The Summer of ’50

On the 25th of June 1950, the Peoples Army of North Korea surged across the 38th Parallel and invaded their neighbors to the south. For me, this act of aggression added a new dimension to an already involved summer. I was 20 years old, living at home with my parents and working on the staff of the family business, a greenhouse and flower shop in the small town of Waverly, IA. Two years earlier, after graduating from high school, I had attended college briefly but dropped out in the first semester because I had picked the wrong school in the wrong place. Mostly, I was just not prepared emotionally for the demands of college life—particularly in a place halfway across the country from my home. So now I was on my way to becoming a small-town businessman.

It was a good life. We lived in a small apartment over the greenhouse—my parents, my 18-month-old sister, my 15-year-old brother and I. My salary was $300.00 per month. I paid no rent and I had free use of any of the automobiles owned by the business. (We had no family car as such.) My older brother, Ted, now married and with a 2-year-old, lived next door and also worked in the greenhouse. The business was a family affair, which meant that we worked hard when we needed to and took time off when we had personal things that were important to us. This was particularly the case in the summertime.

Because the greenhouse became insufferably hot on sunny summer days, we had been following a summertime work schedule that began at 4:00am and ended at noon. For me, the local swimming pool had become the venue of choice on those hot afternoons. Over the years, I had become a strong swimmer had even joined the YMCA in Waterloo (20 miles to the south) so I could continue swimming in the winter. Most recently, I had taken training at the “Y” to qualify as a Leader-Examiner, their highest level of water-safety instructor.

So, after the local pool opened for the summer of ’50, I was asked by the head of the local Red Cross to become the pool’s water-safety instructor for that year. I taught lifesaving and water safety to young people (mostly teenagers) to qualify them to become lifeguards at the pool and I taught beginning swimming to kids of all ages. I think I got paid $150.00 for my efforts and I revised my work schedule at the greenhouse to adjust for the time.

Like a lot of kids in those days, I had played sandlot baseball as I was growing up, but I had never played organized baseball on an official team. In high school, I was on the track team, which competed at the same time of year as baseball. So I have no idea how I qualified to play shortstop that summer on a team in the region’s fast-pitch softball league—but I did. I do recall enjoying it and doing a credible job both in the field and at the plate.

Meanwhile, the U.S. had assumed a principal role in defending South Korea from the invasion by the Communists from the north and the Selective Service System had me registered 1A for the draft—a continuation from WWII which had ended five years earlier. At my age and with no prospects for deferment (most kids my age had college deferments), my likelihood for being drafted into the military was a sure bet. The only question was whether I wanted to look at possible alternative options to being drafted. So, in the time I had before my local draft board sent me “Greetings:” I went to the Army recruiter in Waterloo to inquire what those options might be. Mobilization for the war was just beginning, so the recruiter welcomed me enthusiastically and made me a tempting officer. He told me that I qualified for a “civilian commitment” to officer’s candidate school and explained how that program worked.

He advised that, if I applied for this program, I would first be required to pass a number of tests (physical, intelligence and interviews) at Fifth Army Headquarters in Chicago. Then, if I

passed all the tests and joined the Army under this special regulation, I would be put on a training track that would—in about a year—result in my being commissioned a second lieutenant for a three-year term of service. If at any time during that training I either failed the requirements of the course or chose to drop out, I would revert to my status prior to selection—which was civilian. I would be honorably discharged and could rethink my alternatives. However, without a full year of service, I would still be eligible for the draft. I liked that option and applied for the program. My parents were content with my decision. My two older brothers were both in the military during WWII, so they'd been through the experience before.

Shortly thereafter, I received in the mail instructions and vouchers from the Army for traveling to Chicago for two or three days to complete the requirements to qualify for officer's training. I think I traveled to Chicago on the overnight Illinois Central train out of Waterloo. As it turned out, there were a number of us from around the Midwest that arrived at Ft. Sheridan for these examinations. As I recall, we had three written examinations requiring most of one day. Then we had an exhaustive medical exam and at least one intimidating interview by a senior Army officer. Sometime early in the process, I was required to choose the arm of service (infantry, artillery, engineers etc) to which I wanted to be assigned. I chose the infantry, although I was aware that infantry second lieutenants were generally referred to as "cannon fodder." I had spent the years of WWII (ages 11 to 15) watching movies glorifying combat and I didn't give my choice a second thought. The one question I recall from my interview was, "Why did you choose the infantry?" I'm sure my answer reflected my wish to be where the action was. Two years later I would have the opportunity to reconsider that answer.

A few weeks after that interview, I received acceptance of my application for the program and instructions to appear for enlistment into the Army—at the enlistment center in Des Moines on October 2, 1950, several weeks in the future. Meanwhile, another issue had come up that was going to require my involvement before enlisting in the Army. My brother, Don, had joined the Army after having been out of the Navy for a couple of years after his discharge at the end of WWII. During those intervening years, he had lived in Waverly for a while with his family, acquiring a house trailer at some point in their tenure there. After he joined the Army, his family moved to Kingston, NY, where his wife's family lived. Now, they wanted the house trailer transported to Kingston for his family to use there.

At that time, the greenhouse owned a 1948 Chevrolet pick-up truck with sufficient power to pull the trailer. So, it was decided that my brother Ted and I would tow the trailer out to Kingston using the pickup. It was going to be whirlwind trip. We didn't have a lot of time. We couldn't both be gone from the business very long and Ted—who was a passionate Brooklyn Dodgers baseball fan—wanted to stop in New York City on the way home, where the Dodgers had a home game scheduled while we would be there…and I had to be ready to join the Army in a few weeks.

It was 1,200 miles from Waverly to Kingston, which was a minimum 24-hour trip on the two-lane roads and the kind of terrain we would be traversing. As a result, I can only remember sleeping in a bed one night on that trip. We drove straight through, swapping turns at the wheel as we progressed. Ted had been an Army truck driver in Korea after the end of WWII and the previous year I had driven an Army surplus truck—towing another (www.ocomm.net/memories/convoy.pdf)—over roughly the same route we would be following with the house trailer. However, towing that heavy house trailer with a pickup was a new experience and required some getting used to, particularly in the mountains of western New York. The trailer had electric brakes wired to a control on the steering column. Going down hills, you had

to remember to use primarily the trailer brakes to avoid having the trailer overtake the pickup and throw the whole operation off the road.

We arrived in Kingston on day two of the journey and spent the rest of that day resting and getting acquainted with Don's in-laws. What I remember most about that day was that Vera's mother was cooking spaghetti sauce which, she advised, had to cook at least eight hours to be considered ready to serve. I'm sure there was a big family dinner that night, but I don't recall anything about it. I'm also sure that we hit the hay at their home early that evening as we had a trip ahead of us getting to Ebbetts Field in Brooklyn in time for the start of the game.

It was only 100 miles from Kingston to New York City, but we had to find our way through city traffic when we got there, locate the ballpark, find parking and get our tickets before the game started. Given that, I'm sure we started early. I don't remember much about the trip, except driving by the docks in New York and taking time to see the Queen Mary tied up at the pier there. We didn't seem to have a whole lot of trouble getting around in New York, finding the ballpark in Brooklyn or getting a place to park. I'm sure, the place was a lot more accommodating in 1950 than it would be today. However, our problem wasn't the traffic. It was the rain. It had started late that morning and continued as we found our seats in the stadium. We had grandstand seats, so we remained dry as we waited for the rain to stop and the game to start. Regrettably, it didn't and they finally called the game.

So, we cashed in our rain checks and headed home, disappointed but anxious to get on the road. I think we arrived home about suppertime on day four. It had been a fascinating adventure but, as they say, "All in a day's work." A few weeks later, I boarded a bus for Des Moines to join the Army. It was a fitting end to the *Summer of '50*.

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