

# Interview of Korean War Veteran Raymond L. Ayon, October 27, 2004

**Interviewer:** October 27th, 2004, and this is the beginning of an interview with Raymond Ayon (Korean War veteran) at the office of Congressman David Dreier located in Glendora, California. Mr. Ayon is 76 years old, having been born on January 14, 1929.

*Video transitions to Ayon speaking about his experience working in a MASH unit in Korea when the war began in 1950.*

**Raymond Ayon:** And then on a Sunday, the war broke out in Korea. A couple of days later, I found myself on a C-47 transport plane, and we had no idea where we are going. We landed at an airstrip – at a place called Suwon – and the battle was nearby. When we disembarked the plane, we could hear canon fire, or artillery going off nearby.

And we were loading wounded...casualties...and what struck me the most was pine boxes. They had numerous pine boxes, none of this fancy metal casket type thing. Apparently, they hired Korean carpenters to bang out a whole bunch of wooden caskets, pine, and I recall the wood smelling green still. Pitch (secretion from pine trees) – coming out of the boxes. Blood oozing out, mixed with the pitch. And we loaded a whole bunch of them onto the ship. Wounded, coming in aboard ship.

*Ayon starts to cry and takes out his handkerchief.*

**Interviewer:** I know how difficult this is. These are painful memories. It's alright. You're a brave man. You're a brave man.

**Ayon:** That was my first sight of war.

**Interviewer:** That's horrendous.

**Ayon:** Guys without arms, legs. That's where I learned to give 'em [inaudible].

*Ayon begins to sob into his hand.*

**Interviewer:** How about if we turn off the video for just a minute? Then we can start it again. Would you want to?

*Video jumps to Ayon after he regained his composure, and he begins to speak about how the conflict in Korea changed as he was there serving.*

**Ayon:** I was around 19 and 20 year olds, some 18 - just kids really. These kids have been... I know some of the army guys. None of them [inaudible] plane, they were there but they were also marching with gunpowder and smelling of gunpowder. It was a horrific situation there. There was a bunch of caskets, blood oozing off their sides. And all these wounded and injured people. This one kid, he had no arms and was all bandaged up.

**Interviewer:** Did you sense that these were North Koreans or did you sense they were Chinese that were doing the attacking?

**Ayon:** Oh, we knew they were North Korean right away.

**Interviewer:** We interviewed one fella who said that when he was in the jungles of Korea, that he would run across the Chinese with the red stars on their caps.

**Ayon:** There were no jungles in Korea. There were no jungles.

**Interviewer:** Was that Vietnam?

**Ayon:** Yeah, that was Vietnam.

**Interviewer:** Oh well. They were being supplied by them.

**Ayon:** Anyway, they had said this was going to be a police action. That it could be done - the war would be ended in a big hurry. They said, "Oh, do your job and we'll bring all the bodies back and all the wounded and stuff." And, then they went from a police action, it turned into a complex...then they called it the Korean incident – something minor, but in time it would turn into a war.

Anyway, in the beginning, when they said it was a police action, they said "Oh, we'll bring all the bodies back to Japan." And at the hospital in Bukai, they would lay them out in the courtyard there. And I didn't tell you about the body parts. It's true that sometimes they would make-up a body part by making different parts. It was gory and gruesome...bloody mess.

**Interviewer:** How about the MASH units in Korea? I mean, we don't...

**Ayon:** I eventually wound up with a MASH unit. The Army needed a lab tech so they sent for me and I got stuck with them for months at a time and years. I was in Korea so long that I saw the four seasons. The wintertime was cold. Deadly cold. And us guys from sunny southern California weren't used to this stuff. And not only that we weren't prepared clothing wise for the elements. We had...

**Interviewer:** They didn't outfit you with...

**Ayon:** Combat boots... The combat boots used to have a little strap. And even my folks at home sent me some heavy sweatshirts to wear underneath to try and keep warm. That's when...a different story. I wrote down in my memoirs how deadly napalm is. You heard of napalm?

**Interviewer:** Oh sure.

**Ayon:** Okay, that burns wherever. So, they sent us out on a detail to pick up firewood and the armies ahead of us had already cleaned out the area of firewood. So we were out there in "No Man's Land" looking for firewood of all things.

*[Break]*

**Interviewer:** Tell me about the napalm and collecting the firewood...

**Ayon:** Okay. "Don't worry guys, I know where we can find firewood." So he says, "Let's go to the strip and rip off a drum of napalm." He'd seen it done before. So we had a tent. We had a drum of gasoline, fuel drum. Anyway we made a stove out of it and by experimenting how much material to put in there, the napalm, it would light up. And sometimes it would stay for hours and hours burning. So that was a perfect heat source because we were shivering, we were cold. And you get in situations where its sub-zero cold.

**Interviewer:** How about the fumes? It smells so...

**Ayon:** Well, there was a vent. In order to get the heat...we would...I don't remember the smoke or stuff like that. Anyway, it was a good source of fire, of fuel, to keep us warm from freezing. So this type of thing went on and on.

And I made several trips with the caskets, pinewood caskets. I'll never forget the load of caskets I had in Japan to take to the morgue or hospital. The caskets were behind me about six high. There's a sign that says, "Stop in case of low flying aircraft." And I wasn't paying too much attention and here comes a plane to land. And I slammed on my brakes and here comes a casket. And that casket might have gotten me right in the neck if it hadn't been for the back of the seat. It slammed into the seat and pushed me against the steering wheel. So that was a close one, but I had to push back and push that casket back to where it belonged. Needed to be more careful next time or trips crossing runways.

**Interviewer:** When you were with the MASH unit, and of course we all know that the TV series MASH lasted three times longer than the war did. Was it like that?

**Ayon:** In cases yes. Like my commanders in the MASH unit were an Australian. Now remember this was a United Nations war and we had troopers from all different parts of the world. My commander was named Kader, Commander Kader, an old veteran soldier whom I'd get to know real well. He carried a gun with him all the time running around. Then after having left Commander Kader behind, we were going up to another place. And this time they recruited a civilian, I wrote about him last night, a civilian, I don't remember his name. They made a captain out of him in charge of us. He was a missionary's son who had a leprosarium in Taegu right in the middle of town.

**Interviewer:** A leprosarium being a leper colony?

**Ayon:** A leper colony. He gave us, our commander the captain, he gave us a tour of the place. That's a place to stay away from. A leprosarium. Anyway, at Taegu I had an experience of taking care of enemy POWs. We would give them a bath with hoses. Delouse them. I remember this...I don't remember if it was a North Korean or a Chinaman...that had a big wound in his face, in his eyes, and the poor guy was peeling out maggots out of his eyes. Anyway we treated him as best we could and then gave him an inoculation...of something, I don't recall what it was...but when they saw me coming with that needle they were scared terrible. They were frightened that my syringes...

**Interviewer:** Well they probably had never seen them.

**Ayon:** Yeah well we gave them the treatment. Treated all their wounds and sent them on their way. So this story goes on and on. Two years, off and on. The Pusan perimeter was when the North Koreans almost shoved us into the ocean. And then we were, had, very little real estate in Korea at that time. In fact, our squadron was sent back to Japan.

**Interviewer:** How did people feel about MacArthur?

**Ayon:** I got a glimpse of MacArthur.

**Interviewer:** Was that enough?

**Ayon:** Yeah (*laughing and smiling*). In one of the crossings of the Han River, which is the main river separating Seoul from the South...there's the Han River. All bridges were down and we were waiting in line to cross a pontoon bridge. And here comes a motorcycle and a lot of horns and sirens and like, "Make way! Make way!" and here comes a staff car with the flag's three stars, I mean four stars. I don't know how many stars MacArthur had.

**Interviewer:** Five stars.

**Ayon:** And a guy says, “Oh, there’s General MacArthur.” And they gave him the throughway. As he went past, I do remember seeing his corncob pipe. Naturally all the young guys, all the soldiers, everybody was waving and whistling and cheering, but he paid no attention to us (*laughing and smiling*) MacArthur.