Interview with Ivan Maras

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Interview # 1: December 17, 2013

Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is Tuesday, December 17, 2013. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today I'm in the Library, sitting across the table from Ivan Maras. Good morning, Ivan.

Maras: Good morning, Mark.

DePue We're here to talk about your experiences in the Korean War and right after the Korean War, because a lot of the things we're going to talk about happened while you were still in Korea, after the war was over. They're very interesting stories, and I'm looking forward to hearing them. Let's start with the beginning. Tell us when and where you were born.

Maras: I born in 1931, March 26, in Bulpitt, Illinois, a small town named after the founder of what was farm land before.

DePue: Where is Bulpitt?

Maras: It was a mining community, back in those days. It's about five miles from Taylorville, going west on Route 104.

DePue: Well, I looked at the map. It was right next to Kincaid.

Maras: Right across the street from Kincaid, right.

DePue: Why have two different small towns so close together there, do you know?

Maras: There were several. There was another one, Tovey, just down the road and Jisaville. There were all small, mining communities. The Peabody Mine…There were several back in those days, before they closed down.

DePue: Was your father in mining? Was he a miner?

Maras: My dad was a miner for about twenty-five years, until the year I was born. And then he got out of the mine and bought a little farm, right adjacent to Bulpitt. Of course, at that time, they were having…Of course, there was the Depression and mine wars. So he got himself out of that mess. (chuckles)

DePue: What can you tell me about the mine wars that were going on at that time? Were you too small to know much about it?

Maras: Well, I was just a baby then at that time, but, of course, I've heard stories. My buddy that I grew up and went to school with in Bulpitt—we were in the same class together—his father got killed, right on his front porch. And his neighbor also got killed. Back then, in that little small town, they, I guess, killed quite a few people.

DePue: Who's they?

Maras: Well, they had what they called [the] Progressives, I guess, from down south, that were coming in, taking over the jobs, the union jobs, up north here.

DePue: Is this a different union?

Maras: Supposedly, yeah, from down south. They were calling them scabs. They were just coming in and taking over the jobs at the coal mine, for a cheaper wage.

DePue: Why did your dad, in 1931, decide to leave, what I assume was a secure job, to go into farming instead?

Maras: Well, like I said, he'd just had enough of the coal mines. He had a very nasty, dirty job. It's a wonder he didn't have the black lung. He never did test for black lung, supposedly. He was an excellent worker, they said, at cutting the coal out of the walls. He just wanted out of the mines. Like I said, it was a dirty job.

DePue: And he was able to purchase a farm?

Maras: Right, a small farm, 120 acres, right adjacent to Bulpitt. He had help there from the neighboring town there. They helped him get started with the

farming, because he never did farm before. He came from Europe as a boy, fifteen years old. In fact, he sold a couple of cows over there, as a passage to get to this country.

DePue: Where did he come from in Europe?

Maras: Yugoslavia. He's considered a Croatian. Of course, at the time, when he left, WORLD WARit was still part of Austria, before World War I.

DePue: So, he left right before World War I?

Maras: Yes, he left there several years before World War I, right, yeah.

DePue: That was a good time to be leaving the country.

Maras: Right.

DePue: How about your mother?

Maras: My mother came over, as a baby, from the same country. In fact, I guess, from the same town. But they didn't meet till…Like I said, in Canton, Illinois, they got married in, I guess, I think it was 1920, '21, something like that.

DePue: So, is Maras a Croatian name?

Maras: Supposedly, yeah, there's several Maras' in Yugoslavia, like that, right. I don't know, one time I heard it was French. In fact, I don't even know how they got my name, Ivan, a Russian name. (laughs). I don't know why I was named Ivan, never did know. (laughs)

DePue: Did they speak Croatian when you were growing up?

Maras: This is the thing I'm very sorry happened. They would speak Croatian, only when we had the relatives or friends come in. But around us, they'll always speak English. They didn't want us, really, to learn the language. And I'm sorry about that ever since. Our cousins, they taught their kids the Croatian language, and they had that advantage over us.

DePue: You say us; do you have some siblings, as well?

Maras: Yes, I had a brother, an older brother that served in the World War II Navy, and a older sister that served in the WAVES [women accepted for volunteer emergency service] in World War II and then another sister, two years older than I was, and she served in the Air Force as a nurse, during the Korean War.

DePue: Sounds like you were the baby of the family then.

Maras: I was the baby of the family, yes.

DePue: Did your brothers and sisters figure you were the spoiled one?

Maras: Oh, sometimes. (laughs)

DePue: Were you?

Maras: I didn't think so. I had to do all the work on the farm. My oldest brother, he left…After he got out of high school, he took off for Detroit. (laughs)

DePue: Tell me more about the farm. How would you describe the farm that you grew up on?

Maras: Well, it's a typical farm. Back in those early days, you had everything. You had the pigs; you had the cows, the chickens, orchards, a big garden, so you were self-sufficient. You didn't make much money, but you had plenty of food on the table. But a lot of work involved, and, of course, I learned at an early age, you had a lot of chores to do.

DePue: What was the cash crop?

Maras: The cash crop…We had wheat and a little bit of corn, because most of the grain that we grew were for our own cattle and hogs.

DePue: So, it was livestock that was the main money-maker for your farm.

Maras: That's right. We sold hogs and, of course, we sold chickens, being close to town like that. We sold eggs, and then we also delivered milk in the bottles, back in those days.

DePue: Did they go to a local creamery or dairy, or did you deliver it directly?

Maras: Well, the milk we delivered mostly in the evening, but then some in the morning, to customers in this town of Bulpitt and Kincaid, but mostly in Bulpitt. Then in the mornings, I would deliver the milk to the couple of grocery stores.

DePue: You're talking about the whole milk, unpasteurized, whole milk?

Maras: Whole milk, unpasteurized, and then the milk that was left over, we would have a separator machine that would separate the skim milk from the cream. Then the cream was in cans we took to Taylorville there, nearby. [We] sold the cream there. The skim milk, we fed to the hogs.

DePue: What were the chores you had, as a young man?

Maras: Oh, all kinds of chores. Like I said, I delivered this milk every day, and I helped milk the cows, even at an early age. My dad and my mom usually, we usually had around fourteen milk cows, and we would all go in the barn every

morning and evening, milk the cows, and handle the milk situation, afterwards.

I would, of course, drive a team of horses on the farm, hauling grain to the elevators. In fact, as a kid I remember even cultivating corn, with the one row, horse cultivator. You would mow the hay fields for hay, with the horses. So I handled the horses quite a bit. Of course, even though I did drive a tractor, too, I did plow, as a kid! I did all that, as a young boy.

DePue: Well, nothing you've explained here sounds like you were spoiled one bit. You were working hard.

Maras: Oh, yes.

DePue: What was the least favorite chore? Do you know?

Maras: Oh, let's see. (chuckles) The one that I remembered was in the hot summer months, going through the cornfields, cutting out these big milk weeds, we called stink weeds. They really, actually stunk very bad in hot weather. That was a very terrible chore, along with picking the corn by hand, later on, with a team of horses and wagon, one ear at a time, and throwing it in the wagon. (laughs) I think a couple chores like that was really disgusting to me (laughs).

DePue: It sounds like the family had quite a few milk cows, more than just enough to put milk on your own table.

Maras: That was it, right, because, like I said, we delivered the milk to the customers, made a little side money there. And then the cream went to Taylorville; that was extra money there for the household.

DePue: So, did you become really good at milking cows?

Maras: Well, more or less I did, but my mother was the fastest. She could milk two cows to my one.

DePue: Well, that's an acquired skill; I would think. Your dad, he wasn't doing the milking? She was the main milker?

Maras: He was milking too, but he was slow like I was, (chuckles) I guess. Like I said, my mother was fast at all those chores like that, all those chores. She was…I don't what, but it was just in her to be fast. (laughs)

DePue: Wow. Did you have electricity on the farm?

Maras: No, we did not have electricity, at first. It took many years before we got the…In fact, the first winter was spent in this old farmhouse. They said we almost froze to death. The house that we had in Bulpitt was a newer house. My dad, the following year, had the house moved to the farm. It was wired for

electricity, but we had no electricity, even being like a couple blocks from town. We were that close to town, but we did not have electricity for many years afterwards. Finally, I guess, right before World War II, the electricity came into our house.

DePue: How did that change things on the farm?

Maras: Oh, it was marvelous to me, because, like I said, I grew up with just these kerosene lamps every evening, at our house. What it did to me was just simply out of this world, something really great that happened.

DePue: Did it include electric milkers, milking machines?

Maras: Well, that was an interesting story there, because when World War II, started my mother went to work in a munitions plant, there in Illiopolis. She rode in the car, with several other women; they worked the third shift. I'll never forget this, as a kid. Of course, my dad was very irritated about that. He believed that the woman should stay home, especially on the farm. Of course, that left only us two to milk the cows. So, he ended up buying an electric milker, milking machine, which I thought was the greatest, because it really saved us a lot of handwork.

DePue: Did all the cows take to being milked by a machine?

Maras: The cows did very well with the machine, yes. They seemed like they enjoyed it more than (chuckles) somebody else pulling on them.

DePue: But maybe not enjoying it as much as you did, huh?

Maras: (laughs) Right.

DePue: Tell me about going to school. Did you start off in Bulpitt?

Maras: Yeah. Bulpitt had a two-room schoolhouse, and this was…An acre of ground was given by Mr. Bulpitt, that the town was named after. Of course, it was supposed to be a schoolhouse. Once it was closed, it was supposed to go back to the farm, which it never did, but that's another story.

It was a two room schoolhouse, first three grades in one room and then grades four, five and six in the other room. Then, of course, when you went to seventh and eighth grade, you had to go to Kincaid, and high school in Kincaid also. [It] was the neighboring town there.

DePue: Do you think you got a good education those first few years?

Maras: I thought so. I thought it was very good. It seemed like you got a lot of attention. The classes were real small, even though you had three grades in one room. Just one teacher had to handle all three grades, but you're just

talking about, maybe four, five kids to a grade. So it was, I think, almost a one-to-one situation. I thought it was very good.

DePue: How big was your graduating class in high school at Kincaid?

Maras: The graduation class at that time was about twenty-five, I guess, probably.

DePue: So, even though you went to the big city of Kincaid to go to school, (chuckles) this is still a pretty small town.

Maras: Pretty small town, right. (chuckles)

DePue: I forgot to ask you about the farm. Did you have indoor plumbing there?

Maras: Well, no. That was…We had outdoors for years and years. Then, when we did get the electricity to finally come in, then my dad put in…because we had our kitchen in the basement, in this house. And so the bathroom was made in the basement, too. So, when the electricity came in, we had the indoor plumbing and, using the well water, of course. It wasn't city water; it was well water. We had an electric pump. We had the bath tub, I remember, and indoor toilet, which was really something, because we always had the outdoor toilet before.

DePue: Two-story house? One story-house?

Maras: Just one-story house, with the basement. Like I said, we had our kitchen in the basement, and in the other room of our basement is where we handled the milk and made the skim milk and cream in the cream separator and things like that, right.

DePue: Is that house still there?

Maras: No, the house is torn down, of course, for tax purposes (chuckles).

DePue: For tax purposes? They owed money on it or they—

Maras: No, this is all the barns. My brother took over the farm, in the latter years, and he just cash rents the farm land now. Of course, all the old buildings—they were all old and coming down anyway—he had to remove. The house was in good shape too, but they removed the house, because of property tax.

DePue: Did you get involved in any extracurricular activities in high school, or were you just too busy with farm work?

Maras: Well, that's another story there, because all my friends, you know, they played all the sports. I didn't have a chance to really go out for sports, because you'd always had to come home and do the chores. The only thing that I was really involved with was the band, I guess, but that didn't amount to much.

DePue: Was the family religious? Did you guys attend church regularly?

Maras: We attended a Catholic church there. I was brought up a Catholic. It was a pretty strict situation, back in those days.

DePue: Who was the one who was making sure that you got religion? Was that your mother?

Maras: My mother, right, right.

DePue: Which of the two parents would you say you take after?

Maras: Oh, I guess my mother, (chuckles) in that situation.

DePue: How so?

Maras: She was a fast worker, and I learned to be a fast worker, as time went on. In fact, today I'm always doing my things. My wife always raises cane, because I go too fast on many things. My dad was a little slower at it, taking his time and getting a job done right. (chuckles)

DePue: Was that a reflection of his personality, as well?

Maras: I think so, right.

DePue: Well, you were born in '31, so you were about ten years old when Pearl Harbor happened. Do you remember Pearl Harbor?

Maras: Oh yes, I do. Right.

DePue: What can you tell me about that day?

Maras: I don't remember where I was, particularly, that day, when it happened. I think that was on Sunday, on December 7th, 1941. So I guess we went to church. Of course, it happened later on that day. I guess I was home. We listened to it on the radio.

DePue: You already mentioned your mom went to work at the Illiopolis Munitions Plant. How else did life change for you and the family after World War II started?

Maras: Well, we had all the gas rationing. I know you had to buy these bonds. I know we had to buy…I guess they were kind of like stamps. I remember that, like savings bonds, to support the war. I think we had all these drives going on. We had drives for different junk metals and all that stuff, you know, collecting paper. I remember all kind of drives like that; all the kids got involved with, there at that time. Of course, being on the farm, though, I remember the gas rationing didn't hurt us, because we had to have the gas for the tractors and

that. We had gas for the car pretty well so, too. So we weren't hurt, like the people in town.

DePue: I know rubber was a scarce commodity too.

Maras: That's right, rubber was too.

DePue: Did you have to drive those tires until they got bald?

Maras: They did a lot of recapping of tires, back in those days.

DePue: Your father stayed on the farm though?

Maras: My father stayed on the farm, yes.

DePue: I would assume he would have been too old by that time to be—

Maras: Yeah, too old to serve in the service area.

DePue: But you mentioned your brother. How did your brother end up in the military?

Maras: He was working in Detroit at the time. Like I said, he left high school. He worked at a creamery up there. When the war started, I guess, about one year after or so, that's when he joined, I think, in '42, I think it really was. He joined the Navy and got involved with the medical part, pharmacist.

DePue: Was he overseas? Did he serve on a ship?

Maras: He served on a ship part-time, but it was mostly in the Gulf region. He didn't go to overseas at all, no.

DePue: You're talking about the Gulf of Mexico?

Maras: Right.

DePue: How closely were you, personally, following the events of the war? Is that something that you read in the papers or watched in the news reels?

Maras: Yeah, watched the news reel in the movies and, you know, read out of the papers, right. Of course, I was, as a kid, interested in flying and, I guess, always watched the news, pertaining to flying during World War II.

DePue: Were you upset that you were too young to serve?

Maras: Well, not particularly. I didn't think about it, as such, no.

DePue: Do you remember the way the war ended, in August of '45, when they dropped the atomic bomb?

Maras: Oh yes. Now, where I was at that time, I can't remember, but that sure made a difference among the people in the whole area, because that was the end of the war. That was a big celebration.

DePue: And I know at that timeframe, you're still what, a sophomore in high school, maybe, in '45?

Maras: A sophomore in high school, yeah.

DePue: What were your favorite subjects in school?

Maras: Oh, I guess math and science subjects, right.

DePue: You were the baby of the family. Did any of your other brothers or sisters go to college, after they graduated from high school?

Maras: My oldest sister, she went to college and was a school teacher, before she joined the WAVES. She taught in the same elementary school I went to in Kincaid. She was a school teacher there for a couple of years. She taught—I can't remember what grade it was—but also she was the P.E. teacher, for the girls. Then, of course, like I said, she just joined the WAVES at that time. I don't know what year there, but—

DePue: By the time you're getting close to graduation—you graduated in 1948—there's a draft on. Did you figure that you're going end up being drafted, unless you went someplace or did something?

Maras: Never even thought about it at the time. I don't know…I knew, I guess, the thing to do was to go to college to stay out of the coal mines.

DePue: Was it your idea or your parent's idea to go to college?

Maras: Well, it was a friend's idea that was already going to college. He asked me if I would come along. Another friend in the same class I was, we hitchhiked to Charleston to register at Eastern. That's how I got started. I didn't know how far I was going to go or what I was going to do.

My mother, it was [her] idea of me going to college, I guess, because she wanted me to become an engineer, because my brother-in-law was an engineer. Of course, I was more interested in farming, but I followed her advice. I took pre-engineering there at Eastern in Charleston, Illinois.

DePue: Was your dad hoping that you'd come back to the family farm?

Maras: I think so, because he needed the help. He was by himself most all the time. My brother, he married a girl from Virginia, and he was staying out there. In fact, they went back to Detroit to work, too. So, he didn't come back…He did finally come back to Kincaid and worked in the coal mines, as an electrician,

because he had, after World War II, the GI Bill. He got involved with the electrical part.

DePue: How did you afford to go to school? Is it just the tuition was low enough, and did you travel back and forth between—

Maras: That's right. It was very cheap back in those days, because tuition was just a matter of a few dollars, and that included the books and all. We would stay in a rooming house. We would cook in the rooming house. We would use the hot water of the rooming house (laughs) to heat up the pork and beans and peas and things like that. I would ask for very few dollars from my parents, actually, because I didn't spend any money there at college.

Then, like I said, I would hitchhike home every weekend, would hitchhike back and forth. I'd try to help my dad on the weekends, and it was just cheap living.

DePue: Did you major in engineering?

Maras: Those first two years, pre-engineering. I was supposed to be going to the University of Illinois, to finish up the last two years. But that was against my idea, (laughs) because I was very afraid, scared to go to the University of Illinois, being so big and [me] coming from a small town.

DePue: Why couldn't you stay at Eastern, though?

Maras: Well, Eastern, that's as far as they went with engineering. So you had to go to a larger university to finish up the degree.

DePue: So, did you go to the University of Illinois?

Maras: No, because, like I said, I was interested in agriculture and farming, and I wanted ag courses. The only other places that would offer ag was at Normal, ISU [Illinois State University] and University of Illinois. Of course, like I said, it was too big. I didn't want to go there.

So, I went up to Normal to register and, of course, the registrar asked me what I was going to become. I said, a farmer. And she sent me home, because it was strictly a teacher's college. I had to be a teacher, and I didn't want to become a teacher. I just wanted the ag courses, at that time. So, I did go home and lied. I wrote a letter, saying that I would become a teacher, so I could get the ag courses, up at Normal (laughs).

DePue: What was the name of the school at that time? It's now Illinois State University.

Maras: It wasn't a university; it was just Illinois State Teacher's College, I believe, at that time. Illinois Normal, yeah, Normal, it had that word, Normal, in there, I believe.

DePue: Was it just a four year school?

Maras: Just a four year school, at that time, right, yes.

DePue: So this would have been, what, 1940—

Maras: Nineteen fifty.

DePue: Nineteen fifty, you'd been out there.

Maras: Yeah, because the first two years I went to Eastern, there.

DePue: Did you take more to the ag courses than you did to the pre-engineering courses you had taken before?

Maras: Oh yes, because I more interested in the farming part. I enjoyed it. In fact, I had more fun at that school, because of the ag courses. And, of course, it also was four girls to every boy.

DePue: Not bad.

Maras: (laughs)

DePue: But why wouldn't you…If you're going into farming, and your dad already has the farm, I would expect that your dad would have been just as happy if you'd said, "You know, I don't think I need school. I'll just go right into farming, itself." Why did you want to go to this school, rather than just go straight into farming?

Maras: I was trying to look ahead. I thought maybe if I took the ag courses, it would eventually produce better jobs later on, maybe in the field of agriculture.

DePue: Was there your mom's influence in getting that education, as well?

Maras: Oh, she was a pusher, yes, yes.

DePue: More than your dad was?

Maras: Yes.

DePue: When did you get your degree, then?

Maras: August of 1952.

DePue: August of '52?

Maras: Yeah.

DePue: So, while you're at school, June 24th, 1950, is when the North Koreans invaded South Korea. Do you remember that?

Maras: I vaguely remember that, because, like I said, I was going to school, and people didn't talk about the war. No, there was really no discussion of the Korean War. It was hardly ever mentioned; that's right, that you mention it, because—

DePue: Maybe because most of the students were girls, and they knew they weren't going to be drafted.

Maras: Well, that too, I guess. (laughs)

DePue: So it never occurred to you that that event, half-way across the world, might have an impact on your life?

Maras: That's right. In fact, the draft board never did really come after me till, oh, I guess, a senior in college. You're talking about 1951, I think. They started coming after me then. Of course, I went to the draft board to get permission to go ahead finish college. So they did let me finish college.

DePue: If the Army had just left you alone, what did you intend to do after you got your degree?

Maras: Farm with my dad. That was what my plans were, just to get into farming; that's all.

DePue: But that's not quite how it worked out, is it?

Maras: No, no.

DePue: What happened after you graduated, in August, '52 then?

Maras: Okay, I was supposed to have been drafted. Then I did get a few months relief from the draft board, to help my dad get the crops in, because, at the time, you had the soy beans and corn to get in. So they did let me finish there. Of course, at that time, my dad was very irritated. He didn't let me to go in, and he could have got me out to keep me on the farm. But I was not going to be a draft dodger, because my oldest sisters and brother served in the service, and I would have been the only one never served in the service. I don't think I could live to this day—

DePue: (laughs)

Maras: So, I was definitely going in. I didn't want to join, because that would have been four years. At the time, I know the Air Force was…I was almost going

into the Air Force there. In fact, my junior year in college, at Normal there, I took all the tests for…Like I said, I was interested in flying always as a kid, for a Navy pilot. They had them on the campus. They gave us the written test and physical and all. I passed all that, and I could have been ready to go in.

But that was my junior year. I was just finishing up my junior year, and I said, "Well, I'm going to stay and try to finish college, get the degree first." I thought it was more important, at that time. So I didn't go in the Navy, at that time. Maybe I should have; that would have been a different life experience.

Like I said, I waited until I did get drafted. Even though my dad was very irritated and mad, I did finally go in in November. After the crops were in, I asked the draft board, "Take me, and let me go in." I wanted to get started right away then, get the two years over with.

DePue: Two years, that sounds like a long time when you're, what, twenty-one years old, maybe at the time?

Maras: That's right.

DePue: Twenty-two, something like that. Did you have a girlfriend at the time?

Maras: Oh yes, I was dating at the time; it was a local girl.

DePue: From back in Bulpitt or Kincaid?

Maras: From Taylorville. She was a farmer, off the farm. So, it was just one of those situations, while you're in the service, you just, you know, wrote back and forth letters.

DePue: So, as far as you were concerned, it wasn't that serious?

Maras: Well, in a way, I thought it was, because, like I said, she was raised on a farm, and I was going to be a farmer—I thought —and that would have been a good combination. We were dating for about a year there, before I went in the service, I guess. But it didn't happen that way, because I was in Korea too long.

DePue: Does that mean you got a "Dear John" letter in Korea?

Maras: It amounted to that, more or less. [It was] really all my idea, because she finally wrote, after about twelve months of not dating anybody, supposedly, that she was starting to date this one farmer that did not go into the service. That kind of irritated me. So I just called it quits then, because of that.

DePue: You're in your last year that you're in college; were you paying attention to any of the war news in Korea?

Maras: Yeah, those latter years, right. [I] made sure I was following the news and the newspaper and so forth.

DePue: So, you started basic training in November of 1952; is that right?

Maras: Right.

DePue: Where did you go for that?

Maras: Fort Knox, Kentucky.

DePue: Fort Knox, Kentucky is the home of the Armor School. Is that right?

Maras: That was it. All of us that got on that train for Fort Knox, Kentucky, we figured we were going ride tanks, because that was the Armor Division. I didn't realize they had any kind of infantry basic training at all, until we got down there.

DePue: Ivan, did they ever ask you what you wanted to do, once you got to the Army?

Maras: Oh, no. You were told exactly what to do. (laughs)

DePue: It was much more what the Army needed, huh?

Maras: Right.

DePue: So, tell me a little bit about basic training at Fort Knox.

Maras: Well, the first eight weeks was the, I guess, normal basic training. It was already happening, already during the winter months, which I didn't appreciate. But, being down in Kentucky was a little better weather than Illinois. Then you finished the eight weeks. Then you had to do eight more weeks; they called it advanced infantry training. We fired all the weapons.

Then I didn't have…A lot of them had orders to go overseas. They didn't ship me yet; at that time, I stayed, I think a month or two, after that basic training. I was part of the basic…I was an instructor, more or less. I don't remember the…biological

Private Ivan Maras relaxes on the steps of his barracks during basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky, during the winter of 1952-1953.

warfare. So, they had me doing that for about a month and a half, maybe, before I got my orders for overseas.

DePue: As a farm kid, who had learned how to work hard from a pretty early age, did you find basic training especially challenging?

Maras: No. I sort of enjoyed…I knew what to expect. I took it all in.

DePue: Didn't that include having some drill sergeant scream at you and call you all kinds of nasty names?

Maras: Fellows around me did. (laughs) They got more, because I've followed orders all the time. (laughs)

DePue: So you didn't mind it too much, sounds like?

Maras: No, I took all the orders and did what they said.

DePue: When did you graduate from advanced training?

Maras: Well, it had to be early, yeah, very early spring of '53.

DePue: Did you get a leave after that?

Maras: Got a leave.

DePue: Went back home?

Maras: Yeah, went back home. In fact, like I said, I was at Fort Knox as, like an instructor. So, when I knew I was going to get my orders, I got my dad's car down there, to take my stuff home. So, that was the first time I ever got to do that, drive a car down there on the base.

I'll never forget, after I got my orders, driving at night through southern Indiana, coming home with another fellow, because he got his orders, too. I guess he was from Illinois. I got stopped for speeding down there in Southern Illinois (laughs). [I] told the state trooper, I said, "Well, you know, we got our orders." Running through that small town, I guess, broke the speed limit. He took me back to one of those judges. We're talking about midnight or after. They had a court session, where I had to be fined for speeding. So that was my first, and really only, speeding ticket that I ever got. (laughs)

DePue: Wow, only one speeding ticket in your entire life?

Maras: Well, I got one later on, way down to very old age, but that was it. Of course, at the time, I said, "I got my orders." I thought I'd get a break, but they didn't listen to that.

DePue: By that time, did you know that you were going to head over to Korea?

Maras: Well, I knew I'd be going overseas. But I didn't know where, at that time.

DePue: Take me from coming back home for leave, to actually being shipped out to Korea. Walk me through that series of events.

Maras: Well, when I came home for leave, it was very interesting what happened. My sister that was serving in Japan was getting a discharge. So she came home at the same time I was going over.

DePue: Now, this is one of the sisters that had served in World War II, as well?

Private Maras visited his parents, Sophia and George Maras, on their farm near Bulpitt, Illinois before he shipped to Korea in early 1953.

Maras: Oh no, no. This is in the Korean War. She's two years older than I am, and she was a nurse in the Air Force.

My oldest sister, who was married to this engineer, I was telling you about earlier, they live in California. Well, they brought her home, with their family, to visit Illinois at the same time. In the meantime, I rode back with them, after my leave, to go to Washington to get the orders for overseas. So that was an interesting situation, where I met my sister coming home, and I was just leaving for overseas.

DePue: But you went to Washington, D.C. to get your—

Maras: No, no, the state of Washington.

DePue: Washington State.

Maras: State of Washington, right. What's the name of that?

DePue: Seattle, Fort Lewis?

Maras: Fort Lewis, that's right. That's where I shipped out of, Fort Lewis and, of course, Seattle, then.

DePue: Do you remember the month that you shipped out?

Maras: It had to be early May.

DePue: And did you ship out or did you fly?

Maras: Shipped out.

DePue: Describe the ship.

Maras: Pardon?

DePue: What kind of ship was it?

Maras: It was a regular troop ship, just loaded down. You were stacked, I guess, five or six high (laughs) in these hammocks.

DePue: Any memories about that trip across the Pacific Ocean?

Maras: Most of the guys on there got sea sick. (laughs) That's all I can remember.

DePue: How about you?

Maras: I got sick just watching them get sick. Actually, I didn't get sea sick from the ride, you know on the ship. I enjoyed that part. But, with everybody else getting sick around you, you just couldn't help it.

DePue: So not an especially enjoyable cruise, then?

Maras: No, no.

DePue: Did you ship all the way to Korea itself?

Maras: No, we went to Sasebo, Japan. I was still twenty-one years old. Well, no, I had turned twenty-two already; that's right. March was my birthday, so I was twenty-two years old and had a college degree, and I was very cocky. I figured, surely at Japan, they're going to leave me off, and [I'll] get an office job, because a lot of GI.s were serving in Japan at the time.

But [that] didn't happen. We all got our shots, new uniforms, our M1s and got on the same ship. It was overnight, and we went to Inchon. We had to go in on landing barges, because the ship couldn't go all the way in. Then they put us on a train, overnight. They gave us ammunition for our weapons, because they said watch out for being attacked on the train. They had us scared to death at that time. Inchon, that was right there at the front line, near the front line, because you could see at night, it's like the Fourth of July, skies always lit up, with firing going on.

Then, early the next morning, we got off the train, onto trucks. Went down these dusty, dirty roads. I'll never forget, because it put the fear into me again, more fear. On the way, you see ambulances stopped alongside the road. They had their patients pulled out, giving them a rest from riding on the ambulance. They were up on the front lines. They were taking them back to a hospital somewhere. I'll never forget those pictures in my mind.

DePue: I would assume that your drill sergeants, back in basic and AIT, were almost all Korean War veterans. How much were they telling you about what to expect? You know, about the nature of the combat you were going to go into, when you were in basic and AIT?

Maras: It seemed like very little. They didn't say too much about the Korean War, itself. They gave us some good, to me, instructions and that, because you were trained to kill. I mean, that's basic training, and I think they did a very good job there.

DePue: Growing up on the farm, did you have plenty of experience hunting and fishing and things like that, as well?

Maras: Oh yes, especially hunting. I was very familiar, shooting weapons.

DePue: What was your assignment, once you were arrived at the front?

Maras: [The] first thing that I noticed—and they didn't tell me beforehand—was that I was put into a Puerto Rican regiment, the 65th Infantry Regiment from Puerto Rico. I didn't know why, at the time, and it took me a long time to find out what was really going on.

The war was going on…We're talking about May of 1953, so they put me into the Headquarters Company of the 65th. And, at that time, they had me assigned all kinds of different jobs. All I knew, I was carrying a M1 all the time. I was really never on the front line itself, like the other companies. So I was lucky in that aspect, but there was, let's say, a lot of firing going on and a lot of scary situations that I've even forgot.

DePue: What do you remember about that first impression you got, landing in Korea on that trip? What sticks with you today about the things you were seeing, the things you were hearing and smelling, once you arrived in Korea?

Maras: This was all shocking to me, because I didn't expect this. Like I said, I was cocky. I had a college degree, and I figured I didn't belong there. I thought I would do something **better** in the Army. It didn't happen. They made a believer out of me that you just got to do what they say. You just got to follow instructions, (laughs) and that's all I was doing. Like I say, I didn't know what was going on around me. In fact, it took me many years before I found out actually what was happening, what did happen, during those few months, during the war.

DePue: You grew up on small farm, not a wealthy area, by any means. You didn't have electricity, didn't have indoor plumbing. Did the Korean countryside look pretty similar to you?

Maras: Oh, for that, that was very similar. We had outdoor plumbing, and the countryside itself had the very strong odor of human manure and all that, because that's what they used all the time, over there. It was just something we had to put up with; that's all.

DePue: The part of the front where you ended up serving, was it pretty mountainous?

Maras: Very mountainous, yes. Of course, I was very lucky from the standpoint that I got in there in the springtime, so I didn't serve on the front lines during the wintertime. I'm glad that didn't…I wouldn't think I'd appreciate the cold weather that they had there. I did serve later on in cold weather, in '53--'54 winter. But, at that time, I was in heated tents.

DePue: Yeah, and they weren't shooting at each other.

Maras: They weren't shooting; that's right.

DePue: When did you actually find out it was the 65th you were assigned to? Was it when that truck stopped?

Maras: When that truck stopped, and we got off the truck, and they had us lined up, and they assigned us what companies we would go to, you know. Some went to Company A and B and whatever, and we got our assignments. Then got back on the truck and went to those different areas, yeah.

DePue: What part of Korea was the 65th assigned to at the time? Was it kind of the center of the country?

Maras: It was kind of like the center of the country, above the 38th parallel, called the Kumhwa Valley, Kumhwa Valley.

The entrance to Camp Dankowski, the 65th Infantry Regiment's home away from home in South Korea in the fall of 1953.

DePue: You mentioned this is a Puerto Rican regiment. By the time you got there, what was the percentage of Puerto Ricans who were still serving with the unit?

Maras: I really don't know, because at the time, supposedly that winter, it was, you know, strictly all Puerto Ricans. In fact, that is the last Army unit ever integrated, because the blacks were integrated back after World War II. But the Puerto Rican regiment stayed segregated until winter of '52- '53 winter.

At that time, supposedly, they had these young draftees from Puerto Rico that didn't want to fight, and so I guess we had a big problem then. That's when we started integrating with guys like me from the States.

DePue: Well, I know that the 65th was originally a National Guard Regiment, which is why, when they were deployed to combat, I'm sure, they were all coming from Puerto Rico, originally. But that was way back in 1950, when they first got to country. What was the language that was being spoken when you got there?

Maras: You hear a lot of Spanish and English. Of course, that's the only way I…I didn't understand Spanish. This was the problem, because these Puerto Ricans didn't understand English, a lot of them. Supposedly they didn't understand orders, and I heard, when I was over there, a lot people got killed because of not understanding orders. So, then we had that language barrier.

DePue: Was the leadership primarily speaking English, though?

Maras: Yeah, the leadership, the officers, all knew English, right.

DePue: How did they treat you, the brand new guy? Did you get treated well or kind of coldly, when you first arrived?

Maras: They just put me in with the group. It was the…No, you weren't treated coldly. You just served as part of the group, so to speak.

DePue: The old timers didn't give you a rough time when you first arrived?

Maras: No, no.

DePue: I know that you were assigned to Headquarters Company. What specific jobs did you have?

Maras: They had me, I guess, working part-time in the offices, in personnel again—that's what I remember—where they had records, I guess. So they had me doing some recordkeeping, I guess, some kind of paperwork. But, it seemed like to me, all I served was mostly on guard duty, (laughs) [it] seemed like every night, things like that.

DePue: And other details, as well?

Maras: Oh, like KP [kitchen police] and all that? Oh yes, they had me up, doing all that.

DePue: See, you were right in one respect. You thought they'd find you some desk job for you. You, just didn't know it'd be at the front, in a personnel section.

Maras: That's right.

DePue: Did you get an opportunity to go up to the front, ever?

Maras: Oh, not exactly with the other companies. No, I didn't have a chance to do that, which I'm thankful for. But, like I said, in our area, it seemed like every night was like the Fourth of July. You didn't know where these rounds were coming in, and—

Ivan Maras and a buddy relax from their duties over a card game a few miles behind the front lines in 1953.

DePue: Was your location ever mortared or shelled?

Maras: That's it. We were, several times. All I can remember, as long as I was there, we were always in that front area. If we're talking about the front line —area, our whole regiment was. Finally they said they'd give us time to relieve, to go back for rest, and we were only back one night only, overnight. We had orders we had to go right back. The area we went back to—thank goodness I missed it by one night—the area we were supposed to move in was all shot up. In other words, I missed it by one night, the whole place. I'll never forget that, because all the tents that they had there, they were all destroyed by mortar rounds or whatever they fired at them that evening, before.

DePue: Do you remember the first time that your location was shelled or mortared?

Maras: Oh, the first time? There were several times there. (chuckles) You kind of don't forget that, I guess. You're just fortunate you came out okay.

DePue: Can you describe that night or that incident for us?

Maras: Well, just, just everything hectic, everything, just all around us. You had to be sure to try to run for, you know, for cover.

DePue: Did they have bunkers for you?

Maras: Yeah, we had bunkers, right. I never did have to serve in a foxhole.

DePue: It sounds like your headquarters position would have been maybe a mile or two miles away from the front lines?

Maras: Something like that, I guess, right.

DePue: Any other experiences you remember from the combat time that you were there?

Maras: You know, a lot of that's just blank to me, because it just goes to the part of the last evening of the war. That probably is in my mind the most.

DePue: Well, tell me about that.

Maras: Yeah, we were there, and we were told that 10:00 that night, all firing was supposed to cease. Of course, no one believed it. It was hard to believe, because of what happened all that whole month of July. It was constantly firing, seems like. We were gathered outside, because, like I said, it was just like the Fourth of July, everything all lit up. They were firing away. It was worse that evening. What they were doing is getting rid of their ammunition.

But at 10:00, exactly—I'll never forget it—it was complete silence. That's what really stayed in my mind, to this day, just how still it got, because it wasn't before. It was always noise, noise, noise. Everything was just quiet. Of course, at the time, we were told by the officers and that not to celebrate, because they didn't know what to expect. They thought maybe it would start up the next day.

DePue: You talked about that last month of the war. In fact, I know that, basically from May, June and July, the Chinese really picked up the pace of offensives. They were determined, from what I've read and understand talking to other veterans, of reclaiming as much territory as they possibly could and ending the war on a high note, as far as they were concerned. So the action, all along, especially the Western and middle part of the front, was very hot. From what you described, it sounds like it certainly was in your sector, as well.

Maras: This is like I was saying; I didn't realize until this year—we're talking about, this is 2013—reading some of these articles. I belong to the different organizations that have sent out these magazines, life members of the 3rd Division. They talk about the last month of the war, and they talk about the 65th Infantry here, what they were doing at that time. They mention about…Oh gosh, I just—

DePue: Do you want to read that quote in there, maybe?

Maras: Yeah. Well, here it said, "On July 27th,"—here, they talked about the last day of the war— "the communists fired over 20,000 rounds of artillery at the 65th Infantry Regiment. The barrage included the ammunition that was left over from when the Chinese overran the 555th FAB [Field Artillery Battalion]. It

lasted until 10:00 p.m., the cease-fire deadline. The onslaught put the 65th Regiment in grave peril. 'We did not have bunkers to go into; we had only fox holes.'" These are the guys in the companies A, B, C they had up front. And then, of course, they said this one fellow said, "I remember getting fired on, and three of us were in one hole." But this, like I said, this was happening.

I just read about these various things in these, because these articles talks about the Chinese. They want to help the North Koreans to straighten out that line, to the 38th parallel, whereto it was, years before. We were way above the 38th parallel.

They mentioned, in one article, I don't know, 80,000 Chinese coming at us. But the 65th and the 3rd Division, they held their line, at that time.

DePue: I think the 65th, from what you said, is part of the 3rd Division, as well.

Maras: Right.

DePue: Yeah, so it got nasty at the end of the war. That story you mentioned about the 555th, they called it the Triple Nickel, that—

Maras: The Triple Nickel, right.

DePue: …Regiment. They got overrun, right at the end of the war. That was a nasty affair, from everything that I've heard. How much were you hearing about the peace negotiations that were leading up to this day?

Maras: We heard nothing, at the time. That's why I didn't know what was going on until, really, that final day. They mentioned that we were supposed to have a cease-fire at 10:00 that night. We heard about peace talks before, but they never did accomplish anything. So, it was just…If you did hear something about peace talks, you just figured, you know, it's never going to happen.

DePue: This might be something else you don't recall at all, but on June 18th, because the peace talks at Panmunjom had bogged down so severely and President Syngman Rhee [first President of South Korea] didn't like the direction the peace talks were going, he just, on his own, released tens of thousands, thousands of North Korean prisoners into the South Korean countryside, on June 18th. Do you remember hearing anything about that?

Maras: Never heard anything like that before, no.

DePue: I would have thought that all of the senior American leadership would have gotten very concerned about all these North Koreans—Maras: Definitely, definitely.

DePue: You did a great job explaining that neither the July 27th, when the war ended…What happened to the unit after that?

Maras: After the peace talks?

DePue: Yeah, after the Armistice. It wasn't a peace treaty; it was an armistice.

Maras: No, that's right; it wasn't a peace treaty, no. It was very soon after, then, I got orders to get involved with this school situation, because, like I said, the language barrier…The Puerto Ricans, especially these young draftees…I didn't realize at the time, a lot of them couldn't read or write. I thought everybody knew how to read and write, especially in the Army, because, if you're talking about in a war and similar situation, you'd better be able to understand orders. But it didn't happen that way.

So, we got involved with starting this very elementary school, basic math and reading, writing. Of course, after the war, all the companies had to keep training, keep up, running the hills and play war, but for training purposes. That's where I was fortunate. I didn't have to do that, because I got involved with the school. That's where my degree paid off, as a school teacher.

We had these tent schools. We had at least, I think, a half a dozen tents. We were assigned to teach basic reading, math courses to these young fellows.

Ivan Maras relaxes in the fall of 1953, flanked by two rows of tents that were used as classrooms for the 65th Regiment's school.

We would get a group in the morning. They would come off their training in the morning and attend these classes. Then, in the afternoon, we'd get another group. In fact, even in the evening, we would be able to teach high school courses, too, for those fellows that come in. As far as I knew, that was about the only school system. I'd never ever even heard of any others, in the Army in that area, at all, because of the Puerto Ricans, I guess.

DePue: But this is just for the 65th Regiment?

Maras: Just for the 65th Infantry Regiment we were doing this, right.

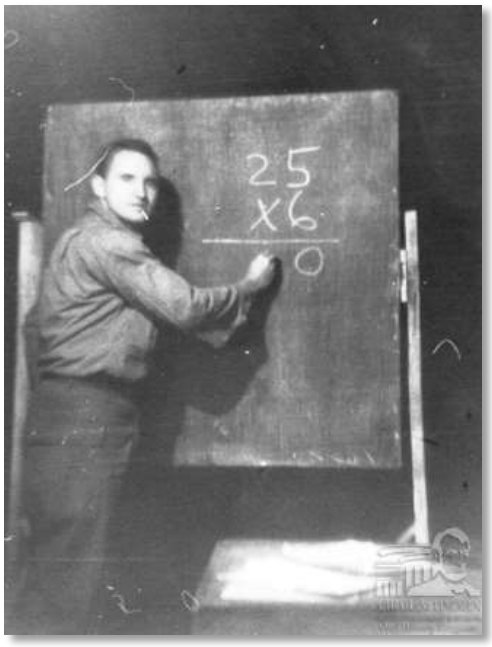
DePue: I would think the first challenge is, you don't speak Spanish, and a lot of these don't speak English. Were they getting English courses, as well?

Maras: They were getting English courses too, right.

DePue: Were you teaching that?

Maras: Most of my job was teaching math. I got involved with some of the reading courses, too. What we'd do, we would…These young fellows that we had for students were so enthused of attending school like this—especially getting off the training situation that they had—they were giving their fullest. They really enjoyed the school.

We would test, and they would, in a few months, test up to eighth grade level, which was, I thought, highly outstanding. So we had no discipline problems over there, like they have in the public school now-a-days, because these students were anxious to learn. So, it was enjoyable to teach them.



Ivan Maras reverted to school teacher, after the Armistice was signed, teaching math to many of his fellow soldiers in the 65th Infantry Division. He's making his point at the chalkboard, in late 1953.

DePue: Yeah, that's the ideal situation for any teacher; isn't it?

Maras: That's right.

DePue: Did they start at the very basic, elementary level, many of these?

Maras: That's right. They had to, because that's where they were. They were at that location, yeah.

DePue: You talked a little bit about it. Basically, your school are tents, Quonset huts?

Maras: Well, at the beginning, were tents. I don't know how many months. We would move around eventually, because it seemed like we constantly— every three or four months—moving to another area. We finally moved out of the tents, into Quonset huts, which I thought, boy, that was really high living, compared to the tents. But the tents served a purpose, like I said.

One of the Quonset huts used for a school at Camp Dankowski, where Maras taught math to Puerto Rican soldiers. The sign above the hut reads, "Heartbreak Hall," commemorating one of the fiercest battles of the Korean War.

We had homemade desks and blackboards out of plywood. It served the purpose. We had lights, you know, in there. We had a little heating stove in there, oil heating stoves they were. It was comfortable.

DePue: Did you have any Koreans assigned to the 65th Regiment?

Maras: The only Koreans we had, they were like house boys. They would do the cleaning and washing of clothes and things like that. That was about it.

DePue: What did you think of the Koreans that you were dealing with?

Maras: They were very good. They were very helpful, and they worked very hard.

DePue: After the war, especially, did you have a chance to travel around in Korea and see some of the countryside?

Maras: After the war, I did get a chance to get involved with the Revisit Program.

DePue: But that's way down the road.

Maras: That's 1987, right.

DePue: But I want to know, when you were first there, did you get a chance to see the countryside, when you were there in '53, '54?

Maras: Like I said, I was always above the 38th parallel, except when I had two R&Rs [military slang for rest and recuperation or rest and relaxation or rest and recreation or rock and roll] in Japan. So you did get to see some of the…For example, the last R&R I did travel by train, all the way down to Pusan [Korea]. So you did get to see the whole country, from that aspect, from the train. So that was interesting, right.

DePue: How would you describe the countryside you were seeing on the train, as you were passing through?

Maras: Well it looked…You know, there were just farmers. They had the old fashioned way of farming, I guess, and growing rice and things like that. Like I said, the odor was pretty nasty all the time.

DePue: Was this more primitive than what you experienced, growing up in the United States?

Maras: Oh, definitely, very much so, more primitive, right, right.

DePue: Did you have a chance to see Seoul or any other big city?

Maras: Oh yes, I did get to go through Seoul. What I remember at the time was that, pretty well, everything was all bombed out. All the buildings were pretty well gone.

DePue: Where did you go for R&R? You said Japan?

Maras: The first one was the end of 1953, right at Christmastime, at Tokyo. So it was [from] there we went to Seoul and flew out of Seoul to Tokyo and spent a week there, which I thought was terrific. That was during the Christmas season.

Early in 1954, while attending a library school in Seoul, Maras snapped a photo of two buddies, while they visited a neighborhood in Seoul. South Korea was devastated by the war, so Koreans used whatever building materials they could find.

Then, I had a second R&R to southern Japan, and I thought it was nicer, from the standpoint, it took longer, because you spent a week in Japan itself. All the travel time…I always liked the travel. I never mentioned this before, I was always happy, even riding troop trains and a troop ship. It didn't bother me, because I was traveling.

Being raised on the farm, you didn't go anywhere. I always kind of had an urge to travel, and this was a traveling situation. Like I said, the second R&R, I rode by train down to Pusan, then got on these boats. [I] got on a boat to southern Japan, on the Inland Sea. You got to see all the…There was so much to see, you know, from this ship.

Of course, that second R&R, I think it was attempting…They knew they'd kept me overtime. I should have gone home in twelve months. I had enough points to go home, and they kept me over sixteen months. So, I got the second R&R, I guess, from that standpoint, because most people only got, usually, one R&R. But, like I said, I enjoyed that R & R the most, I think, that second one.

DePue: Was there a big difference between what you were seeing of the city of Seoul and Tokyo, when you got there?

Maras: Oh, yeah. Tokyo and those other places in Japan were more modern, the electric trains and all that. They were a lot more modern at that time.

DePue: Did you or your unit work with Korean orphans at all?

Maras: No, we never did that, that I ever knew of, no.

DePue: I know there were a lot of American units that adopted orphans or worked in orphanages, because there were just so many orphans around the countryside. What would you consider the toughest part of your service in Korea, the thing that you had the most difficulty with?

Maras: Well, that's hard to say. (laughs) Of course, I didn't enjoy it all during the months of the war. That was the roughest to me, because, after that, I did enjoy it. After the war was over, you were more relaxed, and I got involved with teaching these classes. Even though we didn't have any such things as PXs or anything, we were still on the front lines, because you still always expected to be attacked. You always had to be on guard. So we didn't have any kind of…Well, you didn't have a chance to spend any money, unless you went on R&R, or you sent your money home.

Staff Sergeant Ivan Maras talks on the radio during a training exercise in South Korea, in the spring of 1954.

DePue: What did you think of the soldiers you served with? Did you see a difference between the

Puerto Rican soldiers and the other Americans you served with, in terms of the quality as soldiers?

Maras: Oh, yes. The Puerto Ricans were more poor. You could tell they were coming from poor families. And they were much more, like I said, less educated than the Americans from the United States here, that I served with.

DePue: But it sounds like, by the time they went through a lot of these classes that you guys were teaching, they left the war much better off. Would that be a fair statement?

Maras: That's right. It'd be interesting to find out what they did after they went home.

DePue: What'd you think of the officers and the non-commissioned officers [NCOs] you served with?

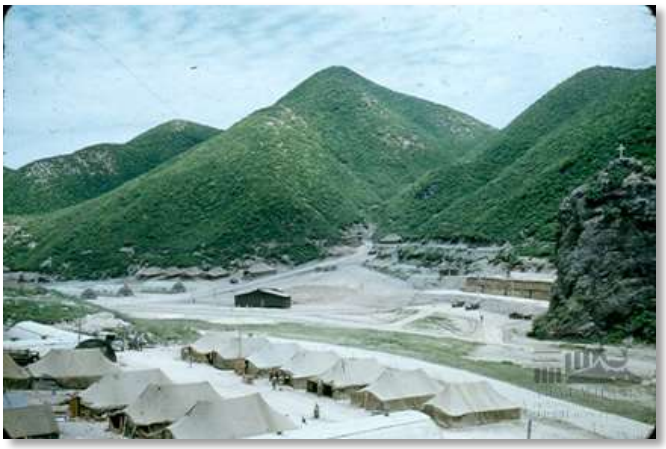
Maras: Had no problem with…It seemed like they knew their jobs. To me, they did a good, very outstanding job.

DePue: Now Ivan, do you remember any especially humorous incidents while you were over there?

Maras: (laughs) Not particularly, I don't. To tell you the truth, I can't recall anything on—

DePue: Why did you stick around longer than most people? Most people had that one year tour, and then they headed back home.

Maras: Well, because I was drafted and my time would expire in a few months…The only reason that I knew that, they just kept me there, instead of bringing me back to the States. In the few months that I had left, there would be nothing for me to do here, back in the States, I guess. So they just kept me there.



Camp Dankowski, as it appeared after receiving a light dusting of snow. Maras was thankful that the unit was no longer in combat and at the front lines after experiencing Korea's bitterly cold winters.

DePue: Were you okay with that?

Maras: No, that made me very unhappy, because I thought, like most other people…Most of the other guys had points to go home, and they went home. I expected the same, and it never happened. I was very highly irritated, all the way out, even my discharge out of Chicago. They asked you if you'd join the Reserves. I put, "No. [I want] no part of the Army. I dropped my insurance. All this was mistakes. At the time, I didn't realize it. I'm sorry later on [that] I did that. But I was so highly mad and irritated with the Army. I just hated everything they did. (laughs)

Hansen Education Center on Camp Dankowski looked much improved shortly before Ivan Maras shipped home in September, 1954. The soldiers of the 65th appreciated their opportunity to improve their education.

DePue: Was that extension in service in Korea, one of the reasons this girlfriend, back in the States, decided not to wait around?

Maras: Oh, I'm sure it was. At that time, I couldn't see any fault on my part. But after a couple of years…In fact, I apologized to her, later on in life. I said that I was wrong, you know, in treating her the way I did, because I understand you can't expect a girl to wait for you that long.

DePue: Tell me about coming back home. Walk us through that process of returning back to the United States.

Maras: Well, again, we got on a troop ship, down in Pusan. We went by train again down to Pusan and took the troop ship home from there. The interesting part there, one of the fellows that was in our school situation, he was getting sent home at the same time. He was our, you might say, secretary in the school, jeep driver. He wasn't a teacher, but he was one of these kinds that was a go–getter. And he got lined up that we got on ship, a newspaper, coming home. So we had better quarters, better situation going home (laughs) on that troop ship than coming over, the first time.

We went to Seattle there, of course. They had a band and so forth when we got off the ship there in Seattle, which was nice. And then we flew from Seattle to Chicago. So [I] didn't have to take a train home; that was nice;

[I] got home quicker. Then at Chicago, of course, they gave us a little leave to go home. Of course, I was so anxious to go home.

I'll never forget the train ride home, back to Taylorville, where my parents were waiting. The train, on the way home, hit a truck, I guess, and we were delayed several hours (laughs) before we got home. In fact, my parents, they went home and came back later on to pick me up, finally. That was kind of…When you're anxious to go home like that and all that happened, it was kind of a rough situation.

DePue: Very quickly, walk through what you did after you returned and the career you ended up in.

Maras: The what, again?

DePue: What career you went into?

Maras: Oh.

DePue: Did you return to the farm?

Maras: Oh yeah, [I] returned to the farm. It was the end of October when I got discharged, and, of course, the crops were just already in. They had this G.I. Bill. Well, I said, I might as well go back to school a little bit. And I did go back to the University of Illinois that second semester, in soil chemistry, because I still was interested in agriculture.

DePue: And the University of Illinois didn't seem as big to you?

Maras: It didn't seem as big. The only bad part there, though, I did flunk a class there. It was because of my hearing. You see, at the time, I didn't realize I had lost quite a bit of hearing overseas. I'll never forget just sitting in this class, towards the back. [I] couldn't hear the instructor's lectures and ended up flunking the course.

DePue: How did you lose your hearing, too many explosions?

Maras: Well, it had to happen over there. Really, the first one started in basic training, on my left ear, of using the bazooka; you put it over your left shoulder. At that time, you didn't wear any hearing protection. So, I guess, I ended up with both hearing aids.

That happened, gee, after I retired from teaching. I had an experience with hard hearing all those years, but I never paid much attention to it. Of course, going to college afterwards, I realized I had to sit in the front to hear the instructor. Then, even during teaching, you had students ask you questions. You'd have to walk back to their desk and ask them to repeat the

question. But I didn't pay much attention. I didn't put any blame on the war at all, at that time. I just thought it was part of my build.

But I didn't get the hearing aids until after I retired and went to Tennessee. I got involved with the VA, [Veterans Administration] finally, and they traced it back. That was interesting, too, because, down in Tennessee, they do treat the veterans very good, I noticed, compared to Illinois, (laughs) I hate to say. They would give me a set of hearing aids every three years, a new set.

As soon as I retired from teaching, I tried to get my one, my left ear—this doctor here in Springfield said he could get me some hearing back, he thought—and had surgery. It failed. Then that's when I first bought my own hearing aid. But, like I said, when in Tennessee, the VA fixed me up nicely down there.

DePue: I wonder how you—a guy who comes back from Korea, taking courses in agriculture so he can go back work on the farm—how'd you end up teaching again?

Maras: At the U of I, in the summer, after I finished that second semester, the principal of the high school I graduated from asked me if I would be interested in teaching. And, of course, as I thought I wouldn't ever be a teacher again, even though I had the experience in Korea there; that was a good experience.

I said, well, I thought I would, you know, just for the experience there and farm with my dad. I said that would be nice. I was qualified to teach the chemistry, physics and math courses, and that's what he assigned me, because in a smaller school, you have five classes, and they were all different. They were all five different preps. But I enjoyed it, being young. In fact, I was a school bus driver, too. They only had one school bus (laughs) and, being non-married, I really enjoyed that first year of teaching like that.

DePue: What school again was this?

Maras: This was the Kincaid High School. Like I said, we only had one school bus; you'd drive to all the sports. I figured I'd spend more time in the school bus than I did in the classroom. (laughs) But it was enjoyable.

And then, of course, that's where I met my wife. She was a school secretary, and we dated all that first year. And then, like I said, I thought maybe I'd teach maybe one or two years, and that was it, just for the experience, because my goal was always farming. But we did get married that year, in August. After our honeymoon, the school board president says one of us had to leave, because only one member of the same family could…Now we were married, so we're a family. One of us had to leave. The rule [was] that one member only could work there at that school district. That kind of made me mad. I didn't realize it, at the time, that he was doing us a big favor.

There was a second grade open in Edinburg, Illinois for my wife. They asked her if she would like to teach over there, because she did have a two-year college degree from Springfield Junior College in Springfield here, which was the only college at that time, really to speak of, in Springfield. You didn't have the University of Illinois here, Sangamon State at that time, back in those years. But anyway, she had two years of junior college, which you could teach, on a special permit back in those years. So, that's how she got involved with teaching, and I stayed with teaching then, too. I figured that, together, that was a good way to raise a family. That's how we both retired as school teachers. (laughs)

DePue: Now, let's jump ahead a couple of decades here, because you've already mentioned that you returned back to Korea in what, 1987?

Maras: Nineteen eighty-seven, June, right, for a Revisit Program. At that time, I didn't think I'd be interested in going, because I heard about the program, and I was invited. I don't know how I was invited.

DePue: Were you involved with VFW or Amvets or anything like that?

Maras: I belonged to all those organizations at the time, American Legion, the VFW, and several organizations. I'm a lifetime member right now. But anyway, that's why I heard about the program. I thought, well, I don't want to go there, because I remember how…like Seoul was all bombed out and all. What's the use of going back there? You know, bring back old memories.

But, see, at the time we took that first trip, I remember, you had to pay full fare. That's all it cost me. Then the Korean government would wine and dine you for a whole week, at a fancy hotel, tours, Panmunjom right there, where they had the peace talks. So, I did go, and I was very happy I did go. That was back in '87. The program was kind of new yet, you know; it wasn't too many years they were having this program.

DePue: What was it like to see Seoul, the Seoul that you remembered from 1954 and the Seoul that you saw in 1987?

Maras: I was surely shocked, because I mean everything was so modern. All the buildings were new, bridges, of course, the roadways were…everything [was] just modern, a lot better than our country (laughs). So I was quite surprised.

DePue: Were you surprised at how well and how warmly they received you, as well?

Maras: That was another thing, right. They would recognize you as a Korean Veteran from the United States, and they would…women, their husbands and all that, would come up to you, hug you, shake your hands and thank you for helping them during the Korean War. That was all new to me, because that never happened here in this country. Like I said, when I came home, you just kind of forgot about the Korean War. You just went to your job or whatever, and that was it.

Ivan Maras was honored by a Korean official during his 1987 visit to South Korea. The South Korean people were very grateful to American veterans of the war, crediting them with saving their country.

DePue: It had to give you a wonderful feeling that what you had done during the war was appreciated.

Maras: That was a very good feeling, right, right. And, like I said, the Korean government, they really treated us well during that week. I always wanted to go back.

I did have a chance to go back again, because they wouldn't let you go back if you already had one trip. But in 2009, they started letting people go back, I guess, that'd been on that trip before. I applied and got this invitation to go again. There were fifty of us that met in Los Angeles.

DePue: So, how much different was the country from '87 to 2009? That's another twenty years again.

Maras: Right, and they were wining and dining us for a whole week. The hotels were more fancy than ever. (laughs) They fed us really good. The tours were neat. We did go back to Panmunjom again. I went to this room, where they had the peace talks. Well, like I said, the country itself is just doing very great, because everybody seemed like they're working; their factories are going full blast, more so than ever. I guess they are one of the outstanding countries in the world right now, in production.

DePue: What do you remember about that trip to Panmunjom and looking across the border into North Korea?

Maras: You see the North Korean guards over there, staring at you with binoculars.

DePue: Don't they have this little village that's just across the border in North Korea, that you're looking at?

Maras: Right.

DePue: I think it's called Peace Village; that's what it is now.

Maras: Peace Village, right, yeah. Yeah, we got to see all that area. The nice thing about it…An interesting part, you go in this building, where they had this table and a white line right in the middle of table, where one side was North Korea; the other side was South Korea. You got a chance to go on the North Korea side. (laughs) That was kind of interesting.

DePue: With no desire to go any farther north, huh?

Maras: No, no, no. (laughs)

DePue: I know it wasn't just Korea that you had a chance to visit in the last few years. Where else have you gone?

Maras: Well, I went back to—not back, because I never was there—Puerto Rico, just a couple of years ago. I thought, I'd sure like to go back and visit my regiment, because I heard they were National Guard over there. Because, at the time, when I was there in Korea, they lost their colors, because of what happened on the front lines.

DePue: "They lost," meaning they lost them to the Chinese, or—

Maras: No. The United States government evidently took their—I don't know how you'd call it—the colors away from their country, that this regiment, they didn't belong to the Puerto Ricans anymore.

DePue: Because they hadn't performed well in a couple cases?

Maras: Oh, hundreds of them got dishonorable discharges for what they did on the front lines. They didn't want to fight. That's when we integrated this regiment with the U.S. soldiers, like me. At that time, I didn't know that was happening. I found all this out later on. But I wanted to go back and visit, and I found out they were National Guard. They got their colors back, I guess, several years after the war. I don't know when exactly.

So, when I heard they were National Guard, I said, I'll just go over here at the National Guard, here in the State of Illinois, and see if I could visit them, you know. The information officer I talked to, he contacted the information officer down in the 65th, down in Puerto Rico. That same day, I got a phone call from Puerto Rico, inviting me down.

So, of course, I was ready to go, because I like to travel anyway. (laughs)

I did fly down there in the next few months after that. This is in 2011, and they began—just like the Korean government— they wined and dined me for those two or three days I was there and take me down to southern Puerto Rico on tours there, showing me where they trained the 65th for the Korean War. I was amazed, because it was just like Korea. It was mountainous, just like Korea. So I had a good time down there.

In May, 2011, Ivan Maras traveled to Puerto Rico to visit with members of the Puerto Rican National Guard. His warm reception included this meeting with Major General Antonio Vicens, the Adjutant General for Puerto Rico.

DePue: Did they treat you like a hero?

Maras: More or less, I guess. (laughs) I [was] hoping to see some of the old retirees from the 65th, maybe, but I never had a chance. Another thing, like I said, they're integrated. The information officer, I think he was from Minnesota. Several of these officers were from this country. I know some of them mentioned they married Puerto Rican girls, and they're living down there in Puerto Rico right now. They're in the National Guard and, like I said, this is a good example of they're integrated, no more segregated.

DePue: I know there's one more trip that you've had an opportunity to take in the last few years. That's the Honor Flight. Is that correct?

Maras: That's right. That was in September of 2012, and that was a very good trip. That's an all day trip to Washington, D.C. and seeing the sights, all the memorials and that. That was very, very good.

DePue: What was the most memorable part of that trip?

Maras: I guess the World War II memorial, along with the Korean Memorial. That was very nice. And, of course, the…[I] can't even remember now. Oh, the museum where they have all the airplanes.

DePue: The Smithsonian?

Maras: Yeah, right.

DePue: The Air and Space Museum?

Maras: The Space Museum. That was fascinating. So I'm glad I got to see all that, right.

DePue: I'd say you've gotten your fill of traveling here, these last few years.

Maras: I'm ready to travel again, too. (both laugh).

DePue: From everything you've told us here, Ivan, you wanted to spend as little time in the Army as you possibly could, both before, and you were more than ready to get out at the end, as well. But looking back at it, how do you think those two years changed your life, or did they?

Maras: Oh, I think they did, because gosh! You had a different look at life itself, serving in all those capacities. Even though it was a rough situation, I am very glad I had the experience to see all this, what I did see. It was just, what, two years? And there was so much done in two years for a lifetime of memories right now, I guess. And they're all coming back now because, like I said, you're discharged, and you're back in civilian life; you forgot all about those places. But the last few years, the service is being more recognized by the public, which I enjoy in seeing, because I think all the services, all the armed services, need all this right now.

DePue: Did it bother you that…Well, Korea is called the "Forgotten War" in the United States, because there's so much focus on World War II, and then Vietnam came along, and everybody was caught up in Vietnam, for a variety of reasons. Did it bother you that the Korean War Veterans typically are kind of ignored and overlooked?

Maras: This is it; we were until now. These last couple of years, we are being more recognized, which I appreciate.

DePue: What do you think has changed in America that has caused that?

Maras: I hate to say it, but I think these other wars are starting all this, Iraq, Afghanistan and all. I think are bringing more to the public eye.

DePue: An appreciation for all of our veterans?

Maras: That's right. That's right.

DePue: What would you like to have people understand and remember about your service as a veteran, the Korean War in particular, and what you guys accomplished?

Maras: Well, I think what we did over there was stop the spread of communism. I think that was our biggest, biggest point, and we did. I feel like I'm very happy to be part of that. I'm glad it happened, because if it spread, at that time and the way it was going, I think it'd have been a very terrible situation for this country and our allies.

DePue: So the sacrifices you made, were they worth it?

Maras: I think very much so, right.

DePue: How would you like to finish? Any other comments you'd like to make for us?

Maras: Well, I enjoyed this session very much. I hope somebody who's listening in, I hope it's educational for them, and they need to give it a good outlook, a better outlook, at what the Korean War was about.

DePue: Thank you very much for the opportunity. I've enjoyed it and really appreciate it.

Maras: You're quite welcome.

DePue: And Merry Christmas to you, Ivan.

Maras: Same to you, Mark.

DePue: Thank you.

[Interview ends.]