



Virginia Korean War vet recalls survival behind enemy lines

By: [Lynn R. Mitchell](#) | *Special To The Examiner Follow Her @Swaccgirl* | 11/15/10 1:00 AM

This past Saturday's [Veterans Day parade](#) in downtown Staunton, Va, saw hundreds who lined the streets to wave American flags and cheer as floats passed by filled with veterans. The community turned out to honor past and present military members, many who vividly remembered the details of war.

One local veteran, quiet and unassuming with slightly stooped shoulders and graying hair, watched the parade from the sidelines and saluted his fellow soldiers. Until last year, few people knew that he had suffered life-threatening injuries during the [Korean War](#).

Now in his 70s, Tom LaBarge (pronounced La-BARGE) does not like to bring attention to himself. That was very evident as he reluctantly gave in to my persistent prodding to talk about his service after a surprise presentation in 2009 of military medals that had been long overdue. Four of his seven grown children had flown to Virginia for the event, and I had been invited to join them.

The [ceremony at the Staunton Army National Guard Armory](#) honored the Korean War veteran with Congressman Bob Goodlatte (R-VA) on hand to make the presentation. The local [television station](#) and newspapers attended as well as soldiers from the Armory's historic [Stonewall Brigade](#).

A Purple Heart and Combat Infantry Badge had been received in the 1950s. The new medals included a U.S. National Defense Medal, U.S. Korean War Service Medal with battle-star attachment, UN Service Medal, and Republic of Korea War Service Medal. He also received a certificate of gratitude from the president of South Korea.

All those medals were impressive so I wanted to know the story behind them. Mr. LaBerge and I sat down at the kitchen table overlooking the back yard and woods of his Shenandoah Valley home as his wife Millicent busied herself at the nearby counter preparing cookies and tea. She also helped coach the story from his sometimes reluctant lips.

To know Tom LaBerge is to know a man of quiet, humble faith. He is not used to being the center of attention nor does he seek it. But as my neighbor, I was able to convince him to talk with me and so he began his story....

It was 1951 and America was at war helping South Korea protect itself from its aggressive communist neighbor, North Korea. Nineteen-year-old Tom LaBerge, whose National Guard unit in Grafton, North Dakota, had been activated, was about to find himself in the middle of war in a way he never imagined.

U.S. troops in conjunction with South Korean troops were holding the 38th parallel of the [demilitarized zone \(DMZ\)](#) where they had been at a stalemate with North Korea. As Mr. LaBerge recalled thoughts of that time, he said the Americans were unable to hold the line against the North Koreans who had been joined by the Chinese Army in a turf tug-of-war. The enemy would battle at night and take a hill, and then the battles would continue and a week or two later American forces would retake the same hill. That was how the war had gone -- the same land lost and retaken back and forth for two years before a young Tom LaBerge arrived.

Sitting in his kitchen going over memories from decades before, he softly chuckled and shook his head, and told me that the dangerous area between the front line of each opposing army was known as "No Man's Land." He emphasized that no man wanted to be caught there. However, during the heat of battle all those years ago, that's exactly what happened to LaBerge and a fellow soldier as the two 19-year-olds found themselves trapped behind enemy lines, alone and isolated from their unit.

During a night-time battle as the war raged with gunfire all around, LaBerge, who was taking cover at the top of the hill, was shot in the leg and as the battle raged on he was again hit, this time by shrapnel that chewed up the other leg and embedded in his back. Nearby, a fellow soldier was also in bad shape with a broken arm and a leg badly injured from shrapnel.

With darkness all around except for the flashes of never-ending machine gun fire and rockets, and separated from their unit, the two young men crawled and dragged themselves halfway down the embattled hill and eventually found shelter in an abandoned bunker. Both hunkered down in the relative safety of the bunker, alone and injured and afraid, and that was where they stayed with no way to alert anyone of their location. They were stranded without food, water, or weapons.

In the course of the battle, American forces retreated from the area as enemy forces took over, and that was when LaBerge realized they were in No Man's Land. Fear seized them. There was no medical help, neither man could walk because of his injuries, and both were scared to death.

After two days hunkered down in the bunker as the war raged around them, running high fevers from infected wounds, they had a visitor and it wasn't someone they wanted to see. A Chinese military officer working with the North Koreans was on reconnaissance of the area retaken by communist forces and showed up at the opening of the bunker. Peering inside, he spied the two young Americans. Thirst outweighed their fear, and in Chinese and through parched lips, they asked for water. He stared at them, his eyes taking in their horrendous injuries, and stood watching for a while. Then he turned and left, presumably expecting them to die. It was a miracle he didn't shoot them.

After the too-close brush with the enemy Chinese officer, they decided it was time to leave. Both men slowly clawed their way out of the bunker and painfully crawled over sharp rocks and scrub down the hill, making their way to a stream in the distance to find water. Their infected wounds were now invaded by maggots, and both were delusional from the pain.

Near the stream they found a parachute and tried to make an "SOS" out of it for American pilots to see from overhead. Hungry and weak, they slowly crawled their way into a nearby field and attempted to eat raw dried soy beans that only got stuck in their throats. It was October in Korea and cold at night but not unbearable with daytime temperatures in the 60s and overnight lows in the 40s.

Without weapons, they were at the mercy of the enemy. Days passed. Noises would carry in the valleys and hills in the middle of the night and they could hear the voices of Greek troops stationed with the United Nations but were unable to make contact. After so much time had passed, their unit feared they were dead although they were officially listed as missing in action.

Finally, after two agonizingly long weeks, U.S. troops retook that area and found the injured missing soldiers. LaBerge had lost 50 pounds during his ordeal. Both were carried on stretchers by fellow soldiers behind lines to the American-South Korean side where they were deposited at a real-life Swedish M*A*S*H unit that cleaned them up. Before putting a cast on LaBerge's left leg, it was discovered that a bullet had gone through his knee.

Two days later, the injured men were shipped to a hospital in Tokyo. After spending a week in Tokyo, LaBerge was flown back to the States by way of Guam and Hawaii to San Francisco and then Ft. Carson where he spent three months in the hospital recuperating from his injuries. After rehabilitation, he returned to active duty.

LaBerge was honorably discharged from the Army in 1952 as a tech sergeant, married, began his career, and together with his wife raised seven children. It was many years later that he and I would sit in his kitchen as I took notes and he recounted the memories of that long-ago time when a 19-year-old went through battles, survived, and then returned to live his life, leaving behind the horrors of war.

In 2008, LaBerge's son-in-law did some research and discovered he was due a number of medals for his service and sacrifice for his country which led to the ceremony at the Armory with Congressman Goodlatte. The medals are proudly displayed in the LaBerge home and are a reminder that there are truly heroes among us.

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