

I Came to Korea a Boy, But Returned Home a Man



By James Raymond Grundy

I was born in Eccles, Manchester UK on the 22nd of June 1931. Coming from a very poor family, life from the start was a struggle for me. My mother had passed away in 1934 at age 36, so it is true to say, that I could never remember my mother's face. Eventually, I was raised by my Grandparents, and was also raised in an orphanage, and from the age of 14 I worked on a farm for very little wage. Life at that time was a struggle for me, but reaching the age of 18 years old, I was able to leave farming, and made my way back to my home town of Eccles. Here I was able to work for a better wage, but soon, I was called into the British army, which, at that time, was compulsory for all males, the minimum length of service being 18 months.

On becoming a soldier, my rough upbringing was helping me to become a better person. In the army I was able to get good education, was able to adhere to the shouting and bullying, and of course, I learned how to defend myself at difficult times.

In the forces I also went to different army camps, and soon life was beginning to get easier for me, although the passing of my grandparents was a sorrowful occasion, so I just had to pull myself together, and make life as good as possible. It is true to say that I made many friends, who many years after my life in the forces, remain my friends up to this day. By now I had become a regular soldier, thus signing on for a further 10 years, but soon, I was to get a big shock : I was told I was to be sent abroad to help a country being invaded. The country was KOREA.

In late January 1951, I and 1,000 other soldiers boarded the ship, which was to take us to this far-off land, unheard of to many people. Many of those aboard had never sailed on a boat before, so very soon, sea sickness would strike. Many troops were quite ill at this stage, so it was a case of everybody looking after each other. After a few days sailing we managed to get ashore at Port Said for a few hours, which was a great comfort to us all, so of course we all enjoyed the break off the ship. During the journey to Korea, many of the troops were of the tender age of 19 years old, and we often wondered what sort of place was Korea. Each day we would discuss what the future held for us, and of course, many troops were to become quite nervous about our future.

Early February saw our ship dock at Busan, so it was time for many of us to say our good byes to our friends, and to find out what Korea had in store for us. On our arrival at Busan, we were greeted by a band composed of Americans that gave us a rapturous musical reception, and we were ushered into the dock building where we were treated to coffee and doughnuts. An inspiring welcome to Korea.

Eventually, a truck arrived to take us to the nearby holding camp, which proved to be a very sparse camp, with only three lots of sleeping quarters and a NAAFI, where we could buy cigarettes, coffee, tea and sandwiches. We were to stay there

for three days when we were ordered to move out to a camp further North, but I was told to stay behind and wait for further instructions. The next day I was told to report to the Commanding Officer, and after a lengthy period of time, he arrived.

We greeted each other and we sat down to talk about where and what I was going to do in Korea. "Grundy" he said, "we are led to believe that you have experience in undertaking" (I had done on this kind of work in UK), and he said that was the work I was detailed to do in Korea. It was voluntary work, and he explained the methods we had to use in our work in Korea. The next day I was introduced to a Korean soldier, who would carry the field radio and a rifle, and an American, an Australian, and a New Zealander. This would be the team to search for and recover any bodies we would find.

We were given detailed maps showing us where bodies had been buried. The map was marked out in sections, which guided us to any bodies buried in that area. The group of us were allowed three days to get together the equipment we were to use, and also we were given a small truck which would be driven by the New Zealander.

We, as a group of volunteers, were given permission to enter any part of the area from north of Busan to north of Daegu— a vast area to cover. With all instructions understood, we decided to start at Daegu, and work our way down to the area north of Busan.

We always had to be on the look out for North Korean soldiers, but surprisingly, we met very few of them, and on very rare occasions we were virtually behind enemy lines. The first two days were fruitless in our search, mainly because of the frozen ground, so we decided to move on and return to this area later, when better weather conditions allowed.

The map covered 20 different sites where fallen soldiers had been left behind, so we drove to another site, which turned out to be a rice field. The information we had about this site told us three British soldiers had been buried in a shallow grave. We had immediate success in retrieving the three bodies, but we were suspicious that someone had been at this site because their pay books did not match their dog tags. We cleaned up the bodies which had laid there for about five months. We took the bodies back to our base at Busan, and upon deciding that these bodies had been interfered with, these three soldiers were interred at the UN Cemetery at Busan as Unknown British soldiers.

As the spring grew nearer, we returned to our first site, where we discovered the bodies, an American soldier and a British soldier. These two bodies were cleaned as best as possible, and interred at the UN Cemetery at Busan, having been positively identified, and so, were buried along with their names on their gravestone.

As the much warmer weather approached, we were successful in finding many more graves : a very few North Koreans and some Americans, but mainly British. I am sure you can understand the conditions we worked under, especially in the rice fields, where gas bubbles from the bodies rose to the surface.

I am happy to say that, although the conditions that sometimes helped us to find bodies, worked against us at times, we were a proud group of men. Over the five months of searching, we recovered about ninety bodies : some North Koreans, South Koreans, American, and many British, mostly interred with their names on their graves. Now



Mr. Grundy received an honorary citizen award from Namgu from Park Jae-beom, the mayor of Namgu. Photo by Jeon Soo-jin

Served Recovery Unit during the War

James Raymond Grundy

A British veteran of the Korean War served as part of a remains recovery team. Many of the fallen soldiers he recovered from the battlefields are buried at the UNMCK. Since 1988, Mr. Grundy has visited the Cemetery every year to commune with and pay respects to his fallen comrades. Despite suffering from late-stage cancer, Mr. Grundy gave several lectures to Busan citizens and was appointed as an Honorary citizen of Nam-gu in 2019.

He is permitted to be buried in UN Cemetery after his death.



was the time for another group to take over from us, so, after saying our goodbyes, we went our separate ways.

My next move was to say good by to Korea for a spell in Japan, where I stayed for a long spell before going home to the UK. There I was to meet and marry my wife Jean who sadly passed away 2008. Now, I am retired from work, but visit Korea every year for the past 40 years. I stay with my good friend Dong Soo Lee, at his DMZ home, and in Busan with my Granddaughter.

It would be quite wrong for me to end this story without mentioning a person, who, over the years has helped me to unwind and speak about my service during the Korean War. That person is my Granddaughter Brenda (Korean name is Park Eun-jung), who I first met in 2006. She was working in the UN Cemetery Office and still does.

Brenda could sense at the first time we met, that I was very reluctant to talk about my time during the Korean War. She convinced me that I should talk more about my experiences, something that I had not done for all the years that followed after the Korea War.

I was also able to attend her wedding in 2010, even though I was having treatment for cancer. Brenda, her husband Robert and their families have been so kind to me, and I stay with them every visit I make.

I came to Korea as boy, but returned home as man.