

Napier AMERICA 250 Transcript

Biographical Sketch: John L. Napier (1931-2007), a resident of Dothan, AL, served in the Korean War. He was taken prisoner very early in his service after a failed attack in which he was wounded. He and his contingent of prisoners were abandoned by the retreating North Koreans. He enlisted in the Army in 1949, served in the 3rd battalion, 29th Infantry Regiment as a PFC during the Korean War, and retired in 1969 as a Chief Warrant Officer2. He received the Combat Infantry Badge, Army Commendation Medal, Purple Heart, and other awards. After retiring to Dothan, Napier was elected to the Houston County Commission and later to the office of Revenue Commissioner until retirement from civilian employment.

00:00:00 Marty Olliff

John Napier talks about his Korean War experience. He joined the Army at age 17 in January 1949. After basic and advanced training in 1949 and 1950, he was assigned to the 29th Infantry in Okinawa. While traveling there, the Korean War broke out on June 25, 1950.

Napier was deployed and was captured in the Hadong Ambush that summer. Held as a prisoner for 63 days, he was rescued by U.S. troops, then rotated home.

His parents thought he was missing in action until reading a Dothan Eagle notice about his rescue on October 1, 1950.

Among other citations, he received the Purple Heart and Prisoner of War medals.

Mr. Napier remained in the Army until retiring in 1969. He became a home builder and realtor in Dothan, then served as Houston County Commissioner and Revenue Commissioner.

He died in 2007. This interview was conducted by Marty Oliff in 2003.

In this first clip, Mr. Napier discusses his enlistment and basic training.

00:01:18 John Napier

I joined the Army when I was 17 years old. January 1949, I was in high school. Really, I came from a background of farming. At that time, there wasn't many jobs that was available in this area. And so I didn't want to continue to live on a farm out in the country, so I chose to go in the service.

I left Dothan on the 11th of January, 1949, and went to Maxwell Air Force Base, where I was inducted. And from there, I went on to Fort Jackson, South Carolina, where I took basic training. I graduated from the training in March of 1949.

I came home on leave. At the time I went in service, I weighed 136 pounds. And when I came home on leave, I weighed 170. They had a way of putting weight on you.

00:02:08 Marty Olliff

Mr. Napier describes his advanced training with the 2nd Infantry at Fort Lewis, Washington, his reassignment to the 9th Infantry in Okinawa, and how he traveled from there to Korea.

00:02:21 John Napier

After I came home on a delay-in-route, I was reassigned to the 2nd Infantry Division in Fort Lewis, Washington. I was assigned to the 9th Infantry Regiment, C Company. I continued to train in mountain and basic training for approximately 18 months. It wasn't much different from basic training, really.

Then in September of 1949, we went on what they call Mickey Maneuvers. We got on a ship, the USS Chilton, and we'd done beachhead landings in San Diego, California for about a month. And from there we went on to Hawaii, done the beachhead landings, and done the training just as if it was real combat.

And in May of 1950, I received orders transferring me to the 29th Infantry Regiment in Okinawa. While I was en route, well, the Korean War broke out on the 25th day of June. But shortly after I got into Okinawa, we were informed that we would be going on into Korea shortly, which we did.

I might have stayed in Okinawa 2 weeks, and then we left Okinawa and went on into Korea on a Japanese fishing boat. I can remember we had to sleep on rice pallets going over there, and it took us some time to get over there, probably four or five days. Landed in Pusan, and we stayed there for about 3 days, and from there we were transported on trains and in convoy up to the front lines.

00:03:40 Marty Olliff

Rushed to the front lines in July 1950, Mr. Napier was wounded in what came to be called the Hadong Ambush. He was captured for 63 days.

In this clip, he describes his actions on the first day of that battle.

00:03:56 John Napier

They told us that there was a guerrilla force defending Hadong, South Korea, and all they were armed with was a pitchfork. We didn't have anything to worry about. All we had to do was go up there and secure the town. We wasn't given no artillery support or air support or anything like that. It was just an infantry battalion, but we was going to rid the town of the guerrillas.

The night before, the battalion I was in, we had slept probably about 30 miles from Hadong, and the next morning we began to move on. It broke out probably about 9 o'clock in the morning, and it was just absolutely terrible. We had mountains all around us, and they were just waiting for us. It was just Americans falling everywhere. I mean, they just slaughtered us.

I was wounded that afternoon around 2 o'clock. I was crawling in a ditch, and a friend of mine, I remember his last name was Miller, and we had gone some distance trying to get out of the trap that we had been placed in. And he says, "I'm going to go across the road, and after I clear it, come on."

So about the time I got up to go across it, well, I was hit with a mortar went off close by and I received shrapnel from it. Of course, it knocked me back down. And so I just went back down on my face and lay in the ditch.

I would say within 10 minutes there was a patrol of North Korean soldiers standing over me talking, and they actually punched me with a rifle butts, and I figured they were going to kill me, but I was breathing just enough to stay alive. I just lay there, and they went on, and all of a sudden, another group came by and done the same thing. They left me thinking I was dead, and so I lay there.

That was probably about 3 or 3.30.

00:05:32 Marty Olliff

In this clip, Mr. Napier tells about being captured.

00:05:36 John Napier

I waited there until it began to get dark. Then I put in to try to crawl, trying to get back to where other Americans was at. That night when I was trying to get back through the lands, around 11 o'clock at night, I was on the road and all of a sudden there was a patrol of about five North Korean soldiers that just emerged from their position and captured me.

Of course, I took my weapon and took all of my personal belongings. They even took my clothing and left me with a pair of shorts, and that's what I wore for the time that I was a prisoner of war.

00:06:09 Marty Olliff

Mr. Napier describes his life as a prisoner of war, his treatment, and problems with food.

00:06:16 John Napier

They captured me and of course they wasn't too nice to me either. And it was raining and they kept me all that night. The next day they kept me. They were continuously harassing me or kicking me or something.

And that afternoon around 5:00 I think it was, they carried me to where they had captured a lot of Americans that was with the battalion that I was with. The best I recall, they had 60-something of the Americans that was there and up on a hill from there, they had taken 20-something more prisoners up there in a different place.

All of them had lost most of their clothing and had some that were severely wounded. A lot of them died from their wounds. They didn't give us any medical treatment whatsoever, none whatsoever.

There was a lot of things happening in Hadong. We were bombed and strafed continuously by the United States Air Force because at that time they found out what had really happened up there. They bombed the church where those individuals were at that I mentioned before, but it killed a lot of them.

An average day there at Hadong was like this: you would get up in the morning and there would be bombing and strafing. This went on continuously. The guards would be there if they'd slack up a minute where you would try to get a minute's rest and try to communicate with some or talk with some of the people that were there with you.

We were all in one big building. There was no beds and no nothing in it. And we would just more or less try to survive.

We didn't have any activities we could do. We would talk and the bombing would let up, but they'd be back. They'd come and go.

We were actually served one rice ball a day. It was probably about the size of a baseball. They'd boil the rice to a mush, and then they'd roll it up, and sometimes they'd wrap it in seaweed, and sometimes they wouldn't. And they had a tray that they would put all the rice balls on it, kind of like a wood box, and they'd bring it late in the afternoon, and that's what we got to eat.

I would like to mention also, we were in a situation, and I'm certainly not condemning the Red Cross, but we never did get a package or nothing. We never got a letter from home. We never had a bath. We never shaved. We just existed for 63 days.

00:08:21 Marty Olliff

The North Koreans held Napier and other captured Americans in makeshift facilities. Eventually, he was moved to the village of Namwon, where the captors simply abandoned their prisoners.

00:08:33 John Napier

We stayed in, paid on, I can't recall how many days, and then one night, they decided that they were going to move us, and they began to move us north. Most of us didn't have any clothes and shoes. This was getting on over in September, and no, we didn't have shoes, and that was unreal. We would go so many miles, we'd just go here in the daytime, and then there were places and buildings at night.

We went into this one village, and we were all placed in a room, and I think it was an old jail that did have a door with a metal plate on it. We wasn't allowed to talk in that room whatsoever, or lay over, or do anything.

But, you know, some of the GIs just couldn't resist the temptation to say something. I guess I was one of them. When I did say something, of course, the method they had, you'd have to place your hands on that bar and it'd beat your hands with a stick. It was probably about an inch in diameter.

We didn't have no idea where we were going and, you know, it was being marched at night and we were called out of the place we were being held at. Ten o'clock at night and they began to move us. It was a slow move, but anyone was daresome to drop out of the file because they knew that it was death or it was just over.

Eventually, we were moved into the village of Namwon. There, they placed us with some more American that they had captured from the 2nd Infantry Division, a coincidence the division that I had left when I went to the 29th Infantry Regiment.

Shortly after we were placed in that group that morning, there was an American liaison plane that flew over. I guess he was spotted or had information maybe that there was Americans in that area. One of the, and this guy was shot, one of the guys that was outside waved something at him, and then they did recognize it.

Well, all of a sudden, a guard came to the North Korean officer, he was in the building there, and told him what had happened. And the North Korean soldiers said something, and they began to tie our hands behind our back. My hands were tied, and I think it was about 13 others.

For what reason, we don't know, they just left.

And when they left, we got the other American soldiers to untie our hands. I thought it was very, very foolish just to sit here and see what's going on. So me and two other soldiers, we left and we went out in the village, running between buildings and so forth to see what we could see. And we finally wound up at this farmer's house. And he was kind enough. He gave us, you know, some food and all.

00:11:03 Marty Olliff

Within a day of being abandoned in Namwan, Napier and his comrades were rescued by an American tank crew.

00:11:10 John Napier

After we eat, we continued to try to find what was going on. We were in Namwon, really, and we heard this rumbling sound and couldn't figure out what it was. We ran inside of a little shack beside the road there and tried to hide. Evidently someone on the tank saw us, that's what it was. He said in English, "you know, there's someone in that building, get ready to fire on it."

Of course, when he said that, well, we ran out, all of them. "Don't fire, we're Americans!"

We told them where they was holding the other Americans and they went and got them. And then they fed us, got us some clothing and it was just a real good time. We stayed there a day or two and then they moved us on back to Pusan and from there we were moved to Japan and of course we went through a lot of debriefing and medical exams and so forth and we stayed in Japan four or five days.

And I'll be perfectly honest with you, I didn't worry about remembering anything. I didn't think about what I was doing. I didn't think too much about anything except coming back home.

00:12:11 Marty Olliff

Napier's Korean War experience ended in October 1950 after a short rehabilitation and reassignment to Fort Benning.

He describes his furlough, in which he arrived home just days after his parents found out that he had been rescued.

00:12:27 John Napier

I had been back in the American's hands for I'd say 10-12 days. On Sunday morning my dad just had an inkling to get up early and go get that *Dothan Eagle*. And that's the first they knew that I was back in the American's hands. They didn't know whether I was dead or alive.

As a matter of fact, I came into Dothan on the Greyhound bus. I think it was within two or three days after that. I got one of my cousins that lives here in Dothan to take me on to Cottonwood.