

Korean War Veteran: I would not trade my experiences for a million dollars

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Lionel Pepin of Minot, wearing a bolo tie he made himself, is a veteran of the Korean War. He earned the Bronze Star for his work clearing landmines. *Nicole Carter/Advertiser Democrat* [Buy this Photo](#)

PARIS — Serving in the U.S. Army during the Korean War, Lionel Pepin experienced the boredom of being laid up in a MASH unit, the burden of guarding fellow Americans under arrest, the dread of clearing landmines and the satisfaction of providing for locals whose lives were in chaos.

He made deep but fleeting friendships and managed to parlay a talent for painting into an innovative art assignment to wrap up his tour.

Pepin's early life was relatively similar to many who grew up in Maine. He was born in Livermore in 1930, one of eight siblings. His father worked at the mill. He dropped out of school at 16 to help his parents support their large family. By 22, he married a woman he calls his angel. They quickly started their family. But then he was drafted and sent to Korea.

Pepin's first assignment was to watch over prisoners. American prisoners who had been thrown in the stockade. He quickly learned that his own well-being depended on keeping his fellow soldiers in line.

"If we let anyone get away, we'd have to take his place," Pepin said of his time as a guard. "I did not want to be in the stockade. One soldier who was on rubbish detail, he asked me what I would do if he dropped his rake and ran off.

"I told him I'd shoot him because I wasn't going to replace him. I'd have to shoot his head off. He shut up and kept raking rubbish."

The sadness Pepin felt being at war and the sadness he saw in others remains sharp, decades later.

"Sometimes it was hell, being so depressed," he said. "I'd see these kids, 15 and 16 years old. They'd lied about their age to get in but once they were in Korea? They'd just lay on the ground and cry with depression."

By law, the Army would have to send them home, but after lying to get to Korea it was not a quick trick to get back. Early on, Pepin attempted to relieve his own depression by getting drunk. It didn't work.

"I got a beer and I drank half of it down," he said. "But I couldn't drink. It made me sick, so that was that."

Not long after arriving in Ogada, Korea, Pepin's unit was training near their camp when an explosion killed three soldiers. They were in a minefield.

"We managed to get out and were told to stay out of the area," Pepin said. "They sent us a special officer, a warrant officer. He asked for volunteers to help him clear the field. All the guys said 'no' — they wouldn't do that work for anything. Except for one idiot. That was me."

Pepin was the lone volunteer to help. The warrant officer trained him on the different bomb types to look for and out into the field they went, probing the ground with bayonets. If they hit something hard, they would have to gently dig around it to expose it.

"The field had 'bouncing Betty's'," Pepin said. "Just a slight touch could set them off. They'd

shoot straight up about six feet and kill up to six men together. Sometimes we'd set additional bombs and wire them for a small explosion to get rid of them. And some were exposed right in the field. It was long work."

He and the warrant officer spent six weeks locating and exploding mines. Pepin has no recollection exactly how much of an area they had to cover or how many bombs they got rid of. He had a job to do, it took six weeks, and when he was done the ground was safe. Pepin was awarded a Bronze Star for his work clearing mines.

"Basically, you got the Bronze Star when you were lucky to be alive," he said. "I got it for cheating death. Clearing bombs, though. It was no game. Because of me and that warrant officer, no other men were lost. I think I was the first person around Lewiston/Auburn who got one."

North Korean soldiers had set the minefield. And they lurked around the camp, trying to commit guerrilla warfare whenever possible. The Americans slept in small huts, the doors tied shut with rope at night and bayonets and guns at their sides. Pepin became ill with a kidney infection.

"Every night and morning, the second my feet touched the ground I'd have to go," he recalled. "I had to go all the time. I'd be breaking the doors down to get out to pee. The other guys, they'd get mad and finally complained about me."

Pepin was sent to a MASH unit to be treated with antibiotics and recover. There for a month, he experienced a different kind of hell – complete boredom.

"It was a lot different than clearing bombs, but I was miserable. There were no butts, I had no money. Some people from Hollywood came through, a USO show. But I had to bum for every single thing I wanted or needed."

When Pepin was released he had to hitch hike back to his unit. Some of the soldiers were surprised to see him. They assumed he had been AWOL and reported him. Luckily, Pepin had managed to hold onto his medical authorization papers while he hitch hiked and avoided the stockade.

Life in such close proximity with other soldiers was not easy. Tensions were always simmering and sometimes tempers would blow.

"The Puerto Rican soldiers and the whites, they had problems with each other," said Pepin. "An officer would give orders to Puerto Ricans and they'd say 'no comprendo' and walk off. That would be that, it worked. So the white guys would throw bottles at them. Get all wise. It went both ways. People didn't understand each other, their mouths would get them in trouble.

"One night in my barracks, one soldier called a colored man a black bastard and they went at it. They tumbled right over my bunk. But a corporal heard the insult and he arrested the guy who started it. He ended up in general court martial."

Pepin's closest friend in Korea was African-American, a soldier named Johnny Shepard from California. Pepin remembers him fondly. He has no idea what happened to him once they parted.

"Johnny, he was the nicest guy," Pepin said. "I loved him. I told him, anything he ever needed, he should just get it from my locker. I would have done anything for him. But I never saw him again."

After returning to camp from the MASH unit, Pepin was under medical orders for light duty only.

"My commander, he asked what I'd like to do. I told him I liked to draw. He said he needed 400 sets of fatigues for the men, and paint for the equipment. So he gave me a truck and told me to go find both."

It was a duty Pepin was well suited to. He would take extra supplies and drive around, bartering in other camps and towns for what he needed. During this time, he watched as children made their way around, literally scraping the ground for food. So he began bartering for them too, bringing them food and even clothing. Even though the locals couldn't speak English, they certainly understood it when someone was trying to help them, Pepin said.

"I was good at scrounging," Pepin said. "I found paint. I filled the back of that truck with 400 complete outfits. It was satisfying work, and I never caught hell for the way I went about it. It wasn't always by the book. I picked up all sorts of little things and I put them in the pockets. So when a soldier put on his new fatigues, he'd find a pencil, or something, in the pocket."

Pepin was then put to work painting Army equipment. And paint he did, adding scenes and illustrations as he went. A colonel took note of Pepin's creativity.

"He poached me," Pepin said. "He sent me all over the place with paint to dress things up. And some of it was pretty good. It took up my last four months in Korea. The colonel, he said I'd have to train a replacement before he was going to let me go. But it was an empty threat. When my release papers came through, I had to tell him that I didn't have anyone. He let me go anyway."

Pepin was elated to return home to the states and his family. It wasn't easy at first though. His son Raymond was already 18 months and didn't know his father. Pepin, his wife Dorothy, and Raymond settled in Lewiston where he worked at various jobs including the

Hill textile mill, construction and welding. He and Dorothy spent 63 years together until her passing in 2015.

"My wife, she was my angel," Pepin said. "A thousand years with her would not have been enough. I loved that woman."

Today, the 88-year-old Pepin moves between his home in Minot and the Maine Veterans Home in Paris. Slowed by age and a wheelchair, he nevertheless has continued with the artistic endeavors that got him through his service in Korea.

"I make bolo ties," Pepin said. He cuts each one from tree limbs, hand-illustrates them, and attaches the clips and cords. "I've made at least 130. I need to start selling them. I also do wood carvings, and paintings. Some of them have taken a year."

Most of Pepin's work are scenes from nature. He described a piece where two wolves challenge a bear over a deer kill, another of eagles soaring over a mountain, and a white stallion he carved and painted.

"I would love a way to share my work," Pepin said, pointing out the detail on the bolo tie he was wearing that features two sparring bucks.

The two years he spent far away fighting in the Korean War was a difficult experience, but one that Pepin values.

"We had a job to do. The North Koreans who set that minefield, they were doing their job," Pepin says. "All of our job was to keep alive. It's not just storytelling, it's living it.

"Some of it, it was bad but some of it was good. I have no regrets. I helped our soldiers. I helped children there, and those in need. I wouldn't have done it any other way for a million bucks. It didn't change me for the worse."

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