

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
JOHN L. OAKESON  
Infantry, Marine Corps, Korean War.

2000

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**Oakeson, John L.**, (1932- ). Oral History Interview, 2000.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 45 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

**Abstract:**

John L. Oakeson, a Marinette, Wisconsin native, discusses his Korean War service with the 5th Marine Regiment, 1st Division. He talks about enlisting, boot camp and infantry training at Camp Pendleton (California), guarding a naval station in the Philippines, and additional training in Japan in preparation for Korea. Oakeson describes the cold Korean climate, receiving his winter gear, front line fighting, and lack of fresh uniforms. Oakeson mentions attending sniper school and returning to the front lines as a sniper. He comments on escorting actress Betty Hutton when she visited Korea to entertain troops. Oakeson touches upon the effectiveness of "Mickey Mouse boots," going on combat patrols, trading eggs for whiskey with Canadian troops, and hearing naval gunfire. He relates leading a group of replacement soldiers and attempting to pass along survival knowledge, and he recalls feeling like a "mother hen." Oakeson talks about having to account for any use of ammunition or grenades, digging and manning fortifications on hillsides, and the dangers of mines. He tells of nearly reenlisting but changing his mind after seeing his name at the top of the list of men to be sent home. After returning to the United States, Oakeson mentions being treated for internal parasites, staying in the Reserves for six years, using the GI Bill to attend the University of Wisconsin-Stout, and working as a school principal. He addresses his activities in the American Legion and the VFW, including four years as a VFW post commander in Waunakee. Oakeson reflects on the effectiveness of his training and on the camaraderie in the Marine Corps.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Oakeson (b.1932) served with the Marines during the Korean War as an infantryman and sniper. After the Korean War, he earned a degree in industrial arts from the University of Wisconsin-Stout and got married. He later taught at Lake Holcombe, earned his Master's degree, and was a school principal in Glenwood City, at a Sauk City high school for thirteen years, and at a high school in the Alma Center-Humbird-Merrillan School District. He eventually settled in Waunakee, Wisconsin.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2000

Transcribed by Hannah Goodno, 2010

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**Interview Transcript:**

- Jim: Okay, John, when were you born?
- John: I was born on October 9<sup>th</sup>, 1932. And I'm a twin, not identical.
- Jim: Fraternal. And when did you go in the service?
- John: I went in –
- Jim: 1922, you said?
- John: No. '32.
- Jim: '32.
- John: '32.
- Jim: Yeah. And where?
- John: Marinette, Wisconsin.
- Jim: Okay, and when did you enter military service?
- John: I enlisted in the Marine Corps in March 1951.
- Jim: And you volunteered, of course, for that.
- John: Yeah, a little interesting story here. My father was in World War I. I worked in a grocery store next to his business. He had a feed store. And I had to wait—I graduated at age 17, so I had to wait until I turned 18. But anyway, a friend of mine from high school class came in and asked me if I wanted to enlist in the Marine Corps. I said, "Yeah." So that was on, I think, on a Thursday. Friday, he came back and said, "We're leaving on Monday." [Jim Laughs] So I rode home with my dad, and I told him, "Dad, I'm leaving Monday for the Marine Corps." And he stopped the truck.
- Jim: Oh, I'll bet.
- John: Like, "What the hell're ya doing?" I said, "Well, that's my choice." And he said, "Why don't you go in the Army?" [Laughs] So anyway, away I went.
- Jim: Did they threaten to draft you? I mean, were you –the draft board--

John: No, no.

Jim: Nobody was –they weren’t on you yet.

John: No way.

Jim: Okay. And where’d you go?

John: I went to San Diego, boot camp. And I went back to Camp Pendleton for training in infantry training there.

Jim: You were just a rifleman? You had no special duties?

John: No, we took tests, and I said, “I want to be in the infantry.” That was my choice.

Jim: Right. And so then how long were you in the States?

John: Oh, let’s see. I left—

Jim: Roughly. The exact dates are not important.

John: I left in August to go to—they sent me to the Philippines.

Jim: Oh. August of ’51?

John: Yes.

Jim: Okay. All right.

John: And we rode on the ship for almost a month. We started on August 29<sup>th</sup>, and we got to the Philippines on August 20<sup>th</sup>. And half the ship were civilians so we had to stop at every island along the way. I got to see Pearl Harbor that way. And just before we got to the Philippines we had one of those horrendous storms where the ship rolled—I thought we were going to go under. And the few of us that did not get seasick, I did. That’s when you say, “I want to die.” [Laughs]

Jim: I know about that. I lived aboard a ship for a year.

John: Boy, you see that in the movies—pictures, but that’s what we went through.

Jim: So, you landed in Pusan, I assume? When you went from the Philippines to Korea?

- John: No. I was in—I was a guard in the Philippines.
- Jim: Oh, you got off your ship and had [unintelligible] duty there.
- John: Yeah, that's where I was assigned to, the Philippines.
- Jim: Guard at a base? At a naval base?
- John: Yes, I was. But I went into the office, and I worked guard duty. They have an area where they store things in the back of the buildings. I was there, and then they moved me out to one day—any of the veterans go on the little ship to go to Tokyo. I was guard there. I checked them out, and check 'em when they came in. And I went in—they reported that I had really enlisted to go to Korea. So they sent me to Japan then in December, early December. Marine Corps, more training.
- Jim: Any special training then?
- John: No [laughs], I guess—just adjustment. I'm not sure what—again, I don't remember all this, but it was interesting. I got there, went to the post office, and a fella walked in, and it was my neighbor from back in Marinette [Jim laughs]. And he'd been in the Marine Corps for—oh, he was—all the way. And we just happened to see each other, and so he showed me around Japan a little bit, which was nice. But then in early December I went to Korea. Actually, in Japan I was at Austin [??] Base. [possibly an informal base camp name].
- Jim: That's not important.
- John: Okay. Then the--
- Jim: In Korea, what outfit?
- John: I was in the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division, 5<sup>th</sup>.
- Jim: 1<sup>st</sup> Marine?
- John: 1<sup>st</sup> Marine, 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment.
- Jim: 5<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>?
- John: 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division, 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment.
- Jim: Got it. Okay.
- John: And I got there in early December, and oh, it's cold over there.

- Jim: I know. I lived there for a year. So—
- John: And then I think about the first thing I remember—well, we got there, of course, they issued me equipment which was a bullet-proof vest, and we'd call 'em "Mickey Mouse boots" [black or white high top boots for extreme cold weather] [Jim Laughs], and our sleeping bag which I was real happy to have that.
- Jim: Where'd they send you in Korea?
- John: Right up to the front lines.
- Jim: Front lines. Do you recall that—let's see, that was in '51. That was about halfway up then. They'd already landed in Incheon. I was at Incheon. That had already happened then.
- John: Yeah.
- Jim: Okay. So you were marching north then?
- John: Yes, we were. I spent most of my time at the front lines. I don't know how often we—a couple time we'd go back to reserve. After the front lines for a while, we'd exchange--
- Jim: Still a rifleman or--?
- John: Yes, I was. And on February 9<sup>th</sup> we called it a clean-up. There was no movement or noise for six weeks. Or—I'm sorry—six days. We tried to trap the Koreans to come in, North Koreans. We didn't get much movement. I think mostly because it was so cold. They weren't moving much either. Like at 30 below. Then, on February 25<sup>th</sup> we were back on reserve, and then they sent me to sniper school. So I got my rifle and some shooting with the rifle. So when I went back up to the front lines I was then a sniper. It was interesting, too, when you'd go back to reserve we'd just throw our clothes away. If they're, you know, if they're dirty and everything else because we wore them for a month and a half or whatever. We didn't have a chance to wash and clean up. So we'd just throw 'em away and get new clothes. And then March we'd go out—mostly if we moved it was at night, doing a little moving around at night. Patrols and just to see if there was and movement around at night, and usually it was pretty quiet. And March 4<sup>th</sup> Betty Hutton came over and visited us. Again, I'm back on reserve on this, and Betty Hutton was there. And they picked about four of us to escort her, and I was one of them.
- Jim: Oh, how nice.

- John: And [laughs] something I remember—we sat down, and I sat probably next to her, maybe two away from her, and I said at the table “Please pass me the butter.” And you can’t believe the reaction I got for that. You know, we never said “Please.” [Laughs] We’d always use the four letter words. But I was being very conservative about that.
- Jim: They kidded you about that for a month, I’m sure.
- John: I usually was anyway, but I can remember that—everybody—it almost blew the tent over [Laughs]. But then March 30<sup>th</sup> I was back on the front line again.
- Jim: Did you set up your perimeters with minefields and barbed wire both?
- John: Yes. And on March 30<sup>th</sup>, we switched lines. We went from the east side to the west side. We’d switch over to relieve the South Koreans. They were originally around the west side, so we made the switch there. We rode by bus. It’s 150 miles—I’m sorry—let’s see, we moved about 150 miles from east to west. And then we relieved the Koreans. Part of the time we moved by truck. We went through Seoul. But that’s—I just remember driving through it. That’s—I didn’t see it. And when we got there we had to march up. We crossed a river, and my—I think my left foot broke through the ice. And of course, we kept on moving. Had to get out of there, and kept on going. We got to the other side of the river, we stopped for just a quick rest, and I just pulled my “Mickey Mouse boots” off and run off the water from my sock, and went on when[??]. And I will bless the Marine Corps for giving us those Marine Corps boots. The fellows that stepped on mines usually lost a leg. With the “Mickey Mouse boots,” you maybe lost a foot, not the whole leg. Sometimes not that serious, either.
- Jim; They were low-top boots?
- John: About halfway up your leg. But I still have a pair at home. Not from the service, but a similar kind. I use them all the time. And they were really very protective for us.
- Jim: Were they waterproof?
- John: I would say yes, yeah. ‘Cause we were in snow a lot, and no problem there. And on one of the patrols at night they asked me to carry a radio, and they’re heavy. I had never carried one before. I wasn’t really sure how to use it, but anyway, he showed me how to use it. And I said, “I need a rifle,” and they said, “You can’t, with the radio so heavy.” I said, “I need something.” So we had—in one of the—in the bunker next to us

was a fellow from Texas, and he had a pistol. So I went and got his pistol. Thank goodness we didn't need it. But I needed some protection other than just a radio [Laughs].

Jim: A typical patrol—what were we talking? How many? Five, six?

John: We'd go out in—ah, probably ten, twelve of us.

Jim: Ten men?

John: Yeah, out patrolling, see if there's any movement from the Koreans, North Koreans.

Jim: Right. Mostly you were at this time were opposed by North Koreans?

John: Ah, yes.

Jim: Not Chinese?

John: Chinese, I think they dropped back a little bit at that point too. They didn't have any pulling either. There's so many—and I think you talked to—maybe you were in the Army—but, people in the Army over there, they had a lot of frost feet, frostbitten.

Jim: Yeah, I took care of a lot of them on our hospital ship.

John: Yeah, and thank goodness for us Marines with those "Mickey Mouse boots." We didn't have much of that, and they were a real saver.

Jim: Did you have any trouble operating the rifle in the cold weather?

John: No. We used a lot of grease and that on it. No, I never had a problem with my rifle.

Jim: Did you run into any other patrols when you were out on patrol?

John: No. One night, we were at a mountain next to us, and again I'm sorry I can't give names of the mountains. I don't remember. A mountain's a mountain to us. But one, we got close to one that was guarded—a station by the Canadians, and they had wires around, which you have to have, but their Canadian Club bottles laying all over the place. We stopped and talked to them, I said, "What are you guys doing over here?" He said, "Well, you know, it keeps us going." And they asked us if we have any eggs. I said, "We have eggs." They didn't have any eggs. I said, "Well, I'll see if I can bring some over next time." So I was able to get a couple

dozen of eggs, and the next time I went over I gave 'em the eggs, and we got some Canadian Club. [Laughs] So that warmed us, too.

Jim: Sure.

John: But I thanked those Canadians for helping us out that way.

Jim: Did you ever run into any Turks?

John: [coughs] No. Again, this was about the closest we got to any mountain that was guarded by another country. So I don't know. We probably went by them, but that's the closest we ever got to them. We'd never get in a firefight with people on our own side. The Navy fired 60 inch shells. I remember you remember that.

Jim: Yes, they'd come over our hospital ship.

John: Yeah.

Jim: I could see 'em.

John: Yeah. We listened to them 'cause once in awhile one would fall short.

Jim: We talked about that a lot [laughs].

John: And we listened to it, and a certain sound—I wish I could explain it to you, but we listened to it, and we could tell when one was coming short, and that's when we dove down in our trenches. And fortunately none landed by us, but there were a couple that weren't too far away, just beyond us. But, that's actually nice to have 'em firing those shells, but [laughs]—keep 'em going. [Laughs]

Jim: Did anyone—did you suffer any bansai attacks? Or of that like a rush on your position?

John: No.

Jim: None.

John: No. Actually, I'd say during the wintertime it was fairly quiet. I was on patrol a number of times, and of course I was doing some sniping work. And we never really understood why, but they were trying to build a listening post between our mountain and I think where the Canadians were, which was quite a distance. So at night we'd go out there and dig trenches and places where observers could sit. Which was—you know, it really didn't make a lot of sense because the Koreans knew we were there.

You could hear us. And we'd do that—every once in a while I'd go out, and the last time I went out there they put me in control of taking out some Marines, and the ones I took out were enlisted Marines, and they'd just gotten there. And I'll never forget this experience. Went out there, and I said, "When we go out there," and I explained to them where we're going, what we're gonna do. Made sure they had the right equipment and everything with them. I said, "Please stay apart of each other, don't get together." We got out there fine, we started working. I was more of a listener, and I heard some movement down below the hill so I threw a field grenade and I said, "Fellas, we're going back. Now, follow me, but stay apart. The machine will wipe us out." I'd go a little ways, and I'd stop and look back, and it felt like little chicks. I felt like a mother hen with chicks. And I explained, "Stay apart!" Again we don't make any noise, but I had to get 'em spread out. I'd go a little bit further, and I wanted to stop and listen. And again, they're right behind me. I did it about three or four times and finally we got close to our, back to our lines, and of course we had to let 'em know we were coming. I'll never forget that experience with those fellas.

Jim: What was your rank at that time?

John: I was a PFC. I was put in for corporal, but I got home before it ever caught up to me. But I think about that time—why they had me doing it. I think a number of fellas that were there had gone home, and replaced them with these drafted men—and I get those kids—well, you know, real young. We were all young. And I'll never forget that experience. I was just happy we got back without anybody getting hurt. Also, on the front lines, I don't know why, but like we were short on ammunition. If we threw a grenade or fired a shot, we had to call in and tell them why—what we did and why. Again, I don't understand that. That was in winter of 1951-52.

Jim: You had to account for everything.

John: We had to account for it. If we threw anything, we had to report in why. And again, I never understood it, but—

Jim: How far back was the command post from where you were?

John: Oh, I'd say probably a couple miles. Again, when we went back in from the front lines back to reserve we'd usually got on trucks, and they'd take us back and brought us back by truck again. A number of times—oh, in fact when we went to relieve the Koreans, South Koreans, went up the hill. We had to set ourself there. We went on the mountain where apparently they were not. So we had to dig our own bunkers and trenches, and that's a lot of digging. Of course we'd use bags. We'd put sand in bags for the

walls and logs on top, and then make sure we'd build those very, very strong because if a mine would land on top of us we had to make sure we had some protection there. After we'd built a number of—

Jim: Did you build a top over?

John: Oh yeah, put logs on top, and then bags of sand. We usually put a number up there to make sure we were safe. We didn't want to get hit from the top. And I guess we built enough of those bunkers, we pretty well knew what to do and how to protect ourselves.

Jim: How many people would that bunker hold?

John: Two, usually. If we're on—at night we're on duty we'd usually switch every two or three hours with the same person in the bunker with you—just exchange.

Jim: So one of you is awake all the time?

John: Right. Out in the trench we never knew when the Koreans or Chinese were coming in.

Jim: I understand that. That's why I was wondering whether they'd ever come in, but apparently not.

John: Not at that point, very fortunately.

Jim: Were you prepared then, at any noise out there, but you would throw a grenade at it or turn a machine gun on it or something?

John: Usually depends on the noise we heard. If we heard a noise, we'd try to listen to how much noise there was. I wouldn't throw a grenade at a bird, you know. You want to make sure the noise we heard, what I heard, had something to do with somebody trying to get in. So then I'd usually use a grenade. Then I'd let 'em know we know they're there.

Jim: Yes, I think that would do it.

John: Fire a—just fire a shot out there, you don't know where they are. A grenade would cover more area.

Jim: Did you connect with all the other bunkers in that area by phone? Land wire? Land line?

John: Yeah, actually our sergeant would usually have the telephone. We didn't all have those. Our sergeant would have it.

Jim: But you made—when you got information you would be on direct voice from him—

John: Right.

Jim: Standing there?

John: Right. Yeah, we always had to report. If we didn't we'd get a call in, "What's going on? What are you doing? Let us know."

Jim: How would you report? Did you have to go back a ways?

John: No. Just use the telephone to call in.

Jim: You did have a phone then?

John: Yeah, our sergeant would have that, and we'd tell him we heard some noise down in front, and we threw a grenade.

Jim: How far away was the sergeant from you?

John: Probably a couple bunkers away. All in the same trench.

Jim: You mean the whole platoon would be hunkered down there?

John: Pretty much so.

Jim: Right.

John: Our platoon, we pretty much stayed together.

Jim: That's what I'm really gettin' at there.

John: That's the Marine Corps way.

Jim: What, platoon units?

John: Yeah.

Jim: As the primary unit?

John: Right.

Jim: About how many men?

John: Thirteen in a platoon.

Jim: Thirteen in a—

John: In a squad. In a squad.

Jim: And then three platoons?

John: Yeah. Again, I'm not real sure about that, but I know it by—

Jim: Sure. Three squads to a platoon? Or four? Do you recall?

John: Four, I think. But don't quote me, again, you're taking me back a few years. [Laughs] Once we were out—this was during the day, we were moving, making some movement, and probably about our platoon—our squad rather, I'm sorry—and we were marching along, and we heard a mine go off and looked over to our left, back over quite a ways, and some soldier had been hit by a land mine. We called in for emergency people. And I and another fellow got on our knees with our little—called swords—there's another name for it—our knives.

Jim: Bayonets.

John: Bayonets. And we'd go down and we'd find the mines. Now, fortunately, those mines that we used then, we could touch them without having them blow up if we're careful. So we got down on our knees and found a path to get out to the fellow that stepped on the mine, and the emergency squadron followed us in there and followed the same path back.

Jim: Sure. You didn't use string or anything like that.

John: No. No, we made a trail wide enough. And well, it's hard to say how they're using the land mines now—do they use 'em more? As I read about 'em, hear about 'em, if you just almost cough on them they're gonna go off. But back then, they were a little different, and you had to almost step on one to go off.

Jim: Were these the Hedge-hoppers that jumped up when you hit 'em, and then explode laterally?

John: Yeah.

Jim: Or just the kind you step on and blow up that way?

John: Right. Most of the—yeah, it'd go up.

Jim: Yeah, the pop up kind are the ones that are really dangerous.

John: That's the ones that—

Jim: They're like "daisy cutters," I think they call 'em.

John: Oh. These ones, the ones we were talking about, the ones going up, those are the ones why so many servicemen lost their legs.

Jim: Yes, 'cause the first explosion would just raise the thing up, and then the second explosion—

John: Yeah. Those are things that I wish we never ever used.

Jim: I took care of many wounds like that. Took off a lot of feet.

John: I betcha.

Jim: Right. Yeah, they were tough wounds. Okay, did you have any, run into any white phosphorus at all, John?

John: Any what?

Jim: White phosphorus? You didn't see those?

John: No. Again, I'm not sure—

Jim: That's another problem. You'd remember that.

John: No.

Jim: 'Cause the burn was so horrific.

John: I know we did, sometime we'd move and check on all of the bunkers. We'd use the fire to clean out the bunker and North Koreans. Make sure—

Jim: Clean up with napalm--

John: No, it's a—what's the word? Again--

Jim: Right. I know what you mean.

John: Okay, we'd use the fire if we were coming and we're moving forward a little bit, we'd use the—make sure the bunkers were clear. Sometimes a grenade in there, but sometimes use a—

Jim: Flamethrower.

John: Flamethrower. Make sure it's empty.

Jim: Generally, when your platoon moved, though, it was on foot?

John: Right.

Jim: Yes. So you didn't move around a lot. How fast were you moving forward at this when you first got on the line? Mile or two a day? Or not that--

John: Not, not—Well, I'd say, usually not far.

Jim: Did you have trouble getting food up to you?

John: Well, we ate what they gave us, cans of food [laughs].

Jim: No hot food.

John: No, no. And sometimes if we'd figure out—see we built our own little heater in our bunker, and we'd get some oil.

Jim: Some Sterno [fuel made from denatured and jellied alcohol]?

John: Yeah, and sometimes we'd kinda warm up the food that way, but most of what they handed us was canned food and so on. What's interesting, too, in going back to Christmas or Thanksgiving—we'd go back if we were on reserve. I went for Christmas—or I was for Thanksgiving—you go back and get the food, go through the line, and if you didn't eat the food right away, it's probably frozen, or darn cold, so I had to gobble it up real fast [laughs]. But that's really the experience I had with food. G.I. ration I guess they call it.

Jim: Right. And how far back was the doctor?

John: The doctor? I know I really can't tell ya. We had—

Jim: You don't recall an aid station nearby?

John: We did—behind us a little ways—not real far where they're safe, but these were—again, I'm sure there were doctors there.

Jim: Oh, I'm sure. At least one.

- John: But, to be honest with ya I never had to go back there, thank God.
- Jim: You were never wounded then.
- John: Thank God. I did get nicked on the leg a little bit, but I never—that was it. It took us—when we got to the hill where—or the area where we'd leave the Koreans, it took us three days and three nights to build our bunkers, and our trenches. And that's, you know, that's a lot of digging to make sure they're protected.
- Jim: Especially, in the cold wather.
- John: Right. And then when we dug the floor we built it so if the grenade came rolling in there we had a little trench in there to protect us. It was just something we designed over the years, you know, we built so many bunkers that if somebody would throw a grenade into our bunker we had a way of trapping it a little bit so--
- Jim: Putting it in that little special trap down there.
- John: Right.
- Jim: What was that covered with?
- John: Just by the hole itself.
- Jim: Wood?
- John: No, just by the hole we dug in the ground. Again, thank goodness we never had to use it. How effective it would've been, we're not sure—
- Jim: Well, it would have helped you guys.
- John: But we did something to help us out so we had a little safety.
- Jim: Did you lose any of your platoon when you were there?
- John: Early in that year in that area
- Jim: By rifle fire or--?
- John: Once—well, actually, some of my grenades—in fact, when they assigned me to a fellow in a bunker, he had been hit with a grenade before, before I was there. And when I went in there I walked in with grenades, and he put his rifle on me. “Don't you *dare* bring your grenade in here.” I understood that so I had to watch—he'd been hit. He had a number of holes from a

grenade, and so I said, “Hey, I respect you for that.” **[End of Tape One, Side One]**

But he had been—yeah, a few of the guys I joined had been—went through more than I did before I got there.

Jim: So in the spring did they move you?

John: Yeah, every time we’d go back on reserve we’d always go back to a different spot. We never went back to the original ones. And in April, I think April 23<sup>rd</sup>, I thought about re-enlisting. When I enlisted it was for the duration of the war. And what—it was something that I could—if the war stayed on I could still be there. Or, when the war, they felt, it was pretty well over I would be discharged. So that’s what I signed up for. At the time my friend talked me into going [laughs] into the Marine Corps. That’s what he said, “Sign up for that.” And it’s interesting too—he went down for our physicals in Milwaukee, and I passed my physical, but he didn’t. He went back, and he came back, and he joined me—or came in the boat two weeks later. So we never saw each other until we went home on the ship. But I was gonna re-enlist because there were benefits when you’re overseas and so on, and I was gonna do that. Going back to reserve, my commander set it up so I could go back. I was the only one in—our whole platoon did not go—I was the only one ‘cause I had told him I was gonna re-enlist.

Jim: You were single then.

John: Right. So he sent me back, and again I threw my clothes away, but I got a nice meal and new clothes, and boy, I had a nice time. But the next morning I went in the office to sign up, and one of the fellows standing behind the counter he said, “Is your name John Oakeson?” I said, “Yes it is.” He said, “I want to show you something.” He showed me a list of people going to be sent home. I’m about the second name on the top. I said, “Thank you.” I went back to the lines again, and in May, I came back.

Jim: Came home.

John: Came home. By ship. And when I got back, most of the fellows I—in fact, this fellow and I were gonna enlist together, he was on the same ship, came home with me at that point. Also, another fellow from Menominee, Michigan. [Approx. 5 sec. pause in recording]. The—do you remember [??]—the liberation zone in Korea, now it’s on the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. It’s two and a half miles wide, 153 miles long, and there’s wire on both sides to keep both sides from doing anything beyond that. And the war started on July 10, 1951, and supposedly it was over July 1953. But it’s still going

on [sound of rustling paper]. But when I got home—went back to San Francisco. Again I went home by ship. It was straight across. It didn't take as long for us to get to the Philippines. But I had internal parasites so I had to stay there for a week or ten days.

Jim: Where?

John: In San Francisco before I could go home. I'd go in every day and get checked until it was cleared up. Then I could go home.

Jim: All the worms were out?

John: I was full of worms.

Jim: Yeah, intestinal parasites are very common.

John: Right. So after that clean up they—

Jim: You never had any more trouble from that?

John: Ah, not—no.

Jim: Never recurred.

John: No. I imagine it was something we ate or something I drank.

Jim: Oh, yeah, it skims [??] in the water. Did you—were you then discharged shortly thereafter?

John: Yes. Well, I had to stay in for six months on reserve.

Jim: In the Reserve?

John: I was in Reserve a total of six years.

Jim: Back here in Wisconsin?

John: Yes. One nice thing about it—being in that service—is the G.I. Bill. I never thought about going on to school, but when I got that I went on to college.

Jim: Yeah, I was gonna say, that was my next question—what did you do with your G.I. Bill?

John: I went to Stout University, and I majored in industrial arts. And I wanted to play football, and I played football there for four years.

- Jim: Hey, wonderful.
- John: I met my wife there from Milwaukee, and we're happily married now for forty—forty-five years now.
- Jim: Oh, that's terrific.
- John: The G.I. Bill—otherwise I'd never gone.
- Jim: That's the greatest thing that ever happened, all right. And what did you do with your degree?
- John: I taught industrial arts at—it's called Lake Holcombe [Wisconsin] now. I went because they had a vacancy for industrial arts and home ec which—my wife majored in home economics. So went there, and they needed a football coach, I went there.
- Jim: You did both.
- John: We did both, and then we were there for six years. Then I went to Glenwood City [Wisconsin] which isn't too far from Holcombe. I was high school principal there. I'll tell you one thing about Holcombe. It's not a big school, and after the first year I went back to Stout to work on my master's degree, and when we went back for teacher in-service in the fall before school starts, the supervising principal introduced the staff again, and he said that I'm also the principal—and I didn't know that. [Both laugh] But that got me started in administration. So I went to Glenwood City, and we went through a program where people would come in and visit our faculty and then grade us on our faculty and the academics, the whole works. And one of these people that came in was the placement director at River Falls University. And he asked me, "John, do you want to make a change?" I said, "I'm not ready. I like this little community." But I'd get letters every once in awhile from schools that need a principal. And where we lived, we bought a home in Glenwood City. We lived right across from the park area.
- Jim: Where is it?
- John: Where is it? It's probably about thirty-forty miles west of Eau Claire [Wisconsin]. And we liked it—it was a nice little community. But one day I was working over at the fairgrounds—our county fair was on. And I had a message that I had to make this phone call. And the call was a call—from Sauk Prairie Superintendent. So when I got home I called him and he asked me about applying for this principal's job at Sauk Prairie [Wisconsin]. And I said, "Well, I'm really not interested in moving." He

said, “Well, we’d like to see you.” I said, “Well, my wife is from Milwaukee. We’re going down there,” and I gave him probably a week later. He said, “Well, stop in on the way down.” I said, “Okay, it’s on our way, really.” So we did, and he said, “Please stop on the way back.” So we came back, he offered me the job. So [laughs] decided to take it which was kind of late in the summer for Glenwood City, but they got by without me. So I went to Sauk Prairie.

Jim: How long were you there?

John: I was there for high school principal for thirteen years. Then I decided that my kids were kind of growing up without me. As a principal I was there not only during the day but at night and on Saturdays—we had wrestling or swimming or something going on.

Jim: That you were expected to attend.

John: Yeah, and so I decided I’m gonna make a change. So I [laughs] applied for one job, and I was offered the job. And I took the family there, and no one said, “Yes.” [laughs] So I was supposed to sign the contract that night, and I went over to talk to the superintendent, and I said, “I’m sorry. This is not the place we want to be.

Jim: My family doesn’t buy it.

John: No. So, I think about—I don’t know, maybe two more years after that, I applied for another job. I got that job. I took the family along. The children were a little bit older now. My daughter, in fact, was going to be—at that point she was a junior. Our son, a freshman. I said, “Please keep in mind, we’re going somewhere. I’m not staying here.” So went up to the—where I ended up in Alma Center—Humbird—Merrillan. [School District].

Jim: Where? In where?

John: Humbird—it’s Alma Center, Humbird, Merrillan [all in Wisconsin]. It’s three different little communities joined in—each at one point had their own school district, but they joined in and created one high school, or one—

Jim: In Merrill

John: Yeah, it’s Alma Center, and Humbird, and Merrillan. And it’s just north of Black River Falls.

Jim: Oh, okay, Merrillan’s the town. Right.

- John: And so I said, “This is probably where I’d like to be.” And of course, they were kind of unhappy about it. My daughter talked about staying in Sauk Prairie and finishing out her senior year, and I said, “No, we’re family.” And we bought a new home there just right along a little crick. And there wasn’t much for children to do around there so in our basement we put in a pool table and ping pong table, and they had friends come over to our house in the basement. And they had popcorn and pizza and whatever else. It’s a place to go and do things. It didn’t take long for both of our kids to say, “Thank you, Dad.”
- Jim: Ah! You converted ‘em. [Laughs]
- John: Yeah, after they found out. What’s tough though when they were at Sauk Prairie I was the principal, and that’s tough on the kids.
- Jim: It sure is.
- John: Real tough on your own children.
- Jim: Yup. So did you join any veterans groups?
- John: Yes, I belong to the American Legion—thirty, I don’t know, almost forty years in VFW. I’ve been commander four different years at VFW, and commander—
- Jim: VFW seems to be pretty good, but the American Legion is sort of disappearing, don’t you think?
- John: Membership is tough on both organizations.
- Jim: Yes.
- John: Not only memberships, when I—first year I was—couple years I was—we started a VFW post in Waunakee, and I was commander there for three years in a row, and our attendance was—we’d grow from like thirty people to forty and so on, and our attendance was usually around sometimes twenty, twenty-five people. I felt good about that. But the attendance isn’t that good nowadays. Of course they’re a larger post. We’re probably about close to ninety people now. At our meeting we may have—lucky to have twenty. But our American Legion, our post is probably about 240, and if we have thirty people, that’s pretty good. And some of us, we’re there every time.
- Jim: Right. Same people.

- John: Yeah. But I kind of believe in why we have them, what they want to do. I think if more veterans would understand what these organizations do to help our veterans—
- Jim: They could do a lot more if more people would help out.
- John: Right, and we try to convince these people of that, but—
- Jim: Yeah, it's hard to do. Do you have a lot of veterans from Vietnam?
- John: A number, yes. And also a couple—
- Jim: If there's anybody you think would make a good interview you should let me know. It might be if they had an interesting experience.
- John: Yeah, I—
- Jim: If you could let me know who these people are then I could contact them. We'd have them come down so I could interview 'em.
- John: Yeah, I'll check with 'em. But some of them weren't very active. They were back in reserve some places and so on, but--
- Jim: Yeah, it'd only be somebody who had some combat experience.
- John: None of 'em that I know were in combat from Vietnam.
- Jim: Any from Korea? Other than yourself?
- John: Ah, no. We have some other—we have two Navy guys that were on a ship. Of course they were there in Korea. But again, they were there and they fired the weapons for us, but they were not right in Korea.
- Jim: Oh, they weren't in Korea?
- John: Not really. We had another guy that was in Korea, but he's again in reserve. Some guys end up as mechanics and so on. No, there's—I haven't been able to talk to anybody through what I went through. And I'll be honest with you, when I—lots of times I don't talk about this.
- Jim: Why is that?
- John: Well, there's things you wanna just kinda forget.

- Jim: Do you feel that there were things you could have done more? Or do you feel that you were disappointed that you didn't do better or something? Any guilt feelings about that?
- John: I guess the only feeling that I have was I think we should have kept on going into North Korea. This problem we have over there now I think we could—
- Jim: Would have been solved?
- John: I think we could've. It'd mean more fighting, probably more deaths and so on, but what's going on now, look at how many years we've been sitting at the line. And once in awhile somebody's getting killed over there now. But if there's anything I feel about Korea, I just—MacArthur wanted to do that, and he, of course, taken out. Some of his plans probably weren't the greatest, but I think at some point we should have kept on going. If there's a time when I think you wanna go, I'll go with you. [Jim Laughs] Even today—'cause it's sad, what they say about starvation and everything else of the children. And the reason I joined the Marine Corps was I was reading about Korea—this started before I enlisted. I read about this and hear about what's going on, people getting killed over there, and for why. And that's why I enlisted in the Marine Corps. And that's—when I went through tests, and I said I joined because I want to be in infantry. Although, while I was in the Philippines they did call me in and ask me to go to officers school. I said, "Well, I'd like to know a little bit more about it." But they found out I was too young. You have to be a certain age to go into officers school, and I wasn't old enough. So I forgot about that. Also, in boot camp they did talk to me about going to Washington as a guard there, and I said, "No, thank you." [Laughs] Being dressed up like full military uniform and—
- Jim: Right. Then you're on display all the time.
- John: Yeah, and that's something that I would not be interested in. That's probably why I asked to be taken out of the Philippines. Which at that point wasn't a bad life either.
- Jim: Right. Have you kept in contact with any of your mates?
- John: No, I haven't. I know we enlisted—a number of us from Wisconsin went out to San Diego together. But we got divided, and I tried to find some, and no contact at all. Nothing. 'Course we all got divided different ways. One guy—he's gonna be a baker.
- Jim: There weren't many from Wisconsin in your outfit then?

John: No.

Jim: Did you win any medals in Korea?

John: Just what you get from Korea.

Jim: Unit citations.

John: Yeah.

Jim: You must've got a unit citation.

John: Yeah, I did. Korean War Medal

Jim: Most of us got those.

John: Yeah, Korean War Medal and--

Jim: Yeah, all that.

John: Yeah, I got—yeah. Again, to be honest with you, they don't mean a lot to me.

Jim: Won't earn ya a nickel.

John: No, I see some people—and again, please, I'm not criticizing—you see medals all over the place that they have. It didn't--that's the past. That's history for me.

Jim: Uh huh, yeah. I agree. I agree that's the way to be. Well, was there anything in your training you felt was deficient, or did you feel you were well-trained for the job they asked you to do?

John: No, I felt very strong about the training I went through with the Marine Corps. It's all for one and one for all.

Jim: Right, but you were prepared.

John: We were prepared. And when we got into some activity I knew that one way or the other they were gonna take me back. And we all had that feeling, and it was a very close feeling. And I think that's what made me feel good about the Marine Corps.

Jim: I was impressed that they never left anybody.

John: That's right.

Jim: A lot of Army guys, they let—I have a friend who was an Army surgeon in a forward hospital. He said, “When I operate I always have to have one eye out the door.” [laughs].

**[End of Interview]**