Interview with George Pempek

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: My name is Mark DePue. I'm a volunteer with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm here this afternoon with George Pempek, a Korean War veteran. Good afternoon, George.

Pempek: Good afternoon, sir.

DePue: Today is Thursday, April 16, 2009, and we're in what will soon become an exhibit location for the new National Korean War Museum. Did I say that right?

Pempek: That's correct.

DePue: It's the old Osco Drug in downtown Springfield. I know that you folks are looking forward to having this actually developed and open to the public and lots of people have a chance, then, to begin to understand about the Korean War. Because if there's ever a war that the United States has been involved with that is poorly understood, it's the Korean War, I think, and I suspect you agree with that sentiment.

Pempek: There are certain things that don't get mentioned too often, and this is an opportunity to contribute to some of the history.

DePue: Well, I know I've told you this before, George, but I've been looking forward to interviewing you for a long time because I don't know many people who were there in Korea on occupation duty in 1948, before the war, and then got sent back with the Fifth Regimental Combat Team right at the beginning of the war, and spent the first year there. Then probably in our second interview session, you'll have an opportunity to reflect on what had changed when you went back for the third time, and that was in what year?

Pempek: That would have been in 1962.

DePue: Okay, about eight-ten years after the war was over. Okay. We always start with when and where you were born.

Pempek: I was born in Blackwell, Wisconsin, Forest County.

DePue: Where in Wisconsin is that?

Pempek: I mentioned it was in Forest County, and there's a lumber town in the northern, central portion of Wisconsin.

DePue: And your birth date?

Pempek: Is the 30th day of January, 1930.

DePue: Okay, so you're a Depression baby, too.

Pempek: I'm a Depression baby and I remember that very well.

DePue: Well, tell us a little bit about that. What did your father do? Let's start with that.

Pempek: As I mentioned, Blackwell was a point for what they call the Triple C, CCC camps, and they actually participated in that as a means of sustaining income. It was a lumber town; they had a sawmill there and that was the big opportunity for people that wanted to work.

DePue: Your father was in the Civilian Conservation Corps then?

Pempek: Yes.

DePue: Okay, I didn't know they had married people in the CCC at that time. I know that the Army was running a lot of those camps.

Pempek: Right, and he was very familiar with that when he talked about it, which was very seldom.

DePue: I would imagine some of your memories don't really begin until the latter part of the Depression, '37, '38, '39. What was it like growing up during those years?

Pempek: Not having been exposed to big city life, I didn't really know what else was going on in the world except people had been peeling logs because of pulp and skinning them back for paper mill production. I can remember the first shower I ever took was at the lumber camp because they had hot water. Otherwise it was water that you would heat in the copper boiler on top of the wood stove. We actually graduated to a kerosene stove later on for heating and water, plus cooking foods.

DePue: Did your family grow up in housing that was provided by the CCC?

Pempek: No. No, that was not provided. I have a picture of it and it looked like a modified settler's home, ground floor, electricity on a wire coming in from some place, and the radio that I still have with WGN marked on the front of the dial, so we got Chicago. And I can remember the powdered milk and yet there was dairy up that way. We also received rice and basic things—and I can remember those items. I don't know what else. I think we even got fresh fruit once in a while. How they got it there I don't know.

DePue: Did the house have indoor plumbing?

Pempek: Indoor plumbing? No. Not even water. We had to go to a well and pump it up, and of course we were so poor that we didn't have our own well. It was dry, so we had to go across the railroad tracks to use the neighbor's pump, and that's where we carried the water from. There was a river not too far, but we didn't use that for potable.

DePue: Were you living in the country then?

Pempek: If you want to call it country, yes. But the country living would have been associated with forestry, you know, where they would replant a lot of trees and they would be clearing areas for fire breaks and all, because there's a national forest in that area.

DePue: Was this a pine forest?

Pempek: I would imagine they had pine and they had tamarack and they had various types of evergreens, and then mostly that, yes. And there was hard maple too, but the pulp wood would have been from, I believe, poplar, what they call a poplar—p-o-p-l-a-r.

DePue: Where were you going to school?

Pempek: Right there. They built a school in Blackwell, and that's where I went to grade school.

DePue: When you say Blackwell, would that have been the actual CCC Camp location?

Pempek: No. I think the CCC Camp probably would have been under the name of Laona, L-a-o-n-a. But it was between Blackwell and Laona, that piece of ground that they were established on. They had barracks-type facilities. Of course the focal point there was the tavern in Blackwell being sort of an offshoot of the military; it was a meeting place for these people and probably the neighboring natives.

DePue: What's your clearest, most vivid memory from growing up during those later years of the Depression?

Pempek: The later years, I actually moved from Blackwell to Wausau, and as a result the earlier years, what I remember in Blackwell, it was a company town. Tennessee Ernie Ford's recording of the song, "Sixteen-Ton" described it quite well: you owe your heart and soul to the company store. The people didn't probably get too much money to take home. They owed it all to the company store, and the few dollars that they did have, why, I can remember going from where we lived to the tavern with a Karo [syrup] milk bucket, what's called a milk bucket or beer bucket. It was a two-quart bucket, I think most of them are two-quart, picking up that beer and bringing it back to the house. And then we received dairy products the same way because there was farmers around that area. So I don't know why we had powdered milk, but it was something they issued to the people that needed help, you know?

DePue: But you mentioned earlier that your home had electricity?

Pempek: Yes.

DePue: Did you have a refrigerator?

Pempek: No. Everything there was ice. They would have what they called ice houses. The river, Rat River was close by and they'd make the ice; they'd cut it with the saws and store it in sawdust in between the layers, and if you did it right it would last all summer. That's where we would get the refrigeration.

DePue: This all sounds like a lot more hard work than we're used to today in our comfortable living.

Pempek: It certainly is. Not only that, but at the time it didn't seem like anything. It was just a way of life. Every kid had something to do; in fact, there was ground where we planted potatoes. I mean, it was by hand. I think the father was able to borrow somebody's horse and then they had one bottom plow that they would just till the field with, and then we would go around with a potato planter. You dropped it in here and it comes out the bottom and planted the next hill and so on and so forth. Interesting.

DePue: Did you have a big enough garden to have chickens and things like that as well?

Pempek: We didn't have chickens, but we did have wildlife. In other words, partridge was a bird that was prevalent, and then of course the venison was always there too.

And I don't know what else, but hamburger, I think I remember getting that from the store. They had little cardboard boats-like that they would put it in there. And the same way with ice cream if you got—boy, that was a real treat.

DePue: Are you saying that most of your protein would have been coming from wild game?

Pempek: I would say that, and there was always a relative who was involved in farming and they had pigs, so we'd be able to have what they would call salt pork, put it in barrels and keep it that way. And then the other thing I remember was what they called head cheese. They would render down portions of the pork, and boy, it was good with vinegar on it. Also they would make canned sausage, you know, put it in fruit jars and so on.

DePue: I wonder if the kids today would be repelled by it when they found out what head cheese actually was.

Pempek: That's possible, but I don't remember it ever coming from the bad parts, you know, the brains and stuff like that. It was usually meat that they would just probably cut off the bones and it would become, sort of like they call pulled pork now, you know? Then they would boil out the fat, and the lard would come to the top and you'd scrape it off and what was left would be the jelly-like looking stuff in the meat. You know?

DePue: What caused the move to Wausau?

Pempek: A change in family life, opportunity for employment, whatever you want to mention. Carpentry—he became a carpenter and a homebuilder later on. They did build the school in Blackwell, you know, from ground up with labor from around there. So he probably learned the trade there. I didn't pay that much attention to it. But opportunity was in a bigger city. Wausau was, probably at that time, 20,000 people.

DePue: Yeah, that's got to be a big change from the way you were living before.

Pempek: It was a distance also from Blackwell; 100 miles you might say. Once you got there, you know, you didn't make that trip too often. It was just a need or to visit somebody.

DePue: Do you remember much about December 7, 1941?[1]

Pempek: I was in Wausau at that time working, going to school and I had a job as a busboy in a cafeteria.

DePue: At eleven years old?

[1] December 7, 1941 was the day the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, the event which propelled the United States into World War II.

Pempek: There was no restriction. Peddling papers, making a few cents. And the big thrill was if you were able to sell an extra paper when they would give you one too many on the route. You were accountable for 100 papers so you've got to have 100 ten-cent pieces at the end of the week to pay your bill. Well, if you had 101 papers, you got a nickel [dime?] to keep. That was a candy bar.

DePue: Did any of your customers ever give you a tip?

Pempek: Yes, some of them.

DePue: What do you remember about December seventh, though?

Pempek: Well, I suppose it wasn't that important at the time, but I can remember the radio broadcasts. It was quite eventful, alarming; you'd never forget it because we're at war. We've been attacked by the Japanese and some other comments. But from that point on, well then, one would study it. And I can remember the Victory Stamps that you would have to buy bonds[2], you know, buy ten-cent stamp and eventually it'll turn into $18.75 and you'll get a bond or something like that.

DePue: You followed it pretty closely, then?

Pempek: Yes. I was an admirer of the aviators at that time, anything I could get a hold of to read about the people flying airplanes. Of course the exciting part was the fighter pilots, and then you remember the one that became the Ace of Aces, Ira Bong? He was from Superior, Wisconsin, or the town between Minnesota and Wisconsin up around Duluth, I believe it was.

DePue: Do you remember what your father was doing during that timeframe?

Pempek: Carpentry, building homes.

DePue: He stayed in the Wausau area then? You stayed in the Wausau area?

Pempek: Right, mm-hmm.

DePue: Are there any memories that you have about the end of the war, 1945? You would have been fifteen about that time.

Pempek: Yes. I'm saying this from now, looking back. I wanted to be in the military. Everybody wanted to meet people because it was just so fascinating, you know. But being too young, that didn't occur until I was seventeen, but by then I was in the military. But at the end, it was, I suppose, jubilation. And I think looking back from memory, the fact that the parents no longer had to work for rations. Sugar was rationed, tires were rationed, and meat was rationed. Families were large at that time, so some of the uncles and aunts had farms and we would circumvent the

[2] The federal government sold "War Bonds" to help finance World War II. The stamps made it easy for citizens to help if they couldn't purchase a full bond; they filled a book worth $18.75 which was turned in for a printed bond which was worth $25.00 on redemption.

accountability of the food because the farmers were able to be exempt from draft because of their abilities. So we would end up with meat from the pigs that somebody would butcher; we would have the opportunity to slide a little our way without having to go through that accountability. And sugar was another item; I remember how scarce it was. Even in the restaurant where I worked, they would watch it, because people would put it in their purses and stuff, the little bit they could get.

DePue: But I've got to believe that growing up kind of close to a CCC Camp when your dad was working there and the kind of hard life the family must have had then versus the years of World War II, World War II probably looked pretty good to you in that respect.

Pempek: Well, it boomed for the people that were back, because then they were able to do this and that and everything. But then after the war, then it was a boon for the people that had a job, but it created havoc for those that came out of the military. There weren't jobs for all of those people, and that's why I was looking ahead and saying, "What am I going to do?" I could become a carpenter or something like that if I wanted to, but I'd had enough of home life was basically what it amounted to.

DePue: You mean you were ready to move on then?

Pempek: I was.

DePue: Okay. Tell me then about the decision to join the military at age seventeen.

Pempek: Well, I wasn't quite through high school yet, but my brother finished high school and went into the Air Force. He ended up being stationed in Germany and that was great. We had a good relationship. I had one older brother and one younger sister. And that was the determining factor too, because now he had something, though anything we had, we shared with the parents.

DePue: Was it more being drawn by your interests, your following the military? Or the opportunity to get a job? Or a little bit of both?

Pempek: The opportunity to get away from home was about basically what it amounted to. Didn't like the regimentation—using that term now—at home: "You can do this and you can't do that, and you can't play basketball or football because you can get hurt and then we'd have the bill." It didn't come out that way but actually, in the end, I have to be sympathetic now that I was, you might say overprotected, by virtue of not wanting to have those things happen. But then in between, I had a tonsillectomy, an appendectomy, and adenoids removed, and all of those kinds of things. So if there was ever anything wrong with a kid, I had it done at that time.

DePue: Nineteen forty-seven: when exactly did you sign up?

Pempek: My birthday was on the thirtieth of January, and I was sworn in on the fifth of February.

DePue: Did you have to have your parents' signature?

Pempek: I certainly did, yes. They didn't seem to be hesitant about giving it.

DePue: Where did you head then, after you enlisted? Army?

Pempek: Army. I tried the Navy and Air Force, but I flunked their physicals. I was color blind, they said, but it was actually just with the red colors. So I had to go with the Army, which was the last choice, because my brother was Air Force and that would have been the first choice.

DePue: Were you still drawn to the notion of flying yourself when you started the process?

Pempek: Actually, when I signed up for the Army I wanted to be a tank driver. I never drove a vehicle before I got in the service. I didn't have a driver's permit or anything, which was not that unusual at that age during that time.

DePue: Why being a tank driver? What was appealing about that?

Pempek: I guess the fact that the tank was big and challenging, and you could be above somebody else or whatever the heck it was. But I never did see the inside of a tank.

DePue: Well, we'll get into that. Where did you go for basic training?

Pempek: Well, I went through induction at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, and then to Fort Lewis, Washington for basic training.

DePue: So many of the people I interview end up in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Do you have any idea why you went from Wisconsin all the way out to Washington State?

Pempek: This is just a statement being made now. I think they probably wanted me to see the world. I can remember taking that train all the way to Fort Lewis. It had nothing to do with that. I don't know either, because it was, when I see people now. But I went there, and I think it was they were closing it down, too, the north Fort Lewis at that time, after the Second World War.

DePue: Was this an armor basic training school?

Pempek: No, it was not. Fort Knox was still the armor, and of course Fort Sill was the artillery, and infantry was all over the place I guess. You know, when it comes to that, every basic training would be only four or eight weeks, I think is what it was at that time.

DePue: Were you thinking you were heading to the infantry at that time?

Pempek: They had me earmarked because I scored rather highly on AFQT[3]—123 or something, which is exceptional for less than a high school graduate. So they wanted me to go to Clerk General School in Fort Lee, Virginia.

DePue: Is that where you headed after Washington, then?

Pempek: Nope. I was valuable in Fort Lewis, so they kept me over there to help close down the north fort, and I had the important job of cleaning grease traps.

DePue: Well, somebody's got to do it. Why not the private?

Pempek: Right, yeah. But I had the opportunity then to go on pass and visit some of the surrounding area, the mountains and the capital and the gulf there or whatever, and met a young lady there from, let's see, that would have been Tacoma, right. And so I even experienced the feminine part of the world there on a different aspect, but it didn't materialize. But by virtue of staying there those extra few weeks rather than change my orders, then they sent me to Fort Meade, Maryland. Why all the way across the country, I don't know.

DePue: Well, it is the Army, after all.

Pempek: Yeah.

DePue: What was at Fort Meade?

Pempek: Fire fighting. They were training people to become fire fighters.

DePue: Had you volunteered to do that?

Pempek: Didn't know what I was getting into. I wasn't even a driver. This first piece of machinery I drove was the two and a half ton truck in training up in Fort Lewis. When I got through Fort Meade and out of that school, then I was stationed in Marietta, Pennsylvania in a fire department and I'd become a fire truck driver.

DePue: Did you like that?

Pempek: Oh yeah. First corner I went around, I forgot to bring it back on the road and ended up down the…(unintelligible??).

DePue: I imagine (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

Pempek: It was 750 gallons of water and, you know, it goes where it wants to go. It doesn't change direction; I can remember that. But that didn't stop them from letting me do that, because the driver had to also regulate the pump pressure. And apparently I had the ability to do that because it was more or less manual then. You'd have to

[3] AFQT: Armed Forces Qualification Test

pump, you know, depending on how many feet of line you had out, give it so much pressure from the gauge.

DePue: Being a firefighter, does that mean that you would have been in the engineer branch?

Pempek: Right. And I was for that period of time, and that was ’47 to ‘48. Middle of ‘48 I had the call to go to Korea.

DePue: Well, explain how that happened then. It was just your time to rotate?

Pempek: Apparently. They were looking for different people, and eventually they turned that back over—it was transportation for a storage depot.

DePue: At Fort Meade?

Pempek: No, in Marietta, Pennsylvania. At that time, they were doing those jobs with military. Then a year or so later they decided to turn those all over to the civilians, I guess, contracted them out to civilians as they closed down the place. Because on the way back, I stopped and some of the people stayed there that got out of the service and became firefighters. I did receive the certificate from the state of Pennsylvania as a qualified firefighter at the age of eighteen.

DePue: That’s something to hang your hat on, I would think. You probably weren’t paying much attention at the time, but of course 1947, 1948 were important years for the military because it was undergoing a significant restructuring from a Department of Army to a Department of Defense or Secretary of Defense, and the creation of the Air Force as a separate branch at that time. I’m sure there was a lot of downsizing and restructuring that was going on in all these hundreds or thousands of installations. Apparently you were experiencing that to a certain extent.

Pempek: Yeah. Being not only at Fort Meade and not being with a unit of military, just school, I didn’t really notice that too much. Then in Marietta, it was the same thing. It was just that we had to get our supplies from New Cumberland, which was around Harrisburg. They would give you a certificate of some sort to go buy whatever the mess sergeant needed—they had a mess sergeant there. We probably had twenty-five people at the most and we had to be fed through the military, and that’s where we would go for this and that. So I didn’t really experience much of that military. But then from there right into Korea, well, then I went to a line company.

DePue: What was your unit of assignment?

Pempek: Company G, 31st Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division, Sonch’on, Korea.

DePue: Where is Sonch’on roughly?

Pempek: It's about the middle of the 38th Parallel.

DePue: We're looking at a map now. It's right about the middle of the country, so I would think—

Pempek: Right here is Sonch'on.

DePue: Pretty mountainous terrain around there.

Pempek: It was very mountainous and it was supposedly one of the routes that would be easy to follow if North Korea wanted to come to South Korea and South Korea go into North Korea.

DePue: Well, it looks like it's in something of a river valley that heads towards the west coast as well, heads right down.

Pempek: Right. When I was there, this portion was Korean, this portion was American, on the 38th Parallel.

DePue: Okay, in terms of who was guarding that?

Pempek: Right.

DePue: We probably should mention then, and do this very quickly, that at the end of the Second World War of course Japan had occupied Korea for forty-plus years by that time. At the end of the Second World War, the Soviet Union[4] and United States decided to share occupation duties, and in one of those incidents of history, they divided the country at the 38th Parallel with the Americans in the south and the Soviets in the North, and you're then part of that occupation army. How long were you in Korea, then? When did you get there, first of all?

Pempek: I don't exactly remember, but I'm saying it was May or June of 1948 because it was hot.

DePue: Okay.

Pempek: We didn't do anything but maybe stop in Japan and get on a different method of transportation to go to Inchon, which is where we were taken in through and that's where we exited through also, which was—where were we?—up in the north of Seoul?

DePue: Yes, it's the port city for Seoul.

Pempek: Yes. Now, of course, everything is down in Pusan. Well, not everything. From there, I don't know how they did that, but I was just a replacement and went to Sonch'on. That was quite an experience to going from something different to

[4] Soviet Union is the common short name for Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, U.S.S.R.

military in a line company and a rifle squad on the Parallel. Well, that was back from the Parallel. From Sonch'on, we'd go up to what they call outpost duty on the 38th itself. This was the headquarters of that particular battalion.

DePue: So basically, you're duties are as a standard Eleven-Bravo infantryman, and you're guarding the border?

Pempek: With the exception that I was a firefighter. They had an old deuce-and-a-half up there with a pump on the front of it, so immediately I was put on, I guess you'd call it special duty. At that point, why, I was responsible for that fire truck and whatever people you got to perform that duty.

DePue: For somebody listening to this later on, a deuce-and-a-Half was a two and a half-ton truck, kind of standard issue for the Army during World War II, for the next fifty years practically.

Pempek: Right. And of course it had the pump on the front, you know, added onto it, and the back had a tank of water. We didn't have any water source, you know; we just had to drop the suction hose into the reservoir and so on. But the duty was interesting because I was still an infantryman and had to participate in that kind of activity.

DePue: What memories do you have, your first impressions of Korea? Let's start with that.

Pempek: Oh my. There were Japanese barracks and, what do you call them? Quonsets.[5] And whichever unit you were with, one company had this and one company had that, a platoon in a Quonset or something of that nature. But it was waiting at the middle of a—to me, right now, it's like a desert—a sand pit, for an assignment after you got out into Korea to be assigned to some unit. And that's when that happened, you know, you go here and you go there and so on. So I was not overly impressed with that.

DePue: When you landed at Inchon, did you get a chance to see the town of Inchon or maybe Seoul?

Pempek: Didn't even know what Inchon was compared to Seoul. I don't really remember. It was just being from Japan to that. I have a picture or two somewhere of when we left Korea. Yeah, but it was not knowing anything different, I said, "Oh my." You know, I thought, Well, maybe in Japan. But it wasn't, they didn't stay in Japan with this particular boatload. And the other interesting thing is I was a buck sergeant[6] at that time already.

DePue: At eighteen years old?

[5] Quonset huts were made of semi-circular corrugated aluminum sheeting. When erected, they resembled half a tunnel with a door, and sometimes windows, at each end.
[6] Buck Sergeant was the common reference to the lowest sergeant rank.

Pempek: Probably seventeen when I made it, but I don't know. Yeah. That's right. And at that time, they had an abundance of buck sergeants. Later, they did away with the buck sergeant and made them corporals. They went to the different stripes, and so I figured that was about ___(??) at that time. But when we went over on the troop ship, I think it was a whole compartment of us that were buck sergeants, and we got the KP duty on the boat. There weren't too many people that could pull that because they got seasick, and I didn't, so as a result I was in the kitchen area quite a bit. The troop ship was another experience. That was—

DePue: Well, let's go back and talk about that a little bit.

Pempek: We got on the train in California, because I went all the way from Marietta, Pennsylvania to the Oakland area. I didn't know what an airplane was except for the Air Force. But none of that bothered me. It was just excitement because it was something different every day just about. You know? It was the same way when I went in. I went from Camp McCoy [Wisconsin] to Fort Lewis [Washington] in civilian clothes. I didn't have a military issue yet, and I had the opportunity to buy somebody's wristwatch for five dollars because they needed money, and I don't think I had but ten dollars. But at that time, they'd give you a flying twenty, or something like that, to go from one place to the other; then when you got paid the next time on regular leave, your pay was minus twenty dollars and at that time it was seventy - either one or two dollars a month. So that was a big part of the money. So that's going back to that part. But the troop ship, you know, they become tiered. And of course if you were smart, you'd get the top bunk because those people would barf all over you when they got sick. And so the guy on the bottom, well, he wasn't too...

DePue: Well, they stacked you up several deep in there?

Pempek: That's true, yeah.

DePue: Was this an old Victory Ship?

Pempek: At that time? I guess it was. I don't know. No, I think it was the Collins I went over on, whatever the heck that was.

DePue: The U.S.S. Collins?

Pempek: I'd have to look that up.

DePue: Practically nobody I interview has a happy memory about life on a troop ship.

Pempek: Well, I don't say that it was unhappy. It was just the idea that being young and not experiencing anything grand before, I had no problem with it. There were other people that, you know, all they did was gripe. Of course card games and shaking the dice were prevalent on board at that time because it's all you had to do on that trip. I spent more time on troop ships in the beginning of Korea than I did on land because it took so long, a couple weeks on whatever ship it was. Why, it had a

little breakdown in the middle of the ocean, so it took an extra couple days before they got something working. They would convert the salt water to drinking water or something like that, I don't know what it was. Just lucky you're on there. Interesting, though. And of course the head, it seemed like that was always on the beginning of the boat or the end. So when you go to the head, well, the damn thing would go up that high and back down, up and down. If you're in the middle, well, you're pretty level. So if you got on one end or the other on assignment, you got sicker than all get out. But you didn't know that at the time or if you had a preference. It was just something interesting.

DePue: You know, I've never thought about that but it makes perfect sense.

Pempek: Yeah. So I think they'd deliberately look at you and say, "Well, you like you're a little anemic, so we're going to put you there where you'll puke all over." No, I don't know. Look at all the sad parts, but then—I had no problem with it. But you didn't have many belongings. A duffle bag is it, you know, whatever you had in your duffle bag was yours.

DePue: Well, let's get you back to Korea here.

Pempek: Okay.

DePue: You have any impressions of the first few times you encountered the Korean civilians?

Pempek: Absolutely. I appreciated them and the experiences because we were in a small area. You know, you had the ration card and you had things. I didn't smoke, so I had the opportunity to convert my cigarettes into yen, ten times for what they were worth. I did go out on the economy a few times and I'd take my shoes off to go into the little joints. And those that drank, why, they would get gassed up. That's the first time I ate dog is when I went out there. They would have it made up in such a manner, it was more spicy and it looked like a jelly thing to me.

DePue: Were they drinking the local brews?

Pempek: If it was that, yes, whatever that is, sake or whatever.

DePue: They had makkoli which is this fermented rice wine that was real cloudy looking, if you remember that, and then they had some other things that were quite a bit stronger than that. What are your impressions of the Koreans? How would you describe them?

Pempek: I felt sorry for them because a majority were just like I was growing up through the Depression. They had nothing and most of them were houseboys. We had an interpreter; every small element had somebody that would be their interpreter and we had one too. We got to know them, and learned through them. If you wanted to go out, well, they would help you out in that respect. But some of the GIs would take advantage of them and would cheat them on the cigarettes. You know,

they'd sell them through the black market and they didn't have the cigarettes in the pack, just stuff them with paper. And then, of course, they weren't too happy about that. They used to do the booze the same way for some reason. They would cut the bottom of the bottle out somehow and then put in something other than whiskey. So if you buy the liquor from the black market, it happened very rarely but whatever they had in it, it probably would make you go blind, at least that's what they said, or something like that.

DePue: Were you at a large enough concentrated American camp that there was a PX or a commissary?

Pempek: They had that, but then the only thing available was your rations, which would be candy, cigarettes, soap, and what else? Not too much else. The rest was issued. You didn't have any refrigerated food. There was no fresh food. It was all C-rations or whatever they would make it from, and the Spam became a sandwich. That was later in Seoul. Up there, we didn't have that.

DePue: Well, I would guess that you're pretty isolated where you ended up.

Pempek: There was a battalion of troops in that area, however, which is pretty sizable.

DePue: About what number, 800 or so?

Pempek: Yeah.

DePue: Okay. You got there in May of 1948. Were you paying much attention to what was going on politically in Korea at the time?

Pempek: No. I was paying more attention to what they said: "Don't do this, don't do that, don't eat any of the fresh fruit or watermelons, and stay away from this and that." Then I remember some of the things, like we couldn't figure out what this little boy was doing on that pile of wood there. He was taking a crap, because all the little kids, when they'd squat, their trousers would open up and they didn't have to worry about pooping on themselves, at least that was my impression. I thought that was pretty different. Now, at the time I didn't know what they were doing. But no, I really felt for them because they had nothing and then some of us would take advantage of that fact also to try to get what they wanted.

DePue: I know that 1948 was the year that Truman integrated the military as well. I assume when you got there, that this was an all-white unit that you joined?

Pempek: I don't remember seeing any blacks at all, not in '48.

DePue: Okay, for the entire time you were there?

Pempek: I didn't think they integrated until 1950. That's when we first got them. Or even later, in the 25th Division. No, I didn't notice any of those people there at all.

DePue: How long were you stationed in Korea then?

Pempek: I want to say just about one year, because in May or June we ended up in Hawaii, in '49.

DePue: Okay. And do you recall the circumstances that got you transferred to Hawaii?

Pempek: Right. From Sonch'on, they drew all American troops back off the 38th [parallel] and some of them were rotated back to the States, some of them were discharged, whatever term of service they had left to do.

DePue: They were handing over patrolling of the 38th to the Koreans?

Pempek: That's right. And the only thing supposedly left at the beginning of 1949 would have been KMAG, the Korean Military Advisory Group. As a result, the designation of units became extinct. Because I think I went from the 31st to the 32nd when I went to Seoul, not knowing what the difference was because you're still under the company. At that time, I went to a headquarters company, for what reason I don't know. But then I ended up in a headquarters rather than the line company. But we still had the 3rd Battalion. I think it was the 3rd. I'd have to look at my records. And whatever was left, they'd just give you a job and you were in there, and I went into the S-2 [Military Intelligence] section.

DePue: This is in Seoul now?

Pempek: Right in Seoul. I think at the end of the year, it became the 5th Infantry Regiment. Until it became the 5th Infantry Regiment, it was just troops over there and the companies.

DePue: So as far as you know, they kind of deactivated the 31st Infantry Regiment?

Pempek: Well, I don't know that they deactivated it but it went, well, it was part of the 7th Division. So I think they went to Japan.

DePue: There were elements of the 7th ID [Infantry Division] in Japan, but it was in pretty sorry shape by the middle of 1950.

Pempek: Well, because of the deal there. They had the 6thh Division at one time also in Korea.

DePue: During occupation duty?

Pempek: Yes. But I didn't even know what a division was when I got there, so I didn't pay much attention. But I think the 1st Cav [Cavalry] was over there also. Maybe not. But in 1949 when they withdrew all the troops… The way I understand it, all American troops were supposed to be out of Korea. That's why they did that; they pulled them all back and put some in this group, others in this group. Either they

went to Japan or they went to the States, or they stayed there, depending on what your length of duty was.

DePue: Did you have any opinion about this new policy of withdrawing all the American troops out of Korea?

Pempek: At that time, it didn't make any difference to me. I was just happy to go wherever they wanted and to get away from that type of living. And going back to Seoul was no real jewel either, because you went into a populated area and they had nothing more than we had up in Sonch'on, which—

DePue: How would you describe what Seoul looked like at that time? What kind of construction was it, how busy were the streets?

Pempek: Oh, well, we would refer to it as, if you go up town, they've got all slicky boys. They would steal anything that wasn't fastened to your body. You would never know it. They were desperate for American whatever you might have: chocolate, cigarettes, influence and so on. There were numbers there, but the buildings and stuff were terrible. Their construction was all scaffolds made out of poles and bound together with ropes or whatever they made the rope out of, so it was not impressive. But Seoul was bustling with people. They had no sanitation to speak of. I know we moved into what is now the Eighth Army Headquarters. That was where the last final elements were, and heck, I think we spent more time trying to get the water system and toilets working. The outhouses were built in the facility. I don't know what your experience was like, but you had your one hole, two holes, three holes there and then you'd have half a fifty-five gallon drum underneath the hole. And while you're taking a what-you-call-it, relieving yourself, here comes the little pony with his honey bucket wagon. It had a big iron thing and would pull that bucket out and dump it in the honey wagon. There was no modesty about it. That's just kind of interesting. We tried to make the plumbing work. I even learned how to use a jackhammer at that time, for pete's sakes.

DePue: What did they do with all that stuff they put in the honey wagon?

Pempek: They put it on the rice fields, I guess. I never did see it, although I remember in combat where some of it was. I fell into one of those holes.

DePue: That was always a hard thing when I was there for Americans, even in the 1980s, to kind of wrap your brain around the notion that you're putting human waste as fertilizer into the rice paddies.

Pempek: Yeah, and that was one of the reasons we weren't, I guess, encouraged to use any of the local market stuff. But then eggs—we did do that quite a bit. We did buy eggs from them somehow, you know, bartered for them or whatever. And even during combat, we would have those straw things each egg would be fastened in between so they wouldn't break. But then in Seoul, as far as unit integrity, we were just there. If the people were lucky they would have enough to fill out a

platoon and a company. And the weaponry is the same thing because they didn't have much.

DePue: Well, I know in doing some research that there was a rebellion or an uprising around October of 1948, and I think that was primarily around Taegu. But a lot of it was because of communist guerillas that had infiltrated south or been left south at the end of World War II. Do you remember anything about that?

Pempek: I don't remember anything about that. All I know is that if you did go outside the compound, they encouraged you to be careful and be with somebody and all that kind of stuff.

DePue: Did you get lectures or anything about guerilla activities around the areas?

Pempek: I think troop information and education was lacking. I experienced that more in Europe when I went over there, finding out that they were lacking information in Europe. I was there as soon as I got back from Korea—one year in the States and then Germany. In fact, I was a traveling instructor for troop information and education.

DePue: What year would that have been?

Pempek: That'd have been in '52, '53, '54.

DePue: Okay, when you were in Korea that first tour, or even in basic or advanced training that you got, was there any kind of training or indoctrination about the difference between the United States and the Soviet Union, capitalism versus communism, things like that?

Pempek: If there was, I probably didn't pay much attention to it because I don't recall it. Only thing I recall is what in the world are we going to do tomorrow? You know, because we knew we weren't going to be there very long, or forever, and so it was just, I suppose, the recreational things that you could do if there were any. And the clubs were established in Seoul at that time. They also had another institution that I completely forgot about, and you've probably heard that too; they had what they called a Clap Gap. And that was a special element in Seoul that all the people that got gonorrhea would end up going to. There are all kinds of stories to tell about that too. I don't know if this is the time to do that.

DePue: Well, you know, nobody's explained that yet, recuperation and some retraining, if you will?

Pempek: Yeah. Well, this was one of the cautions, you know, because there was an awful lot of venereal disease. Of course the military, being very interested in companionship or what their carton of cigarettes would give them, they indulged and no doubt that they'd come back with what they would call the weeping willow down there. And in the middle of the night, they'd get you up and tell you to do the thing. I don't know if you heard that expression or if you want to know.

DePue: To do the thing.

Pempek: Skin it back and milk it down, boys.

DePue: Oh boy. What were you being told about the people on the other side of the 38th parallel? And were they defined as the enemy?

Pempek: When we were in Sonch'on, we had evidence of that because our electricity would go off from time to time.I It was controlled by North Korea, so they had the ability any time they didn't want us to have electricity in Sonch'on, they would just turn it off. "Uh-oh, they turned the power off again." It didn't mean anything to me because I didn't have anything that could work on electricity anyway, and if you did, it was a radio that wouldn't pick anything up without a battery or whatever.

DePue: Did you see those people as the enemy? Is that how they were portrayed?

Pempek: I don't think I ever did, no. Because it was sort of a clandestine operation, I suppose, and it was only for those people that dealt in that business. And that's what I later did in the S-2, you know, because that was part of their function.

DePue: Well, the reason I'm kind of belaboring this is because drawing the line at the 38th Parallel was pretty arbitrary in how it was plopped down where it was.

Pempek: It had certainly no strategic importance.

DePue: Then as soon as it's there—not too long after that—you kind of have the notion that there's two opposing parties or groups that are enemies with each other. But you didn't get a strong sense of that when you were there?

Pempek: Well, I don't know. At that age and level, if I did it didn't bother me one bit or the other because, you know, you don't know what the next day is or what you're going to do. All we know is that the South Koreans, when I was back in Seoul, they were training real hard. You know, man, they'd go by our barracks and in the morning they'd do their physical running and chanting and all that kind of stuff. And here we were, looking out, trying to keep warm during the winter with the dirty old coal dust because that's the only fuel. Didn't have lumps of coal; all we had was the dust and we'd make them hard and then burn them in the stove like briquettes. And man, you filled up with that black stuff in the morning. You'd wake up blowing out black boogers, you know? And finally they got oil for heaters inside.

DePue: Fuel oil? When did you leave for Hawaii?

Pempek: That would have been, I think, in June of '49 is when we left and boy, that was a surprise. And of course that's when I had to make up my mind whether I was going to give up the Army or stay on, because I'd only signed up for three years; '47 to '48 was one year, '49 was two years, and then June, that was a little over

two years. And in order to be stationed other than Japan, you had to have over a year to do. If you had over a year to do, you could go as a unit to Hawaii, and that was the 5th Infantry Regiment, which was formed probably in January of '49 or shortly after the 31st, 32nd, 7th Division was excommunicated, however you want to put it. Then we were just the 5th Infantry Regiment.

DePue: You decided that you were going to stay in for a longer period of time?

Pempek: The only reason I thought that was I didn't necessarily want to go to Japan. I'd seen enough of the Orient. When they said Hawaii, I said "Oh, give me another year, I'll go!" So I took a year's extension and therefore went with the unit to Hawaii, and most of us did go there. And then by June of 1950, putting it together now, the war broke out and as a result, we didn't go back to the States.

DePue: You got to see more of the Orient.

Pempek: Right.

DePue: Well then, the way you're describing this, it sounds like the last thing on your mind when you made that decision was, "Oh, something might happen here in Korea I'd have to come back for."

Pempek: I think the thought was that whatever was happening didn't make any difference because we weren't there, and the focus was on Japan. I think even the country had that same idea, that Korea wasn't worth messing with. But then after we got into the next phase of our discussion, one could see very easily what a disappointment it would be, after promising those people that had nothing, that we would more or less help them out and defend them.

DePue: Was the 5th Infantry Regiment newly organized when you joined it?

Pempek: It had to be because I never heard of it before.

DePue: Okay, and this was a separate infantry regiment, wasn't it?

Pempek: Right.

DePue: Wasn't affiliated with a division?

Pempek: It wasn't in the 7th Division for sure.

DePue: Now I know later on it's known as the 5th Infantry Regimental Combat Team. Was it known as that then?

Pempek: No, it was just the 5th Infantry Regiment. And then in Hawaii, it became part of the 5th.[7] When we were in Korea as the 5th Infantry, we had no patch on the

[7] The 5th Regimental Combat Team (RCT) served in South Korea from 1 January 1949 until 31 June 1949, with the mission of providing security to all U.S. troops who were then withdrawing from the country. The 5th RCT

shoulder, so we were looking for what we were going to wear, and they couldn't make up their mind either. So it was a KMAG patch for a while.

DePue: KMAG?

Pempek: Korean Military Advisory Group. It was a bell and sort of the size of a 2nd Division patch, but it was red and blue and white and so on. And of course that left us. Well, when we got to Hawaii we were in the same situation. There was no infantry unit. The 24th and 25th were in Hawaii at one time, but there was no 24th or 25th on active duty there. So when we got to Hawaii, we ended up being part of USARPAC, and we wore that USARPAC patch, which was the islands with that blue backfield and white stars and, I guess, the—

DePue: Yeah, I know that one. USARPAC, United States Army Pacific?

Pempek: Right.

DePue: Okay. You know, the military loves its acronyms, doesn't it?

Pempek: Oh boy, now they have so many that it's difficult to know which one pertains to the thing.

DePue: Well, coming from the border along the 38th Parallel and then to Seoul, and now you're in Hawaii, how different was Hawaii from what you had lived before?

Pempek: Boy, happy shirts and drinking all you can. I still was not of age; I was only eighteen, nineteen. Eighteen, and I didn't get to be nineteen until the next—well, I would have been nineteen then, yeah. But still, everybody had the opportunity to indulge in that and that's what we looked forward to.

DePue: Was that considered good duty?

Pempek: I thought so, yeah. I have many experiences in Hawaii that—well, just like Korea. So many things happened in a short period of time because you're continuously on the move. You know? And then Hawaii, well, then we actually decided, or somebody did, that we were going to become a combat element. I can remember when, I think towards '49, '50, they had what they called Operation Mickie. The 2nd Division came over from Washington, I guess, and was going to drive the enemy, the aggressor out of Hawaii, which was a maneuver. We became the aggressor and we had to wear the aggressor uniforms. I ended up being one of the stay-behinds and got captured immediately. (both laugh) But then I had to sleep

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was transferred to Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, where it was when the Korean War began. It deployed to Korea on 25 July 1950 to reinforce American and South Korean forces then bottled up in the Pusan Perimeter. In July and August it was attached to the 25th Infantry Division, then the 1st Cavalry Division on the Naktong River line. In September the RCT was attached to the 24th Infantry Division, replacing the 34th Infantry Regiment which had been decimated in the first two months of fighting. It remained with the 24th Infantry Division until January 1952 when it officially became a separate RCT again and was assigned to IX Corps. *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/5th_Infantry_Regiment_(United States) (accessed April 12, 2010).

on the beach and there's all kinds of different stories when we get to that part. But that really started forming our combat unit. Then we had tanks, we had the armor, you know, and we had the artillery and the heavy mortars, and you had the air support or liaison from the air and all of that.

DePue: Was adding those elements part of the transition from an infantry regiment to a regimental combat team?

Pempek: I think so, yeah, because we ended up with a mortar company and everything they have in a self-supporting—

DePue: Yeah, I know there's an armor company, a mortar company, as you said, the Triple Nickel.

Pempek: That was a field artillery battalion.

DePue: Okay. And that's all part of this regimental combat team.

Pempek: Well, each Battalion would have a, what would you call them, company of artillery assigned, you know, three from the artillery battalion. Batteries, that's what they are, batteries. Okay. I forgot all that.

DePue: Yeah, I should have helped you out on that. Was this at Schofield Barracks?

Pempek: This was at Schofield Barracks.

DePue: Which is on Oahu? Is there enough terrain there to actually do some good maneuvers?

Pempek: Oh yes. Kahuku was our training grounds and that was—

DePue: What was the name of it?

Pempek: Kahuku. I don't know how, I'd have to look that up.

DePue: We'll get that later.

Pempek: There were other areas too, and then we had our own private beach, those of us that wanted to gamble. We weren't supposed to, it was off limits, but we went there anyway for recreation because there was no police. Well, we were actually treated well because we came from Korea to Hawaii, and just like it was a combat element or something, I suppose. And to look back, that's the first time I had the entertainment. Oh, Al Jolson and Eddie Peabody, they came over there and entertained us one time and stuff like that.

DePue: Was that part of a USO show?[8]

[8] The **United Service Organizations** Inc. (**USO**) is a private, nonprofit organization that provides morale

Pempek: I guess so. All I know is they came there and I went to see them.

DePue: Did you get a chance to get some leave time, maybe get to Honolulu or places like that?

Pempek: Yeah, that was fine. But we had what was closer; it was Kemoo Farm[9], they called it, right outside the gate. That was the first watering hole for the people in Schofield, and from there they would go to some other spot and then Honolulu, oh yeah. Wahiawa was a good beach area, and there were interesting things to talk about, all of that, if a person wanted to. Because I had a lot of experiences there, too, oh goodness. Christmas one Hawaii, sure, sure. Because we would go to the beach and we purchased a car, two of us together. I guess it would have been a '39 Lincoln Zephyr or something, twelve cylinders, aluminum head on it. (DePue laughs, Wow) Well, they were an item of importance in Hawaii at that time for all the tourists, I guess, so they were just sort of left behind. And that son of a gun caused more problems. It had a built-in antenna and every time you'd go over a bump, the radio would go out on it. I think it went through the ceiling of the thing, so you had to beat it up and so on.

DePue: What was your buddy's name that you bought the car with?

Pempek: His name was Hudman Mock. We purchased it together. In fact, we followed each other all the way from Fort Meade to Korea and to Hawaii and back to Korea. And then of course in Korea, he got wounded, went to Japan. I didn't do that. I didn't get wounded. He lost half of his fanny there.

DePue: What was your exact unit of assignment?

Pempek: It became Headquarters Company, 3rd Battalion. I was in the S-2 Section. I became the Battalion Intelligence Sergeant with the same rank I had before.

DePue: Buck Sergeant?

Pempek: Yeah, but they were then, what did they call them? Corporals, I guess.

DePue: Okay. The terminology they'd use now in terms of enlisted ranks, was that an E4 or an E5 that you were?

Pempek: That would now be an E5, because they went from private one, PFC [Private First Class, corporal, then to E5, and E6 would be a staff sergeant.

DePue: I know that a private first class is an E3 and a corporal now is an E4, and then a sergeant is an E5. So the first three enlisted ranks are private ranks.

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and recreational services to members of the U.S. military.

[9] This pub & grill is located in Wahiawa, and caters largely to the soldiers of Schofield Barracks.

Pempek: Before they generated the E8 business, yeah. They didn't have a buck sergeant for some reason.

DePue: Okay. Was that considered to be good duty, then? Did you get some extra training to do that?

Pempek: I didn't have any qualms about doing anything they wanted me to do. They said they wanted me to fill a school quota, so I would go to clerk school. Then I went to leadership school in Hawaii and did everything. It apparently helped me because then they started what they called the proficiency testing; you took the test and if you scored high enough on it, you got promoted. I ended up getting promoted finally, but then I wasn't really in grade that long anyway, when I look back at the years. But when I went to Korea, and I when I came out of Korea I was E7, the higher rating.

DePue: Sergeant first class?

Pempek: No, this was master sergeant in 1951 when I came home.

DePue: Okay, okay. A master sergeant at that time would have—

Pempek: Was top enlisted grade.

DePue: In a company?

Pempek: Well, in a company, the only one that had it would have been the first sergeant, and the platoon sergeants were usually a sergeant first class.

DePue: Okay. Well, we're getting ahead a little bit. Tell me about the specific duties that you would have had in the S-2 section, in the intel [intelligence] section.

Pempek: At that time, it was the Battalion S-2 who were responsible for three items, and that's enemy, weather, and terrain. So you'd take training in those aspects. One of the things that I did was mess around with the field safes. I would change combinations or help get one open that they lost the combination to, all that kind of stuff. You developed a touch for that. In addition to that, map distribution was part of what the S-2 would do. And the weather, why of course you'd get that from the weather forecasters, Air Force, I guess. Then as far as the enemy goes, when you went into combat you'd learn about the enemy through capturing prisoners.

DePue: Does that mean that the S-2 would participate in patrols?

Pempek: That meant that we would do that, that's true. When we went back to Korea—perhaps I should back up. In Hawaii, that's where we did the training, physically and otherwise. Rifle firing in 1949 or early '50 especially. We had really become a proficient organization, but undermanned. We didn't have full strength. I don't think many units did at that time.

DePue: Okay, this is while you're still in Korea you're talking about, being undermanned? Excuse me, still in Hawaii.

Pempek: Right, yeah.

DePue: Okay, when you say undermanned, what exactly do you mean? It just didn't have—

Pempek: I was the intelligence sergeant, which was supposed to be an E7, as a sergeant. And the sergeant major was also. Well when we went to Korea it was staff sergeants, because that's all they had. They weren't promoting any people to that rank. Those people that had that rank were running the officers clubs, mess halls, the NCO clubs, PXs and all that kind of stuff. So when it came time to go to Korea, aha, they were drafted into the Fifth RCT and they became the S-2 sergeant, the sergeant major, and they had the rank when they were in these other positions.

DePue: So they might have been running the PX or the NCO club, and the next thing they are is an intel sergeant?

Pempek: Right, because they had the rank and you had to put them somewhere. Those people that had the best jobs probably ended up with the Headquarters, S-2. Then I immediately became a section leader. Each section in the S-2 section had the driver of the jeep and then the three people, and they would be the ones that would go on patrol and outpost. That's where I had my combat duty with that work. Because I would go with the line company, or we'd be in position with a line company in combat, and then we would be called upon to go out with the patrol to feed back information. I don't think I ever went on a combat patrol with them. We would design the patrol routes, S-2 would, and they'd be assigned to a line company when we were in a defenseless position.

DePue: You talking about when you got to Korea now?

Pempek: Right, yeah. And in Hawaii, we were trained for that pretty well.

DePue: So would you characterize the training you got in Hawaii as being good?

Pempek: Real good, yeah. Except that we had World War II equipment and not too much of it.

DePue: A lot of the stories I read about the condition of the Army at this time was, just as you mention, that it was cadred in so many respects. For example, that a regiment that's supposed to have three battalions maybe would have two battalions. A battalion would be a couple companies short that they wouldn't fill at all. Was that what you saw?

Pempek: Well, we had every battalion because we were assigned to quads and the regimental headquarters, service company, mortar company, and tank company.

But we trained together in Hawaii as a unit. But no, a company, say the Headquarters Company, would have 120 men. We maybe had 100 at max, you know, with the chaplain's assistant, the chaplain and the mess sergeant and stuff like that. But as far as the people assigned to the S-2 section, you're lucky you had the S-2 sergeant and maybe a couple of other people there that would be considered to be… There would be the jeep driver; they always had the jeep driver and a radio operator.

DePue: Find any young ladies in Hawaii while you were there?

Pempek: For some reason or other, they were there, but I didn't know that at that time. You know, I was pretty naïve at that age. There wasn't that much opportunity in Korea, and when I left the States I still had a high school sweetheart, I thought. So I was pretty clean. But there were those. Let me say, the people that we actually had in the unit were people like myself that came into the Army because there was no other avenue for them or they were left-over World War II people that probably weren't the most efficient or weren't exactly professional military trained. There were alcoholics looking for good times who couldn't find a job and so on. So it was interesting that these people finally gelled to form a unit when we got a little older, I guess, another year older. But I can remember this one World War II guy, old Marty Shield. Man, as soon as he got around that booze—and they assigned him to me—but he was a good guy. He was from Brooklyn. But he was drunk all the time in Hawaii. He'd sleep in the shower room. In fact, he even stole the liquor out of the car one time.

DePue: He was a World War II vet?

Pempek: Yeah.

DePue: But you outranked him?

Pempek: Oh yeah, because he got busted more times than he got promoted. He was a real good guy if he stayed away from the bottle. Well, you had that in civilian life. You had good workers at that time; once they hit the bottle they weren't with the poop; they wouldn't show up for two or three days. And these were the same way. An awful good guy. I visited him even when I got back from combat, because he stayed with me through the whole thing. He was in a flop house in Brooklyn and I don't even know if he lived through that.

DePue: Any memories, especially strong memories you have of experiences or incidents while you were in Hawaii?

Pempek: I suppose the fact that Sundays were dry and we still found a way to have beer. They had their local beer and then they had West Coast. And everybody seemed to do that. I can remember another fellow I just met from Decatur. He would visit his brother in Pearl City. I guess he must have been in the Navy or something. And he was, well, this is all after the fact; didn't know him during the time just because of the few people you had in the company. But there were some real

jewels, I'll tell you. Oh my, yeah. I know one time, we went to the beach, there was the first sergeant, and it seemed like those people in that rank area hung out together. We come back to the unit like normal do. By golly the next day or so, I don't know what the time lapse was, we got picked up by the local police and **put in jail** because on the beach, somebody claimed that we stole their billfold out of their car. By the time they got it all cleared up, Mark and I had spent a day in jail in Hawaii. As it turned out, I had money saved and I had no reason to steal money. I had money in a bank in Hawaii because I saved all the money when I went to Korea and I had it transferred there, and I had just made a withdrawal the day before, so apparently that didn't match what they thought that the burglar should be involved in. The end result was it was a buddy of the guy in that car that took the money out of his car, but then we still had to go through that embarrassment. (laughs) So that was one thing.

The other, I guess, was when I spent a couple weeks in Tripler Army Hospital and I watched one of the Mars airplanes burn up in the bay. The Howard Hughes wooden machine that they made, for some reason or another it didn't make it, whatever the heck happened to it. That was something I just kind of remember.

Then they had the USO show there with this group of entertainers and they were singers. They weren't the Ink Spots, but they were something similar to them. It was decent. W got all that free.

DePue: Mills Brothers?

Pempek: . No, they were the colored ones.

DePue: The Mills brothers were…

Pempek: Yeah, they were, yeah

DePue: Let's get you up into middle of 1950 then. June 25, 1950. What was the reaction you had and your buddies had when you found out that the North Koreans had attacked?

Pempek: Difficult. We had shipped a car back to the United States, (laughs) the old Lincoln Zephyr.

DePue: You were thinking that you had just a few months left?

Pempek: Well, yeah, we'd have been rotated back to the States. Of course, as soon as we heard that, well, that all changed. The car stayed in San Francisco for a year, had to pay rent on it, landed up in Spokane, Washington, go down and pick up that heap of junk. (laughs) No battery, no driver's license. You know, it was interesting. But in spite of that, the return: I thought we were pretty well-prepared for that, to go, and I was just kind of excited. I don't know about my buddy because he already went through second world war in Europe, Mark.

DePue: Did you have some doubt whether not the Fifth would be going?

Pempek: Not then, not when they mentioned that, because we were all out doing the firing. In fact, we even fired off the back of the ship going over to get qualified again with different weapons. No, we knew we were going. It was just the idea that, "Oh well, what the heck?" You know? But I think the good thing is we went as a unit. I don't know if I could have handled that, going back as a replacement like some of the people later on.

DePue: Most of the people in the 5th Regiment then, or a lot of people, had been in Korea before, like you?

Pempek: I'd have to say that maybe like 50 percent of those that went back. Maybe that's an exaggeration, I don't know. But the reason I say that is because hindsight, you had to have a year to do to go to Hawaii, otherwise you went to Japan. So all of us that left in '49 had to have a year to do after June or May, whenever it was, okay? So when we got to Hawaii in 1950, it was just that year. So there was a lot of them like me, although I knew a few more people that did get back to the States but they never got to go home. They came as replacements right back to Korea, only they went to the 1st Cav, the 24th Division, 25th Division, 2nd Division, wherever it was. So I met up with one of those persons at one time in the 1st Cav because we were attached to just about anybody there, so it was like winning the lotto. You run into a person that went home, and we didn't go home and it was kind of interesting.

DePue: But when the bottom line came, they just ended up in a different unit, that's all.

Pempek: That's all, yeah. But they went as an individual, you know, and I said, "I don't know if I could have handled that as well." Of course, you wouldn't have any choice. It's just the idea that it happened that way.

DePue: How would you describe, then, the mood of the guys you were with on that ship heading back to Korea?

Pempek: The people that I had with me were for the I & R [Intelligence and Reconnaissance], because it was serious then. I know we got the 2.36 rocket launcher and we'd never had one of those before and didn't know what it was. Because we weren't going to be in combat. All we had was the carbines because we were just supposed to be information and stuff like that. But then after going to Korea we got the bazooka. Well, these are the things we had never fired. But we did throw hand grenades and things of that nature and learned all about that, which helped me out later on when we were in a defensive position.

DePue: Well, if you had to find an adjective or two, were you guys optimistic, cocky?

Pempek: I think that we were kind of cocky, ready to go—those of us didn't have the experience before. Now, those of us—I say us, but those that were probably in a similar situation during the second world war, they probably had a different

disposition, which would have been the company commander and the platoon leaders. In fact, one of the platoon leaders cracked up, and I attribute that because he was probably reminded of what was probably going to happen.

DePue: He cracked up on the ship on the way over?

Pempek: Well, on the ship we had people that were difficult. Now they probably would have locked them up and had the psychiatrist look after them. But at that time, you just learned to live with what you had. The same thing with the unit that I had was more or less castoffs from different units or something of that nature. It was interesting. But no, I think it was kind of like myself anyway was so gung ho. "Wow, look at this!" What were we going to do?

DePue: Do you recall the specific date that you guys landed in Pusan?

Pempek: We actually landed the last day of July, but we didn't get off the ship. I think it was the Second Battalion that unloaded first from one to the other ship. I was on the USS Mann, I think, and we stayed one night in the harbor area. In fact, I even got to go first class on that ship. Man, that was all right. Because they had room on it, and those people that had different jobs, we got transported. But then as soon as we got there, well then all these people come out of the woodwork with the rank and so on.

DePue: When you were on the ship heading to Korea, were you hearing about how the war was going?

Pempek: Oh I think so. I think definitely. But I don't know to what degree because we didn't have anything except what would come through the system on the ship. You don't know half the time whether it was factual or not. But I remember the first time I went over, I had my big radio. Of course I couldn't pick anything up on the darn thing, one of those transoceanic Zenith guys. You had to have a big battery, and when the battery went dead there as no way of getting another battery, there was no replacement. But going the second time, what you took with you, that's what you had to hunch around. We left the duffel bags and everything else, all your personal stuff. I don't know where the heck they went. I guess they went to San Francisco also or something, but we did pick them up somewhere.

DePue: When you actually got to Pusan, were you hearing things about what had happened to the 24th [Infantry] Division and Task Force Smith10?

[10] Task Force Smith was the first U.S. force to see combat in the Korean War. The Task Force was hastily assembled from occupation units then serving in Japan, with the 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment, of the 24th Infantry Division, comprising the bulk of the force. The force of young, and mostly green troops was led by Lieutenanct Colonel Charles B. Smith, commander of the 1st Battalion. The unit entered combat on July 5th, 1950 near Osan, South Korea, and soon encountered North Korean troops, with T-54 tanks in the lead. TF Smith had nothing that could stop the tanks, and the tank column soon breached the thin American line. When Smith reluctantly ordered a fighting withdrawal, many of his green troops panicked, dropped their weapons and fled to the rear. Smith eventually regained control of his force, but not until TF Smith suffered severe casualties

Pempek: Yes. We did hear that, and we also were alerted to the fact that there were airplanes that would come over even as you were unloading or something, but we had air superiority—using that term now. But at the time, it was just Bedcheck Charlie I guess is what it amounted to, because they never did drop a bomb on us. But they wouldn't probably get down that far to Pusan. But then when we got on line, there were sometimes when… But most of the time, we didn't run into that. But that was a frightening thing, because as soon as they said, "Air," well, everybody would scatter and look for a hole to go to. There were no holes. You know, just when you're getting off the ship, you're going to a unit right away by jeep. We transferred, reported to Masong by vehicle because we each had a jeep. Some of the infantry units, they were transported by train even, you know, to Masong, because that was our assembly point.

DePue: Okay, that's just a little bit north of Pusan area, then. No, that's straight—

Pempek: Well, mostly west, yeah. See, that would be around the Nakdong River area, I think.

DePue: And the Nakdong was where the big defense was. Before I get you there—

Pempek: Yeah, that would be the Pusan perimeter.

DePue: Yeah. Before I get you there, what's going through the mind of a twenty year old kid who's been in the Army now for two or three years? You've got some experience under your belt, but now you're hearing stories about hey, the 24th Division, that the Koreans kicked their ass. The division commander was captured.

Pempek: I think what we heard mostly, or at least impressed me most, was the fact that they lost one of their regiments, one of them, and they were saying it was the black regiment.

DePue: The Twenty-fourth?

Pempek: Yeah. And then, of course, we were assigned to the 25th Division when we first got there, and then later the 24th, the 1st Cav everybody, but then we became part of the 24th because we replaced that particular—

DePue: Well, that's a little bit farther down the story.

Pempek: Now, initially, no, I think we were ready but we were reluctant to accept the fact, well, we're here and that rocket launcher's not stopping the tanks, the 2.36. We didn't have the 3.5 then. Some of them then did get them; well, they never had experience firing them. And they did have the recoilless rifles. They had the seventy-six, you know, which was sort of organic or for a line company or a

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– approximately 150 Americans killed, wounded or captured. It was an inglorious baptism of fire for American forces in the Korean War. See *The Korean War: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Stanley Sander, pp 327-330.

weapons company. But anything larger, then they had the sixty millimeter mortar. I became experienced in all of those because we did different things when we had to defend or go home.

DePue: Were you still confident though that the 5th was a good unit, that you guys were going to do well?

Pempek: Sure, oh yeah. I can say that as an individual, until we finally got to where we were going. But I don't know why, it's just that I never had any fear of the enemy. And yet, our first real test was on that defensive position, and then when we made the Sinuiju there, which was a fake attack, we knew we were going to be surrounded because that was part of the scheme. We weren't a large enough force, at least that's what we accepted. So I think that we were maybe a little cocky.

DePue: Your first posting was with the 25th Division, then?

Pempek: Yeah, I'm trying to go over that now. This is when we were on outpost duty, my outfit, and this was when I picked up my—well, it's somewhere from the Masong up this way. They were tied in along that river. I had a map, but that didn't mean nothing because it was all one here or there, and you just knew what was on your left and on your right. But that was interesting. I'm trying to put that together, and I wanted to do that before I made the statements. But in a defensive position, the first OP [Observation Post] we were at, I can recall that we were in with either I or K Company, I don't know which one. We weren't married into them with communications, but we would go down one day, two people would go down, pick up a five-gallon can of water and do a (unintelligible) OP, and then the next day the other two people would go down and pick up C-rations to last us a day or two. And we'd have to go up that doggone hill. We had a bunker but no overhead cover on the bunker. When they finally were overrun at that position, we didn't get the word. So hell, we didn't have no problem. We just stayed there. This other fellow, he—

DePue: In the bunker, you're talking about?

Pempek: Yeah, and we had foxholes here or there.

DePue: And this is right on the front lines, then?

Pempek: Oh yeah, yeah. This is where you have our outpost. Before that, there were all kinds of things we'd observe. I did FO work because we didn't have enough forward observers from the artillery or mortar company to do those jobs. We registered in at certain points and all we'd have to do is call for the concentration to be fired and they would do that. But when they had that big attack, the line companies, they were banging away like crazy but we never did see the enemy. I attribute a part of that to the fact that we weren't firing. But now in the foxhole right down the hill from that—the next day, this is—of course, in between now and then we got strafed by our own planes, but there was enemy in that foxhole. But they were so, I suppose, sparse at that time that there was no opposition from

the enemy. Whatever they did, they did, and then they got out or annihilated because they had a lot of troop losses there.

DePue: You're saying the Americans were so sparse, so spread out at that time? Or the Koreans?

Pempek: Well, the Americans were in the defensive position, so they knew what they were doing; the line company was tied in to platoon, to company, to battalion. But ROK [(soldiers of) Republic of Korea] was only on line with the battalion. Well, the battalion never called us when they gave the order to withdraw. The line company's got the order, so after the fight when it got to the point where they were going to be overrun, hell, they were gone.

DePue: So they withdrew and you stayed there because you didn't know any different?

Pempek: That's right.

DePue: How many were in that foxhole?

Pempek: Well, there was just the four of us.

DePue: And you never saw any enemy during that entire time?

Pempek: Well, we suspected the enemy, yeah. But this is nighttime. This is a nighttime attack. The sergeant major, the one that was in Hawaii, he was the sergeant major but he was the same rank I was. So he had one section and I had another section, and we both ended up, up that same time. So he was supposed to be out here to watch, you know, and sat out there and fell asleep. (laughter) And here I am, I think, "Goddamnit, I don't understand what's happened to him". I'm sure that he didn't get killed or anything. But then one thing led to the other, and that's about when it happened. But I did pick up my own .45 then, because I got it off of a dead person and he must have got it off of an officer or something. Now I'm thinking, well, I wonder why I didn't find that out. You know, I could have probably found out who it belonged to through a serial number. But it was immaterial at that time.

DePue: Well, how did you get out of there?

Pempek: Because we didn't know any better. Next day, the planes start strafing the hell out of us, American planes. We observed them doing that all the time before, you know, first three times is machine gun and after that is napalm. Well, by I guess the fate of God or luck, there was a lieutenant and his radio operator who came up. They were stragglers. They didn't go anywhere either, apparently, and they had the air panel for that day. Rolled it out and the planes quit.

DePue: And is that the time, then, that you guys found out you were totally isolated from the rest?

Pempek: Yeah. Not only that, but when we went to the foxholes, you know, the ones that we had dug, I had hand grenades hanging all over. I couldn't get my ass down, so it was sticking up there. But then the planes, because they're fast or whatever, unless they're firing directly at you where they're more of an angle, the bullets are hitting all over, but none of them hit us. I said, "Wow, what a way to go." So it turned out all right that way, and then the next day in daylight, God almighty, everybody and their brother from the unit was coming up to see what the hell was going on.

DePue: Well, the incident you described here, it sounds like the North Koreans moved through your lines, but then they moved back some time afterwards?

Pempek: Oh yeah, from what I'd seen of it. Because I fired into that one foxhole because the lieutenant said, "Well, there's enemy down there." Well, I didn't know any difference. And of course the enemy was scared, and I had my little old carbine and it probably was 100 yards at the most. All he did was get up out of there and run down the hill. I don't know if anyone else fired. He probably ran too fast for the bullet to catch him.

DePue: So you saw him scooting back north?

Pempek: Going back north, yeah. Or west, whichever way he was going. But that was the only live enemy I'd seen. But the next day, there was a lot of dead around there and stuff like that. But being that we were still there, it become the point of interest.

DePue: That was your baptism of fire then, so to speak?

Pempek: I don't know if that would have been it, but that was one I remember so much, because there was another before or after that. We were sent out with platoons from the line company because we were actually on the move. I'm thinking it was after that whatever-the-heck-it-was. Anyway, so we went down this road here, one part of the platoon on this side, one on this side, and here I am with the radio operator and one other person, and here comes a vehicle down. (makes garbled noises) this kind of stuff, it was an American three-quarter [ton] truck. And all of a sudden, the goddamnedest noise, everybody's firing like crazy. It's a wonder we didn't kill each other, but it was full of the enemy they had recaptured and they had the PX or supplies in it of some sort. But they wiped them out, and they never fired, never killed each other. You know, what I'm saying is the road was here, and they fired. (laughter)

DePue: So you've got this cross fire going, all shooting at this vehicle.

Pempek: Again, this is after that we found this all out because we heard the commotion and so on, but it was interesting.

DePue: Well, it's about this time you start thinking about, "Well, man, luck has something to do with my future".

Pempek: Yeah. I wanted to get back in the headquarters tent instead of out here, and things of that nature. Well, there were times—but I think this is one further north, I don't have to drop out on that one but we, I think it was—and that's why I wanted to look and see when… But we had to go and pick up prisoners too—and of course it was terribly dark out and **rainy**—and all we had through our own minefield. And I said, "Oh God, I don't know about that." And we had that engineer tape. That's supposed to safeguard you as you go through.

DePue: Somebody had the line down so that you could know where the lanes were?

Pempek: Yeah, where the mines were. If you stay on that line, you're all right. But you know, you get a little excited and it's rainy, you can't see, foggy and all that stuff. But we made it through and back. Before, when you come back through the lines you get a problem sometimes too, because they change the password because it could be compromised. This was when I start thinking about all this, "Oh man, what if they do that and here we are trying to get back in". But it turned out it was no problem because they wanted to give up and we just brought them back, that's all.

DePue: Well, that was the question I had. Because to me, you're trying to go out and find an enemy to capture as a POW, and I can't think of a dicier mission to have.

Pempek: Yeah.

DePue: Tell me about a typical mission like that, or this mission if you can remember.

Pempek: They had two types of patrols. One was just for information or (unintelligible) and then you have the combat or ambush. Well, I never went on an ambush. They didn't need any intelligence people on that. They were definitely set up at a road block or some place where they expected the enemy to come through, and they'd just wipe them out. Before, they had the outpost line of resistance and MLR and so forth.

DePue: MLR, main line of resistance?

Pempek: Yeah. And most of the time, that's where we were if we were in a defensive position, with the outpost. Then the outpost line of resistance would be the regimental I&R and they had a track vehicle or two. They would be up there because they're mobile and they could get back quicker. So that would be the first line of warning in a defensive position. On the offense, it was different. And the S-2: all they did was reconnaissance to establish another outpost or another command post. Then if they had the special mission—ours was to go pick up some prisoners because they wanted to give up—I think that came later when it was Chinese. I had that experience, had to pick up a couple of them, and the jeep driver got very excited. It had to be after because this was in North Korea and because that was after the 187th had their air drop. That's when I got that jeep.

DePue: When the 187th had an air drop?

Pempek: Yeah. Well, in Sonch'on where they had that tunnel that they were supposed to have the—

DePue: Yeah, north of Pyongyang.

Pempek: They were too late to save them.

DePue: Well, let's not get into too much detail about that. Just how do you go out and run a patrol that's designed to capture POWs? How do you do that?

Pempek: Okay. If we would go out from the S-2 section, we would be going along with combat troops probably, to capture. The line company would call back to headquarters and say, "We have two people up here who want to give up. Send somebody up to pick up the prisoners." That's when we would go up and do that. Fortunately, none of them were people that wanted to commit suicide. That was the fear that most of us had, because they would disguise a hand grenade or something like this and when you'd go pick them up they'd blow you all up.

DePue: But these are people that had already been captured then?

Pempek: Well, not necessarily, no. They just wanted to give up because they had all kinds of ways. You know, the airplanes would drop the leaflets and they'd give up—safety and this and that. So we didn't know that. They just said, "Go pick up two prisoners at this point here; you've got to go through here," and they'd give you the patrol route. And that's part of what you would do. So it was interesting, yeah.

DePue: When you got them back to the S-2, were you guys responsible for some initial interrogation?

Pempek: No, we didn't do that. If there was something that we were looking for from that person, then they would, because we didn't have the capability of the translators. But then we'd go to regiment and they'd pick them up right from that point, the way I understood it. I don't know because I was just glad to get back and give them to somebody.

DePue: I imagine. During these first couple months, were there Korean troops that were incorporated in with your unit?

Pempek: Definitely, yeah.

DePue: Right from the beginning?

Pempek: Even with their backpacks, that is their A-frames, what they would use for—they were KATUSAs [Korean Augmentation To the United States Army], yes. They became our replacements to fill them out. There was some animosity there that it wasn't going to work, but gee whiz, you had to really give them credit because they didn't get much of anything. You know.

DePue: Did you have KATUSAs assigned to the S-2 section?

Pempek: No.

DePue: To the line companies primarily?

Pempek: Right. What we had would have been an interpreter.

DePue: Okay. Well, tell me, if you have any specific memories, about that first couple weeks while the Pusan perimeter defense was going on.

Pempek: I think there was a little anxiety there because at a particular time, the word got to us, no more withdrawing. You know, no more retreats or whatever they wanted to call them. No more retrograde. They didn't want to use that term. Then it begins to sink in that, hey, this is serious. You know, when you look at the area, well, we didn't go far out here. All we knew was that we had troops up this way from outpost line or whatever, and a few down here. And I have to say, I left out one more important thing in the Masong area and I'll cover that a little later, from that outpost line there.

DePue: Well, why don't you go ahead and talk about that now?

Pempek: I'm sure that's where it was. Anyway, the Navy must have had the ability to fire at targets of opportunity. This was all after it happened. But prior to that, man, we spotted a whole bunch of troop movement out in front of us going from—well, where we were facing, it would be from the ocean side up to—

DePue: Yeah, you're looking west.

Pempek: —in the enemy territory, anyway. They got sent out and we got the word it was a platoon-sized unit. And the Navy opened up on them.

DePue: Were these Americans?

Pempek: (Pause) I don't know why I get emotional now. I never did then. But anyway, it was a mistake, but they wiped out quite a few of them.

DePue: Do you remember, I think it was the 27th Regiment that moved west towards Hadong and pretty much got decimated?

Pempek: Yeah. There was a lot of those things that happened that we would learn about, and then you'd become fearful that it would be the same way. Another time, when we would relieve each other in position. This particular time—I don't remember when—that we relieved the Marines in position. Some of them left their holes before we got there—the way I want to describe it—and then when we got there, there was enemy in the position. It was isolated, but it happened. Of course that was not too easy to take either, because you could immediately get killed.

Another time, when nobody moves at night, if you do, you shoot, in that perimeter. One of our people did that and shot, you might say, a friend because he didn't want to crap in the foxhole, I guess, or whatever it was. But those things happened. Another time—this was in a Chinju incident, when we made our attack to Chinju—some interesting things happened there too. When we were breaking out or made the attack to draw, I guess, one of the North Korean divisions, it worked because it drew them all down and that's when they were planning the breakthrough from the Waegwan area.

DePue: Okay. Where? You said Chinju?

Pempek: Yeah, this was, well, here's—

DePue: I don't know if it's on this map here.

Pempek: No, it's right down here. Here's Masong, and this is Chinju. That's all enemy territory. That was our assignment. We were going to go as a regiment and we were going to attack the enemy through this area here, and that was to draw them down because the actual plan was for the—I know now, but at the time I didn't know that—was because the breakthrough was going to be through the Waegwan area out of the Nakdong to join up with the landing at Inchon.

DePue: Yeah, and that was fifteenth September, so were you guys attacking about the same timeframe then?

Pempek: Yeah. That was the strategy as I read about it now. But we knew that we were going to be surrounded, so when we went, part of the experience I had or others was that we weren't assigned organic to any division. So we didn't have a direct supply route for ammunition or food. It has to come through whoever we were attached to. Well, it was all right as long as the 24th or the 25th Division considers us part of it, but sometimes it took a little longer to get something. So when we made that Chinju deal there, they said, "Well, we've got to have two more loads of ammunition. You stay back there and bring it up to us; join us wherever we're at." And of course I did that with the 2 1/2 tons (trucks)full of ammunition. But it was the nighttime movement again, and as we were moving, hell, I didn't know where we were going and we were just following the railroad tracks with the two trucks full of ammo. All of a sudden from my right front—**goddamn**—light from somebody with a great big flare, you know, waving it and coming down. It looked like it must have been a mile away. I don't know how far it was. But they got to us. We stopped the trucks because we were following the railroad track. Well, the railroad track was bombed out.

DePue: A bridge?

Pempek: Yeah. And as a result, this guy here—and he was deaf or dumb too because he couldn't speak—but he actually saved us from...

DePue: Another American GI?

Pempek: No, no, it was a Korean. You know, because we're in friendly Korea. But when I think back at it, you know, another five yards—because at night, all you could find, well, we had nothing in front of us. Otherwise, you followed the cat eyes with the vehicle. But they specifically said, "Well, you know your way around." Yeah, I know my way around all right. But it worked anyway because then we took the trail. There were two ways to go. One was down and around, and that's where everybody else went. But you couldn't tell that unless you were out in front of the vehicle with a flashlight, I guess. So that was interesting. So then when we'd first seen the cat eyes [a setting for night driving on jeeps] whenever we got to where we were going, wow, that was a welcome sight. We knew we would get back. (laughter) So I thought that was an experience too. In that situation when they accomplished what they were going to do, we were on the road and ready to come back out. That's when the I & R usually takes a trail and plan the next CP [Command Post]. And we were on our way back there. Well, something delayed us. My buddy was in the P&A platoon, Pioneer and Ammunition; he was the platoon sergeant riding the tank. If you stayed on the road, no problem. Well, they didn't. They moved off the road. And we normally would have done that with the jeep. Well, they did it with the tank and blew the tank up.

DePue: When they got off the road?

Pempek: Well, because somebody else wanted to go through with a vehicle. You know how the armor goes through, and they were just—their mission was to clear the minefield, the P&A. What kind of gadgets they would use probably, I don't know. But that's when that tank got off too far while, I would imagine, allowing some of the other troops to go through because we were still in… But they had already mined all the roads back out the way that we came in.

DePue: Okay. So the road was there because the P&A platoon had already cleared it and knew there were no mines there?

Pempek: Not going out, though. Coming in, you know, everything was clear. It was just going back out, they apparently missed some or the enemy had already mined them. Because I don't know how far down it was, but it was on the way back when we were pulling back from that area. That's where the organization got the Presidential Unit Citation.

DePue: Was that the whole 5th Regiment or just that particular…?

Pempek: Just the Third Battalion.

DePue: Okay. What was your impression of the North Korean soldiers that you were fighting at that time?

Pempek: You know, we thought that, at least our experience—of course you learn. And this, again, I could talk all day long on little things like this. Burp gun versus the BAR [Browning Automatic Rifle]. You know, all of them have a different sound. And so finally, they wouldn't let the Americans use the burp guns anymore

because then you'd think they were the enemy. Now of course the BAR was easy, it's just a thump, thump, thump, not very rapid, and you knew that they didn't have that yet. But those other things. It's just something when you were sitting at the OP and it seems like it was forever. but hell, all of these things happened just in a matter of a few days, and you get to experience all of those different things. I thought the North Korean, they were, I guess, portrayed as evil demons or something. And of course the experience they had, they had moving vehicles, they had their SPs, self-propelled guns on their tank chassis or whatever the heck it was, and had some experiences with that too. Because there, it's just bang and whoom, it's already by you, you know, when you hear that one go. They would wipe out the trees and then you get the fragments. What other kind of story was it on that defense position there? Well anyway, it turned out that when we got back there, then we ended up, I think going with the 1st Cav. They moved us from down here to up in the neck there by Waegwan where in the heck ever Waegwan is.

DePue: Yeah. Well, somewhere around Taegu, I would think.

Pempek: Yeah, a little south.

DePue: Okay. Yeah, I know that you guys were a little south. There it is, right there.

Pempek: There we go, yeah. Okay, that was interesting. Before that, on the OP—

DePue: That would have been late August, early September as I read the unit's history.

Pempek: Yeah, that was Taegu, yeah. But you know, all of that up to that time—it just seemed like forever—was in position, defensive. And it really wasn't. You know, one month, that's about all. August, the month of August.

DePue: Do you remember the North Koreans—I think the 6th Division where you guys were, that 6th North Korean Division—

Pempek: Was it the 6th? I don't know why I had some 3rd in mind or something.

DePue: Well, it could have been, but I know the 6th was way down in the south part on the western side of the perimeter.

Pempek: Yeah, well, this is the one down here. Now, when we got up to Waegwan, I think then we were—maybe I'm mixed up with when I went to North Korea with 1stt Cav. Whatever it was, they had the 5th. It had to be the Cav because they had a 5th Regiment also, and they got all the credit. Here we were the ones that actually broke out, the 5th Regimental Combat Team. We were with the 1st Cav and they had a 5th Regiment. But they saturated, what they call saturation bombing, of Waegwan. And wherever it was, I was on high ground somewhere. God almighty, look out! The next day, nothing, but like a checkerboard. That whole area was just full of holes where the bombs dropped from our B-29s or whatever they sent over.

DePue: Had you heard anything about a potential landing up north at Inchon?

Pempek: No.

DePue: When did you find out about that?

Pempek: It probably wouldn't have been much more after that. I don't know, I have no idea.

DePue: Because those two operations were obviously in conjunction with each other.

Pempek: Oh yeah. But we didn't know. All we heard was, "You're going to be home for Christmas."

DePue: Okay, let's talk then about the landing at Inchon on the fifteenth. I'm sure that the 1st Cav and you guys are launching north straight towards Inchon as much as you can so there'd be a link up between the 7th Infantry Division coming down from Inchon and the 1st Cav elements south of Inchon—Suwon is where they basically end up.

Pempek: No, I think Suwon had air and Osan had air too.

DePue: That would have been about twenty-six September, so you've got about a ten-day period there between the Inchon landing and you guys driving north and you linking up. I'm curious about what happened after that. Was it kind of a mopping up operation that the 5th Regimental Combat Team was going through?

Pempek: I think that what we did was probably take up defensive positions or we were in reserve or something because they always had a reserve element, and one regiment would be in reserve. And I think after while, that was probably our situation. And as a result, why then we got a chance to get a haircut, take a bath, and stuff like that.

DePue: You don't recall any operations against little pockets of guerillas or isolated North Korean troops at that time?

Pempek: I'm sure there was; it's just that it might have been at a time when the 3rd Battalion was in reserve and the 2nd Battalion would do it. It might have been the opposite way. I don't know. Because this is where, now I'm saying that the 3rd Battalion is the one that did the Chinju deal, and the other ones were in reserve or still stayed in defensive positions or something.

DePue: Okay.

Pempek: Used the whole regiment or something. On the way up there, I'm trying to say if—because that's when I met this buddy in the 1st Cav. It had to be after Waegwan because then it was sort of like in an assembly area. There was different things going on, and I ran into this guy.

DePue: Well, it's after this time-frame you get to late September, early October, and then everything starts to really move again, it sounds like. Because by the end of October, you guys were way, way north. Do you recall much in terms of combat operations between the breakout after Inchon and moving north?

Pempek: We seemed to be tooling right along. We had no opposition the way I recall it, not that much. Just the weather was a factor.

DePue: When you say tooling along, are you guys foot-bound or are you in trucks?

Pempek: No, we moved rather rapidly so it was very little foot movement. It would have been convoys. Whenever you'd let up, then you'd pull out your security for defensive, but not as much as you would if you were in a defensive position. Just security. Because the next day you're moving again. It seemed like the word would come out that these people were doing this and these people were doing that and these are up there and you hear that. Well at the time, our objective was going to be Antung, Sinuiju, and I never realized that until later but that was where the big air base was, the enemy air base.

DePue: Okay, Sinuiju is well north of Pyongyang.

Pempek: But it's nowhere near as far north as these ROK scouts and then the Marines.

DePue: Yeah. Well this one, Sinuiju, would have been right on the Yalu River.

Pempek: Yalu River, yeah.

DePue: Okay.

Pempek: Yeah, we were about twenty miles from that, I guess, when we were told to hold operations and pull back. Well, the reason being, they were coming down here and they'd had us all cut off.

DePue: Well, we're getting a little bit ahead of the story. Looking at the maps here—I should mention we're looking at a series of West Point Atlas and Military History. They've got the 24th, and you guys were assigned to the 24th by this time? According to the records, that's what…

Pempek: Yeah. Somewhere along the line, it was the 24th because we started with the 25th.

DePue: Okay. I used the wrong term, because you weren't assigned to them, were you? You were attached to them.

Pempek: Yeah. Whatever terminology they would use at that time, I don't know either. But we didn't become a part of their division for quite some time.

DePue: Just kind of filling in a couple blanks here, the reason that you guys were attached to the 24th is because the 34th Regiment had been decimated.

Pempek: Yeah. That's why we became, you know, if they had to have their third regiment, well then we were available depending on what the mission was. Because they would probably let up on their mission as a division versus, what was it, the 1st Cav, which was full. And the 2nd, yeah. I don't know that.

DePue: In fact, the 34th I think would have been decimated during that initial trek down to Pusan.

Pempek: We heard about that, and that's why we figured that we were just going to be there all the time, but we weren't. After we pulled out or whenever they attached us to them, well, then we were with the 1st Cav on that move up. And then I think even then, I think—I don't know.

DePue: Well, I got the impression though reading the timeline—and what very little I've read so far about the 5th—that when you passed the 38th Parallel at least you were with the 24th. When you were moving north towards the Yalu, you were with the 24th. Does that sound incorrect to you?

Pempek: I'm just trying to figure that out, because like I mentioned...

DePue: No, at your level it probably doesn't mean that much.

Pempek: No, it didn't mean that much because we were independent anyway, and somebody else always had been there, just like when we went through Seoul, you know, everybody and their brother was there. But I do remember that we were to marry up with the 187th because they jumped into the enemy territory, and then that was part of what our mission would have been, and that was…Kunuri—I think—wasn't that 1st Cav that had that incident there where they murdered those people in the tunnel, the friendly people?

DePue: I don't know if it was the 1st Cav. I know what you're talking about; that was a horrendous incident.

Pempek: Anyway...

DePue: A lot of those would've been prisoners that were captured at the very early stages of the Pusan perimeter that were then slaughtered by the North Koreans as they were moving north, I believe.

You mentioned something in passing. Your unit had to go through Seoul on the way north, is that what you said?

Pempek: Yeah.

DePue: Having seen Seoul in 1948, what was your impression driving through it then?

Pempek: The way you do it, you don't really… (pause) I can remember the train station from occupation, but we didn't go to town very much. But it just seemed like

there wasn't too much there. I don't know what route they took. But I do remember them blowing bridges on, that would have been on a retreat again, across the—

DePue: Han River probably.

Pempek: —Han. And—

DePue: Was the town pretty well decimated when you drove through it north?

Pempek: I would say that it was just like always—it wasn't much of a place. The area was slum areas and stuff like that, so I don't know as far as—if you had to compare it to now, because they've got big buildings. But at that time, it was just very poverty-like, anyway, during occupation. The biggest vehicle or the most prominent one was the converted jeeps that they had for taxi cabs during occupation—delivery jeeps or something like that. I don't remember too much. All I know is that certain times prior to crossing the 38th that we set up a defensive line somewhere until they made up their mind that we were going to go across. I don't know how that fit in, because at that time we were just moving all the time and never knew when you were going to do whatever you were going to do.

DePue: Yeah. I'm sure moving that much, it'd all kind of end up being a blur for a while.

Pempek: Until you run into something, yeah. And sometimes the other units—I know when the Triple Nickel got wiped out just about, that one battery, I don't even remember that. They couldn't get back through. Well, we had already made that retreat, and they wiped them out.

DePue: This is while you were there? Because I knew that the Triple Nickel, the 555th Field Artillery Battalion was in a very serious engagement right at the end of the war in 1953. But this is much earlier?

Pempek: Oh yeah. They even fired direct fire with the artillery pieces a few times, the 105s, yeah.

DePue: Okay, we're getting a little bit ahead in the story, I think.

Pempek: Okay, get me back on track here.

DePue: For most of the month of October, as you talked about, you're pretty much road-bound and you're moving north, continually north. Of course, at this time MacArthur has made the decision that he's going to get to the Yalu River. You already mentioned: the word that was coming down was, where were you going to be at Christmas?

Pempek: Back home, yeah.

DePue: What was the mood of the troops by then?

Pempek: (sighs) We did get a big Thanksgiving dinner too, somewhere along the line. We had turkey and everything. I don't know, I'd have to put that together, where the heck we were at that time. Then all of a sudden things changed.

DePue: I'm going to move a couple maps forward here. I think this might be a good place to just kind of end the story right before the Chinese come in, in a big way. I've got the 24th Division right here. Now, you said that you guys actually moved north towards Sinuiju for—

Pempek: Sinuiji is what I call it.

DePue: Sinuiji, which is right on the coast and the confluence of the Yalu River, so right across the other side of the river would be China. Did you—

Pempek: That I do know, that was our objective, the 5th RCT; that was our objective.

DePue: Okay, how close did you guys get to that?

Pempek: I'm saying we were quite a ways. I'm saying we probably didn't get much further than here. I don't know what the scale is here.

DePue: But then you were pulled back?

Pempek: Yes.

DePue: Okay. Now the timeline here—let me see if I can get this right—is...

Pempek: It was during the Chosin Reservoir incident because we heard about that, you know, and that's the reason that we were going to have to, because the Chinese were coming across like crazy.

DePue: But before that, in early November, late October there was a limited offensive that the Chinese had or a counter-offensive against some South Korean units and I believe also the 1st Cav in the beginning of November. The Americans got a bloody nose out of the thing, but I know shortly after that MacArthur still insisted to continue the offensive north. Do you remember that first encounter or hearing? As the S-2 section, were you hearing things about other units finding Chinese troops?

Pempek: I think so. Yeah, in fact, I think this is where I had the experience of picking some of them up. I don't know.

DePue: This would have been before the major Chinese offensive though.

Pempek: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Because I'm thinking of that incident we had there where the 187th dropped in. I'm almost sure that they were Chinese that we picked up. And when I get to that one, (overlapping dialogue; unintelligible)—

DePue: Well, I think we're—

Pempek: It's something, I never forget the incident but then I can't… I know it was after that because I had that jeep.

DePue: Okay. Well, let's set the stage here a little bit.

Pempek: Sure.

DePue: Pyongyang is the capital of North Korea.

Pempek: I remember going through there.

DePue: North of that was the location where the 187th had two air drops. Let's go back to that map.

Pempek: Sonch'on.

DePue: And the two airdrops were, say the names here. Sonch'on?

Pempek: Sonch'on.

DePue: And Sonch'on. I'll let you pick it up from there, then.

Pempek: Okay. Now?

DePue: Yeah.

Pempek: Goodness, sakes alive. Well anyway, when we got there, lo and behold there was all kinds of equipment laying around from the air drop. One of the pieces was this jeep that they didn't take with them. So I said, "Well, I wouldn't mind having that." So we picked it up and that had become my personal jeep—we didn't have to walk anymore—called a headquarters ten and a half. The shortcoming is some little things. It didn't have a gas cap, we used a rag and pushed it down in there to keep the gas in there. And finally there was probably a few more things, but they let us keep it. I can remember then when we went to pick up those prisoners, they said, "There's a couple people that want to give up here." "Okay, we'll go get them." Old Whitmer from Pennsylvania—he was the driver—and I went with another person. I don't know who it was. And Old Whitmer got all excited there, dogonit, and he had to light a cigarette. When he lit that cigarette, the jeep started burning because it didn't have no gas cap on. These Chinese put sand on it and put the fire out, so we drove them back home and they were just happy to give up. I'm almost certain they were Chinese, but I don't know what to base that on.

DePue: Was it the difference in the uniform that they had?

Pempek: I thought they had on their padded uniforms and stuff. Of course, that could have been—but that's what made me think that they were. But whatever.

DePue: All of the accounts that I read at this time, there is lots of those kinds of incidents that are occurring. But I get the impression that there is a lot of denial going up at the higher levels that China was going to come in at a big level. Was that your impression as well?

Pempek: Well some of it is hindsight, but at the time we were saying, "Hell, these aren't North Koreans!" Of course the line companies are meeting them more often, and then when you put that together with what they were experiencing up this way. Of course that Reservoir thing, that was supposedly all Koreans at one time, is the way I understood it at that time. You know, there were no Chinese in that, the Chosin. But it turned out to be that the Chosin was a big incident for the Chinese to come and wipe them out. Now, where in the heck is the Chosin?

DePue: Yeah, that's right over here. But the—

Pempek: Hagu-ri.

DePue: The attacks at the Chosin would have occurred at the same time [as] the Chinese main offensive on your side, so this is well before the main Chinese offensive kicked off.

Pempek: Oh yeah.

DePue: Okay. And maybe this is a good time, because we've been at this right at two hours here, George.

Pempek: Wow. I may never come back now. (laughter)

DePue: I hope I didn't scare you.

Pempek: Well, no. I dreaded the idea of getting started because I'm not prepared. I have things that would help me refresh my memory. In fact, I dug this out, only it was too late this morning to help me as far as putting things in perspective, and names and so on.

DePue: Well, this would be an opportunity for both of us to do some more homework on this, because I'm sure for you, the next couple months, from the end of November through about May or so of 1951, had to be one of the most gut-wrenching experiences of your entire life.

Pempek: Yeah. And I attribute most of it, you know, as they say, the 5th was on combat for all the time they were over there except for when they had the prison deal. I don't know what happened after. All I know is I didn't care if I didn't have anything.

When they said it was my turn to go home, I didn't care. They could keep the .45, they could keep everything that everyone else was trying to bring home. You know? I didn't care about that. I didn't go on R&R, and as a result I got to come home sooner. They started that program. So I have some… But the one down in the Navy is the one that kind of gets me because you know, nowadays I don't know if we're still on or not.

DePue: Yeah, we are.

Pempek: —that would be considered to be quite an incident. I ran into one of the fellows that was a survivor of that not too long ago, maybe a couple, three years ago in a reunion. And he remembers it much… At least then I know I wasn't dreaming when it happened. But there was no way to stop it.

DePue: Yeah. Unfortunately, that's the nature of combat.

Pempek: Sure, sure. Yeah. And then I know that I even directed air strikes from a C-47; they fired out the hatch side door. All I did was give them an avenue of fire that way because I was on outpost and there was nobody else. I don't know what the hell it was, it was opportunity for them to strafe or they wanted to do something that was in the defensive position. I think that was way down south too because all they had to do was fire that way and they were firing at the enemy. Crazy things happened like that.

DePue: Let's finish this up, because you had mentioned that you remember Thanksgiving of 1950. Do you remember anything specific about that particular meal?

Pempek: I couldn't believe at that point in time, that we had that. My goodness. I said, "Wow, that was like being home."

DePue: What did you have? What was on the menu?

Pempek: We had turkey, yeah. We had turkey.

DePue: All the trimmings?

Pempek: Well, I would imagine whatever was there would be a trimming, but then I don't know. Then we'd start getting rations of beer and stuff like that somewhere along the line. But it was too damn cold to drink it. Some of it would freeze. That's the part we're going to get into next talk. But it was kind of like rejoicing, you know, we don't have much further to go. Of course, some of the things that were disappointing, at least to me, was MacArthur's removal and so on.

DePue: So the irony of all of this, the tragedy of all this is just a couple days after this high, everybody thinking the war is close to being done and a Thanksgiving dinner and celebrating—

Pempek: Close to being annihilated again. (laughs)

DePue: Yeah. So let's pick that up for part two. Thank you very much, George.

(end of interview #1)

Interview with George Pempek
VRK-A-L-2009-011.02
Interview # 2: May 14, 2009
Interviewer: Mark DePue

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A Note to the Reader

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DePue: Today is May 14, 2009. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, and I'm here today with George Pempek. Good afternoon, George.

Pempek: Good afternoon, Mark.

DePue: This is our second interview. We did one a couple, three weeks ago about your experiences growing up in Wisconsin, early days in the Army, spending some time in the occupation army of Korea in 1948- '49 I believe, a little bit of time in Hawaii. Then of course your unit, the 5th Regimental Combat Team [RCT], came back in late July of 1950, back into South Korea at the time when the Pusan perimeter was just beginning to form. We have talked in that first interview all the way through the movement north and up to the Yalu River. I believe we finished off last time in our interview with your talk about the Thanksgiving dinner. Of course it was just a few days after the Thanksgiving dinner, that things went south

in a lot of different ways, I would recall. You guys were on the offensive at that time. MacArthur had been talking about finishing the war by the end of December, and then you had Thanksgiving dinner. Just a couple days later, the Chinese came into the war in a huge way. Do you recall where your unit was in general?

Pempek: We were on the western side of North Korea, and our objective was Sinuiji. We were probably twenty miles from that on the eastern portion.

DePue: Are you talking about close to the Yellow Sea then?

Pempek: Yes. Because we never did get up to the Yalu. Our objective, as I understood it, was Antung. At the time, I didn't realize it, but that was actually where they had the big air base—the North Koreans and the Chinese or whoever controlled it. So it was kind of a surprise to me that that was it. But as we got to a certain point, the word came out that we were to do the retrograde and don't waste any time getting out of there because of the possibility of being enveloped from the east where the main push was.

DePue: The official records said that your unit, or at least the 24th Infantry Division which I believe you guys were attached to at the time, was near Chongju and in that vicinity at least. But you say the initial word that you got, under no pressure, you guys were just ordered to withdraw?

Pempek: This is the way we felt it, because we weren't actually engaged with the enemy that I recall at the time.

DePue: Okay. I've got an awful lot of questions about—let's call it a retreat from the north. I would assume somewhere in that process, you did get to see some serious combat. Would that be correct?

Pempek: I think our unit probably did not get the brunt of that. It went on the other battalions probably, because I think the artillery took a pounding somewhere along the line, which would have been the Triple Nickel and whatever support we had. We had already preceded them, as my recollection is, through that area where that took place.

DePue: Just a quick reference again on the organization, as I mentioned, the records, you guys were attached to the 24th Infantry Division but otherwise organized as a separate regimental combat team. I know that the 2nd Division got pummeled during this whole exercise, and I think the 25th got beat up in a serious way, as well as the 1st Cav, on that retreat back as well.

Pempek: The 7th Division also.

DePue: Yeah, the 7th Division was with the (Tenth) X Corps on the—

Pempek: With the Marines.

DePue: —Chosin Reservoir area. Of course they did a seaward evacuation, which is one of the rare events in American military history. As you guys were moving south, can you describe for us the Chinese tactics?

Pempek: I think the thing that I would recall most was the way they did that, with the banzai [war cry] and the bugles they would sound off with and probably frighten you psychologically as far as the enemy itself. And then the weather was a big factor. It was extremely cold. Even the fuel oil would freeze—not necessarily the oil but the moisture in it. Being in an area where it wasn't combat, the stoves wouldn't work, whatever they had in a CP [Command Post] tent. They had to bring the oil inside. I can remember that. We would start the vehicles every so often so that they would be ready for a quick evacuation or a quick withdrawal, otherwise they wouldn't start, you know, many of them.

DePue: Did your unit pretty much stay on the road network on the way back?

Pempek: I would say at least which I with, because that was part of what we did in that situation, I&R, [Intelligence and Reconnaissance] we would reconnoiter for the next command post and road guides and things of that nature.

DePue: I need to refresh my own memory. Your specific assignment was with the Headquarters Company?

Pempek: 3rd Battalion. I was in the I&R at that time, which was controlled by the S-2 [Intelligence] officer. We had two sections, and we were mostly for reconnoiter at that time.

DePue: Did the unit come back with all of its equipment?

Pempek: What we had. We seemed to have everything that we needed from our battalion command post, yes.

DePue: What was the mood of the troops as they were withdrawing? I mean, you went all the way from the Chinju area; fifteen days later you guys were at the 38th Parallel. Maybe you got there a lot quicker than that, but I know at the 38th Parallel, on the fifteenth of December thereabouts, they were reestablishing the line. So what was the mood of the troops on the way back?

Pempek: I would say we were concerned about being cut off, because that's the way we would read whatever orders they would give to withdraw, because it was inconvenient times. It wasn't you travel all night and then in the morning you sleep or something like that. But that would be the way they would prepare. But I don't remember at that time whether they were worried about night movement versus daytime movement, because we still had air superiority as far as I knew. So I don't recall. I know we moved at night a lot but I wouldn't say that it was any more than daytime. So that seemed to happen so fast, that's all we were doing. Picking up and moving, picking up and moving.

DePue: That can't be good for morale for the troops though. Did you feel defeated?

Pempek: I did not as an individual. Some of us were wondering, "What the heck is going on?" you know, because there's no enemy firing at us as we were told to come back in that area, so why are we in such a big hurry to get going? Why make life miserable by no sleep, just keep going, keep going?

DePue: Did you feel like you wanted to, well, let's stop and fight?

Pempek: As an individual, I would say I didn't have any feeling whatsoever. Just do what we had to do to keep moving or where are we going? When are we going to stop this for a line? Because at different times they would have different phase lines, but there didn't seem to be, at least at the level I was at.

DePue: Would you describe the situation as very confusing, then?

Pempek: To a degree I would say so, yes. Wondering what's going to happen next based on the fact, and then when something did happen, it was with huge force that we had to move. Yeah.

DePue: Okay. You kind of suggested this already. Did you see any Chinese or North Korean troops on this way south?

Pempek: I'm trying to say that probably not. Most of them we had confronted were when we were going north, and it was unbelievable that it was Chinese, you might say. When we had to pick up a prisoner or two—this was part of what we did on the way north—why, surprising to some people that they were Chinese. They probably said, "Well, there's not Chinese; they're not supposed to be here. It should be North Koreans or something." But they were definitely noticeable.

DePue: Do you remember passing through Pyongyang? Did the unit pass through Pyongyang?

Pempek: We passed through going up. I remember that real well. But coming back, I don't recall. It must have been as we were coming through at night because I don't recall. But going north, it appeared like we spent a little time going through the villages and stuff like that.

DePue: Were there a lot of refugees on the road heading south at the same time?

Pempek: There were, yes. And wherever there was a terrain feature, mostly the rivers— I don't remember which one. I'm thinking that it would have been when we got back to Seoul that they had to blow up the bridge with all the civilians on it, which was difficult, because they were trying to come south also. But there wasn't enough roadway for Americans plus that, and at a particular time when everybody was out, they would blow it whether somebody was on it or not.

DePue: Yeah. There's a very poignant picture, one of the most famous, I think, from the Korean War. I believe it's the Han River—the incident you're talking about—and all the refugees climbing through the rubble of the downed bridge that's half in the river; they're just going from the rafters and the beams trying to escape from the north.

Pempek: And I couldn't even recall who these people were, whether they were North Koreans, because they were civilians in most cases, and being in the north you would just think that they wouldn't be anxious to come back. That's sort of after the fact. But during the time, it didn't make any difference who they were.

DePue: Well, I read an account that there were something like three million refugees on the move at that time; that's a mind boggling number considering what the size of the country was.

Pempek: Yeah, because we were in one small area and they were just continuous, you know? And they didn't have too much of anything, what they could carry. The women always had a little something on top of their head that was their personal belongings and how they carried it, and children and stuff like that. If you got close to it, it was depressing. And if it was from a distance, it didn't bother you that much.

DePue: Did they come and ask for food or beg for provisions or supplies?

Pempek: I don't recall there being time for that when actually things had happened that way.

DePue: I think it probably is important also that we kind of get a frame of reference of who you are at this time. How old were you when this is going on?

Pempek: Well, in 1950 I was twenty years old.

DePue: And what was your rank at that time?

Pempek: I probably was a sergeant first class.

DePue: Okay, which would be, I guess, an E6 today?

Pempek: Right.

DePue: Okay. So you'd moved up pretty quickly. You'd been in the Army about three years by that time, something like that?

Pempek: Yes.

DePue: Okay, but still, an awfully young guy.

Pempek: Right, but probably experienced from the fact that I was on occupation duty. Koreans meant something to me, and I got to mature because I was a low NCO or a buck sergeant in, of course, whatever took place in between. And going in Korea, I don't know when I got promoted or if it made any difference. But there was a TO&E [Table of Organization and Equipment] position grade for that squad leader or section leader.

DePue: And you had five-plus months of combat experience when this is going on.

Pempek: Right.

DePue: Which counts for an incredible amount. Historians have talked about this, and the term that I have read and the term that I understood that the soldiers themselves used to describe what was going on was "the big bug out." Have you heard that?

Pempek: It was a term used a lot, and of course most of the people in leadership didn't want to use that term because it would be depressing, you might say. But it was just something that was happening. We'd say bug out, and somebody in a different position would say, "Well, that's not true. We're just retrograde or whatever." We'd kind of make fun of the fact that we're retreating. You know, they didn't want to use that term.

DePue: So you did hear that term being used?

Pempek: Oh yes, oh yeah.

DePue: I know that, again, some of the other units involved with this—the 2nd ID [Infantry Division], the 25th, the 1st Cav, certainly the ROK divisions—the accounts would suggest that it was near panic or it was panic in terms of how these units were reacting to being attacked by the Chinese.

Pempek: This was what we heard. I never experienced that same feeling, maybe because I had my own transportation—the jeep that belonged to me because it was a cast-off from the Sunch'on air drop—and I didn't have to walk. But the actual infantry depended on transportation furnished by a transportation company—service company in our case—for their means of getting back. I would imagine they were very excited or wondering, what's next, is there going to be room for me and things of that nature. But in our case, we didn't have that as long as we had that vehicle; otherwise, we would have been up for grabs too. Where am I going to ride, what do I go with? Well, at that time we would just go ahead and plan a route back and where the next CP was going to be, and this is where you go and this is where you go. Of course, I was just a little Indian and would do the reconnoitering with the lieutenant or whoever was going, the party that did the establishing of the new CP. But I don't think those people really were that depressed, you might say. They already figured, at least I'm thinking, "Well, heck, this was just the same thing we were doing in the beginning so what's different?" Until you get in a close combat situation, which we weren't.

DePue: From what you're describing, this is my guess. Were you guys kind of in advance of this move, that the fighting was north of you generally?

Pempek: The way I understand it, it was north and east, and as a result there was no pressure immediately in front of us. But on the way back—and I can be mixed up once in a while—we would relieve in position a lot of times. One unit would be in position, and as we were coming we'd take their place and then they would be relieved and move back, and sort of leapfrogging backwards like you do in the offensive situation, until they got down below the parallel and it was decided that this was going to be one of the—whatever they call that, killer line or something. They had a word for every phase line or something like that, but I don't recall what they were.

DePue: Okay. What was the vehicle you had? Was it a jeep?

Pempek: It was just a jeep, yes, a quarter-ton.

DePue: Did it have any armament whatsoever on it?

Pempek: No, it was just bare; windshields were down and things of that nature. It was sort of holding together, that was all. It wasn't authorized, but then that didn't make any difference. You got the fuel. We had room for all of us; before, it was somebody would have to go with somebody else because the S-2 officer would usually have one of the jeeps. Well, there was four of us and that's about all you can get on a jeep. Then the S-2 sergeant, that's a couple of more people. So the true I&R people would either be on a vehicle or they would have to wait for transportation with a deuce-and-a-half[11] or whatever they had.

DePue: As far as you know, did all of the people, in your company at least, have wheeled vehicles for transportation? I mean, nobody was walking out?

Pempek: No, I don't think so. They all had means of transportation.

DePue: Where you were—maybe you didn't see this much—but do you have a sense of how much naval artillery support or general artillery support or aerial support you guys were getting while you were on the way south?

Pempek: It didn't appear to me like it was lacking anything, but then I don't recall that we received a whole lot of that. No, not from the aerial or through Pyongyang. I don't think we experienced a whole lot. I don't recall where we really ended up getting clobbered, that is the artillery got pretty well beat up somewhere along that.

DePue: You'd mentioned before the Triple Nickel, that's the 555th Field Artillery Battalion.

[11]Deuce-and-a-half was the common term for a 2 ½ ton truck.

Pempek: Yeah, because the 105, which was our organic Fifth RCT Battalion of support….??

DePue: Okay, 105 millimeter howitzers?

Pempek: Right.

DePue: Okay. One final question during this phase. I would suspect there was an awful lot of confusion. You described yourself, why do we keep moving south? We haven't seen anybody. We haven't felt anything yet. But tell me about the cold.

Pempek: I come from a part of the country that was cold, but there was nothing like that because you had no way of getting warm. Sometimes you would be damp. I know one time, I was a road guy at an intersection and I actually froze to the ground with the boots that we had on, because you know, you stand there for a period of time and it just turns cold that way. But I don't recall that I was frightened of the cold. It's just that as long as you're moving, I didn't have any problem with it. But it was in the thirties, and the biggest thing is nothing worked like it should if you allowed it to get cold. I recall the vehicles, because we had one, it would be just like an alarm clock. They would say, "Well, in an hour, somebody go start it up," or something like that. Well, then you worry about, if you're going to use up all your fuel where am I going to get some more fuel? Little things like that, comfort items, you might say, for infantry. Because most of the time, they just waited to be picked up, ride on the tank, ride on the service company deuce-and-a-half or whatever was available. But the Headquarters Company, they had transportation for the commo [team], they had transportation for P&A, the pioneer and ammunition group. A deuce-and-a-half would be assigned to them, and they would be platoon, but light platoons.

DePue: Would the guys in the line companies—and you were in 3rd Battalion you said, right—would the guys in the line company have transportation on the way south?

Pempek: They had to rely on our service company or another truck unit, I would say from division, because it took more.

DePue: So they were catching rides wherever they could.

Pempek: That's right, whatever support unit we were with, they would furnish. You'd have to wait for that, I don't know if they called them companies or platoons or what, but a group of trucks would come for transportation.

DePue: On the way south, when you settled down for the night did you have a tent to sleep in?

Pempek: If one wanted to put one up, you had it. But most of the time, they just improvised with sleeping bag on the ground. And I recall that most of them wouldn't even take their clothes off. You know, they just jumped in there with boots and all on, and as a result they didn't experience really thawing out, you know, they'd freeze.

But then when you get up, well, that's all you had, what you had, your sleeping bag.

DePue: That sounds like an awfully cold night, night after night.

Pempek: Well, this was the thing. But I don't know what period of time it took us to go all the way back down. But that was, I think in my case, Man, when are we going to get a break from this, you know? Sometimes, we took over the Korean villages. Of course they had the setup where they feed the wood into there and it's underground heating.

DePue: Yeah, the ondol heating they called it, I think.

Pempek: Yeah, and that was **really** something. Man, would we pile into that hooch there and get warm. Wow.

DePue: Yeah. I know in my experience, they had charcoal heaters and they would pipe the hot air underneath the floor so it would emanate from the floor. Is that what you're talking about?

Pempek: Yeah, and the way I see it, it was just like this table here, and underneath a heater was here, and then channels would be almost out of dirt or something mud-like. Instead of piping, it would be just made by mud and that would go under the floor or whatever the heck it was.

DePue: Would you be kicking villagers out of these places or are these abandoned villages in many cases?

Pempek: That would be up to somebody else. I mean, there was no Koreans there when we got there, not in the villages. I don't know whether we'd run them all out or if they were told to evacuate or stay away or whatever. But those that would stay around, they were determined to be in their own place until they died, you might say that. But we couldn't allow that.

DePue: Describe the roads that you were on, and what was on either side of the roads if you got off the road.

Pempek: I don't know if I can. That's what they were, just more like trails made into roads. And of course they were hazardous because when you were going like we were, you couldn't pass. If you did and something happens, well, you've clogged up the whole movement. And of course there were some people that would almost bump the line and try to get through in an officer jeep or something like that, and you'd have to move aside. And the people, they were walking a lot of times too, but that wasn't myself that was doing the walking.

DePue: So this is dirt roads that you're on most of the time?

Pempek: Yeah. Oh yes, there was no paved roads that I remember.

DePue: Or gravel even or anything, any kind of improved roads?

Pempek: No. And the improvement was usually when they had a terrain feature that caused a slowdown, so then the engineers, if you had them, would have to widen it or fill in the ditch or make a stream or river passable, or you'd go through. But at that time it was cold enough where you could get over. I felt that the real cold was later on in January, and February too.

DePue: When you guys were slowing down a little bit?

Pempek: Yeah.

DePue: Okay. Pretty mountainous where you were most of that way?

Pempek: I think that you could say that it was. And it isn't a mountain like you're used to when you're in the States, like Mount Hood or Pike's Peak or something like that. They weren't that tall. But it was terrain features that were difficult for movement with a vehicle, and walking, it slows you down. You get pooped out all the time, that's all I know.

DePue: Okay. We already mentioned that the line kind of stabilized and then the Americans apparently, from what I've read, were moving faster than the Chinese were because they were almost entirely on foot. But the line stabilized around the fifteenth of December right near the 38th Parallel, which is where this whole thing kind of started in the first place. You guys were a little bit farther in; at least the 24th is shown a little bit farther in, part of (Ninth) IX Corps, I believe, at the time. But on that line of attack, you're north of Seoul and north of Uijongbu, so they're going to have to come straight through you because that's the main route of advance into South Korea, I would think.

Pempek: That's probably where we were on line and we would replace each other, and so on, until you got back to another line, MLR: main line of resistance. The rivers were—there's two of them. There's one, I don't know what the one north of the Han was but there was one up there too somewhere.

DePue: Is that the Imjin?

Pempek: Could be Imjin.

DePue: I think it's the Imjin River. Okay. This is about the time [General]Walton Walker died, on the twenty-third of December. Do you remember that?

Pempek: I heard about that; that was kind of depressing. We figured that that was going to wipe us out then. We didn't have that leader. I don't know, but that was the general feeling I guess you'd say. Somebody that you're used to in something like that.

DePue: So that was hard to take.

Pempek: I would say if you had time to think about it, yeah. What do we do now? I think from then on there were a lot of command changes from that point on.

DePue: The twenty-third of December is just a couple days before Christmas. Any memories about Christmas of 1950?

Pempek: I don't seem to have any, no. I know there was no Santa Claus though. (both laugh)

DePue: It was a lot different than Thanksgiving I would guess.

Pempek: Yes. Because even Thanksgiving, I remember we had a good meal. But I thought we had something similar on Christmastime or somewhere in that vicinity.

DePue: Well, if my timeline is correct, you'd been in the line, basically fairly stable for about a week or two by that time. Do you remember General [Matthew] Ridgway coming in?

Pempek: Yes, most of us did, because he had those hand grenades on his carrying straps and all that kind of stuff. We were wondering how that was going to work out, based on being a frontline type person rather than from an office.

DePue: Now you're talking about Ridgway's reputation of having hand grenades strung on his own gear.

Pempek: Yes.

DePue: Was that something he expected everybody to adopt?

Pempek: I don't know. (laughs) I know that we were impressed at that time with the fact that the commanders, the corps, and everybody were visiting each other, and looking at positions, and there were a lot of generals. Here we were, the 5th RCT, and a full colonel is the most we ever got to see. When somebody from a division level would come down, that would be another staff officer or something. Operations. Seldom the commander. Then all of a sudden corps commanders are there and wanted to know what we did or didn't do. But they were visiting.

DePue: So what you're describing is, after Ridgway got in, you saw a lot more of the senior leadership on the frontline.

Pempek: Yes, I would say. And I can't put a timeframe. But it appeared like the stability of that line and what they were supposed to be able to do, and they were digging in with unlimited support from artillery and air or whatever it was going to take. But they didn't have any increased armor. They've already determined way back that it wasn't armor country or terrain. But the artillery, I remember that . The FOs [Forward Observers] were the ones that were scarce. I would imagine at that time too, whether they couldn't assign them to every group or whatever, but I FOd quite a bit in the defensive position when we had outposts and so on.

DePue: FO refers to forward observers, which are the field artillery guys who are actually...

Pempek: Could be artillery, could have been heavy mortars, could have been air, because they would tie in with each other. Before that we didn't have much TAC [Tactical Air Command] air people with us, with the observers. They were at a higher level and would go out wherever they thought they had the need for the air attack or something.

DePue: For yourself and the guys you were with, did you feel an uptick in morale once you got settled into that line and maybe after Ridgway came into the picture?

Pempek: Being that you mention that, I would say that it definitely made a difference. We thought we were in a line that wasn't going to have to move. But then that happened. We did move back after that. And then we went back, the way I recall.

DePue: Yeah. Well, as I understand it, it took the Chinese some time to catch up to the Americans as you guys were retreating, but that they re-launched their offensive around the first of January '51. Do you recall that?

Pempek: Yes.

DePue: Were you guys in the line at that time?

Pempek: I think we were, yeah. They rotate. Whatever battalion was reserved, 1st, 2d, or 3rd, why, they switched it around. But yeah, we were a little tense then.

DePue: Did you see some combat during that phase?

Pempek: Oh yes, I can recall that, because of the nature of what we were to do, rather than what we normally would do. We almost became infantrymen.

DePue: Well, for the novice who doesn't understand military structure, you're in an infantry regiment but in the I&R [Intelligence and Reconnaissance] platoon at the headquarters company. So you're describing a scenario where you'd have to be like the regular rifleman?

Pempek: Because if it was in a defensive position then we would establish outposts. And they would have an outpost line of resistance and that was usually manned by the regimental I&R, which they had armor—a couple of light tanks. And of course that was the warning through the OPLR [outpost line of resistance]. So they would withdraw and then it would be the MLR would take over. Well, if we were on line at that time, our OP [outpost] would be with one of the line companies at the MLR,—and then when the OPLR would withdraw, well, then we were the frontlines.

DePue: The OPLR.

Pempek: Yeah, that's the outpost line of resistance.

DePue: How far forward would that typically be from the main line of resistance?

Pempek: I have no idea. And they weren't all the way across either. They were at strategic intersections or mostly for mobility type units that warn of an enemy column led by tanks or fast moving. Once that was detected, they would call in the artillery and whatever else it would take to stop that. If it was a real full attack, then the enemy infantry would come up on the line wherever it is. But otherwise it was mostly from strategic points that they would warn.

DePue: Were you one of the people then that was going forward to these OPLR positions?

Pempek: No. We wouldn't. That was done by the regimental I&R; they had more equipment. All we had was people. They had tanks or light tanks that they could withdraw with, or vehicles with mounted fifties [50 caliber weapons] on them or something, thirties on them. Well, we didn't have that; all we had was foot mobility. When we were on outposts we just would walk up, just a line company.

DePue: They were up there primarily for observation purposes?

Pempek: Right.

DePue: And to maybe give the enemy a bloody nose before they retreated to the main line?

Pempek: Yeah. We weren't actually combat. We were there just for listening and observation. And as a result we were in a position to actually FO [forward observe]. They would pass on the concentrations and we could call for one. It would wipe out that intersection, as an example, where the regimental I&R was and the enemy is coming that way. So that was pre-established. Then they'd call artillery and we would be able to observe that and if there was an FO in a position to take it over, they'd do it. But if they weren't, then we would be able to—at least I was involved with FOing quite a bit.

DePue: And most of your FOing was either to the mortars or artillery?

Pempek: Right, yeah.

DePue: Did you see much air support at this phase?

Pempek: I don't recall. But I know it was there. Oh, a few times, even though they weren't doing what we thought they were going to do, the psychological effect of the jets screaming in down the frontlines like, oh man, nobody can get through that. But I don't know how long that feeling took.

DePue: Well, again I think the Chinese offensive began about the first of January and from what I read, again Seoul fell or changed hands again about the fourth or the fifth of January. That's not very much time between that.

Pempek: Short period.

DePue: So you guys must have been on the move again.

Pempek: I don't remember exactly how or where we were going. But they had phase lines and at that level, well, you just went where they told you to go. Whether you were going to stay there or not was the thing that you were anxious to know. Are we going to dig in or shall I take a chance of not digging in. I can recall further north when they opened up with their SPs, [self-propelled ammunition] the flight trajectory from vehicle or tank type thing, why, man, it was like **bing bang** and it was at you. I really got scared a few times then. I just thought we were wiped out because they were right close to the frontlines where we were.

DePue: This is enemy fire coming in?

Pempek: Right.

DePue: You said SP.

Pempek: Well, self-propelled, yeah self-propelled weapon, yeah. They had—I don't know the caliber but it was probably similar to a seventy-six or something like that.

DePue: That the Chinese had.

Pempek: Well, I don't know if it was Chinese, North Koreans or whoever. Whoever was out there, whatever enemy it was, it was there. This may have been later even, then. Because I don't recall. I do recall though a few times that people were bayoneted in their sleeping bags, because they didn't have security or nothing like that. But it was just something that was incidental. It's not all over, but it didn't take long for the word to get out, hey, don't do that. Don't get in that sleeping bag without somebody having security around you because they'll get you. So you made sure that somebody was awake. They were so cold, they didn't care what the heck happened.

DePue: I imagine some people might be thinking that what you had was a solid line of trenches like in World War I. What was the frontline? What did it actually look like?

Pempek: That's what they were supposed to be. But when you're making a movement, whether they were successful in getting everybody to dig in, a deep hole, well, you couldn't do that in the frozen terrain. So you're just using natural terrain features for security. And if we were told we're going to be here for a while, then it was up to somebody to dig in. Or if you didn't dig in, well, you're just—I don't know if they're going to shoot you if you...

DePue: But there's no continuous line that stretched across the country then. It's a series of strong points?

Pempek: Oh I would say they had that, but I didn't notice it from where we were.

DePue: OK. I know this part of the country almost all of the road networks would have been heading straight toward Seoul. Did you guys pass through Seoul on your way south again?

Pempek: Well, I thought we did. I don't know for sure. I thought we did.

DePue: You have any memories? You already talked about that one bridge that collapsed or the bridge that you had to blow with the...

Pempek: Because that was in daytime. I don't know what happened at night. I know we blew up a lot of our own supplies too, because we could hear the big explosions and whatever they stockpiled, especially along this line I think. Why, they would blow them along with the bridges or whatever the heck was there.

DePue: Did it make sense that you're still moving south?

Pempek: I couldn't answer that one because nothing made sense at a particular time. Then you begin to wonder if we're going to be back down to Pusan again or something of that nature for the whole thing. But I think somewhere along the line it was evident that—at least I seem to remember that the Chinese were running out of—their supply lines were too long and the Air Force was able to really wipe them out if they had good weather. It made us think, wow, we got it made now. With the fact that they were talking about millions of them [Chinese]. That was frightening. Because we didn't have that same manpower. Not that we needed it.

DePue: Well, the reports now, of course, are that it's much lower than millions of Chinese we're talking about. But that's all part of the morale and the psychology of warfare at that time. The line moved quite a way south, all the way down to...

Pempek: Pyeongtaek.

DePue: South of Osan area. Pyeongtaek. And like you said, I know even at the senior leadership level there was serious talk about, well, we have to go all the way back to Pusan perimeter again. But it finally did stabilize there about the end of January. Mid to late January. Maybe fifty, eighty miles south of Seoul. Somewhere about fifty I guess. Where am I in my timeline here? Did you guys get replacements during all this?

Pempek: I don't know how they came about, but I do know that my buddy got down here, Chinju area. Got half his hind end blown off. So he went to Japan and he came back to the unit somewhere around that way because he brought me a cigarette lighter made in Japan out of aluminum or something like that. So that would have been after Christmas sometime. When they come back through the pipeline, just

using him as a reference, well, you weren't necessarily assigned to the unit that you left. And he wasn't, but he managed to find his way back there. And then of course they took him. But there were two people for that particular platoon at that time. So I don't know how they resolved that. But I was far from them. I had my own little world to worry about. And the replacements—for awhile there we were getting a lot of Koreans because there wasn't… I don't know if it was then or when. Then of course the integration took place somewhere in there too, because we didn't have blacks with us in our outfit for a long time that I can recall. I don't know when but evidently somewhere along the line that happened.

DePue: Okay. Since you mentioned it, let's talk about both of those categories. I know you talked a little bit about some of the Korean soldiers before. But what was your impression of these Korean troops that suddenly showed up? And you're in the midst of withdrawal or...

Pempek: Initially my feeling was, well that's good, we got somebody to do some of the labor, manual stuff. But none of them were assigned to our I&R. But the other people, why, they were mostly civilians, KATUSAs at one time. After that, they became a little more trained I suppose. Or they had what we called chiggy bearers. They were just civilians that were willing to help or unwilling to help. In other words they carry the five-gallon water can so that we didn't have to carry it, or the extra rations or something of that nature, just for resupply. They were welcome that way. But it all depended on the individual and what experience they had. I had a lot of feeling for them, where some of the other people were just angry at Koreans, period. And I was impressed with the fact, well, gee whiz, they're human beings just like you and I, so treat them that way. But that wasn't my worry, because we didn't have them but...

DePue: Did the Republic of Korea, the ROK units have a bad reputation among your buddies?

Pempek: I don't know how to answer that because my experience with them close up was after the war when I went back for the third time. But prior to that, it was just the ROK unit that we thought wasn't worth their salt because they were overrun but they were the ones, supposedly whenever they would mention somebody bugging out, it was always the Korean unit one would think. But it wasn't. It was just a combination. So I think for the most part I would say that we welcomed them, if for nothing else than their ability to speak Korean and every once in a while you had somebody that could speak English along with them that made it a lot easier.

DePue: Did you know any Korean at that time?

Pempek: Just the necessary, stop, hello, goodbye and don't do this or whatever. I can't recall.

DePue: How about the integration of the black troops? How was that received?

Pempek: Again, with my small unit, we didn't receive too many of them, but it appeared to go smoothly. I don't think we had any problem with it, but I don't think many of them came to the headquarters. They probably went to the line companies.

DePue: This was going on when you guys were in this very difficult stage of repelling Chinese attacks and moving back and forth across the middle of the country?

Pempek: I would say that it started at that time because they had that one regiment that was predominantly black I believe. And they didn't last long.

DePue: That was during Pusan perimeter phase.

Pempek: Right.

DePue: Did you see any incidents yourself where there were some examples of discrimination or prejudice or feelings that were coming out when the blacks showed up?

Pempek: No, I recall most of the tragedies just of our own people not doing what they're supposed to do and as a result, they suffered. But whether it was because of a racial agenda, I didn't have any personal experience. I know we had Spanish or Puerto Ricans or Cubans or something like the Hawaiians. It was a real mixture in the Fifth RCT at one time. As a result, I know I had a person with—they were very willing to do, you just had to tell them what to do.

DePue: You referred though, there were some tragedies that you saw and experienced. Can you share some of those?

Pempek: Well, as an example, when we were on line, and I would imagine the order was given, no movement, no this or that. Of course somebody did, and friendly forces shot him. And all they did with the person that shot him, they moved him to another company, but nothing made of it like that. But it happens. And other times some of the people would take advantage of the—what would you say? — the fact that we were in numbers and civilians, you were there to be used by us if we wanted to do that. If they had something we wanted, they would take it. And there were incidents of fraternization. That's a kind word for some things that came out after we were in position for a while, because they seemed to have to satisfy the urge for female companionship. And it took place. I sometimes wondered what happened to these guys, because we had a couple in our company. They'd go into town. It would be some people that you wouldn't even think would do that. So I don't know what the military did to them, but all of a sudden they were gone.

DePue: So they left the unit and you just don't know under what circumstances?

Pempek: Well, I would imagine they were disciplined and put in for rape or something like that when the word got back.

DePue: Okay. What was your impression of the Chinese soldier now that you had seen them or at least...?

Pempek: In the beginning, I know we had to pick them up some places; that's when they weren't supposed to be there yet. But they weren't willing fighters at that time. They seemed to think well—I mean that was my impression. They wanted to surrender. Otherwise we probably wouldn't have gotten them as a prisoner. I would imagine they expected better treatment. I think we treated them better, I don't know, than we did the North Koreans. Because I never was at the—except in the front where they were. But the Koreans they treated terrible when we took prisoners.

DePue: The Americans did or the South Koreans or both?

Pempek: Well, I'm talking about our American forces when we took North Korean prisoners. We were treating them like supposedly they treated us. Strip them down, search them, and just sit there until we get ready to take you someplace else. The Chinese, I don't recall that. One time in May there, my goodness, they had more prisoners than we had troops: 1,200 prisoners in one day.

DePue: Was this in your battalion area?

Pempek: Yeah.

DePue: Wow. Yeah, and what, 100 or 200 people in the company?

Pempek: Right, yeah. Over 1,200 Chinese surrendered, 1,200 and some, I don't know. I didn't know it at the time, but that's what happened.

DePue: What was your impression looking at these Chinese prisoners then?

Pempek: To me they were just very humble and scared and whatever the heck it was, like anyone else that was in that situation. I can't answer. I can't say that anyone that I took or had come up with was looking to kill me or looking to booby-trap or something of that nature. Which is the word that goes out: don't do this, don't do that, check this and all that kind of stuff. Well, I felt like they were just a person scared and ready to give up now. When they had a lot of civilians, when they were involved, they would try to infiltrate—that was the word—why, then you treated the civilians kind of rough, because you thought maybe some of them were the enemy coming to infiltrate, retreat with them or however you want to describe it.

DePue: Especially North Koreans that had thrown off their uniforms.

Pempek: Yes.

DePue: Any particular incidents that occurred to you in that respect dealing with guerrillas or...

Pempek: No, I couldn't say that, because we didn't interrogate. All we did was get them back and they took them from that point.

DePue: OK. Again by about the end of January the American forces, the UN forces, were quite a way south of Seoul along this line that starts from Osan that goes over to the east coast of the country. And it was about the same time as I have read, about the twenty-fifth of November or thereafter, that the Army went back on offensive again.

Pempek: It wouldn't have been November.

DePue: Did I say November?

Pempek: I thought you did. Well, anyway, January, February or somewhere in there.

DePue: It was twenty-fifth of January I think, that officially, according to the records, that the Army went back on the offensive. Operation Roundup. I didn't find much about that. That was February fifth. But the two bigger ones are Operation Killer and Operation Ripper. Do you remember?

Pempek: Killer yeah, I remember that one. But I don't know. What was the other one you said?

DePue: Ripper. Killer was...

Pempek: Oh yeah I heard that one too.

DePue: Killer would have started about February twenty-second.

Pempek: We were happy again I guess, the fact that we were going forward. But I don't know when it was they started replacements or talking about going on R&R [rest and relaxation] and stuff like that. I never did go. But it must have been a little later, because I never did go on R&R to Japan. But that was a big factor too. I think that was maybe after Killer. I don't know.

DePue: Well, you guys would have been there about six or seven months, in extended combat practically the entire time. World War II studies, that the senior leaders would have known at that time, were saying about 180 days and you need to rotate these folks out so they can get some rest and reorient themselves again. About that stage what was your thought? That you were going to be there for the duration of the war? For a year? Or what?

Pempek: No. I thought that we were going to do something to retake the whole thing. That was my attitude or feeling. That we were going to go all the way again.

DePue: All the way to the Yalu.

Pempek: Yeah, because we had the upper hand.

DePue: So morale was bumping up about that time?

Pempek: I would say mine was anyway. Other people probably were getting tired of it. Depends on what situation you were in and what you may have experienced. But I never experienced anything really that tragic except getting strafed and stuff like that, but that was all over with then.

DePue: When did you guys start hearing that you were going to be rotated out after a particular period of time?

Pempek: I'm trying to put that together too, because I know I didn't. I think it came down to, well, if you don't go on R&R you can go home sooner or something, I don't know why, but I never went. As a result I left the last part of May.

DePue: Why did you not go on R&R?

Pempek: I don't know even if I was offered R&R. (laughs)I think the line companies probably got the first wrap. But then some of our people did too. Which it should have been.

DePue: So you guys were on the offensive again. You're starting to move north. April eleventh is another important date in the big picture of things because April eleventh is the day that Truman relieved MacArthur. What was your reaction to that?

Pempek: As an individual, and there were several others, we thought that was really bad. We couldn't figure out why they did that, because he was an established figure, or something like that. I don't know. But as far as I was concerned, I would have been wondering well, what are we going to do now, are we going to go more, are we going to stay here, or defense, or give it up or whatever. But that didn't even affect, except that he was a famous individual. I don't think.

DePue: There wasn't any thought or resentment among the troops that he was the one who was responsible for getting up into North Korea and then getting overrun by the Chinese? Sticking his neck way out? The Army sticking its neck way out, and that was his fault for it?

Pempek: The people that I associated with, I didn't feel that, no. No, others may have, but I didn't.

DePue: But you were in the middle of an offensive operation at that time too I would guess, is that right?

Pempek: I would say so. But then I don't know what that was supposed to lead up to. Initially they said we're going up to the parallel again or something of that nature. But whether that materialized or not I don't know.

DePue: Okay. This is when the war is really seesawing back and forth. And you guys, by the middle or late April, had reoccupied, so were you involved with that?

Pempek: Yes. Oh yeah.

DePue: Do you recall any images of going back through Seoul yet one more time?

Pempek: I don't know if we went to Seoul itself or whatever. But it was, I suppose a feeling of being a little more permanent. I don't know. Or successful.

DePue: Well, the next thing I'm leading up to here is the major Chinese spring offensive which began—where'd my date go?—about the twenty-second of April where they have a huge launch against the UN forces again. Do you recall the new offensive that the Chinese launched about that time?

Pempek: I don't know how it affected me individually but I recall that they were out to do something, yeah.

DePue: I know that because the 6th ROK Division broke under the pressure—ROK was on the right flank of the 24th—so you guys started to move back just to what they would say "refuse the flank," you know, move the flank and put it in a different angle. But no specific memories about any of that?

Pempek: Not that it made any difference, because like you say, that was something back and forth, back and forth or whatever. But no I can't say.

DePue: Well, I know that for all soldiers in these kinds of scenarios these things—the incidents and the dates—all blur together for you. Are there any particular incidents that really stick out in your mind during this phase?

Pempek: No, I can't say that there is. No, because that's about the way it ended up, because the timeframe was… I know at one time when we got situated they started training. And I said oh, man, what's this all going to be. I wasn't in for that.

DePue: Your unit was pulled out to do training?

Pempek: Well, they did that, yeah, once we had a particular time. They said that you're going to have to do a little of this and a little of that or whatever. Almost like garrison but not quite. I can remember that I'd have to do a little training. Well, apparently we were getting a lot of replacements or something, I don't know what the deal was there.

DePue: Roughly the time that would have been - a month in spring.

Pempek: Yeah, the weather was better at least when that happened.

DePue: So this is about that timeframe it sounds like. So the Communists begin their offensive on the twenty-second of April or thereabouts. The UN forces do their counteroffensive one month later, late May. Again, any memories of any of that?

Pempek: The only thing I know then is when it was time for me to rotate back. I didn't care what I had to do (laughs) to comply, because a lot of people were trying to take war booty with them. I said no, they can have everything. I had the forty-five that was mine. I didn't want anything to delay me. I wanted to go. So I'm ready.

DePue: Tell me about why you were eligible to be rotated back. How did they figure that out?

Pempek: By the amount of time you spent there. I thought it was supposed to be something like nine months or a point for this and a point for that. I don't know how it was. But when it was my turn, why, I don't know if there was any options or anything like that. If there were, the only option I would have selected, I want to go back home now.

DePue: Yeah, I think it was three points and maybe four points if you were in direct combat. And I would think you would have been considered in direct combat for that whole timeframe.

Pempek: Somehow along the line I thought I had nine points accumulated or something. I don't know what that meant. But somehow nine comes up.

DePue: What this really illustrates, George, is that people in your end of the food chain, (both laugh) you're just trying to survive day by day and you don't have time to really worry or argue about such things I would imagine.

Pempek: No. I think I began to wonder then, "Now what the heck am I going to do when I do go back?" I had a car in San Francisco. And thinking about well, let's see, where am I going to go back to. I ended up going back to Seattle, but that came later. But I also was promoted during that period to master sergeant.

DePue: Wow, you're moving right up then.

Pempek: Yeah.

DePue: Do you remember roughly the date that you were rotated back?

Pempek: I'm sure it would have been the latter part of May sometime.

DePue: And trace from the frontlines to back in the States. Where did you go?

Pempek: I have no idea. I have no idea.

DePue: That's all a fog as well?

Pempek: Right. Yeah. Whether it made any difference where we left from, something of that nature.

DePue: Did you come back on ship?

Pempek: Oh yes.

DePue: Stop by in Japan on the way?

Pempek: I'm sure we did, yes. I remember the third tour more than I do this one. When I came back.

DePue: That was quite a few years later though, wasn't it?

Pempek: That was, yeah. Then it was airplane. Otherwise I thought I was in the Navy. Spent so much time on a ship from States to Korea, Korea to Hawaii, and then Hawaii to Korea.

DePue: Well, you were back in the States when a couple things happened. They started peace talks in July. What was your thought? Now the line is right in the middle of the country, basically where the war started. What was your thought hearing about peace talks? That sounded like, Okay, we're going to settle for this line just being in the middle of the country again.

Pempek: I don't know how or if I did. I was kind of concerned about where am I going to go myself. And of course that was interesting because of the way they reported, where you got the news firsthand, and all that stuff, and who was in it and who wasn't, and what they're doing. Where did I want to go when I got back? So I was kind of interested. I ended up in Akron, Ohio as adviser with the reserves. So I had to think about where am I going to stay and live and this and that, because I was living in a hotel. I didn't mind that a bit, but I suppose that's what occupied me most. Now what am I going to do? They got girls over here? (DePue laughs) Golly, here I am, a sergeant, and I'm doing nothing, what am I going to do? But I had a brother that was in Germany. That was a thought that I had. How am I going to get with him?

DePue: When was your tour up?

Pempek: It ended one year later. Let's see. I had five years. So it would have been '8, '9, '50, '51, '52, February of '52. Well, I was going to get out. But I decided well, let's see. What should I do? So I reenlisted and then went to Europe right away. I was in Europe in 1952. Occupation. Or '53, yeah.

DePue: So you were in Europe when the war ended then, as well.

Pempek: Oh yes.

DePue: Any memories about the war ending with the armistice, not a treaty, an armistice, in July of 1953?

Pempek: Gee, that didn't really sink in. What's the difference? War is over with.

DePue: Did it bother you that it ended right where it began, that it didn't end with occupation of North Korea?

Pempek: I think as an individual it did because I was wondering what the heck, why did we let that happen, why didn't we do something about making it a little more permanent or secure? It was sort of disappointing that we had to settle for that.

DePue: I want to take you back to some general questions, your experiences in Korea. Did you manage to stay in touch with your family during this time?

Pempek: There was mail. I don't recall, but I would get a letter, probably more from my brother in Germany. We were kind of close. But yeah I had mail.

DePue: I've forgotten from the first interview, but did you have any sweetheart back home to be writing to?

Pempek: Well, I had one girl but I didn't think I was eligible to have any girls at all. (laughs) No appearance, no future, whatever. But apparently this one gal—and she did write me a few times, even after she got married. So I missed my chance there. From then on I didn't do too much. But even now I think about that, how that turned out, rather than coming back to her or something of that nature.

DePue: Yeah. Tell us a little bit about the food. Did you get hot meals on a fairly regular basis?

Pempek: I don't recall much about the hot meals at all. But then I suppose we did when we were in reserve. Then we got to eat regularly. Otherwise it seemed like we lived off of C rations, even in the very end.

DePue: What was your favorite C ration meal?

Pempek: Well, I'd have to probably say the beans and weenies were about the favorite, yeah.

DePue: What was the one that you hated to open up?

Pempek: Ham and lima beans.

DePue: (laughing) Doesn't sound appealing to me either.

Pempek: But the fact that some of them would change one way or the other.

DePue: How often did you guys get a chance to get a shower or change clothes?

Pempek: I was thinking about that. I do have one picture when we were in the Pusan perimeter that we apparently got in reserve, because I was able to clean my weapon, live in a pup tent, and probably got a shower and a haircut or something. I often wondered how often. (laughs) I don't know.

DePue: If you remember that particular incident, it doesn't sound like you were getting a lot of showers.

Pempek: No. I remember one time I fell in a honey well, whatever, and I didn't get a chance to bathe either. That was when we were on the offensive. I didn't have many friends going through the burned-out village. Figured well that's not too bad, just step in there. Whoosh. Went down into the toilet area of one of the villages.

DePue: Yeah, I can imagine why you weren't popular for a couple days.

Pempek: Well, you didn't have much to change to. But there was a pond or something around there I remember. It was cold. Got to clean off a little bit.

DePue: Do you recall any instances? Had entertainers or USO shows, anything like that, that made its way up to the frontlines?

Pempek: Well, I'm trying to think of that. I think that they came over there, but I don't know how they did that, with units or whatever. Because I know when I was in Hawaii it was Eddie Peabody and, not Durante, but the other comedian. And then when I was in Korea, I think it would have been—hmm (pause)—well anyway, there was a troupe. It had to be. It might have been there when I was at the third tour of duty, I don't know. But I remember Bob Hope and somebody like that. They were there in the Seoul area. I'm trying to figure out what the heck was I doing. There was the Andrews Sisters or something like that.

DePue: This would have been during the war? Or afterwards?

Pempek: Well, it had to have been during the war because—after the war, it could have been then too. I don't know.

DePue: How much time did the unit actually spend in the frontlines versus in the rear someplace in the rotational cycle?

Pempek: Well, it seems like we were always involved in some sort of a security situation. But when you got to be in the reserve battalion, that was fine. And even if you were on line there was always a reserve company. But I was in the CP [Command Post] area all the time so it didn't make a whole lot of difference. It doesn't seem like we got involved or did anything different. Except we may have had the opportunity to have hot C rations or something like that rather than just what you carried with you.

DePue: What would you say is the worst experience, the worst memory you have from that year in Korea?

Pempek: Well, the one time in particular, I was pretty worried about not making it when this SP [self-propelled] got real close and they were firing point-blank, direct fire from that. And there was no place to go, we hadn't dug in yet. I said "well shucks." There's a rock over there, I'll just sort of get behind it. Just the vitals, the heart, anyplace else, maybe I got a chance to survive. But that scared the heck out of me. And then when they were firing it was in a wooded area besides. When the projectile would hit a tree or something, then you got fragmentation. Those things were kind of scary because there was no defense against that. There were other times too. I wondered when I'd go out on patrol once in a while, now what the hell am I doing here, now how am I going to do this or that or what if this happens. Finally you get engrossed in what you're supposed to do and it just disappears; you just go ahead and do that and it ends up being okay.

DePue: You do what you're trained to do.

Pempek: Yeah.

DePue: Did you have any direct contact with the enemy in any of these patrols?

Pempek: I would say we did. The first time would have been when I was with the one unit. We were on the road and troops on this side and this side. It was just along for reporting back. A vehicle came down that road there and it was full of Koreans—not full of them, probably two of them—and they opened up on that whole little vehicle. I think it was a three quarter ton American vehicle. And of course they were firing. I said "well how in heavens did we ever get through there without killing our own people," because with the crossfire, when the vehicle comes, troops on this side and troops on this side, they fired at the vehicle, and they wiped them out, but nobody else got hurt that I know of. Of course we kept on going after that. The next day or whenever the heck it was they found out it was North Koreans; they had goodies in the three-quarter-ton but they got on the wrong road.

DePue: Was this on the way north the first time?

Pempek: That was.

DePue: How about the best memory you had? Or is there something you would classify as a really good memory of the war?

Pempek: Oh, I just look back at some of the incidents. I know one time with living on the land, from the people, getting some of their food, a tube of eggs or something of that nature. And appreciating some fresh food. But as far as what was good and what wasn't, I couldn't really… Go from day to day. Even mail call didn't mean that much. I suppose when we got beer rations, if you wanted to explain that or talk about that. The British would have hard liquor, and if you had something that

they wanted, you'd get a bottle of that with a weapon, burp gun or something. I didn't, but then other people around you, they had the opportunity to make that trade. And then I'd get a nip of the booze, something of that nature. The crazy old little bitty tracked vehicle that they have, I forgot what they called them, the British, probably wouldn't hold more than a jeep. But they'd come tooling along the road and bouncing around like a doggone kangaroo. And they seemed (laughs) to be happy all the time. I don't know. Just some of the things.

But some of the more anxious moments would have been when there was a large force, and you hear the bugles going. Of course, everybody knew what that meant: they're on the attack ready to come. You get ready for them. But I don't know how you get ready for them except wait for it to happen. If they don't come to your position, good. If they do, fine.

DePue: It had to be unnerving to hear that. Did you have anybody you were especially close to?

Pempek: Well, this one person, yeah, we ended up coming over together and ended up going back together.

DePue: What was his name?

Pempek: Mock, M-o-c-k. Hudman Mock from Georgia.

DePue: He was in the...

Pempek: He was in the P&A. He was a platoon sergeant of the Pioneer and Ammunition Headquarters Company.

DePue: So you were both in headquarters company. He was in one section, you were in another. What was it about the two of you that drew you together?

Pempek: Well, we came from Fort Meade, Maryland where we took firefighting training. We got assigned to Marietta, Pennsylvania in the beginning, and then we went to Korea at the same time. Well, we wore our welcome out in Marietta. Then it's Korea and we stayed in Korea and then went to Hawaii together. And back to Korea together. Then we came back to the States almost together. And only then we got separated. So I guess that would be why. He was a World War II veteran in addition.

DePue: Did you manage to stay in touch with him after you got back?

Pempek: We still do. I'm still in touch with him.

DePue: Where's he now?

Pempek: He's in Mount Vernon, Georgia and I visited there. I'm about due to go there again. He's not in too good of shape. But he's in his high eighties.

DePue: I know I just recently saw you at the 5th Regimental Combat Team reunion here this last weekend in Springfield. How many people did you have there?

Pempek: I would say we had a couple hundred anyway, which is decent.

DePue: I was very impressed by the size of the crowd. Something like 200, 250.

Pempek: Yeah.

DePue: So that's an outstanding show for something like that.

Pempek: I was at the first one they had when they organized the 5th RCT, which was down in Georgia. I made most of them for a period of time, and then a little void in there.

DePue: What is it about the 5th RCT that brings guys like yourself and so many people back year after year?

Pempek: I guess it was a small enough unit. And many of us—not many that I knew—that we stayed together. Some of them I wish I was able to have contact with, because they were in the section of the I&R in Korea. But probably most of them I knew were from the Hawaii area when we had good times together.

DePue: We've been at this for a little while. I want to finish up with a series of questions, because you have mentioned already, you got back to Korea later in your career as well. When did you get back and under what circumstances?

Pempek: You mean my third tour of duty? This would have been in '62 and '63. I got back just before the assassination of Kennedy. I was assigned to Fort Benning, Georgia.

DePue: What was the unit you were assigned to when you went back to Korea?

Pempek: I got assigned to headquarters Eighth Army, the operation. General Houston was my boss. I was the operations sergeant of Eighth Army.

DePue: So you were master sergeant E-8 by that time?

Pempek: Yes.

DePue: Okay. Tell me about the differences you saw in Korea in '62. Well, first of all where were you stationed? What was the closest town?

Pempek: In '62 and '3? It was Eighth Army headquarters in Seoul. The same place that we left Korea from before. Eighth Army headquarters, that's where they had them, in Seoul, Korea. I looked for some of those same buildings, because when we ended up in occupation, rented those posh places, permanent buildings, Japanese buildings. Went on back in '62 and '63, why, then I had it made, because I was

the operations sergeant in Army headquarters, and I didn't have any duties to do except be in that building with no windows. (both laugh) I had to take care of a lot of paperwork.

DePue: How different was Korea in '62 and '63 from when you left ten years earlier?

Pempek: I didn't see that much difference really. Of course the town when I left wasn't destroyed by anything as it was after the period I was back there. But they were hustling around and I kind of enjoyed the opportunity be there. But then I didn't enjoy it because I'd just got[ten] married too. When they found that out they sent me to Korea. (both laugh)

DePue: Puts a cramp in your style then, doesn't it?

Pempek: Yeah. But it was only for a year. It wasn't that bad at all I thought.

DePue: Was Seoul rebuilding at a furious pace at that time?

Pempek: It was, yeah, but I would say nothing modern compared to when I went back to revisit in 1999. Then it was like "oh my goodness." It was all modern, big buildings. I was escorted because I was involved with a lot of military stuff and colonels from Korea came over here. We hosted them and took them to the house. When I went back to Korea, when I revisited, they picked us up at the airport and gave us a grand tour, went to the opera house, ate together and so on. I really had an experience. And the fact that the streets—my goodness, they were so wide. I had to go underground, otherwise you'd get killed trying to get across them; traffic was that heavy in '99. But in '62, '63, I didn't see that.

DePue: Didn't see much difference at all. Did you have any exposure to the Korean army in '62?

Pempek: Oh yes. We had two sets of documents: one for secret US and one for secret Korean, ROK. Of course our alternate position headquarters was in Pyongtaek. I think that's where they moved their whole thing to now from Seoul. The forces today, the Koreans got the frontline and Seoul headquarters. And I think the American forces are all off the 38th parallel now and their headquarters Eighth Army is in the Pyongtaek area. That was our combat or headquarters position.

There I was really impressed. I don't know, they have the purple vision or whatever. It was underground and tentage and Air Force generals, Navy admirals and everything else that came in for briefings. But still used the old grease pencil and ashes from the cigarettes to clean off the doggone situation maps.

DePue: This was for your '99 trip now you're talking about.

Pempek: No, no, this was in '62 and '3. In '99, well, there was visitation.

DePue: Were you impressed by the ROK soldiers you saw in ’62 and ’63 compared to what you remembered ten years before?

Pempek: It was a different situation at the Eighth Army headquarters.

DePue: So you weren’t seeing the average soldier there.

Pempek: No, just the ranking people.

DePue: Okay. You were there in the midst of the war. You were there in ’62. Came back there thirty years later basically. From what you’ve explained, ’62, ’63 was pretty darn close to the situation in terms of living conditions and everything from the war. What was the living standard you saw in ’99 for the Koreans?

Pempek: Well, at least where we stayed and we visited. We visited villages that were common during the Korean War, and that was one of the highlights of the tour. They’d take you to a Korean village. Like around here, [the New Salem. Well, they had the village. This was one day of the tour. We actually toured as a group and then of course we went to the...

DePue: Was this a tourist site?

Pempek: Yes.

DePue: The Korean folk village?

Pempek: Yeah.

DePue: Okay. Yeah I’ve been there myself. But that’s old style Korea.

Pempek: Right, yeah. But this is what I’m saying. Now of course when you talk about new, I never did go to homes or anything like that. It was always—well, in Seoul itself, why, whatever we wanted to do and so on. And I visited Inchon and the peace talk area.

DePue: Panmunjom? Did they take you to Panmunjom village?

Pempek: Oh yeah. Now in ’62 and ’63 that was when they had quite a few incidents also, going back. I’m trying to think of what it was. But then we had a lot of helicopter things that had to be in operations that orders would come out. They had to change this or that because it appeared like they were violating the parallel or getting too close or whatever the heck it was. It was just interesting who was going to do what about it.

DePue: Just a couple more questions in a general sense then about your experiences in Korea. Are you proud that you had the chance to go to Korea during the war?

Pempek: Now I think that was really an education that you couldn't buy. I have no regrets as far as being able to help out some people. At the time not knowing that you're helping anyone out, because they were just Koreans, you might say.

DePue: Well, that's the next question. Was it worth your sacrifice and the sacrifice of so many Americans who were there?

Pempek: Unless you notice somebody right next to you getting wiped out, I suppose I would have to say that I didn't experience any feelings towards the Koreans one way or the other. Definitely it was not bitter. I was just, like you mentioned, proud and happy that I was in a position to help them become part of what they wanted. Disappointed in that they haven't been reunited yet, because I know I got familiar with the German group of people. They did have that same situation in Berlin, and they did reunite. I know one of my friends Jaewon Lee that was at this thing, even took him with the Germans I had in Chicago. And he was wondering how they got together, and they were wondering how Korea might get together the same way. I don't know if they ever will. But it happened that they [Germans] brought down the wall and they're one country again. To me now that would be quite an accomplishment if I was alive when it became one Korea, instead of divided like they are.

DePue: Yeah. Well, a few years ago we thought, especially after East and West Germany came together, well, Korea is next. But they're still working on it. They're still talking about it. The Korean War experience especially, how did that change you?

Pempek: The only thing is I think it made me realize that I'm an adult and I have to do things myself. One way or the other it's up to me. I had the opportunity. I took it and got myself in the position to be better than what I was before because I was just a seventeen-year-old kid. I had no problems adjusting to military life because I did the same things at home. I had to take care of myself and wash the dishes, scrub the floor and cut the grass and work in between. And so that didn't bother me one bit. The regimentation was good, I thought.

DePue: And if you were to offer—this is your opportunity, George—offer up advice or wisdom to somebody in the future listening to this, maybe your kids or your grandkids or anybody who's interested in hearing the stories from the Korean War veterans themselves, what advice would you offer?

Pempek: You have the opportunity to go one way or the other. And whatever situation you're into, you're going to be important to contribute. You make yourself or break yourself; don't look for somebody else to do it for you. You have the opportunity; even if it's not the best in the world, take it. And if you go from that point, fine. If you don't, why, do what you want to do. But there's a world of opportunity for anyone that's motivated—doesn't have to be the President of the United States—but in your own community if you can find something, just get better at it.

DePue: Okay. This is something a little bit different. Would you be willing to read this into the record? Remember that?

Pempek: Saw that, yeah.

Chests Full of Pride

Men of the 5th, we stood side by side.
Some were captured; other men died.
But they're still with us, and it hurts inside,
As we stand straight and tall with a chest full of pride.

We stand at attention when the colors go by,
And if you look close you'll see a tear in our eye.
Never forgotten, our buddies, who are not by our side,
As we stand straight and tall with a chest full of pride.

From Seo-bong-san to near Sinuiju,
All along the way we lost quite a few.
Attacking, withdrawing and getting hit from the side,
We fought like young heroes with a chest full of pride.

Many years have passed since we have done our thing,
But the thought of the big guns still makes our ears ring.
The war that we fought, at the time tried to hide,
Still makes us stand tall with a chest full of pride.

The 5th Regimental Combat Team I'll never forget;
I've seen many units but they can't match it yet.
My old combat buddies are still at my side
As I stand straight and tall with a chest full of pride.

DePue: Share those sentiments?

Pempek: Somewhat.

DePue: Thanks very much, George. That was written by Master Sergeant Buddy Brimberry. Did you know him?

Pempek: No.

DePue: But he was there during the same time—1950, '51. This has been a real pleasure for me to interview. Any final comments for us?

Pempek: That's it.

DePue: Okay. Thanks again, George.

Pempek: Okay.

(end of interview #2)