I was kind of a rebel and the only time I wrote home, once in a while we were given orders that you had to write a letter home, and that was me. My name is Gerard Becigneul. I was born in Windsor, Ontario. When I turned around 19 years old I joined the service. The only reason I joined — some friends of mine were gone for a few days and when they came back I asked them, “Where were you?” They said, “Oh, we joined the army” and [I said] “Baloney!”, you know. “Yeah, come on back with us.” I said, “Oh yeah, sure, I will.” I had a good job. I had a good union job and in a union shop. I was making at that time what they call pretty good money, you know? When they had to go back to London they said, “Well, are you coming with us?” I said, “Oh yeah, you know I’ll go get a ticket.” I wasn’t going to back out then, so I went bought a ticket, got on a train with them, didn’t tell anybody. A few days later I came home and my mother says, “Where have you been? The shop has been calling for you! You’re going to lose your job!” I said, “I got a job for three years now,” and she said, “What are you talking about?” She says, “You’re lying to me. Don’t you tell me that, you know, you joined the army!” I said, “Yeah,” and she sat down and she broke down and started crying, as my other three brothers were in the service. Two were in World War Two and my other brother was in the Navy at the time. And anyway, so I was in the Army.

I ended up being led into the Royal Canadian Artillery. We were in Camp Petawawa here and that’s one of our 25-pounders and we were practising a drill because we were going to Parliament Hill to fire a 21-gun salute. I forget if it was the Queen’s birthday or the King’s birthday. That’s me on the tail. We were supposed to relieve the 27th Infantry Brigade in Germany, but they kept us and were training us to relieve the 25th Infantry Brigade in Korea. And we didn’t know that until the very last minute.

« In Korea United Nations troops push on in the cautious advance against the Communists. An advance whose purpose is not to seize ground but to wipe out the enemy. »

We arrived in Korea around the middle of April in 1953. We went on trucks and we relieved the others that were serving there already. I was sent up with the Royal Canadian Regiment as an observer for the artillery and we had a crew of six people from the artillery. My officer, myself and four signal men, etc. When we first landed in Pusan they put us on a narrow-gauge railway track. There were hundreds of little kids. They had sores on them. They were dirty, some had shorts on, nothing on the top. Some had maybe a T-shirt on or something. And they had their hands out; they wanted cigarettes, they wanted anything they could get. And there were no parents, with them. And it was sad because I think all the younger population probably from 16 to 30, or 40, were drafted into the service.

This picture here, this is Bill Steptoe. He was from Windsor. Bob Walsh, from Windsor, and that’s — the cute guy back here — is me. The enemy knew we were green. They launched a very vicious attack on us. It was the worst attack in the Canadian history in the three years that we were there. We suffered a lot of casualties that night. And the troops we were fighting against were very, very seasoned troops. They were the Chinese, they weren’t North Koreans. Thethe Korean forces, they were just about finished. That’s why the Chinese helped North Korea. They sent 350,000 Chinese in.

We were on Hill 187. We were with the Third Regiment RCRs, Charlie Company. I’ll never forget it, that’s for sure. And the infantry part was very undermanned. We had some what they called “KATCOMs”, Korean Augmentation Troops, and to fill in some of the spaces that were empty from wounded people. They were South Korean soldiers and there was no communication with us. You didn’t even know if, who they were, you know? Altogether total we had 90 casualties. We had, I think it was, 30, 34 Canadians were killed that night. And there were four KATCOMs that were killed. I don’t know how long it went on. You, you just lose track of all the time, and there was three guys back in our bunker. They were down there and they wanted to go out and repair the telephone lines because they were cut from shrapnel. And I told them to stay there where it was safe, because until everything lifted. So, when everything lifted I went down there to see what was going on. And it was pretty silent. And I remember going to our bunker… I tripped over a body you, I don’t know if it was an enemy, or one of the KATCOMs. I couldn’t tell because you couldn’t understand. I checked him; he was alive, his eyes were wide open, very scared. When I went in our bunker as soon as I got there, I noticed an artillery shell landed right in the doorway of our bunker and two of my guys were sitting on my cot right across from the doorway the bunker and as soon as I saw them, I don’t want to be graphic about it, but I knew they were both killed instantly. And the third guy that was in there was on his cot near the doorway of the bunker and the only, he was unconscious from the concussion. I came out, I was over by this guy that was laying in the trench again and I don’t know what happened. I start crying like a baby. I was crying like a baby and Jim was still in the bunker. He was unconscious. And an officer went by and he said, “What are you crying for?” I said, “My two buddies are dead in there.” He said “This is no place for crybabies.” He says, “Get out of it,” and it snapped me right out of it. And I start doing what I had to do again.

The enemy barrage stopped but meanwhile we did get some communication with one of the other outposts and we called our own artillery down upon us to get the enemy off. They were in the trenches. We threw hand grenades that — they were duds. None of them were fused. We weren’t allowed to fuse them without permission, and that was sad. We might as well have thrown rocks at the enemy. And some of the fellows, after they couldn’t fire any more, their guns were empty. They were swinging at the enemy, swinging their rifles like baseball bats. But when our own artillery came down upon us, our battery fired over 4,000 rounds of 25-pounders and that chased the enemy off our Hill — our own artillery.

That’s the bunker inside here where two of my guys and my crew were killed and the third guy survived. And we’re just — this is a couple weeks later — after the battle we were in. We had to come back on this hill before we were relieved. The ceasefire date, the 27 of July, we use that as our Remembrance Day for the Korea Veterans. The day, I have a picture when we’re ripping everything apart because we had to, they wanted us to tear whatever we had built there, to tear it apart. So that it was no-man’s land, but if the enemy came they couldn’t use that stuff against us. We fired red, white and blue smoke over on the enemy lines to let them know we were still there. Anyway, this young guy, call him young guy, he was probably my age at that time, but he looked like he was about 15, and he was walking not too far past me. There was a pathway and then going down the hill to where the kitchen was, and a shell came in and landed not too far away and a piece of shrapnel caught him under the jaw and came out the back of his head. And he never knew it hit him. And that’s the last person I saw that was killed.

All those pictures, they’re indelible in my mind. As soon as I think about it I see it. I still, I picture my two friends, and it wasn’t pretty. Politics wanted the Canadians to believe that that war was over because they were talking peace talks, well, if you want to call them peace talks, for almost two years. From 19 — I think 1951 to 1953.

I joined on June 6, 1951. I got home right near the end of May [1953]. Yeah, I made it home just a couple days before my brother’s wedding and there’s nothing. Nobody come up and said, “Hey how are you doing?” You know? Like I don’t know. Everybody was kind of closed-mouthed, didn’t say much of anything.

One time I was duck hunting and we were in Willowood Beach down on Lake Erie. And we were duck hunting. It was a beautiful day and ducks are flying and this fellow had a 12-gauge shotgun and he said, “Is this how they did it in Korea?” Cranked his shotgun and fired around near my feet. And some sand hit me, like in the face and stuff, and I had a semi-automatic shotgun and I took the safety off and I had it pointed right at his stomach. I just whisked around, and to this day, to this day, I don’t know why I didn’t pull the trigger. I, you know, it was kind of, that was in 1954, you know? I haven’t been home too long. It was in the fall, and I got home in May.

I was at the Cenotaph a few years ago in Windsor and there was a member of Parliament was there. We mentioned World War One, World War Two. Nothing about the Korean War. And after it was finished I knew the fellow and I asked him, I says “How come you didn’t say anything about the Korean War?” He said, “That wasn’t a war,” he says. “That was a police action.” And then later on people got tired of hearing it was a police action so they called it a Korean conflict and it wasn’t until not long ago that it was declared that it was actually a war.

This guy I knew on the golf course he found out that I was a veteran he says, “I didn’t know you’re a veteran.” He says, “you’re a hero.” I said, his name was Bob, I said, “Bob, don’t say that.” I said, “I’m not a hero. I’m a survivor.” I said, “all the heroes are still over there. They’re buried. We didn’t bring anybody home.” I said they’re still over there. They’re the heroes. They gave their life for the freedom of South Korea, you know?

When I was in Seoul, people were living in cardboard shacks and the tallest building was about three stories high. I went back about eight years ago and you know, after I saw how the people were living, and they were number six in the economic world at that time, and I was amazed, just amazed. I couldn’t get over it. Cars, people driving cars, and high-rise buildings and all you saw was construction cranes building. The older people - they had signs on the bus, “Korea Veterans, Canadian Korea Veterans” - and you could see some of them at the side of the road when they saw the sign. They showed their respect, you know?

When I was talking to my two friends at the cemetery, I said “You gave your life for these people.” And to me it was worth it. You know, except for the fact that not one, not one death, was worth it, you know, of our people especially. But that’s what freedom is all about.