

The Orderly Room

This is not a story about neatness. It's a story about friendship. I spent three years on active duty with the Army during the Korean War. As I was reflecting on those years recently, I got to thinking about the friendships I had made, what I could remember about those friends and what made them memorable. When I hear old combat veterans talk about their "army buddies," I sometimes wonder if their experiences were anything like mine. I suspect that they were not, so I would like to tell you about mine. To do that, I'll need to mention a bit about the environments in which those friendships blossomed.

I spent my first year in the service undergoing training, culminating at the end of that year in my being commissioned as a second lieutenant in the infantry. During that year (1950-51), I served in half a dozen different training assignments, which I shared with hundreds of other GIs, and I made a number of temporary friendships. The closest I came to having an "army buddy" that year was a guy named Doug Gill. I first met Doug at Ft. Sheridan in Chicago, about two months before either of us was in the Army. We were both there to be tested as potential officer candidates. He came from Indianapolis driving a recent vintage Mercury automobile. I'll never forget driving in that Mercury late one night with him and a couple of other guys, ninety miles an hour up the Outer Drive from downtown Chicago to Fort Sheridan. As it turned out, we both were selected for the program and ended up in the same basic training company at Ft. Riley that fall.

We were also in the same class at leadership school and did our practical leadership training in the same company. Then we had a short leave before we started Officers Candidate School (OCS) at Ft. Benning, GA (in the same class). I intended to drive my "new" (1941) Oldsmobile from Iowa to Ft. Benning. So, we arranged for me to stop over at his home in Indianapolis on the way and drive to Ft. Benning together. We were not in the same platoon in OCS class #4, so our opportunities for regular interaction during the course were limited. However, his parents were present when we graduated, so his mother kindly consented to pin on my bars as a surrogate for my mother who could not be there. I never saw him again after we graduated. We did talk once on the phone some years later, after we were both civilians again. I did make some other memorable friendships while I was in OCS, but it was only because of a reunion of my OCS class fifty years later that any of those friendships became rekindled. Two of them (Dean Denmark and "Mac" McComber) remain active friendships today.

In the first eight months I served as an officer in The States after OCS, I made a couple of memorable friendships with officers with whom I shared a duty assignment as instructors in a basic training unit. Don Boyd had been in my OCS class. As we were both single, we palled around a lot after we were assigned to the same instruction committee. He even went home with me to Iowa (from Kansas) one weekend when, as it happened, I met the woman that would become my wife. Somewhat later, Jack Dorward was assigned to our committee and became a friend, although he was married and we didn't see much of him socially. That summer (1952), Boyd got orders shipping him to Europe and I was shipped to Korea. Except for a possible letter or two, Boyd and I never connected again.

However, when I got to the headquarters of my assigned division in Korea, I spied a familiar face in the officer's mess the first night there. It was Jack Dorward. Jack had gone to Korea a couple of months earlier and was now a minor functionary in division operations. After that brief meeting, I went on to an assignment in one of the regiments in that division. Jack remained at division headquarters until he rotated sometime the next year. During the months we

both served in the division, we connected on rare occasions—notably, for Christmas dinner as I was passing through division headquarters on a road reconnaissance. We also arranged to go together for R&R in Japan in March 1953. After the war, Myrna and I once visited Jack and his wife Jan at their home outside Chicago.

Now, before I recount my friendship with the denizens of the 31st Infantry Regiment headquarters company orderly room, I need to explain a bit about how the regiment was organized for combat, how I fit into that organization and how I uniquely connected with those denizen over the months I was there. Some of this I explained in my book *Friendly Fire* (see <http://ocomm.net/fire>), but this narrative has a sufficiently different context that a somewhat more detailed approach will be useful.

The basic administrative unit in U.S. Army organization is the company. Everybody in the army is assigned to a company, from the commanding general on down. Each company commander is responsible to account for the whereabouts and status of every service member assigned to his unit. Those data are reported every day on the company's "morning report," so-called because it is the first document prepared and submitted through channels each day. In my day, in the stateside army and in rear-area units in the combat zone, these activities were carried on in what is typically called "the orderly room." There, the company commander, the first sergeant and the company clerk (and, in rifle companies, an administrative warrant officer) carried out the business of the company. The company is also the basic tactical unit in combat situations, although administrative personnel typically were maintained in a rear area during the fighting. In the combat zone, these locations were termed "command posts" (forward and rear), or CPs.

When I arrived in Korea as a green 2nd lieutenant, I expected to be assigned as a platoon leader in a rifle company. These were the units in which GIs were being killed more routinely and were in greatest need of replacements. A full-strength rifle company had six officers, one warrant officer and just short of 200 enlisted men. And, ideally, each of the four platoons in the company would have about four dozen men, commanded by one of the officers—although, in my experience, they seldom, if ever, came anywhere near full strength. With rare exceptions, all of the platoons in a rifle company share a common mission. That common mission tended to promote camaraderie among the officers in the company.

When I reported to my assigned regiment, I was advised that my assigned company would be regimental Headquarters Company. As I mentioned earlier, everyone in the Army has to be assigned to a company. The company to which the regimental commander and his staff were assigned was Headquarters Company. In addition to the operations of the colonel and his staff, there were a number of special operations carried on by the regiment that required teams of specialists. These five teams (platoons)—one of which I was assigned to command—were also a part of Headquarters Company. The mission of each of these platoons was sufficiently unique that they seldom, if ever, worked together. The rest of the officers in the company were part of the regimental staff—with missions that were remote from our own. So, the structure into which I was inserted as a new officer in the regiment did not promote the molding of enduring friendships among any of my colleagues.

In addition to that, my platoon (Intelligence and Reconnaissance) had a cadre of combat-qualified men and an authorized mission that the terrain and the circumstances made essentially irrelevant. So the colonel often found it convenient to attach us to some front-line rifle company that was short-handed due to combat losses. I spent much of my first three months in Korea "on the hill," attached to a rifle company and serving as a front-line platoon leader. In those

situations, I was always an “outsider,” and I never had anything more than a speaking acquaintance with any of my fellow officers in those companies. The one exception was a guy who, like me, was an outsider in the company to which I was attached. Although our friendship was short—less than two weeks—it was a memorable relationship and worth a few lines of commentary.

Joe Conley was the field artillery forward observer in our attached rifle company. His OP (observation post) was in my platoon sector, so we were thrown together not only by our shared status as outsiders, but also by simple geography. I took an instant liking to Joe (called Charlie O’Brien in my book). Here is how I described our relationship in the book.

Even if we had not shared this status, I could not have avoided developing a strong affection for the forward observer. He was a fun-loving Irishman with a charming personality and an encyclopedic memory for bawdy stories. When the chips were down he was all business but the rest of the time he was a continual source of good humor.

The memory of those days of shared time on that hill east of Kumhwa would have been all I every knew of Joe Conley except that he went on to become a well-known actor, best known for his role as the storekeeper Ike Godsey on the long-running television series, *The Waltons*. I remained totally unaware that the guy I watched on *The Waltons* was the friend who shared that hill in Korea. Then, the son of one of my OCS classmates began to write a book about a later battle in which his father and Joe were both participants—and of which I was an official observer. It was from that young author that I first learned about Joe’s later career and also received from him contact information.

I talked with Joe on the phone and agreed to send him a copy of my book, in which he was a significant character. He called me a couple of times after that and then, about a year ago (July 2013), I learned that he had died. I left a phone message with condolences for his wife, who graciously called me back. We talked for some time and I had the opportunity to tell her that her husband had been one of the more unforgettable characters in my life, albeit that our time together had been very short.

The most enduring friendships I had in Korea were not with fellow officers. They were with three enlisted men—the denizens of the orderly room: Corporal DiPlato, the company clerk; Master Sergeant Daniels, the company first sergeant; and Master Sergeant Little, the regimental sergeant major. The three of them bunked together in the back half of the orderly room tent. Of the three, Sgt. Daniels was the one with whom I had the closest relationship. That relationship started when we discovered, soon after I arrived in the regiment, that we both were avid chess players. I’m sure the relationship flourished in part because of some wisdom I had learned in my year as an enlisted man. Here is how I described that wisdom in my book:

Another if-you-know-what’s-good-for-you principle I had learned in my short army career was “When the first sergeant has something to say, you listen!” The fact that Master Sergeant Davidson [Daniels] was almost a complete stranger to me was irrelevant. The fact that I outranked him was also unimportant—at least at this time and in this place. What was relevant was the fact that he was older, wiser and far more experienced than I—and he was the first sergeant. That meant that he had seen more action, knew more important people and wielded more real clout than I ever would.

The fact was, when you wanted to get something done at regimental headquarters, one of these three guys needed to be your first stop. However, this was not the main reason for my friendship with them. They were all genuinely nice guys and I expect they appreciated a young officer that treated them with the respect they deserved.

Although I spent a lot of my time in Korea away from my bunk at Headquarters Company (including four months attached to the field artillery) it was still my assigned home and the orderly room was always my first stop when I was in the area—and for a game of chess with Sgt. Daniels if time permitted. It was there that I was guaranteed to find out what was going on behind the scenes at regimental headquarters. It was there that Cpl. DiPlato and I hatched the plan to abduct the chaplain's assistant and his pump organ to go Christmas caroling around the area in a GI truck. It was there that I spent Christmas Eve with my three friends reminiscing about better days. It was there that I was playing chess with Sgt. Daniels the evening Old Baldy was being assaulted by the Chinese, before I made an unexpected late night trip up front with a bunch of stragglers I found on the road as I left regiment headquarters for my bunk at the field artillery CP.

By the time I was completing my tour in Korea, few of the headquarters officers remained among those that were there when I had arrived ten months earlier. Yet my friendship with the three enlisted friends in the orderly room had endured for almost the entire time I had been there. I do have memories of experiences with my fellow officers, most of them pleasant—some of them amusing. However, it is the orderly room and its denizens that I recall most fondly as think about the friendships I made in the Korean War.

The adjoining photo of Sgt. Daniels and me was taken sometime toward the end of my Korean tour.

