RICHARD ALLEN WARD

1932 – 2009, KOREAN WAR

U.S. ARMY, PRIVATE FIRST CLASS

WRITTEN BY Daniel Brennan
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

The night of Monday, July 27, 1953, was hot and humid in the Kumhwa Valley. A full moon illuminated the valley that separated the American troops and their Communist Chinese adversaries. Tracer bullets and artillery rounds occasionally flashed in the darkness.

Members of the 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team were on familiar ground in North Korea, as they had helped build the Kumwha Valley's elaborate defenses only a year prior. But to Richard Allen Ward, who only recently had joined the paratroopers on the Korean Peninsula, the terrain was less familiar. All he knew was the 187th's enemies were concealed in the gloom on the valley's opposite slope, only a rifle shot away.

Their concealment evaporated just after 10:00 p.m., when an unexpected light suddenly revealed the Chinese entrenchments. The other side of the valley glimmered like a star-filled sky as thousands of Chinese soldiers lit their cigarettes in celebration. The freshly signed armistice had just taken effect, establishing peace after three years of war between North Korea and China, and the United Nations coalition. The Korean War had come to an end.

Ward and his comrades spent most of the evening cautiously celebrating the ceasefire. Nevertheless, the West Virginia native also felt uneasy at the sight of so many glowing Chinese cigarettes. Years later, he insisted that their sheer number meant he and his unit "would not have survived" if peace had been delayed and the enemy made another assault. Richard Allen Ward was only 21 years old when he saw those false "stars," but by that time he had already lived a life filled with loss and adventure. He was born on May 14, 1932, to Joseph and Hallie Wright Ward as the youngest of six children. His father worked as a carpenter while his mother took care of the children and household.

Ward Family collection

Richard grew up in Huntington, West Virginia, a sprawling industrial town on the banks of the Ohio River. The family home sat just east of the confluence of the Ohio and Guyandotte rivers, at 102 Buffington Street. Guyandotte, as the neighborhood was appropriately named, was a tough area where Richard grew up fast.

Not all dangers were man-made, however. In January 1937, just before Richard turned five, the worst flood in Ohio River history inundated Huntington at 19 feet above flood stage. The Wards were likely among the thousands displaced. Even after they returned home, they and their Huntington neighbors had to be wary of nature's caprice. Hallie Ward even collected a small pension serving as the lightkeeper for the floodwall adjacent to the Wards' waterfront home.

Paratroopers of the 187th Parachute Infantry Regiment prepare for a drop over Korea, 1951. *National Archives*

Tragedy struck the Ward family again after the flood. Two of Richard's brothers—Charles, who was only two, and Billy, age 14—died within months of each other in August 1938 and February 1939, respectively. Billy had suffered from tuberculosis for years, and was thus susceptible to the pneumonia that claimed his life. But infant Charles' sudden death, also from a form of pneumonia, must have come as a shock.

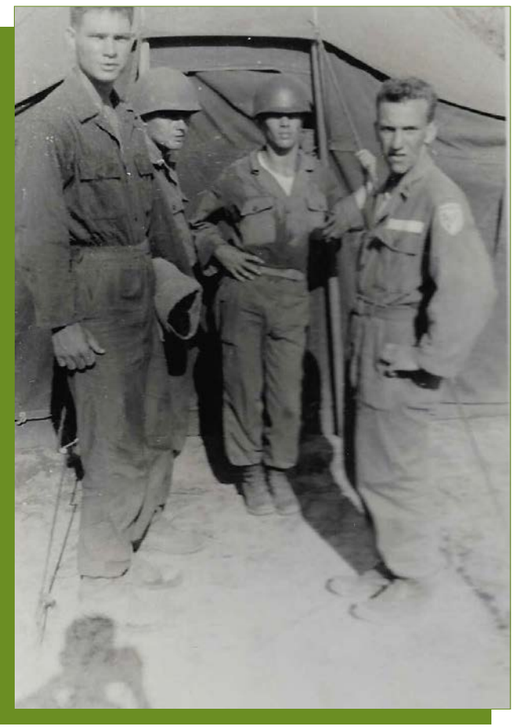
The family soldiered on through the 1940s as World War II raged. Entering high school after war's end, Richard played basketball for Huntington East High. He spent summers working on a riverboat that traveled locally along the Ohio, and almost fell overboard during one nighttime excursion. On November 7, 1949, he parlayed his experience on the water into an enlistment in the U.S. Naval Reserves, a decision he admitted was primarily about earning a steady paycheck. The extent of his duties in the Reserves involved attending drill in Huntington and reporting for a yearly inspection in the Norfolk, Virginia.

In 1950, Richard was preparing for life after high school graduation when his father died. Young Richard did not have a strong relationship with the head of the household, who struggled with alcoholism and a quick temper. But John Ward's passing still left a mark which Richard reflected with his own children. "He had loss in his life," Richard's daughter Risa recalled "Growing up, there was dysfunction in his family." Nevertheless, he turned his mourning into a strong desire to protect his unemployed mother, affectionately known as "Mamaw."

Service to his country during a time of need seemed a logical route. The United States entered into the Korean War in the summer of 1950 after the communist forces of the Northern Korean People's Army (KPA) invaded the capitalist Republic of Korea (ROK) to the south in hopes of conquering the land and unifying the peninsula.

For the rest of that year, ROK and United Nations forces (which included the U.S.) constantly traded blows with the North Koreans and their Chinese allies. U.N. setbacks meant a sustained conflict for which many men would be drafted. Motivated by the threat of the draft and the prospect of earning

BOTH PAGES: Richard Ward with Army buddies. The photograph at right was taken in Korea.
Ward Family collection



"hazard pay" to support both himself and his widowed mother, Richard traveled to Charleston, West Virginia, and enlisted in the United States Army for a three-year term on February 27, 1951—just one day after his discharge from the Naval Reserves.

Ward desired above all to serve in the Army as a paratrooper, a position that came with extra pay and prestige. These infantrymen trained to parachute from aircraft to their military objectives. Grouped into Airborne Infantry units, paratroopers gained heroic reputations during the Second World War for hard fighting at D-Day, Bastogne, and other famous battles.

Soon after Ward volunteered for paratrooper service, he was ordered to Fort Benning in Georgia for airborne training. Students attended eight weeks of grueling marches, calisthenics, weapons training, and a daily three-mile run. Trainees practiced jumping from training towers, and later performed jumps from aircraft. Officers believed that the repetition of this exercise gave the future paratroopers experience in the air and confidence to complete difficult maneuvers under fire. Repetition alone could not make up for particularly harrowing occasions, however. Ward went through one training jump where the conditions were so rough and windy that several paratroopers "broke pelvises," as he recalled to his children. When he exited the aircraft and opened his chute, he could "see stars" in all the chaos and discombobulation. Fortunately, he landed safely during this exercise, passed the course, and earned the coveted "Jump Wings" visible in his portrait taken at Fort Benning.

Ward spent much of the Korean War within the United States. Even though he stood only 5 foot 7 inches and weighed around 120 pounds at the time of his enlistment, his basketball skills proved handy on the Army team that sometimes went on the road. During a trip to Chicago, Richard got into an altercation with a noncommissioned officer who took issue with Ward wearing a hat indoors. He exited the scuffle with a black eye, and perhaps a damaged ego, but without any blot on his record. At last, the young private got the chance to take his fighting spirit abroad in the winter of 1952-1953. Ward received orders to report to the West Coast for transit to join his new unit in Japan. En route, he paid a visit to the Oregon home of his sister and "second mother" Gladis, 14 years his elder, before reporting for duty on a transport ship. His experience on the waters of the Ohio River did not prevent bouts of seasickness as he crossed the Pacific Ocean to the theater of war.

After arriving in Japan, the young soldier joined experienced paratroopers in the 187th Airborne Infantry Regiment, which had served with distinction during World War II. They had distinguished themselves liberating the Philippines, and became the only airborne unit to parachute onto Japanese home soil. From then on, members of the 187th referred to themselves as "Rakkasans," the Japanese word for "falling umbrella." Ward soon made himself at home among them.

By the time Ward reached his overseas assignment, the 187th was stationed in Japan as a reserve force. The Rakkasans functioned as an independent Regimental Combat Team (RCT) bolstered by its own artillery batteries and additional auxiliary units. The ranks of combat-experienced Rakkasans, however, had thinned during multiple missions in Korea throughout 1950 and 1951. In 1952, they deployed in defense of the Kumwha Valley.

The paratrooper joined the 187th on Kyushu Island at a time of great reform in the Rakkasans. Their commanding officer, General William Westmoreland (later made famous during the Vietnam War), pushed a program called "tigerization" that accelerated physical training, hand-to-hand combat experience, small unit problem solving, and perfecting jump techniques. The work was hard and leadership demanded perfection, but witnesses noted considerable improvement in the abilities and morale of the troops. Ward even got to meet his commanding officer when General "Westy" visited the newcomer's tent.

Soon, both officers and men would put their training to the test when called to the Korean Peninsula once more. The Rakkasans reported to airbases on Kyushu on June 19, 1953, to set out on what would become their last deployment of the Korean War. Each member received a green camouflage silk scarf for the journey—the combat trademark of their unit.

Upon landing in South Korea, however, they did not immediately move to the front lines. Instead, the 187th trained in reserve around the South Korean capital of Seoul. This changed on July 13,

when the Chinese attacked U.N. lines northeast of the city. The paratroopers, including recently promoted Private First Class Ward, moved into fortified positions in the Kumwha Valley and engaged the enemy. The warring sides traded fire constantly. Ward recalled his fear of artillery barrages to the end of his life.

Two weeks into their stay in the Kumwha Valley, the men heard rumors that a ceasefire would go into effect on the night of the 27th. It was hard to believe, as only days prior the 187th and Chinese forces had jockeyed for more advantageous positions along the line. But soon they received official word from their officers to take the news seriously. At 6:00 p.m., most of the guns stopped firing across the valley, and four hours later almost complete silence enveloped the region. American soldiers cheered and celebrated the end of the war and the beginning of a tenuous peace. Chinese soldiers put down their weapons and cherished the moment by lighting up the cigarettes that had made Ward so uneasy when he saw them from across the valley in the darkness.

The fighting may have come to an effective end on that muggy July night, but Richard Ward still had to live the strenuous life of a soldier. General Westmoreland commanded his men to pick up litter, dismantle old defensive positions, and build new bunkers and outposts to guard the boundaries set by the armistice.

The Rakkasans traveled across the Yellow Sea back to Kyushu in early October, marking the end of the 187th's third—and Ward's only—combat tour in Korea. For two more years, the Rakkasans would remain in Kyushu, but Ward's enlistment period was about to expire.

Richard Allen Ward received his honorable discharge at Fort Knox, Kentucky, on January 29, 1954. The veteran returned home to Huntington and worked at a repair store called the "Fix-It Shop" with his uncle. He acclimated himself back to civilian life by reconnecting with old friends and acquaintances, including a young woman he knew from the Guyandotte Methodist Church named Ruth Ellen Greene.

Richard and Ruth fell in love and eloped across the river to Ashland, Kentucky, on December 31, 1954, marrying at the First Methodist Church. Only three people knew about the wedding: Ruth's Aunt Jane, who sneaked the bride a champagne dress for the occasion, and mutual high school friends Goldie and Charles Bias, who were the ceremony's only witnesses.

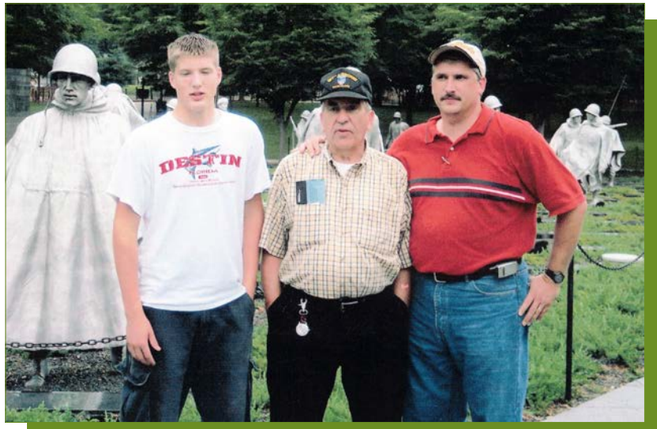
Richard and Ruth Ward soon had three children. Their eldest daughter Risa was born in October 1955, and they welcomed their son Allen 18 months later. Both were born in Huntington. When Ruth was pregnant with a third child, the growing family moved just across the river to Proctorville, Ohio. Roy Joseph, or "Joe," was born there in the Buckeye State.

The children spent their formative years in a little pink house that their parents owned in Proctorville. They were active in the local First Baptist Church, where Ruth played the piano and organ. When they later returned to Huntington, they became members of the Jefferson Avenue Baptist Church, where Richard helped run a printing ministry. Richard played an active part in his children's lives, whether coaching Little League Baseball, attending Allen's football games, or watching Risa cheer for Fairland High School.

To be an active family man and community member, Richard often had to carve out time from his busy work schedule. Always handy with machinery, he secured a job as a regional repairman for fast-food chains Burger Boy Food-O-Rama (BBF) and Frisch's Big Boy. He was perpetually on call to fix numerous appliances, sometimes at locations hours away. The unpredictable hours and long drives caused him great anxiety.

Fortunately, he eventually secured a job working as a technician for General Electric (GE). Later, he worked as a technical advisor and appliance repair instructor at GE. The latter position required him to travel around West Virginia, Ohio, Virginia, and Kentucky, but the schedule improved his quality of life and family time.

Except for his three years in the U.S. Army, Richard



Richard Ward and family visit the Freedom's Never Free "Traveling Korean War Memorial."

Ward Family collection

Ward lived his entire life near the banks of the Ohio River. That all changed in 1976 after Risa went to South Carolina to attend college. Ruth and Richard saw the benefits of moving closer to their daughter and changing the scenery. General Electric had a plant in Greenville, offering Richard a chance to continue his work with the company.

The family lived in the Palmetto State for over a decade. Once Risa, Allen, and Joe finished their education, however, Richard and Ruth found their way back to West Virginia. In 1988, the Wards returned to the Ohio River Valley well north of Huntington in Wetzel County's Paden City. Joe moved to not-too-distant Parkersburg a few years later to take on the pastorship of the Tri-City Baptist Church. Richard and Ruth decided to join their son's congregation, relocating to Parkersburg in 1996. They became very active members, and their presence was always welcomed at Friday morning prayer meetings and Sunday services.

The couple's health issues began to multiply with age, however. Ruth battled colon cancer in 1995. Three years later, Richard had an aortic valve replacement in Charleston. In a fortuitous coincidence, the doctor who performed the surgery was South Korean; he and Richard shared an emotional conversation about the doctor's memories of paratroopers serving on the peninsula.

Richard survived the 1998 surgery and lived over a decade more. His health eventually required another heart surgery, this time at a much higher risk. Taking comfort in his faith, he confided to Joe, "I'm in a win-win situation... if the surgery is successful, I get to stay here with the family and serve the church; if the surgery is not successful, I get to go home to the Lord."

His attitude comforted the family when the risks became insurmountable. Richard Allen Ward died at the Charleston Area Medical Center on February 4, 2009. He was interred in the West Virginia National Cemetery in Pruntytown four days later. Officiating the graveside services were his son-in-law Dan Baker and son Joe.

In addition to his work as a civilian pastor in Parkersburg, Joe has served as a chaplain for the West Virginia National Guard since 2007—a decision that Richard supported. The young man from Huntington who survived two harrowing weeks under fire in 1953 lived long enough to see his own family carry on the tradition of service.

PLACE OF INTERMENT:
West Virginia National Cemetery
SECTION 5
SITE 509

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As home to one of the nation's first national cemeteries—founded shortly after the Civil War—the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. Since the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, Grafton High School, and University High School, among many others.

Please refer comments or questions to the West Virginia Humanities Council
1310 Kanawha Blvd E, Charleston, WV 25301
wvhuman@wvhumanities.org
www.wvhumanities.org
304.346.8500

WEST VIRGINIA HUMANITIES COUNCIL

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SOURCES AND COPYRIGHT

For readability, bibliographies have been omitted from this publication. Student research for these biographies relies heavily on primary sources—census records, city directories, draft cards, muster rolls, and more—made available digitally through Ancestry and Fold3. Yearbook repositories and the digitized collections of many universities and archives have been invaluable resources. Most newspaper research was conducted digitally via Newspapers.com, NewspaperArchives, and the Library of Congress's *Chronicling America* database.

Servicemembers' Official Military Personnel Files (OMPFs) and Individual Deceased Personnel Files (IDPFs) are another essential part of project research, provided free of charge in most cases by the National Archives through standard records requests.

As the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project has grown and matured, the team has found that new sources sometimes surface for veterans researched in prior project years. To better maintain a "living bibliography" of all its veterans, a single master document is kept up on the project's webpage under the "Programs" tab at **www.wvhumanities.org**.

Views and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Archives of the United States, or any other federal agency. For more information about the Veterans Legacy Memorial and the Veterans Legacy Grant Program, visit **www.vlm.cem.va.gov**.

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