turn this off so we can start unplugging, but thank you very much, Ken.

Hanson: Sure thing.

(end of interview)