



West Lothian and the Forgotten War

Experiences of World War II, National Service and the Korean War

Three Scottish regiments went to fight in Korea: Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (1950), King's Own Scottish Borderers (1951) and Black Watch (1952). About half men were National Servicemen.

On the front line

Most travelled by ship, practising shooting and physical training on the deck. The Argylls sailed from Hong Kong in four days, but the others took six weeks from the UK. The youngest waited in Hong Kong or Japan until they were 19 and old enough for battle. Everyone got vaccinations against diseases such as cholera, smallpox and yellow fever.



Tam's hootchie

Tam Gardner and two Black Watch mates in front of their "hootchie". The men slept and ate in the sandbag protected dugout. Notice the food containers on the right.

Courtesy of Tam Gardner



Porters

South Koreans supported UN troops by carrying heavy supplies or working in reserve camps.

Courtesy of King's Own Scottish Borderers Museum

In 1950 - 51 soldiers were on the move a lot. Later the battle raged on the 38th parallel between North and South Korea. Soldiers on the front line had to build dugouts or "hootchies" as living quarters. Hootchies were plagued by rats and other pests, but they were built to give as much shelter from enemy artillery as possible.

The enemy included hundreds of thousands of Chinese "People's Volunteers" supporting North Korea. The Chinese usually attacked at night blowing trumpets and bugles. They came in waves, picking up the weapons of men who had fallen in front of them. Sometimes they fought hand-to-hand in the dugouts.

Men spent about two months at a time in the front line constantly ready for enemy attacks. Their food came from American ration packs. In these conditions it was vital to keep cheerful. Changes of clothes and proper food were luxuries they could get only in tented rest areas behind the lines. Many thought American soldiers were better equipped and better treated. Occasionally men got a period of leave in a camp in South Korea or even in Japan.



KOSB behind sandbags

King's Own Scottish Borderers keeping a look out for enemy movement over the valley © Imperial War Museum



ASH men return from front line

The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders on the move. They fought the length of the peninsula and half way back again carrying their kit with them.

© Imperial War Museum



Disembarking Inchon

Soldiers of the King's Own Scottish Borderers approach the beach at Inchon.

Courtesy of King's Own Scottish Borderers Museum



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National Servicemen who survived the Korean War can never forget what they experienced or the hundreds of comrades who died.

Casualties and Captives

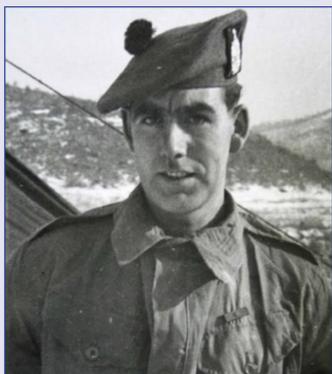
Korea is a country of hills. The force holding the hilltops, controls the country. The Argylls held Hill 282 against North Korean forces even when American aircraft bombed the Scottish regiment by mistake.

Later in the war the Chinese sent down earth shattering bombardments on to hills held by United Nations soldiers, followed by waves of foot soldiers. In spite of these terrifying attacks the KOSB held Hill 355 and the Black Watch held a hill position known as The Hook.



Lt. William Purves

Lt. William Purves (left) was the only National Serviceman ever to win the Distinguished Service Order. Although wounded himself, he led his men out of an area under heavy attack to rejoin their company.
Courtesy of King's Own Scottish Borderers Museum



Private William Speakman wearing the ribbon of the Victoria Cross.

Courtesy of King's Own Scottish Borderers Museum

Two soldiers serving with Scottish regiments won the Victoria Cross. Major Kenneth Muir VC of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders died on Hill 282. Private Bill Speakman VC fighting with the King's Own Scottish Borderers held the enemy at bay for hours with a hail of grenades. He won his medal for his bravery in defending his position under intense enemy attack between 4 and 5 November 1951.

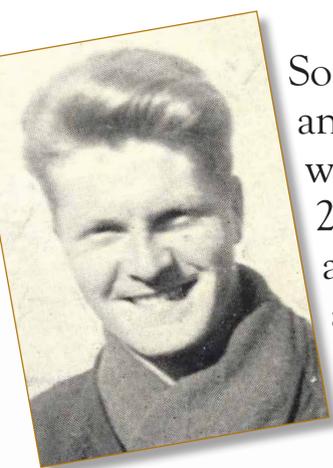


KOSB battle patrol

A patrol group briefing. Patrolling by night close to the enemy front line was a very frightening and stressful experience.

© Imperial War Museum

Some unlucky soldiers were taken prisoner. Chinese propaganda leaflets promised good treatment to United Nations prisoners-of-war. The Chinese tried to convert prisoners to Communist ideas. Men who refused to cooperate were viciously treated. Many just listened but did not believe what was said.



Andrew Condron

West Lothian Council Local History Collection

Some prisoners were impressed by the Communists' ideas and got better treatment. At the end of the war prisoners were allowed to choose whether or not to go home. Only 22 stayed - 21 Americans and one Scot, Andrew Condron, a Marine from Bathgate, who accepted Communist ideas and used his favoured position with the Chinese to get better treatment for his mates in camp. At the end of the war Condron decided to study at university in China.



PT display

The inter prison camp Olympics held by the Chinese included boxing, running and football competitions and this physical training display.

Courtesy of King's Own Scottish Borderers Museum

Hill 355

Hill 355 was taken by KOSB soldiers in October 1951 in an operation in which seven men were killed and 34 wounded. In the battle for a similar hill in September 1950 the Argylls lost 17 dead and 78 wounded. They were killed as the result of "friendly fire" from American airmen who mistook them for North Koreans.

Courtesy of King's Own Scottish Borderers Museum





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National Servicemen counted the days till they were demobbed at the end of their service. Few were persuaded to stay in the forces. Most returned to pick up life where they had left off. Many ex-National Servicemen value the experience. Nearly all remember the comradeship they enjoyed and many have stayed in touch with comrades to this day.

It was an experience

There is also a darker side. Men who have seen war and suffered its effects think that more should be done to avoid it. They and their families fear for the young men who go off to war today.

Former servicemen always have interesting stories to tell. Some are light hearted but others are stories of pride, endurance and achievement.

In 1950 John Shepherd was on a troopship on the way to Hong Kong when the captain announced that National Service had been increased from eighteen months to two years because of the Korean War. He was on the way back at the end of his service when another announcement was made, this time that King George VI had died. "Is that all?" said the man next to him. "I thought National Service was going up again!"



Servicemen were sometimes issued with a civilian suit when they were demobbed. As money was often short men often wore their "demob" suit to get married. Courtesy of Alex Easton

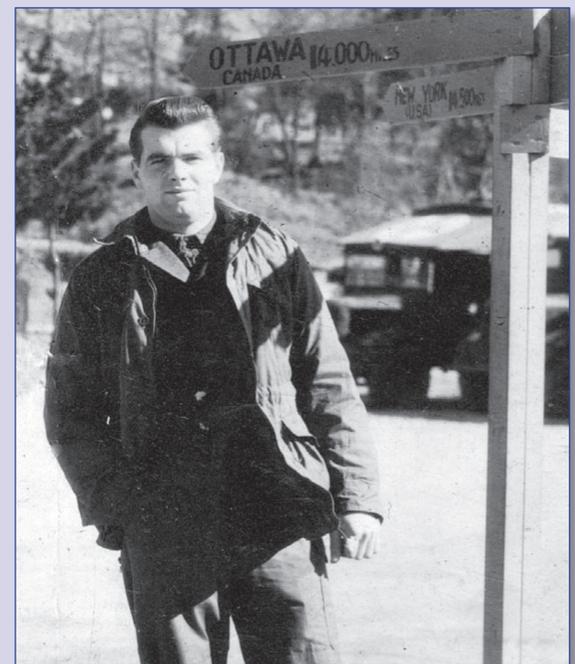
Alex Easton was wounded at the Battle of the Hook in November 1952. The Chinese took his dog tags. Canadians rescued him and flew him by helicopter to an American MASH (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital). As he had no ID they thought was American. He was treated in an American hospital in Japan for a year before being transferred to the British Commonwealth General Hospital in Kure. By then the war was over.

Sam Kemp was serving with the Black Watch in Korea, when he got the chance to take part in a parade in Seoul to mark the Coronation of the Queen in 1953. The only problem was that he had no camera so there are no photos of his proud moment.

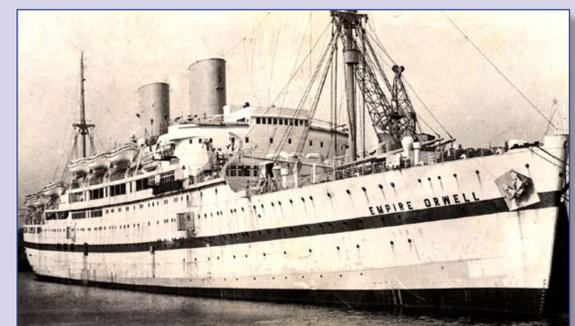


Tam and Sam
Sam Kemp (standing) poses for a mate's camera in Kenya.
Courtesy of Tom Gardner

Jim Ferguson was working as cook in an officers' mess in Catterick on Coronation Day in 1953. Many Scots thought the new Queen should be Elizabeth the First and not the Second. Jim gave the officers a laugh by sending in 34 trifles decorated with ER II and one for the only Scottish officer decorated with ER I.



Alex Easton at the American Hospital in Osaka, Japan.
Courtesy of Alex Easton



The troopship "Empire Orwell"
Courtesy of John Shepherd



Souvenir Coronation mug 1953.
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Men died throughout the National Service period some accidentally and some through terrorist action, but most died in Korea. The deaths of one thousand and ninety men have been largely forgotten, perhaps because the Korean War was not seen as a British war. The forces in Korea were fighting for the United Nations and most of them were American.

Not one of them is forgotten before God

Very few names of men who fell in the Korean War are listed on local war memorials. Members of the Perth Branch of the British Korean Veterans Association have succeeded in setting up memorials in Glasgow and Perth. The Bathgate Branch of the BKVA worked and campaigned to set up a national memorial.

The veterans found a site at Witchcraig in the Bathgate Hills, where the hillside setting reminds veterans of the Korean landscape. It is planted with Korean firs and Scottish birch trees. In the centre is a pavilion, modelled on a traditional Korean house, where the names of the 1090 British servicemen killed are listed. The pavilion is surrounded by two mounds in the shape of the yin yang emblem on the South Korean flag. There are walkways, picnic tables and memorial benches where people can sit and remember. The memorial opened on 27th June 2000.



Capt and Mrs Lee with four veterans
 Captain Lee, South Korean military attaché in Britain, visits the Korean War memorial near Bathgate with his wife in 2008. He told the veterans who met him that the South Korean people are very grateful for all they did during the war to keep the country free of Communism.

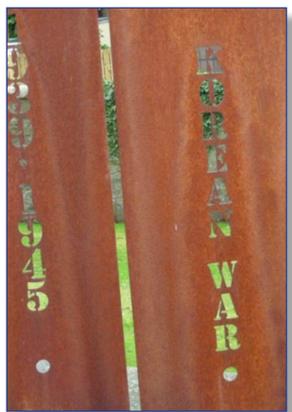
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This British Korean Veterans Association plate was designed and produced in time for the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the war in 1950. It shows the red and blue yin yang symbol from the South Korean flag.

Courtesy of King's Own Scottish Borderers Museum

From 2008 the "West Lothian and the Forgotten War" project worked for two years with local veterans and children from the school nearest to the Witchcraig memorial to create educational material about the Korean War and National Service in general. With the help of Big Lottery funding and support from Museums Galleries Scotland the project has produced a booklet of memories, a film with text and animations by pupils at Torphichen Primary School and twelve online exhibitions of images and oral history recordings on the website www.RememberingScotlandatWar.org.uk



Plaque commemorating the Korean War beside the town War Memorial in Bathgate.
Courtesy of Sybil Cavanagh



Korean War Memorial
 Two Korean veterans take two visiting schoolboys on a tour of the Korean War Memorial at Witchcraig in the Bathgate Hills.

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The Korean War and National Servicemen are no longer forgotten in West Lothian.

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