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Surviving Hell: A Marine's Story of the Korean War

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HIS 485

**Surviving Hell:
A Marine's Story of the Korean War**

Introduction

The Korean War is often called the forgotten war in American history. The war began when the U.S. in conjunction with the U.N. invaded North Korea in an attempt to contain the communist North at the beginning of the Cold War. It was the first in a series of interventions that would become America's main strategy for dealing with communism in far off countries. The Korean War was supposed to be short and decisive, but soon turned out to be very challenging and very costly. The war's roots date back to lingering feuds between the North and South that began long before the U.S. got involved and were not solved at the end of the fighting.

The Korean War began on June 24, 1950 when North Korean forces invaded the south crushing any and all resistance in their path. In less than a month the Republic of Korea Army (ROKA) was reduced to less than half strength with only two divisions fully equipped.¹ The utter devastation faced by ROKA spurred the U.S. to action. The U.S. joined the war on June 30, 1950, beginning what would be a series of military disasters caused by the over-confidence of America's military leadership. Initially, the U.S. Army thought they could easily overcome the North Korean Army, but found the North Koreans to be well trained and seasoned fighters. The U.S. military would face defeat after defeat at the hands of the North Korean Army until MacArthur's bold invasion of the north reversed the tide of the war.

This success was short lived however as the U.S. was forced on the defensive once again when the Chinese entered the war. The Chinese Army surprised the U.S. by crossing the Yalu River into North Korea and was able to surround the American Army. It was at this point that the U.S. forgot any notions of victory and focused solely on survival. At the Chosin Reservoir, U.S. Marines fought tens of thousands of Chinese soldiers in an attempt to break out and return

to friendly lines. The Chinese advance brought the U.S. back to the 38th parallel where both sides reached a stalemate. It was at this point that the Korean War ended for the U.S., but not for the Koreans. A ceasefire was signed on July 27, 1953 that created a two and a half mile buffer zone across the middle of the peninsula.² While this treaty ended the fighting, it did not end the war and both sides remain in a state of war to this day. The way the war was concluded is one of the many reasons why it is not remembered by Americans today, and has since faded into history.

Another aspect of the war that has long since been forgotten is the men who fought it. Though faced with overwhelming odds the courage and tenacity of the men who fought helped the U.S. avoid total disaster in Korea. Many of these men were reservists: teachers, lawyers, and college students under-trained and untested in combat. They faced dire situations in their conflict with the enemy, and persevered nonetheless. The emotions these men experienced would have been many but they often kept them to themselves. One of their only outlets was writing letters to family and loved ones. Though conditioned by their society and upbringing to show little emotion, the men who fought in the Korean War faced a huge emotional toll in combat. These men wrote letters to loved ones as a way of coping with this burden.

The following story follows Private Jake Sullivan, a Marine in the 2nd Battalion, 7th Regiment, 1st Marine Division. Jake's story will be told through a series of letters he has written to loved ones throughout his time in Korea. His story begins as he begins training and lasts until he goes home. Though Jake Sullivan is a fictional character, the battles he fights in and the experiences he shares could have and probably did happen to a lot of the men who fought in Korea.³

July 20, 1950

Dear Beth,

I hope this letter finds you well and I'm sorry that you're hearing about this in a letter but by the time your family gets back from your trip I will be in training. These past few months with you have been some of the best of my life and I will miss them terribly. I'm sorry that I have to cut our summer short but my reserve unit has been called up. Looks like I'm going to Korea sooner rather than later. I never thought I'd be sent to fight a war when I joined the reserves. I had figured that I'd join after high school and learn some new skills and earn a little extra money for college. I never for a second thought we'd be going to war so soon after the last one, but I am ready for whatever comes next.

Well there's nothing I can do about it now but keep my chin up and move on. I know you had something planned for my twenty third birthday. I'm sure it would have been great. Maybe you can come visit me while I'm training in California and we can celebrate your twentieth birthday early before I leave. I have some money saved up from my time working at my Dad's drug store and can buy you a ticket out here. I already miss your beautiful smile and your infectious laugh and hope that I can see you before I leave. If not know that you will be in my thoughts and prayers.

Sincerely,

Jake

July 29, 1950

Dear Mother and Father,

I have arrived safely in San Diego and I am going to begin training at Camp Pendleton tomorrow. There are so many different people here from all over the country that I'm having a hard time placing their accents. Many are reservist like myself, but there are a few professional Marines among us. I had thought that all of the career Marines left with the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade.⁴ The men here seem so out of shape and I can see that our officers are worried. I must confess that the muscle I gained while training in the reserves has been lost under a layer of fat that I have gained while working in the shop.

I met a few of the men that I'll be training with on the train ride to the base and I feel like we are going to get along very well. There's Alan Davis, Alonzo Garcia, Fred Chapman, and Mario Fontanella. We are all assigned to the same rifle platoon. Everyone's already started calling Alan "Tex" on account of his thick southern accent even though he's actually from Missouri. I think the only connection he even has to Texas was that his dad was born there but moved to Missouri before Alan was born. Garcia joined the reserves to make some extra money and never figured he'd be going to war. Chapman's a lawyer, I think he joined just to prove that he was a man. All I know about Fontanella is that he's from New York City but he doesn't talk much.

Our lieutenant fought in the Pacific against the Japanese and says he plans to turn us into proper Marines. Unlike us, Lieutenant Rogers is a real Marine, the way he walks and talks makes me think he comes from money but there is something about him that makes me want to

follow his orders. The lieutenant has promised to run us ragged and has planned sixteen hour days for training to get us up to snuff. I'll write to you again soon when I have the chance.

Your son,

Jake

August 25, 1950

Dear Mother and Father,

Thanks for your letters and I know you're worried about my safety but I will have you know that these weeks of training have transformed me into a new man, I am ready to take on whatever those commies have to throw at me.⁵ This is my chance to do something amazing, something other than working in father's shop for the rest of my life.⁶ You would hardly recognize me or the men who joined me here. Our lieutenant has drilled us mercilessly, running us for hours then sending us to the range for target practice. Most of our sergeants were in the same boat as us, Sergeant Allen looks like he belongs in a library and Sergeant Price looks like he spent too much time behind a desk but they both have training and know how to be a Marine.

Our commanding officer Captain William Barber has repeatedly yelled at us about our marching and parade drill but the lieutenant always stands up for us.⁷ We have only a few weeks to prepare for combat and they want us to learn parade drill. I'd rather learn how to stay alive. I am the best marksman in our whole unit and its all thanks to you Dad. Those hunting trips on the weekend have turned me into a regular sharpshooter. I can't wait to get one of those Koreans in my sights.⁸

Beth came up for a few days to visit me during training last week. We went to the beach and walked around town. I think I'm going to ask her to marry me when I get back from the war. What do you guys think about it? I know you both like her and I hope you approve. I'll be leaving for Japan and then Korea on the 1st of September. I'll write on the voyage and send you my next letter as soon as I arrive in Japan.

Your son,

Jake

August 27, 1950

Dear Beth,

I'm so glad to hear that you got home quickly and safely. I enjoyed your visit more than you can imagine. That training was really taking its toll on me and seeing you was just what I needed. I will never forget the memories we made together at the beach and around town. I'll be leaving for Korea in a few days and these memories are going to help me get through whatever I am about to face. Hopefully the enemy is really as disorganized and stupid as MacArthur says they are and we can end this war quickly, so I can come home to see you again soon. Who knows maybe what this war needs is a bunch of average joes to help sort everything out. I love you beautiful and will miss you dearly.

Love,

Jake

September 17, 1950

Dear Mother and Father,

The voyage to Japan was very uneventful, that is if being constantly seasick is uneventful. The ship was packed with men and the temperature below decks was sweltering. Father you would understand my situation, I remember your stories about your trip across the Atlantic when you were deployed to Europe during the last war. When we weren't sick, the Lieutenant had us practicing maneuvers in the cargo hold and shooting at floating targets. We arrived in Kobe, Japan on the 16th. This place is beautiful though some of the Marines who served in the last war are a little rude to the locals. By the time you get this I will have arrived in Korea and may have even started fighting. I'm sorry this letter is so short but we are in Japan for less than a day and I want to see as much of the area as possible.

Your son,

Jake

September 17, 1950

Dear Beth,

I'm glad to tell you that I made it to Japan in mostly one piece. I spent most of the trip leaning over the side of the boat. The only time I wasn't throwing up is when we were training in the hold and shooting at targets of the back of the boat. I don't want to sound too full of myself but I have to be one of the best shots in the battalion. I hope everything is going well back home. Oh, I wish you could see Japan it is a curious yet beautiful place. A lot of us are

pent up with nervous energy. I'll write to you again when I get to Korea. Please keep me in your prayers and know that you are in mine.

Love,

Jake

September 30, 1950

Dear Mother and Father,

We landed at Inchon on the 21st and we were immediately sent to the frontlines. Trucks were waiting to take us away as soon as we disembarked. We drove for several minutes when the trucks slammed to a halt and we were ordered out. Almost immediately there was gunfire all around us and I began to run towards it as much as my head screamed for me to turn around. I didn't realize it at first but Tex was running right beside me with a look of pure terror on his face. I must have looked just as bad but we had our training and our orders so we ran. After what seemed like hours of running across an open field we regrouped with the platoon at a ditch. I couldn't even see the enemy but I just fired round after round in their direction hoping to make it stop.

The Captain ordered us to advance and as soon as we emerged from cover Tex got hit. I saw him fall and I froze. I can remember yelling for a corpsman, but not much else. I don't know how long I stood there, it could only have been a minute or two, but the rest of the unit was gone by the time I came too. Eventually I made it back to my platoon and we moved on. That was the first time I have ever seen someone get shot, and I don't think I'll ever forget it either. I am sorry for the state of my letter but I have been writing it over the course of several days. The only time I get to write is at night when I'm on guard.⁹ I'm so jumpy on guard duty

which makes me mad but, after those first days of fighting I can't help but jump at the slightest noises.

On the 23rd we moved on to Seoul where we fought street to street. I saw more men go down but with each one I recovered a little bit faster. Was it like this for you father, am I a coward, none of the men talk about what it's like to kill someone. I'm still scared but I feel number and number with each one. I ran into some men who were in the 1st Provisional Brigade the other day during a lull in the fighting. They looked like they have been through hell.¹⁰ I'll write to you again soon. Also our Chaplain has been writing to families so expect something from them soon. Don't worry its nothing serious just policy I guess.¹¹

Your son,

Jake

October 25, 1950

Dear Beth,

I have been receiving your letters and I know you must be going crazy waiting for me to write you. I'm sorry it has taken me so long to write you, it has been pretty hectic over here and I knew my parents would keep you updated with news from me. I don't know what the hell was wrong with me thinking this would be a walk in the park. Everyone thought our landing at Inchon would send those commie bastards running but we're fighting for every inch of land. I found out today that Tex is still alive, god that just made my day! In all the confusion I just assumed he died, but it looks like he passed out from the shock and was taken away before I realized what was happening. He's heading home in a few days, oh how I envy him.

The reason I can write to you now is that we finally took back Seoul and the area of Inchon. That doesn't mean the war is over by any means but we're moving to the east coast to a place called Wonsan. We are finally pushing north of the 38th Parallel. We were supposed to land on the 20th but it looks like the harbor was mined so we have to wait. God, I hate waiting I know it means I'm not getting shot at and I can try and rest but I just want to get it over with. It's like pulling off a Band-Aid, it'll hurt more if you pull it off slowly. They are supposed to issue us our cold weather gear when we land but the weather has been nothing but beautiful this month so I don't think I'll be needing it for a while.

I saw from your last letter that you started college in September. I hope you are doing well in all of your classes. If anything going to school will help you take your mind off what's going on over here. I saw in your last letter that your brother was thinking of joining up and I beg you to try and convince him to stay at home. I'll write to him if I get the chance maybe I can scare him out of joining up. Once we land we should be heading towards a town called Hamhung and hopefully we can push all the way to the border. There have been some rumors that the Chinese are going to join the war but I don't think they'd be dumb enough to try it. Anyways, I'll write to you when I get the chance, please share this with my parents I know they're so worried about me but I'll be fine, I've made it this far haven't I. I love you dearly and miss you so much. Try not to worry about me too much, I'll write again soon.

P.S. If you can send some of those delicious peanut butter cookies you make that would be wonderful.

Love,

Jake

October 26, 1950

Dear Johnny,

I heard from your sister that you were thinking about joining up with the Marines. I'm writing to you in the hopes that you'll reconsider your decision. I don't think your parents can handle the stress of having you over here and I know Beth would just worry herself sick thinking about the both of us here. I know the recruiter probably promised you a glamorous, exciting adventure but all of that is bunk. I'll tell you what it's really like over here.

To start from the time we landed at we've been living in the dirt and getting shot at on a regular basis. If that's not enough our enemy is much tougher and more determined than we thought and gaining any ground from them is like pulling a tooth. Another thing you might not have realized is that the higher ups care little for us grunts were just pieces on a map. Pieces to be used or used up to secure an objective.

I know you really want to join and my letter might send you to another service but the army has it just as bad as us. The Navy is a little better but they still take their share of casualties. I really hope you think this decision over as much as possible. If you don't want to do it for your family do it for yourself. You're a bright kid and I think you have a great future ahead of you and I've seen to many guys like you get killed or wounded in this stupid war.¹²

Your friend,

Jake

October 30, 1950

Dear Mother and Father,

I'm sorry I haven't gotten back to you in a while but it's been really hectic over here. By now Beth must have informed you as to where I was going and how I've been. We arrived in Wonsan on the 26th and left immediately for a place called Hamhung. Our regiment is camped out just north of Hamhung at Saint Benedicts Monastery. I got to go to my first proper mass since I got to this horrible place. Our Chaplain seemed pretty happy to talk in a real church too, not some makeshift chapel made out of ammo boxes.¹³ Speaking of churches I got a letter from Aunt Merriam the other day saying that cousin Jimmy was getting married. Tell him I said congratulations and I hope to congratulate them in person when I get home. I just want you guys to know that I love you both so much and that your letters are one of the few things that keep me going out here.

Mom, the rest of this letter is for Dad if that's okay, there are just some things I need to ask him. On our way to Hamhung we ran into a small party of the enemy, we took care of them no problem but the whole thing put us on edge for the rest of the trip. Later that night we were passing through a small hamlet when an someone startled by the racket we were making burst out of his house to yell at us. I reacted without thinking, he had a gun he was the enemy, so I fired and killed him. When I went to check if he was dead, I saw that he was an old man and the gun was just a stick he was waving at us. I thought he was going to kill me. You understand what did don't you, you fought, and you know that it's kill or be killed out in the field.¹⁴

All this fighting and dying is starting to take its toll on me, how did you ever make it through the war? You don't talk about it much but when you do you have these glorious stories

about your buddies and what heroes they were. I'm not saying that these guys aren't up to snuff but there doesn't seem to be anything glorious about this war. What kept you going all those days in the field? I have these letters and my friends in the unit but what are we fighting for and is it really worth it. Do you ever get used to it all, the sounds, the smells, the sights, there is just no escaping them.

Your son,

Jake

November 15, 1950

Dear Beth,

I am so glad to hear from you, I just got several of your letters today and the cookies, which lasted about thirty seconds. You have no idea how relieving it is to read your letters. I'm so glad everyone is doing well. I had begun to doubt you got my last few letters. Well it seems the rumors about the Chinese entering the war are rumors no longer. We have been fighting them constantly during our push north. They seem to have no limit to the amount of men they throw at us. These are not untrained recruits like we were told but veteran warriors. I try not to show it, and I am loathe to admit this to you but I am scared.

The earlier battles were more shocking than actually scary, I knew that I could make it. I am not so sure anymore. Lt. Rogers was killed in action the other day when a piece of shrapnel from a mortar hit him in the chest. He was a good leader to have around even if he was a little rough around the edges, he always tried to keep our spirits up and led from the front. He always put on a brave face that looked like it was set in stone. The only time he changed it was to scowl at us. I think he did it more to keep himself calm than to help any of us. I've gotten Mario to

talk a bit more, he's a pretty good guy and he's one hell of a rifleman. He and I are becoming fast friends and I'm glad I can count on him to watch my back when things get ugly. From what we've been hearing the rest of the army is having one hell of a time against the Chinese and I hope we don't run into the same problem.

On a lighter note I got your report card with your last letter, I'm so proud of you. I know you're upset about that C in English but you have done so well in all your other classes. I hear you've been visiting Mom and Dad a lot and I appreciate it. They must get lonely out there by themselves and worrying about me isn't helping any. I don't know when I'll be able to write to you next because we're are going on a major offensive soon. We'll be working with the army and there's been a lot of talk about this being the final push.¹⁵ I hope so, I want to see you and hold you again as soon as possible.

P.S. I'm sending home some North Korean money and some trinkets I've picked up in my travels before our push north. The money's not worth much but it looks pretty neat.

Love,

Jake

December 1, 1950

Dear Mother and Father,

I haven't heard from you in a while and you probably won't get this letter for some time for the same reason. It seems we are surrounded, our grand offensive was a disaster. It seems that the idiots in command thought that there was no real threat from the chinks because they

just couldn't have been capable of outmaneuvering us.¹⁶ I knew we were in for one hell of a fight in the coming days.

The offensive began as planned but the Army was soon surprised by the chinks and forced to retreat. This was a setback for sure and might have been okay if they told us Marines about it but we didn't know about the retreat until we fully committed to the advance. Next thing you know we were surrounded by God knows how many chinks and our company is forced onto a hill our captain named Fox Hill. I turned out that everything had gone to hell and if we didn't hold this hill the rest of the Marines might never make it back to the perimeter. What about us getting out, how the hell were we supposed to escape? At the time however, I didn't really know what was going on but Cpt. Barber told us to dig in so we did. What came later that night was something I would never forget.

It was quiet at first then out of nowhere I saw someone approaching, I called out a challenge, nothing. So I did what I was trained to do I fired and thank God I did. They came charging at us like something out of a nightmare. It was early in the morning when thousands of screaming Chinamen came rushing out of the dark to kill us. They were blowing bugles, beating drums, and making all manner of noises. They came at us like a stampede and some didn't even look at us just ran past further up the hill. Chapman, Fontanella, and I had to fight back to new positions and find the rest of the company.

At some point one of those chinks ran up and tried to gut me, I ended up stabbing him with my entrenching tool. By this point I'd shot my fair share of enemies and I'd gotten so used to it that it no longer stunned me. This was different, I felt the blood run down my hands, I saw the look on his face, and he must have been no more than sixteen. This is insane we're fighting and dying for some stupid hill in an area we can no longer conquer. If the attacks weren't bad

enough it's so cold that men are freezing and dying in their sleep. The only good thing about this cold was that if you got shot your blood froze in a matter of minutes. One of the guys next to me got hit in the forehead, an area that tends to bleed a lot no matter how little the cut, by some shrapnel, had a gushing wound one minute the next it was completely frozen over.¹⁷

When the attacks finally subsided I collapsed and I just lost it. I didn't care if anyone saw. This was too much. The attacks continued like this every night. I hope we can get out of here soon. I think I'm one of the only men on this hill who isn't wounded yet and I don't know how much longer that will last. I only had time to write this one letter and I don't know if I'll make it off this hill to write another so please tell Beth I love her and miss her more than ever.¹⁸

Love,

Jake

December 23, 1950

Dear Beth,

I'm sure by now my parents had informed you of my situation but I'm happy to report that I made it out alive and in mostly one piece. I'm recovering in Japan right now with most of Fox Company. I think only 60 out of 250 of us were combat effective in the end, which is to say that only 60 of us could stand for roll call when it was over. We lost so many good men. Garcia went down on the second night when his foxhole was overrun. But, God did he go down fighting. It was so cold that night that our guns kept jamming and we couldn't keep the enemy back. Garcia was with two other Marines in a fox hole when out of nowhere the chinks were on top of him. He fought like the devil clubbing those chinks with his rifle, he must have got a dozen of those bastards before one ran up and unloaded their machine gun into his chest. He

was a good man and whether he went to heaven or hell he's in a better place than North Korea. Our captain got shot in both his legs and dragged himself all over the hill to keep giving orders. I think just about every marine who fought on that hill deserves some sort of medal. I think everyone of us is gonna get a purple heart that for sure.

Fontanella is both the reason I'm still alive and the reason I'm in this hospital. When we finally got the order to withdraw I had to drag his ass halfway back to the safe zone because he got hit in the head with a piece of shrapnel and could barely stand. It was in the process of this that I got shot in the back by some coward. By the time I came to we were back to the line. I thought I was going to die up on that godforsaken hill. There were moments I lost hope but thinking of you and writing to my family kept me just strong enough to survive.

I'm going to be stuck in Japan while I recover and I looks like I'll be heading back into the field when I'm all better. I don't know if I'll be able to do it, but I know Fontanella and Chapman are going to need looking after so there's one reason to go back. After what I've been through this last month I can't wait any longer, I want to marry you Beth. I love you more than you could imagine and I don't even know if I'm going to make it home so I want your answer now.

Love,

Jake

May 25, 1951

Dear Mother and Father,

I'm sorry I haven't written in so long it's just that I am back on the line and have little time to write. I'm sure you heard already but I proposed to Beth and she said yes. For a while I was getting kind of nervous because she hadn't responded but there was a mix up in the mail and her letter was really late. Japan was pretty swell these last few weeks. Well the parts I saw when I was finally allowed out of bed were pretty nice, I'm not sure about the rest of the country. I'm so excited, I can't wait to come home and get married.

Our new posting is so much better than at the start of things. We have settled near the 38th parallel and are mostly conducting scouting missions and looking for people of military age to be drafted into the South Korean army.¹⁹ I hate this part most of all because I know what's going to happen to them and I try my hardest to report that they are too young or too old to fight. I have to report some of them or it will look suspicious but I hate the idea of sending someone else into the hell that we went through. I hope this fighting doesn't drag on for too much longer, I doesn't seem like we're going to be advancing north anytime soon.

We occasionally get a small raid by KPA soldiers but it's never serious. They are nothing like the bastards we faced around Chosin Reservoir. I think Mario put in to get me a medal, I don't know why though there were way tougher Marines with us on Fox Hill than me. I'll write to you again as soon as possible. I'm sending some Korean money home with this letter, it's not worth much but it's pretty neat. Tell Beth I say hi and that I miss and love her. Hell, if I made it through the hell that was Fox Hill I think I can make it through anything these commies can throw at me.

Your son,

Jake

June 5, 1951

Dear Beth,

I'm glad everything is going well at home and I'd like to report that you will no longer have to worry about me darling. I'm coming home! I wish I could say it's because this stupid war is over but I got shot in the leg a few days ago and the Marines are sending me home for good. The only reason I'm coming home at all though is because of Mario. That idiot got himself blown up saving my ass. Some sneaky gooks snuck up on our position and opened fire. I should have been more alert. I'm so stupid this is all my fault. My friend is dead because I couldn't do my job. During the firefight one of them threw a grenade and Mario saw it before me or Chapman and dove on it to save us. Right before it went off I could swear he looked me right in the eye and said now we're even buddy. Why would he do that, he always talked about what he was going to do after the war and he pulls that crap, what an idiot. I'm gonna miss him so much. I'm really glad I have you to talk to about these things hun.

After the grenade went off we recovered and drove off the enemy but as a parting gift one of them shot me in the leg. It felt like my calf was on fire. I have never felt pain like this in my entire life. When the docs finally got a look at me they said the bullet hit the bone and shattered it. They said I'd recover but I'd probably have a limp for the rest of my life. I wish I could say I was happy but I'd always hoped that we'd all head home together now Tex is home, Mario and Garcia are dead, and poor Chapman is left here without us. I hope he'll be alright. Once I heal up enough they're gonna ship me out and I can come home and marry the most beautiful girl in the world. I miss you more than ever and you cannot begin to understand how anxious I am to see you. I love you and will see you soon.

Love,

Jake

August 3, 1953

Dear Mom and Dad,

Hey guys, I hope everything is going well back home. Beth and I just got home from our honeymoon the other day and we haven't put a phone in the new house yet so I'm writing to you instead. We went back to the beach in California where Beth and I went while I was in training. I also found a job as a reporter for the local paper and I'm working on a few stories already. My leg is much better, but still gives me problems. It always seems to stiffen up when it's about to rain, maybe I should be a weatherman instead. We had a wonderful time for most of our trip, but when I read the news about the cease fire I was fuming.

After everything we did how the hell could they just call a ceasefire and leave everything just like it was. I got sent over there and watched friends die so the country could be united and free from those commies and all we get is a ceasefire. The only thing I am glad about is that the rest of our troops will be coming home. I know Chapman is still there and I'm glad he'll be heading home soon to see his kids. I wish Mario and Garcia were heading home too but they weren't so lucky were they. I still miss them both especially Mario. How'd you and your buddies deal with losing a friend Dad? I still wake up some nights thinking some Chinaman is sneaking up on me in the dark. One day we were out on the beach watching the fireworks and I just started feeling nervous and next thing I knew I was cringing and taking cover with every blast. It worries Beth when it happens but it's getting better. I think only time will heal what happened to me over there.

I'm also writing to you guys because I don't think I said it enough when I got back from Korea. I love you guys and want you to know that I couldn't have had better parents. Your support while I was in training was a great motivator. I thought about home and you guys every day I was over there. Dad, your stories and the courage you displayed were always in the back of my mind whenever fighting broke out. Mom, the food you sent kept me energized enough to keep going even on the coldest days. Now I've always loved your cooking but after having to eat frozen rations every night your meals were a godsend. No matter what was happening, when I got your letters it was like a weight lifted off my shoulders. The same goes for writing to you guys. I can't tell you how much it helped to write down what was happening and asking you guys for advice. Again, you guys are the best parents a guy could ask for and I hope you'll come visit us soon.

Your son,

Jake

July 6, 1956

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Fontanella

My name is Jake Sullivan, I served alongside your son in Korea and wanted to tell you that he is the reason I am alive today. I am sorry it has taken me so long to write to you but I have had some difficulty tracking you down. Your son was an outstanding Marine and a personal friend of mine.

I met your son when we were called up to train at Camp Pendleton and immediately took a liking to him. I'll admit that I am a very shy person and don't talk very much but your son took every opportunity to talk to me about anything and everything. I looked to him during

training when I thought I couldn't go on. On our long runs when I began to flag he would appear at my side and would shout "Come on Jake, were not gonna beat those Koreans running like this." He had reserves of energy that seemed superhuman. On our trip over to Korea he would invite me to card games below decks and talked to me about life and family in an attempt to distract me from my sea sickness.

When it came to combat I have never seen a braver man. He was one of the first off the trucks when we reached our first engagement. When our friend Tex got hit he stood up amidst a hail of gunfire to help me signal a corpsman. I'm pretty sure he's the reason Tex made it out alive that day. No matter how much we fought, Mario never seemed exhausted, never seemed afraid.²⁰ When I was scared I looked to him for inspiration, not our officers. Your son was a rock that our squad could rally around.

One time when I accidentally shot an old man in a village near Hamhung. I was devastated by the incident and everyone else seemed to think it was just fine, that it was no big deal. Your son was the only one who came to see if I was alright and he told me that it was an accident and that there was nothing I could have done. He told me that if I had hesitated and been wrong we could have all been dead. I still have not forgiven myself for what I've done but your son helped me recover immensely from the ordeal.

When the Chinese entered the war and had us surrounded I thought we were doomed. We fought for what seemed like months against an unstoppable tide of enemies but Mario remained strong. Even the weather couldn't get the indomitable Mario Fontanella down. If hot coffee was being brewed somewhere along the line Mario would find it and get us a few cups. He told us that even though it was cold we had to keep changing our socks or we'd be in trouble. Sure enough our unit had one of the lower cold casualty rates in part because of Mario.

When I got word that we were finally getting the hell out of the north I couldn't have been happier, that is until I found out that our company would be the one staying behind to hold of the enemy. I'll admit that the idea of desertion seemed very promising at the time but just as I thought I'd sneak off here came Mario. He must have known something was up because he looked at me and told me he'd watch my back and that we'd make it out if we stuck together.

Sure enough we did, even if I had to drag his sorry behind out of there after he got knocked out by an explosion to do it. If I had more time I could write a book about the things your son did for me and the rest of our company. The reason I wrote this letter was to let you know how amazing your son was and to ask for your forgiveness. I am the reason Mario died that night. I was supposed to be on watch and I nodded off, it wasn't until those god damn gooks were right on top of us that I saw them. Mario opened fire first and killed two but a third threw a grenade into our foxhole. Without any hesitation Mario pushed me and Chapman out of the way and jumped on the grenade. I am so sorry and want you to know that if there is anything I can do to make this right I will. Please write back to me I need to know how you feel even if all you feel is hate. Just know that I will never forget your son or what he gave me that day.

Sincerely,

Jake Sullivan

Notes

¹ Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2010), 11.

² Cumings, 34-35.

³ See Bob Drury and Tom Clavin. *The Last Stand of Fox Company* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2009), Joseph R. Owen, *Colder Than Hell* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), Martin Russ, *Breakout: The Chosin Reservoir Campaign* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).

⁴ The U.S. armed forces faced a drastic reduction in size after WWII and as such were unprepared for war in Korea. Truman ordered the marine commandant to bring up the reserves and to deploy a force immediately. The 1st Provisional Brigade was the answer. It was an ad hoc unit composed of any marines available from the 5th division. The unit was undermanned but well trained and full of marines eager to fight. See John D. Manza, “The First Provisional Marine Brigade in Korea: Part 1” *Marine Corps Gazette* 84.7 (2000): 66-75.

⁵ Soldiers often found loved one who were being over protective to be annoying. What the soldiers wanted was their support not their concern. See D. C. Gill, *How We Are Changed By War* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 203.

⁶ While Jake is a reservist called up to fight, and doesn't have a choice many men see going to war as an opportunity to do something meaningful with their life. For a more complete look at why men go to war see Lawrence LeShan, *The Psychology of War: Comprehending its Mystique and its Madness* (Chicago: Noble Press, 1992).

⁷ The reservists called up for duty had very little training and the officers only had several weeks to prepare them for war. With so little time many commanders decided to focus solely on combat exercises and physical training which meant the units trained very little for parade duty, and often appeared unorderedly and messy. See Joseph R. Owen, *Colder Than Hell* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 41.

⁸ The training soldiers endure are meant to strip them down and build them up into a new person. One of the goals in training to make a reluctant to kill person into a ready to kill soldier. See Nancy Sherman, *The Untold War: Inside the Hearts, Minds, and Souls of our Soldiers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 11-14.

⁹ The fighting for the Marines after landing at Inchon that they had very little time to do anything but fight the enemy. Writing letters was a major factor in maintaining the men's morale so they most often wrote it when on guard duty for the night. See John H. Baird to his wife, January 23, 1951 in *Forgotten: The Arkansas Korean War Project*, <http://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/korean/id/155/rec/17>

¹⁰ After fighting almost constantly since the outbreak of war the 1st Provisional Brigade was finally disbanded on September 15, 1950. That brought no rest for the men who fought tirelessly to hold the Pusan Perimeter however, instead the men were incorporated into the newly arrived Marine Divisions and sent right back into battle. For detailed accounts of the 1st Provisional Brigade see John D. Manza, "The First Provisional Marine Brigade in Korea: Part 1" *Marine Corps Gazette* 84.7 (2000): 66-75., and Rudy Tomedo, *No Bugles, No Drums: An Oral History of the Korean War* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1993), 23-28.

¹¹ The military recognized that letters helped soldiers deal with being in combat and away from loved ones, so they urged families to write to their soldiers. Chaplains would write letters to families to try and explain what their soldier was going to face. They urged families to send newspaper clippings and pictures of friends. See Marine Chaplain to Allie Stephens, January 24, 1951 in *Forgotten: The Arkansas Korean War Project*, <http://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/korean/id/346/rec/110>.

¹² Many soldiers were disillusioned with the war and wrote home to friends and loved ones warning them of the dangers they might face if they came to Korea. For a good example see Jack Train Jr. to Kathie Thompson in *War Letters: Extraordinary Correspondence from American Wars*, ed. Andrew Carroll (New York: Scribner, 2001), 361-363.

¹³ The chances to conduct church services during the fighting were few and far between and often consisted of ammo box pews and a Government Issue folding podium. These field churches were often set up on the battlefield after the area was secured. No matter how run down or hellish the landscape these churches appeared on it brought a lot of joy to the men. See Molton A. Shuler to Helen Shuler in *War Letters: Extraordinary Correspondence from American Wars*, ed. Andrew Carroll (New York: Scribner, 2001), 356-357

¹⁴ Soldiers would often attempt to explain themselves and their actions in relation to someone else's actions in an attempt to understand and justify what they had done. This imaginary

conversation is the soldiers attempt to reconcile what they did with themselves, it is a cry for absolution. See D. C. Gill, *How We Are Changed By War* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 71-73.

¹⁵ The Allies grand strategy consisted of the U.S. Eighth Army and the Marines moving north toward the Yalu River in a pincer move designed to surround the enemy. For a detailed explanation of the campaign see Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War* (New York: Times Books, 1987), 429-556.

¹⁶ As the war dragged on negative talk about the leadership increased and many soldiers blamed the higher-ups for their predicament. See John H. Baird to his wife, May 16, 1951 in *Forgotten: The Arkansas Korean War Project*,

<http://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/korean/id/158/rec/19>.

Chinks is a derogatory term for Chinese and was used by most soldiers. See John H. Baird to his wife, January 23, 1951 in *Forgotten: The Arkansas Korean War Project*,

<http://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/korean/id/155/rec/17>

¹⁷ The temperature around the Chosin Reservoir and most of North Korea reached temperatures around 32 degrees below zero. The men were not equipped with the proper cold weather gear and at times the cold would claim more men than the enemy. See Drury, *The Last Stand*, 59-61., and Faris R. Kirland, "Soldiers and Marines at Chosin Reservoir: Criteria for Assignment to Combat Command," *Armed Forces & Society* 22 (1995): 261.

¹⁸ For a full account of the battle of Fox Hill see *The Last Stand of Fox Company* by Bob Drury and Tom Clavin.

¹⁹ After the Chosin Reservoir Campaign and the bloody retreat south the 7th division was placed close behind the lines to conduct lighter duties until it could return to full strength. See *7th Marine Regiment, 2nd Battalion, Historical Diary*, June 1951, http://www.koreanwar2.org/kwp2/usmc/083/M083_CD22_1950_08_2281.pdf

²⁰ One of a soldier's biggest fears in combat was not about killing or dying but about being afraid. Soldiers never wanted to disgrace their unit or themselves by showing fear. This often led to soldiers putting on a brave face to those around them, which often helped give other courage. See Richard Holmes, *Acts of War: The Behavior of Men in Battle* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 205-207