

Column: Service, Sacrifices of Korean War Veteran generation on Veterans Day

November 10, 2022



Each year, our nation sets aside Veterans Day to remember all the men and women who have defended our liberty through their honorable military service. American cities big and small celebrate with ceremonies across the nation to honor their service and their sacrifice.

We are proud to note that even in the wake of devastating and destabilizing world events like the COVID-19 pandemic, celebrations that honor our nation's veterans were among the first to return to full strength. The value that we as Oregonians and Americans place on honoring and showing gratitude toward those who have served and sacrificed to protect our freedoms and way of life is immense.

This year, while the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs continues to honor all veterans of all eras, we are paying tribute to one particular era of our veteran community: Oregon's Korean War veterans. Though this war it is referred to as the "Forgotten War," we in Oregon have never — and will never — forget the extraordinary and heroic veterans who fought for freedom in the Korean War.

This theme has a personal significance for me. My father fought as a Marine during the Korean War, where he earned the Purple Heart. After I was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Army and asked for my first tour of duty to be in South Korea, my father shared the only thing he ever said to me about his combat experiences there. He half-joked that if I ever traveled near the DMZ, I would surely see his fingernails where he desperately attempted to dig a deeper foxhole as enemy artillery rained down on his Marine unit.

Of course, my own experience of being stationed in the Republic of Korea was vastly different, thanks to those courageous men and women who fought during the Korean War. In fact, I enjoyed my first tour in Daegu so much that several years later, I served a two-year tour in Korea. The Korean people are wonderfully gracious and kind. Whenever I was in uniform outside the military base, older Koreans who remembered the war would sometimes approach me and thank me as a representative of the American military.

In 1950, our nation was weary of war after years of global conflict. Yet, 1.5 million Americans — including 60,000 Oregonians — left their family and friends and their homes to help defend our nation's friends and allies halfway around the world, in a place they had never been and on behalf of a people they had never met.

Together with men and women from 20 other nations, they joined shoulder to shoulder with the brave people of South Korea to defend their independence, to safeguard other Asian nations, and to protect

the freedom that remains our greatest gift. All those who fought in the Korean War endured terrible hardships — deadly cold, unbearable conditions, an enemy of overwhelming numbers, the threat of brutal imprisonment and torture.

But their courage never wavered — not when they were defending the perimeter at Busan, braving the tides at Inchon, confronting the world's fastest fighter jets in Mig Alley, enduring hand-to-hand combat on Heartbreak Ridge and Pork Chop Hill, or even fighting their way back from the infamous Chosin Reservoir.

In September of this year, I had the privilege of speaking at an Honor Flight of Portland, Oregon, send-off event for 24 honored veterans — 19 of whom served in the Korean War. It was an honor to meet them, shake their hands, hear some of their stories, and wish them well as they prepared to fly across the country to visit the fabulous memorials built in our nation's capital to honor and remember their service and sacrifice. They set a standard of valor and perseverance that may be equaled, but will never be surpassed in the annals of American history.

The men and women who served in the Korean War set themselves apart not only by their courage and sacrifice, but by their unity and dedication to one another. It was just before the Korean War, in 1948, that President Harry S. Truman issued Executive Order 9981 — abolishing discrimination based on race, color, religion or national origin in the United States Armed Forces.

When war broke out in 1950, our country — for the first time in its history — entered the fray with a fully integrated and desegregated military. These proud service members of all races, ethnicities and backgrounds joined the people of 20 other nations and South Korea to fight this war.

Earlier this year, we also observe the 73rd anniversary of the establishment of the Korean Augmentees to the US Army (KATUSA) program. It was started as a spoken agreement between President Seungman Lee and U.S. General Douglas MacArthur. At that time, the U.S. Army needed a military force that had the proper knowledge of the geography of Korea, and the abilities to distinguish South Korean allied troops from North Korean enemy troops and communicate better between U.S. soldiers and Korean soldiers. Therefore, some men were drafted as KATUSAs, and others voluntarily applied. After training, they were assigned to U.S. military units. During the Korean War, nearly 44,000 KATUSA soldiers fought for South Korea with U.S. forces. They, too, are heroes, and we honor them today.

This program continued after the Korean War, and KATUSA soldiers would spend 18-months with the U.S. Army learning an occupation and would then return to the ROK Army to train others. The program remains active today, and is a symbol of the ongoing friendship and mutual commitment between the Republic of Korea and the U.S.

I was fortunate to have KATUSA soldiers in my organization during both of my tours in Korea. They were among the most dedicated soldiers I have had the honor of serving with.

Finally, on this day, we remember and give thanks for the 40,000 Americans who paid the ultimate price in the fight for freedom and independence during the Korean War. Among their number were nearly 300 Oregonians whose names are inscribed on the Oregon Korean War Memorial in Wilsonville. Similarly, we give thanks for the more than 11,000 KATUSAs who went missing or were killed in action.

The world is a better place because of these men and women. Our duty as a nation and people is to remember and honor them, and to always strive to live up to the ideals for which they served and sacrificed.

Please consider joining me and ODVA for our Oregon Statewide Veterans Day Ceremony, which will take place at 11 a.m. Nov. 10 — the day before Veterans Day — at Oregon Capitol Mall, directly across from the front entrance of the Capitol Building.

The event is free and open to the public. It will also be livestreamed on ODVA's Facebook page at facebook.com/odvavet.

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