

Korean war veteran recalls the conflict

By MAGGIE HANNAH
Herald staff writer

Sunday will mark the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War I. Remembrance Day began as a commemoration of the first World War's ending on Armistice Day, November 11, 1918. Regrettably, since then it has come to involve the servicemen of World War II, the Korea conflict and several other wars in later years.

George Gaskill saw service in Korea, but doesn't associate Remembrance Day with himself or even with friends he lost during that war. For him, Remembrance Day recalls World War I vets like his father, who died during a poisonous gas attack in 1933.

"I don't think of us," he told The Herald this week. "I think of people like my Dad on Remembrance Day. Somehow I associate it with the First World War vets. Of course, sometimes I think of the people I knew who died in Korea, but not at this time. For me, Remembrance Day is special for World War I."

Korean War dead are listed on Royal Canadian Legion honor rolls, however, and stories of what happened to United Nations troops who served there between 1950 and 1954 are less familiar than those of World War I and World War II events.

TWELVE YEARS

Mr. Gaskill was part of the first British detachment sent directly to Korea in October, 1950. He had enlisted a year earlier because he had no clear idea of what exactly he wanted by way of a career, and the army looked like a good place to start out while he made up his mind.

"In those days you enlisted for 12 years," he said. "Five of them in active service and the other seven in reserve. That was the minimum period."

As a member of the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME), Mr. Gaskill and the approximately 1,300 troops who sailed from Liverpool to Pusan, were part of the special 29th Commonwealth Brigade made up of British, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand, South African and Indian troops.

Mr. Gaskill was part of a team which recovered damaged or deserted vehicles.

"We didn't know what to expect when we arrived," Mr. Gaskill said. "Things changed during the two weeks or so of our passage and the Yanks pushed the Commies back over the border into North Korea. When we put into the port at Pusan, the Yanks were telling us to go on back home because the thing was all over."

The new arrivals picked up their equipment, however, headed north as ordered and before long the North Koreans were pouring back across the border.

"I don't remember how long we were settled in before it happened," he said. "All I remember was the organized chaos as we scattered south again."

EXTREME COLD

Mr. Gaskill's memories of Korea centre more around the extreme cold than around the fighting.

"I have to remember how dangerously we lived then," he added with a laugh. "We used to carry 50 gallon tanks of high octane gas on our recovery vehicles as spares, in case we got stuck somewhere away from our supply base. We rigged up a rubber hose from the tank into our tent, put a piece of copper tube in the rubber hose and clamped so that the gas just dripped. Then we took a sardine can of sand and used that as the fire pan. It hissed and danced away and I don't know how we never burned the tent down or blew up the tanks. We were really living dangerously, but it certainly seemed cosy when we'd bank the tent up with snow and get that fire burning away. We had shell casings cut for a chimney and piece of metal cut to protect the hole through the tent. I'd never risk it today."

The heat and rain were just about as hard to tolerate as the

cold, Mr. Gaskill says. Smells too, were a large part of life in Korea.

"Everywhere you went there were the 'honeywagons' - sanitation carts, drawn by oxen," he said. "There was always a cart parked in any village you went into, and you'd find the women carrying the honeywagons to the cart."

"(Korean) cooking is very different, too, and they do it in open pots over charcoal fires, so the smell drifts out. They use an awful lot of garlic in everything. They also eat a lot of fish which they hang outside their huts to dry. Put those two together with the sanitation system and it's a smell you just don't forget."

DIRT FLOORS

Although poorer Koreans lived in dirt-floor huts consisting of only one main room, the more affluent ones had homes divided into rooms, sliders covered with rice paper to form doors and highly polished wooden floors in their homes, he recalled. He found their heating system ingenious.

A pit was dug under the house in which a fire was lit. Then tunnels led from the pit out under the floor to let the heat into each area.

"I don't know why the places didn't burn down but it seemed to work," he chuckled.

Asked whether narrow escapes and dangerous situations were commonplace, Mr. Gaskill recalled towing a number of recovered vehicles back to camp when the recovery vehicle he was driving flipped over and he had to jump to safety.

Another incident was prompted by orders to find a vehicle and then reach a predetermined destination following map instructions. The men located the vehicle they were to pick up, but had trouble deciphering their directions so they could tell one hill from the next.

"We pulled up on this hill to sit and figure out exactly where we were and where we were going," he remembered. "And this little voice right underneath us told us to get the so-and-so out of there. We looked down and we were right on top of a couple of soldiers dug into the hill. We got out of there in a hurry I can assure you."

PADDIES AND HILLS

Mr. Gaskill remembers Korea as a land of rice paddies and hills.

"I think every hill in the place had a number given to it," he says. "It was like kids playing king of the hill. The ones with the highest hill had the best command over a valley and so on. Every hill seemed vital then. We had lean-to we could put against the side of our recovery vehicle for shelter but the infantrymen just dug into the side of the hills like moles."

While Mr. Gaskill considers military service a good way for young people to train for a career, he didn't follow up on his own training as a mechanic when he left the service. He is now in maintenance with Holiday Inns.

"I didn't mind going to Korea when I was called," he said. "But there were a lot of men who did. Half the men we sent were called up from the reserves and they were very bitter. They were called up

Expansion approved for area business

The town planning board has endorsed a proposal to expand Spycide Auto Body, south of Acton, subject to several conditions aimed at preventing the business from taking an "a wrecking yard nature."

The board last Tuesday night offered no objections to owner Mike Lovrin's application before the Niagara Escarpment Commission (NEC), upon which councillors were invited to comment, but suggested that a six-foot high, solid board fence should be erected along the Highway 25 site's northwest boundary.

The board also stipulated that the total number of vehicles stored both indoors and outdoors should not exceed 20, and that the local Conservation Authority should be consulted regarding any plans for new buildings or the placement of fill on the site.



The poppy has been chosen as a symbol of remembrance by veterans of World War I and World War II. George Gaskill turns out for the Remembrance Day parade usually, he says, but for him it's a time to remember First World War vets like his father, not more recent soldiers like himself. (Herald photo)

because they needed experienced men and most of them had been through part of World War II. A lot of them had just nicely got established again, back with their families or started a business and suddenly they got told they had so many weeks to get things in order and report for duty. A lot of them were very bitter."

"Then too, some of them had had pretty bad experiences with Koreans already and they'd just as soon shoot them all as go in there to help them. Japan occupied Korea for 40 years prior to World War II, you know, so men in Japanese prison camps had Korean guards. Some of them really hated the Koreans."

UNITED NATIONS
Mr. Gaskill also recalls talk about how the League of Nations had fallen through in the 1930s and speculation as to

whether the United Nations would be any more successful than its predecessor.

Although he didn't mind going to Korea, Mr. Gaskill says he was much more appreciative of the reserve troops' bitterness when he got notification in 1957 that he might be needed back in active service for Suez.

"I'd just gotten married and my regular time was up," he says. "I told Betty I thought I'd just disappear, so they couldn't call me in again. But I didn't, of course, and I never did actually get called back into active service."

Mr. Gaskill, his wife Betty, and their four daughters came to Canada in 1964, settling in Limehouse three years later. He enjoys golf and darts and belongs to the Royal Canadian Legion, Branch 127, Georgetown.

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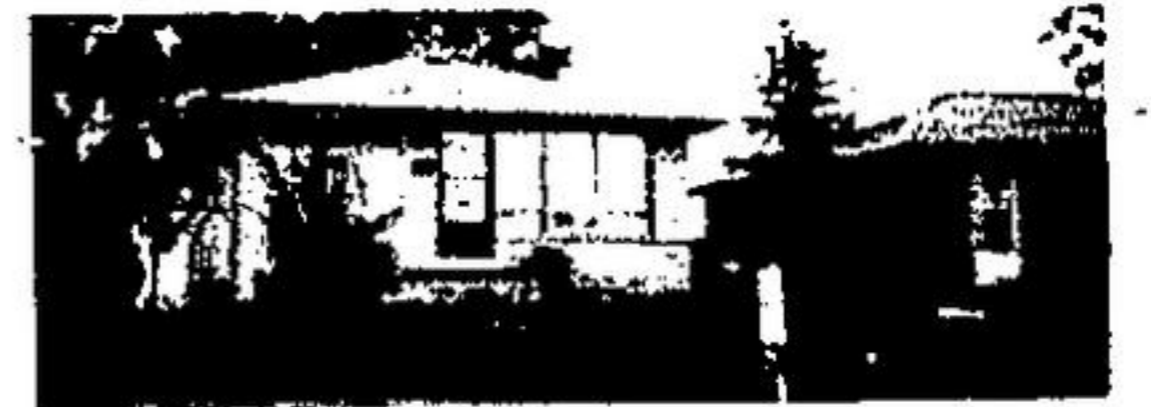
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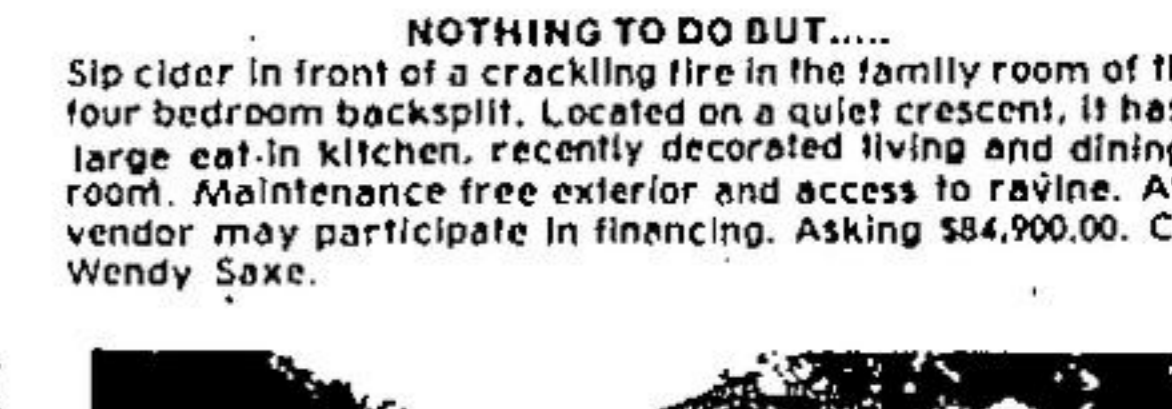
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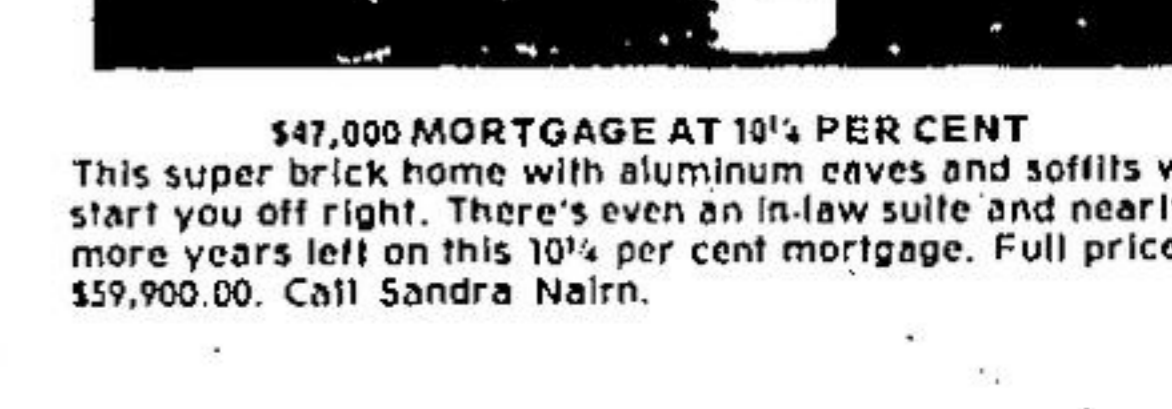
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