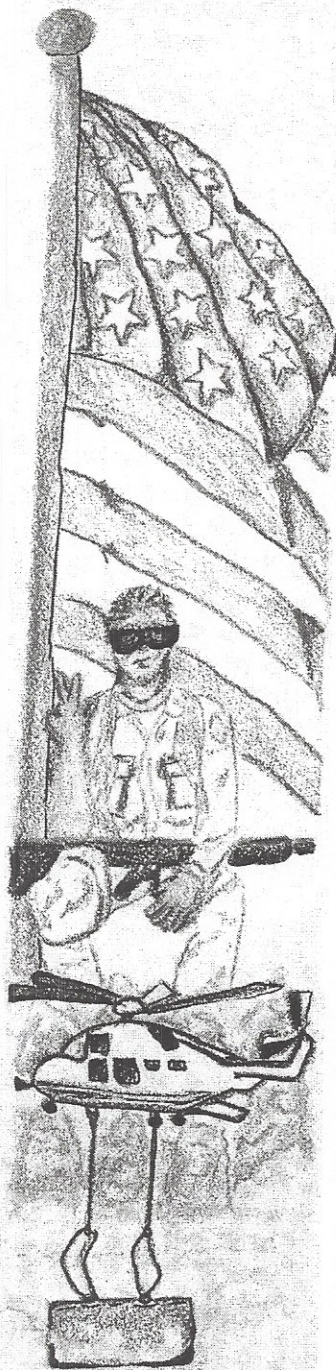


MARINES



Marine
Corps

Mayhlon Degernes, Jr.

August 1944 - May 1967
Korea



One of the Chosin Few

An Interview with Major Mayhlon Degernes, Jr.

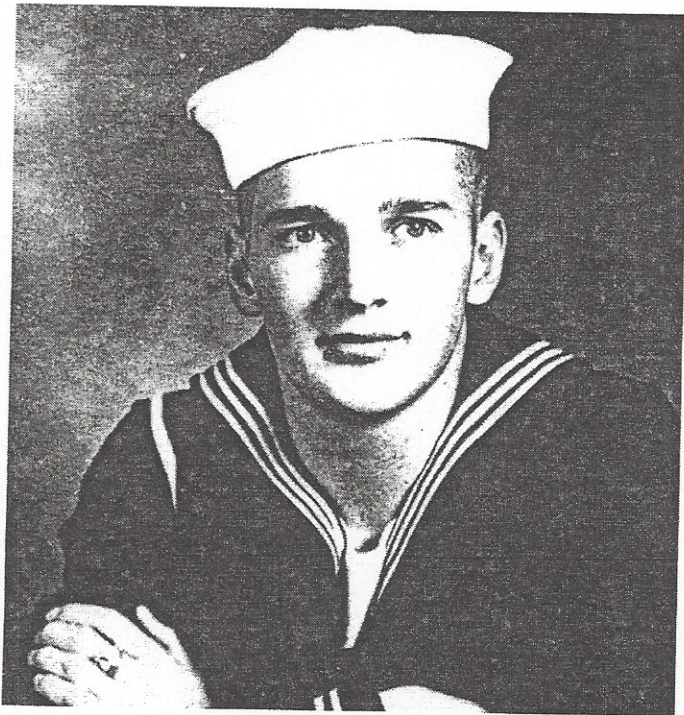
By Kasey Anonsen

In the year of 1926, in a small northern town of Bagley, Minnesota, an American hero was born. Major Mayhlon Degernes, Jr. started his life in the same little house as his father. When he was just two years of age, he and his family moved to the city of Minneapolis. While his father was away working for the IRS, Mayhlon's mother took him downtown to the Federal Building in Minneapolis where the Marine recruiters also worked. He would see the Marines leaving in their "dress blue" uniforms, and as a little boy, he decided, "I want one of those." In the year 1948, his wish came true.

After graduating from high school in 1944, he and a buddy went to sign up for the Marines. When they got there, they were not able to join because the quota was full for August. The recruiter asked them to come back in September, but Mayhlon's buddy would be eighteen years old in September, and only seventeen year olds were able to choose the branch of service they wanted to go into, so they chose to go into the Navy. Their twenty-one months in the Navy was far from eventful. In fact, the only time they saw the water was when they were on leave. After leaving the Navy in 1946, Mayhlon opted to become a Marine, and his request was granted. A couple years later in 1948, he graduated from the University of Minnesota as a Second Lieutenant in the Marines and was shipped to Quantico, Virginia. After seventeen months of training, just as the Korean War began, he finally wore the USMC Blue uniform he always wanted.

Second Lieutenant Mayhlon Degernes became a part of the First Marine Division, Company Third Battalion First Marine Regiment, based in California. There were only two officers and one sergeant in his company. The day he joined, four other Second Lieutenants from Quantico joined, so now there were seven officers. The following day, busloads of two hundred and twenty-one enlisted men were dropped off. Fortunately, many of the men in his platoon had already been in active duty for at least two years.

His platoon was able to transform quickly into part of a very good rifle company. After going through five days of intensive training at Camp Pendleton, they



Degernes, Jr. Navy enlistment 1944

set off for Japan for an additional five days of training. After training in Japan, he boarded a Landing Ship, Tank (L.S.T.), and headed towards Inchon, just south of the 38th Parallel, to engage in General MacArthur's most famous amphibious attack on the evening of September 15, 1950. This operation was only a month and a half after Mayhlon got out of Basic Officer Training. This attack almost didn't happen. On the way over off the coast of Inchon, Mayhlon's ship was caught in a typhoon. After this violent storm, he was thankful that he was fighting on land and not at sea. When they finally landed ashore that evening, he and his platoon had to cross over a seawall, and five minutes later they were attacked by a mass of North Koreans. A US Marine to the right of Mayhlon was shot and killed during the landing. After the Marine's death, they never had a full strength platoon again. This was the first person Mayhlon actually saw killed in battle, and the first time he was ever shot at. He knew then it was for real; he was at war and in a battle against those who wanted to destroy his company and take over South Korea.

Once the Marines took over the beach area at Inchon, the rest of the war was all land warfare, mostly in the cities of South Korea. They were able to recapture the capital city of Seoul resulting in ceremonies in Seoul celebrating the recapture of their city. Meanwhile just a half mile away, the Marines were still fighting North Koreans. Mayhlon and his platoon were ordered to push up and through the 38th Parallel into

North Korea. The 38th Parallel is the border between North and South Korea. Then they boarded ships and went from the west coast of Korea around the peninsula to Wonson, a small city on the east side of the peninsula in North Korea. When they arrived, the North Koreans were nowhere to be seen, and the city was already under South Korean captivity. When General MacArthur decided to push even farther north, Mayhlon's life was changed forever.

General MacArthur received a warning from the Chinese stating that if the Americans progressed any farther, the Chinese would invade and attack them. General MacArthur didn't take this threat seriously and progressed on. The Chinese took this action by the US Marines and US Army as a dire threat, so they sent a large army across the border with North Korea and attacked the Marines and Army. The overwhelming size of the Chinese Army bombarded the Marine battalions and pushed them back, while the freezing winter set in across the country.

Even though Mayhlon grew up in Minnesota, which also has tough winters, he was still not prepared for the struggle with the cold in North Korea. He was, however, more prepared than those men in his platoon from San Diego and other places with mild climates.



Degernes, Jr. and his sister

During the winters in Minnesota, his mom taught him always to change his socks when they were sweaty to reduce the chance of frostbite. Mayhlon believes this trick saved the men in his platoon from getting frostbite during one of his major battles. Each Marine wore a heavy felt liner, two pairs of wool socks inside heavy, knee-high leather boots with a rubber bottom. To keep the socks from getting sweaty, the men either had to stand still or keep moving, which was not always possible. So every night he went around to each Marine and made sure that they had taken their sweaty socks off and had put them inside their jackets next to their chest to help dry them out and warm them up. Even though they smelled like dirty socks, and the men sniffed the unpleasant smell, he was proud that none of the Marines in his platoon ever got frostbite.

Now far north of the 38th Parallel, Mayhlon and his men went to a small town, Majon-Ni, where the enemy surrounded the Marines for two full weeks. The only way they were able to get food was by air support. They had limited ammunition and received any new ammunition for their guns by airdrop. Much of the ammunition was taken from the deceased bodies of the North Koreans and the Chinese to keep the Marines supplied. They patrolled the area, but there was hardly any fighting because the North Koreans just wanted to get home. However, in Majon-Ni they learned a lot about living surrounded by the enemy, which proved to be excellent training for the upcoming ordeal at the Chosin Reservoir.

The Chosin Reservoir, a decisive battle in the Korean War, was a battle for the ages, taking place from November 26 through December 13, 1950. After the two weeks in Majon-Ni, they went to the town of Hagaru-ri mid-North Korea, near the south end of Chosin Reservoir. They spent the next ten days there under attack by Chinese Divisions almost every night. Because the fighting was at night and they had very good daytime cover from Navy and Marine Aircraft,

they were able to get a lot done during the day to improve their position by digging trenches into the frozen ground and putting up barbed wire. His platoon was able to do all this and fight intensely at night without any sleep for four days straight with the help of amphetamines. Mayhlon was responsible for making sure his men received one pill each night, but he did not force them to take it. For one month they were not able to change clothes or shower; they were too busy fighting off the hordes of the Chinese Army.

Mayhlon recalls that for every Chinese soldier who was killed another kept coming back. The conditions during this battle pushed the men to their limits as they struggled not to freeze while fighting the Chinese. These men had been able to handle the blistering heat in the summer months, but could they handle -20 to -35 degrees? When the Marines were trapped down in their frozen foxholes and were going to sleep for the night, Mayhlon helped them by having them use his sock trick. When a child, he learned another trick from his mom: if he tied his mittens to a rope that went through his jacket, he wouldn't lose the mittens. Mayhlon was able to use this trick with his platoon because he was supplied by air with parachute rope. He gave the rope to his men to secure the mittens because they often had to take them off to do things such as load their weapons or pull a pin on a hand grenade. He did not have the heart to tell the Marines he learned these tricks from his mother.



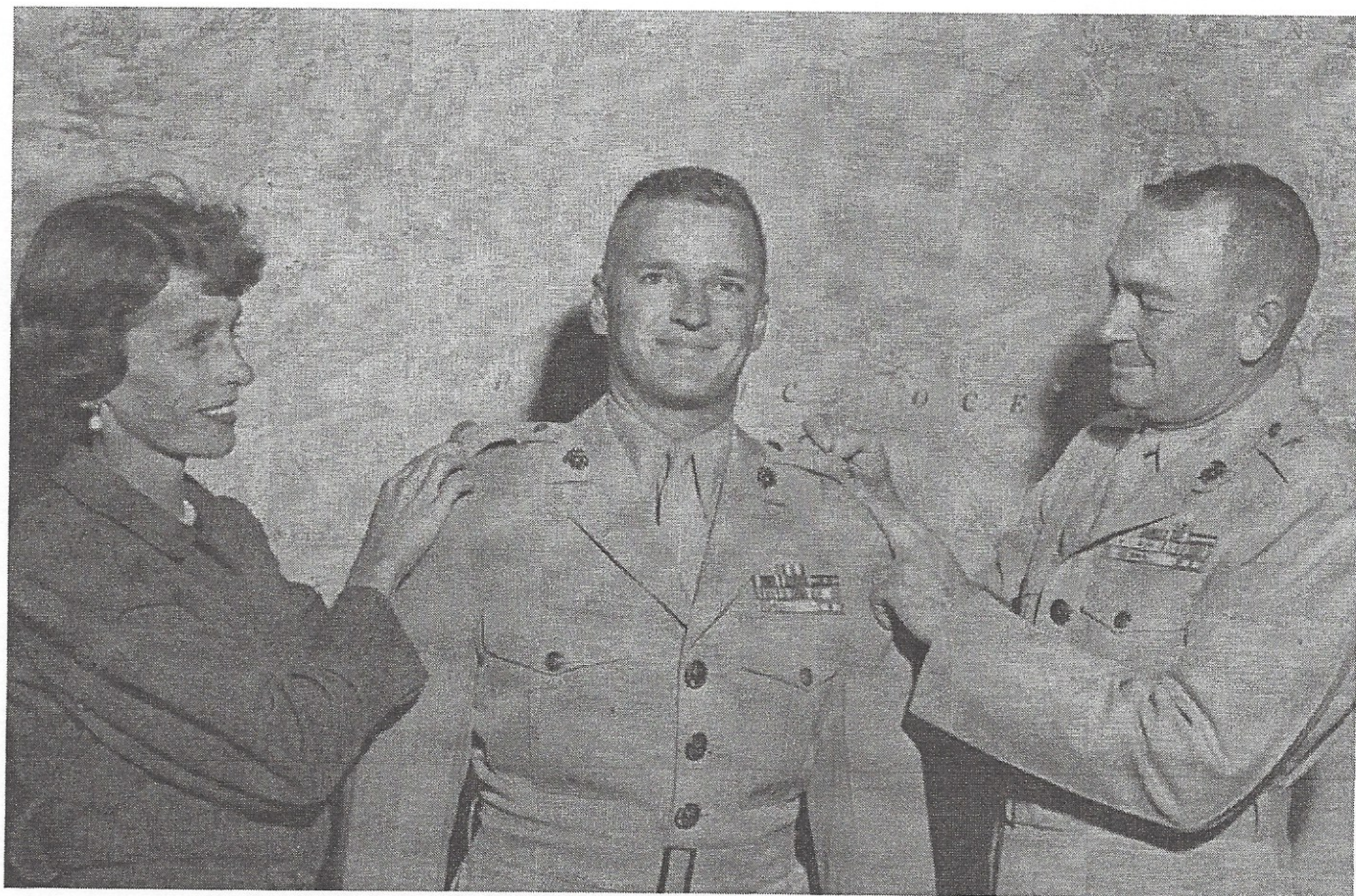
*Major Mayhlon Degernes, Jr. rappelling,
Sierra Nevada Mountains 1962*

Food was also a struggle during the Battle of the Chosin Reservoir. They were able to have food on the "friendly" side of the hill since the fighting occurred on the other side, but the North Korean building they used was much smaller than the typical mess hall. They punched a hole in this building and put a poncho over it to keep the harsh weather outside. Meals, also known as C rations, were cooked 24 hours a day and usually consisted of hot meals that were canned meat, canned or dehydrated potatoes or

vegetables, or a type of pasta, and canned fruit. The meals were served on a steel tray, and the Marines were able to eat when there was a lull in the fighting. After getting their food, they left the mess hall to go to another enclosed, but unheated building where they had to decide whether to eat the hot food before it got cold or the canned fruit before it froze. They found out it was better to eat the hot food first then the frozen fruit next. Their coffee was served hot, but if they were not careful, it would start to freeze. Mayhlon's favorite meal was canned pork and beans, which tasted good no matter if it was hot or cold, and because it was much better than eating cold, greasy canned meat, he always carried a extra can of beans with him just in case he got hungry. When they came out of the Reservoir, they had no way of thawing their C rations, so the Marines dropped large Tootsie Rolls to them by air. They were big and too frozen to eat completely, so they hit them against the butt of the rifle to break them into smaller pieces. They would thaw the pieces in their mouth providing them with a great source of energy. Now, at every reunion, they serve Tootsie Rolls, and he still likes them to this day, unfrozen of course.

After two and a half bloody weeks in the Chosin Reservoir, the Marines won the battle, but it was not without some casualties. The rest of his time in North Korea was uneventful in comparison.

While serving in Korea, Mayhlon received three medals, including two Purple Hearts and a Silver Star. He received the Purple Hearts for being wounded in battle at the Chosin Reservoir. He commented that among the five Second Lieutenants, they earned eight Purple Hearts, and all but one are still alive today. They are all around the age of Mayhlon, which is 90. The first Purple Heart he received was when he was talking to one of his machine-gunners. Suddenly, a mortar round exploded between them and badly wounded the gunner in the face and pierced Mayhlon through his parka. Mayhlon did not realize that he was hurt until someone told him he was bleeding. Mayhlon said he felt more pain from being knocked on the frozen ground than from the injury. The second Purple Heart was earned several months later when a Chinese soldier was rolling a grenade down a hill, which the Marines later conquered, and it exploded near Mayhlon. He was lucky the quality of the grenades was not as



Degernes, Jr. promotion to Major, 1959, San Diego, California

good as the US made grenades. The cast iron grenades did not always explode; sometimes they fragmented or didn't even blow up. In this case, the grenade fragments pierced both of Mahylon's arms and hands. Although painful, neither injury caused serious complications.

He received the Silver Star for his Company maintaining their position and never being overrun by the Chinese during the Chosin Reservoir, which was rare. Mayhlon believed this was because they had such a good combat leader. According to the letter he received from the President of the United States and the Secretary of the Navy, he received the Silver Star for "his conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity as a Rifle Platoon Commander of Company I, Third Battalion, First Marine, First Marine Division (Reinforced), in action against enemy aggressor forces in Korea on 28 and 29 November 1950." During the vicious attack by a "numerically superior enemy force at Hagaru-ri," he demonstrated "inspiring leadership, indomitable fighting spirit and unwavering devotion to duty in the face of grave personal risk."

During his time in Korea, Mayhlon received many medals in addition to the Silver Star and two Purple Hearts (i.e. one Purple Heart Medal with a gold star on the ribbon in lieu of second award). The additional medals consist of the Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal with Combat "V"; the American Theater Award, which he received for being in the Navy during World War II; the World War II Victory ribbon for serving in the Navy; the Uniformed Service Medal with a star in lieu of second award during the 50's and 60's; the Korean Service Medal, for fighting in five of the eight major battles in Korea; the South Korean Government Medal, and a Korean Combat ribbon for being actively engaged in combat in Korea. He also received Presidential Unit Citation Ribbons from both the President of the United States and the President of South Korea, and a United Nations Ribbon, awarded to those who served in the Korean War. In the early fall of 1958, he was promoted to Major.

On the way home from Korea, Mayhlon was unaware that the same type of war was brewing in the



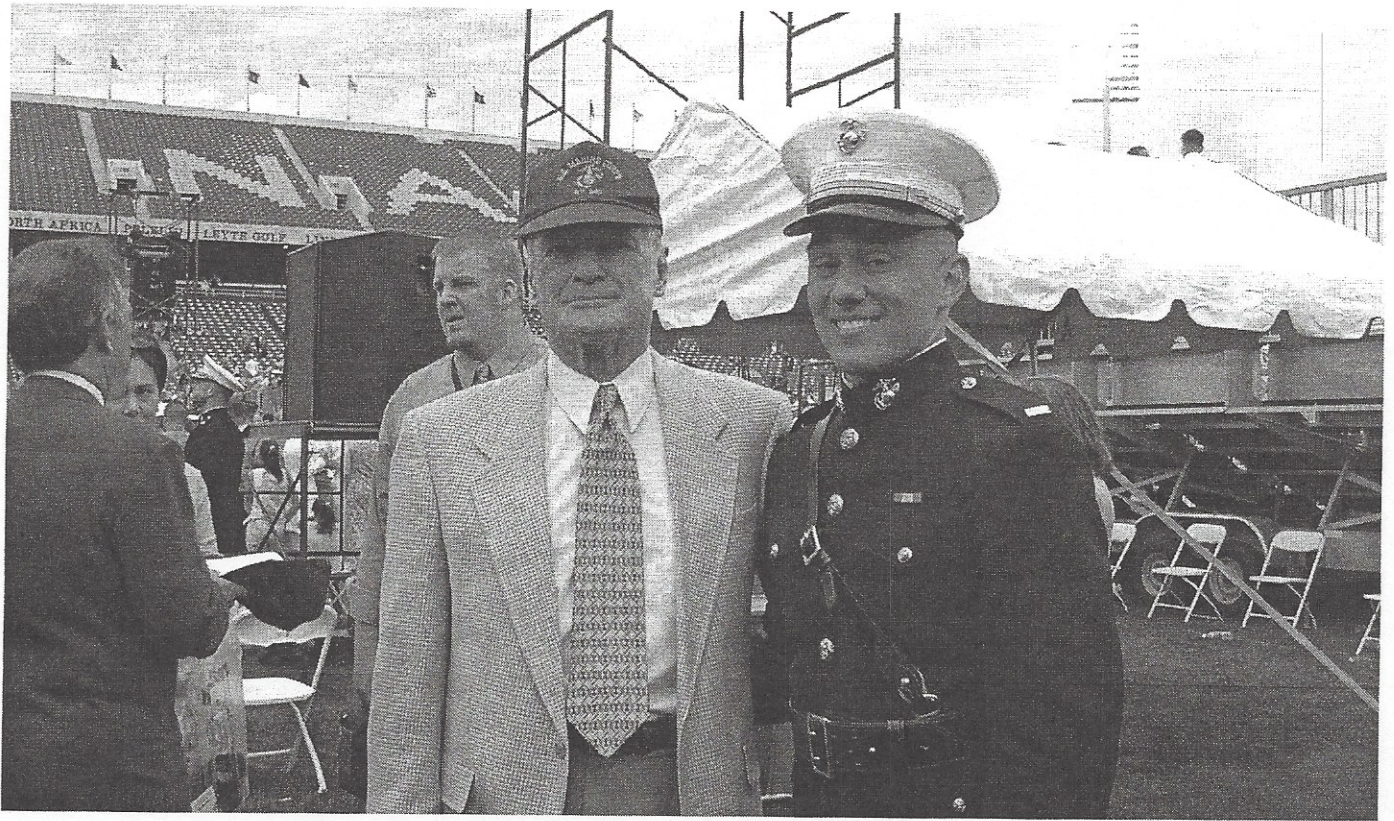
USMC Symbol

jungles of Vietnam. After hearing about the war in Vietnam, he wanted to go, but he was an infantry officer and his last job in the military was as an Executive Officer of a Marine Corps Communications Battalion. Although he was well trained to work with high-level communications, he would be in a back office and would not see many Marine troops. Instead he would be worrying about radios and Teletype. With emotion, he stated strongly, "I am an infantry officer, I was always an infantry officer, and I'll die an infantry officer."

Therefore, in May 1967, Mayhlon decided to hang up his USMC Blue uniform and retire with twenty years of service behind him. He would have gone to Vietnam if he could have remained an infantry officer, and he declared that, if he were able, he would still be fighting today at the age of ninety.

When asked if he missed the military, he replied whole-heartedly, "I miss the Military very much because, if I had not enjoyed being a Marine Officer, I would not have stayed in." After the war was over, he took on numerous other jobs as a Marine. One of these jobs was in the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California at the Mountain Warfare Center. He taught survival techniques such as cross-country mobility, cliff climbing, and stream crossing. These skills were never taught to Mayhlon as a Marine, which is why he wanted to teach them to the new Marines. The techniques are still being taught today.

The retirement was for another good reason: his four children were then entering high school. He and his wife wanted them to be able to enjoy their high school years, as they had, and to be able to stay



*Major Mayhlon Degernes, Jr. with great nephew 2nd Lieutenant Michael Rogers
at Annapolis graduation in 2005*

at one school. His wife, whom he met in Hawaii, had been a Navy Officer for four years, so she understood the demands on him and was a great military wife and mother. She retired after her four years of service to start their family.

After retirement, he was a City Manager for Montevideo, Minnesota, then Boulder City, Nevada, and finally Florence, Oregon. The attribute that helped him to be a great City Manager was his military background that included responsibilities such as water treatment and street and building maintenance. He also has a degree in political science and local government.

Many years after the war, Mayhlon decided to go back to South Korea with his wife to see what it had become. A young Korean civilian walked up to him and asked if he was from America and why he was there. Mayhlon said he was from America and then explained that he helped free this country from the North Koreans. The man stuck out his hand to shake Mayhlon's and said a sincere "Thank you, Sir, thank you." Mayhlon was choked up as he said that this moment was worth the whole trip.

Mayhlon was amazed to see how far South Korea had progressed since the end of the war. His

trip consisted of going to Japan first to see his landing beach, which was no longer there, then to Inchon, and finally to Seoul where the interaction with the man took place. He remembered when he fought down the main street in Seoul; it had only six traffic lanes, with three going each way, and all the buildings had been destroyed to ensure no North Koreans were hiding in the buildings. When he went back to Seoul, there were six lanes going each way and skyscrapers towering over the same road that he fought on. Although the Korean War is called "The Forgotten War," the South Koreans had not forgotten it.

When asked about the value of the war, Mayhlon believes that what they accomplished in the battles for South Korea "was very worthwhile." When he saw what South Koreans had done for their country many years later, he was convinced that the Americans were right, and he still is convinced to this day. "If we can support some country and help them to turn around and become a good member of the United Nations, great. Unfortunately, it doesn't always work." But it did for South Korea.

After 45 years out of the service, he has lost touch with many of his close, lifelong friends, but he is still a part of several military organizations. These

include the Marine Corps Association and the First Marine Division Association. He is also a member of the "Chosin Few," which is comprised of Marines and others in the military who served at the Chosin Reservoir including those who helped the Marines survive, such as Navy and Air Force flyers. This is a last man type of organization. The reunions started out with around 5000 men; now there are around 900. Someday, there will be no survivors remaining.

The Chosin Few will remain a heroic part of the United States and South Korean history forever, and when it is all said and done, the South Koreans will never forget the Marine in the dress blue uniform.

