Ed Schmitz: 
Korean War Veteran

I recently spoke with a veteran of the Korean War by the name of Ed Schmitz, who was born and raised in Nauvoo, Illinois. Staying close to his hometown, he currently lives in Hamilton, Illinois with his wife Kay. Ed is a fairly humble individual and was often prompted by Kay during the course of our initial interview to provide details on his achievements. Prior to going into the military, he got married and his plans consisted of farming, until he was stationed in San Diego where he spent two years training for the Marine Corp. During this time he experienced the intense conditions of boot camp, a time upon which Ed does not reflect fondly. He was particularly not a fan of getting up to scrub the floors with sand. Furthermore the running and exercises were extremely strenuous and he had to wake up very early. Eventually on September 1, 1952, he went overseas to Korea. In order to further understand the context of Ed’s experiences, it is important to know about the circumstances surrounding the Korean War.

The Korean War was a conflict between the United Nations (who were supported by the United States) and the communist Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea). The war actually started in 1950 when North Korea invaded South Korea, and South Korea was then aided by the U.S. military. Harry Truman was president at the
time and he had never asked Congress to pass the official declaration of war, so it was declared a “police action”. (This action set a precedent for Lyndon Johnson when he sent troops to Vietnam without Congress’s declaration of war.) General Douglas MacArthur was the commander of the United Nations troops. North Korea’s troops were pushed back to the north, but then the Chinese came to their aid. In 1953 a truce was signed because neither side was going to win.

I was interested in knowing more about the United States involvement in this war, so I did some research from the Houghton Mifflin Company Encyclopedia. According to this source, at first Americans supported President Truman’s thought that the U.S. needed to be involved in this war because our honor and credibility were at stake. The effects of the Vietnam War caused some to change their minds. They felt that the United States’ involvement basically supported what was a civil war. A total of 1.8 million Americans served in Korea. Of those, 54,200 were killed and 103,300 wounded (Ed was in this category).

While in Korea, Ed was on the main line of resistance. He would be stationed at various outposts, fighting the Chinese, and he was also a flamethrower operator. He held the title of corporal and was there for about a month before he got injured in October. He endured wounds on his hip and both legs and spent six weeks in the hospital. He said it was very painful, but he was able to eventually heal up (to a certain extent) and return to his duties. Ed’s wife added that he had a piece of shrapnel in his rear end, but Ed chose not to elaborate on that. Overall Ed appeared to be rather sensitive when it came to the details of what he witnessed while in combat. During the daytime he said not too much happened so everyone usually slept, and most of the action happened at night. This is
when they would have to be on their guard basically all the time, and he said there was something to do almost every night. Ed said they “just hated the Chinese”. That mutual feeling was what created the initial bond between him and the other men who were fighting with him.

Also during the day he would write letters to his wife and other family members back home. This was the only way he could communicate so he said he wrote quite often. As for meals, they ate what was referred to as “shit on a biscuit”, and Ed assured me that this is not something I want to try. He said they were in sort of a rushed state when they ate, but he usually had all he would have wanted. As far as other conditions go, he said that everyone was dirty most of the time, as they only showered once a week. Along with the rest of their outfit they had three different pairs of socks that they would rotate through, and one pair of boots. Ed said his feet were often in a state of pain and he doesn’t miss that feeling. He actually cringed as he remembered how his feet felt.

It was Christmas day when they boarded the ships to come home. Ed was awarded the Purple Heart and was very honored to have this. He even gets to have special license plates. As he looks back on his time spent overseas, he feels that people have an obligation to serve their country, but as far as combat goes, he feels that women have no place in battles. After Ed returned home, he said that military service did not greatly impact his life due to the fact that he was able to transition back into farming fairly easily. However he did endure some painful experiences that he said he would prefer not to talk about in depth. I could see that this was a sensitive issue and didn’t want to pry, but I could tell that being in the war probably had more of an impact that he actually communicated to me. I also found later that it wasn’t until recently that Ed
began talking to anyone about his experiences in the war. He went on to say that he made many close friends with his fellow marines while he was overseas, and to this day he stays in contact with a few of them. He has even traveled to Nebraska to visit one of them.

Ed admitted during the interview that he was not very well educated on the purpose behind this war, other than the fact that it was communism-related. But regardless of how much he knew, he was still proud to be serving his country and just doing what he had to do. Upon his arrival home he felt that plenty was done to honor himself and his fellow veterans. Overall he was just happy to be home and get to eat normal food. In response to some other issues we talked about, he is generally very supportive of our current government. There wasn’t a specific action that he felt was something he could totally disagree with, but he thinks the military could probably use more money if this was an option. His views on the current war in Iraq are supportive but he thinks it is time for our men to come home.

If students could learn more about the sacrifices those in the military have to make, he thinks this would be beneficial as well. He said that beyond this, students should try to stay more educated on the current issues facing our military in general. He said he would have to get back to me on how this could be achieved, because he recognized that it would be quite a large undertaking, but projects like this are a step in the right direction. He feels that many people currently fighting in the war in Iraq would probably have an opinion on this topic as well.

The moral of Ed’s story seems to be that the war did have an impact on his life, even though he wasn’t extremely forthcoming with details, especially regarding combat.
I feel this way because Ed had gone for so long holding the details of this war inside. He obviously didn’t take the things he encountered lightly. While he may have been able to start up farming right away upon his arrival home, there was most likely an emotional impact that he has dealt with for quite awhile, and continues to. I could tell as he spoke that he truly values what members of the military have to do and appreciates the sacrifices they make.

For example he spoke in support of the decisions our government has made in regards to the war in Iraq, but he truly feels that our soldiers need to return home soon. As he made that statement it was powerful for me because I knew it was coming from someone who knows what it’s like to fight in a war, not just a bystander who wants to throw in their two cents. There are few aspects of life that I could see as being so powerful that one would be driven to not speak about them for many years. In Ed’s case, when I asked for details about the conditions during combat, the moments of silence really helped me realize the impact war can have on a person. As a result of this project I not only met someone new, but I developed a greater knowledge and respect for all veterans who make sacrifices for our freedom.