



### **Episode 806, Story 1: Korean War Letter**

Eduardo Pagan: Our first case investigates what this letter can tell us about an unsung act of heroism during the last months of the Korean War. Korea, May 1953. For nearly two years, the war along the 38th parallel has been at a bloody stalemate. While peace talks stall, the fighting along the front lines is intense, and casualties mount. Now the daughter of a Korean War soldier wants to learn about a firefight in these last weeks of the war, and an alleged midnight act of heroism.

Rhonda McAuliffe: I'm hoping that this letter can help me find the man that risked his life to save my father.

Eduardo: I'm Eduardo Pagan, and I'm meeting Rhonda McAuliffe to learn more about this letter.

Rhonda: This is a letter that was written by my father in Korea. The date is May 25th and I've recently read this letter. I didn't know my mother had it.

Eduardo: Well where is your father now?

Rhonda: He's missing in action. He was fighting in a battle called Outpost Harry on June 11th and there were several men in that battle that are still missing to this day.

Eduardo: Rhonda's mother was pregnant with her when her father, Ron Bradley, went missing. She wants to know more about a man in the letter who, just weeks earlier, had made a deep impression on her father. The letter relates the story of a midnight patrol and an ambush, in which her father had a grenade thrown at him by Chinese soldiers.

Rhonda: It tells about Kenneth Friend sitting on a hand grenade; it actually saved five men's lives.

Eduardo: In the letter, her father asks his parents to check the newspapers to see whether the man who saved him had been recognized for his heroism.



Rhonda: He was adamant about wanting his parents to look to make sure that Kenneth Friend received the Medal of Honor.

Eduardo: Although her father never returned from the war, she wants learn more about the man who saved him that night.

Rhonda: My father wasn't around to look up Kenneth Friend's family and let them know. So I guess I'm doing that for him. I tried to find Kenneth Friend just in "Killed in Action" list. And I couldn't find him anywhere.

Eduardo: What exactly would you like me to find out?

Rhonda: I really hope that you're able to find out what happened to Kenneth Friend, and if his family knows what a true hero he is.

Eduardo: I will be honored to investigate this story. I have a particular interest in this investigation; as a 19-year-old my father was drafted into the infantry during the final days of the war. Ron's letter details a remarkable story. On April 21, 1953, around midnight, 150 men head out on a patrol. But they're ambushed by Chinese soldiers, and take cover in a creek bed. Rhonda's father describes how he heard grenades fall next to him, but is saved when a soldier named Kenneth Friend smothers the blast with his body. That act of courage saves five men, but the hero, Kenneth Friend, was gravely wounded. Ron doubts he survived. This letter is really detailed. There's a lot of information for me to work off of. This should be enough for me to get a start. The letter's date of May 25th, 1953, is just two months before the end of the conflict. When Communist North Korea had first invaded the south almost three years earlier, in June of 1950, the eyes of the world turned to Asia. The Korean War became a proxy war. On the one side were the United Nation forces led by the United States. They came to the defense of the South, while Communist China and the Soviet Union took the side of the North. But by the date on our letter, the war had ground to a bloody stalemate. On the home front, Americans were worn out from the long years of World War II, and the Korean War—dubbed "The Forgotten War"—slipped from public view. I'm drawing a blank on my research. There is no mention of a battle on April 21, 1953, and a search of the U.S. Army Center of Military History turns up no one with a similar name who received a Medal of Honor in the Korean War. I'm going to need to get some expert



help. I've enlisted the assistance of Korea historian James Person of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. One detail of the letter immediately strikes James as unusual, even odd.

James Person: Well the first thing that catches my eye here is the date of the battle, April 21st. I frankly wasn't aware that there were battles on that day.

Eduardo: James explains that around that date, there had been a major turning point in peace negotiations.

James: On March 5th, 1953 Joseph Stalin the Soviet leader died, and the new Soviet leadership was a bit more anxious to bring the war to an end.

Eduardo: Although there remained much vicious fighting that spring, James says that at the end of April, there was a pronounced lull as the two sides began an exchange of sick and wounded prisoners. Where can I go to find out more information about this particular battle?

James: There are a number of veteran's groups that do an excellent job of detailing specific battles. That may be a good place to start.

Eduardo: Hal Barker heads up the Korean War Project, and is the son of a decorated Korean veteran. He says that because there is no Medal of Honor listing for Kenneth Friend, it doesn't mean the story in Ron Bradley's letter is untrue. Establishing proof of the extraordinary heroism worthy of a Medal of Honor is a lengthy process. It requires the gathering of forensic evidence, and eyewitness verification.

Hal Barker: In some cases the persons who witnessed it were killed shortly afterwards. Many of these incidents of bravery were unsung. There was a lot of confusion at the end of the war. And a lot of happiness that the war was ending from a shooting phase.

Eduardo: While every Medal of Honor is deserved, not everyone who deserved one received it. Well if he doesn't show up in the Medal of Honor records, where else might I go to find out information about him?



Hal: On our website, the Korean War Project, we have databases relating to casualties from Korea. If he was wounded, we will probably be able to find him.

Eduardo: We try several variations of the name, and finally come up with an entry in the project's database.

Hal: Okay. Kenneth L. Friend, Infantry. Date of casualty, May 22nd, 1953, and he was badly enough injured so he was separated from the army.

Eduardo: Oh, so he survived?

Hal: If he was wounded he obviously did not die.

Eduardo: I notice here that the day of casualty is May 22nd, which is quite different what's listed in the letter. Hal says that there are a number of things that could account for the discrepancy: The records might be wrong, or in the chaos of battle, Rhonda's father may have simply been confused about the date. He suggests we check the command reports from May 21st for the 15th Infantry, Ron Bradley's unit.

Hal: Well a command report is a compilation of the actions on a specific date. This is the official record.

Eduardo: It seems that a company of the 15th Infantry had been busy that night.

Hal: On May 21st, 1953 a screening patrol accompanied by war dog teams dispatched to the east and northeast of an outpost called Tom. Now that was along the main line of resistance.

Eduardo: Main Line Resistance, that rings a bell. One of the things he references here was the MLR.

Hal: In World War I you had trench warfare. You had defined lines in which the battles were conducted. In the Korean War it was a totally different situation. The Main Line of Resistance



didn't describe a solid line of soldiers. You had outposts that were on hills, in valleys, and in areas that could be defended. But there was rarely every a continuous line.

Eduardo: The official command report describes a patrol of about 150 men departing from outpost Tom just before midnight. A Chinese ambush, using machine guns, mortars, and grenades lasted into the early morning. By the time the smoke cleared, 39 U.S. soldiers had been wounded, and three had lost their lives. Hal and I compare details from the command report and Ron's letter: they line up closely. So this is the battle then that Ron's letter talks about?

Hal: That is apparently the battle. There was nothing before that remotely like it and this is so specific, it fit perfectly.

Eduardo: It appears that Kenneth Friend survived the ambush, even though there is no specific mention of any act of heroism. To learn more, Hal suggests I contact a group called the Outpost Harry Survivor's Association. He explains that the fighting at Outpost Harry three weeks later—where Rhonda's father, Ron Bradley, went missing—took place over eight brutal days. He suggested that veterans of that battle from Ron Bradley's old unit, the 15th Infantry, might know more about Kenneth Friend, and the earlier ambush described in our letter. One of Ron's old comrades, Waldon Storie, has agreed to meet at the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. It's been half a century, but his memories of Korea, and what it did to the young men who fought there, are still fresh.

Waldon Storie: I remember the first day that I met Ron. I'd been in Korea about a week. I think he'd been there a few weeks and he seemed like an old soldier.

Eduardo: Ron's letter mentions a Kenneth Friend. Did you ever know Kenneth Friend in Korea?

Waldon: I never knew Kenneth. Can't recall ever meeting the guy.

Eduardo: Ron wrote this letter. Does the combat story that Ron tells his family about sound familiar to you?

Waldon: I was there.



Eduardo: You were there? Waldon says that on that night the 150 men were ordered on a routine, but dangerous, patrol to hunt the enemy under cover of darkness.

Waldon: Well the patrol we went on was what we called a raiding patrol. We were working in what was called a "No Man's Land".

Eduardo: They soon found what they were looking for: contact with soldiers from Communist China.

Waldon: The enemy opened up on us. I was in that creek bed he's talking about. Although it was really a rice paddy irrigation ditch.

Eduardo: So you remember the grenade explosion?

Waldon: I remember the incident just after it happened. I saw a gentleman whose clothing was on fire. He was on fire in his legs and in his groin area. And someone was calling for a medic to get him out. I never even knew the gentleman's name. I didn't see the fall, I didn't see him sit on it, fall on it, I just looked around and there he was, on fire. And if he sat on it, he kept me from taking some shrapnel. I know that.

Eduardo: Do you know what happened to him afterwards?

Waldon: I have no idea. I assume they were rushing him to the aid station. I never heard anymore about the gentleman after that. Never. Nothing.

Eduardo: Now that I know that Kenneth Friend likely survived the war, I make better headway on my search. I eventually pull up an obituary. It's from the *Oregon Journal*. It seems Kenneth died of cancer in 1976. Kenneth Friend passed away at the age of 43. And I think this is the Kenneth Friend that I've been looking for. It lists that he was a Korean War veteran. And it looks like he had children. A daughter and four sons. After several phone calls, I finally speak to Kenneth Jr.

Eduardo: Kenneth Friend was just a boy when he enlisted.



Kenneth Jr: He was 18. He was getting ready to go to Korea.

Eduardo: Kenneth Junior says his father had almost infinite time for his children, but remained mostly silent about his time in Korea. He was always the type of person that never talked about himself.

Eduardo: What did your father say about what happened during the battle?

Kenneth Jr: All he said was that he jumped on a grenade to save other guys and knew that if he didn't jump on the grenade everyone was going to die. And he said he ended up living and didn't understand why.

Eduardo: Ken shows me the military documentation of his father's injuries. He had shrapnel through 70 percent of his body, suffering extensive internal injuries. He spent 14 months in army hospitals before returning home.

Kenneth Jr: They said he'd never walk, never be able to use his left arm and never have kids. And he walked perfect. He could use his left arm. He just had no feeling in it. And then he had five kids. He fought for every breath he took. And there was life in his eyes through my whole life.

Eduardo: Ken takes a look at the letter. The character it describes is immediately familiar.

Kenneth Jr: Whew!

Eduardo: Does this sound like the man that you knew?

Kenneth Jr: Oh yeah. Yep. My father was a protector for the whole family.

Eduardo: Ron's letter mentions that your father should have received the Medal of Honor. Did he receive any kind of recognition for his act of heroism? What Ken tells me next is the answer Rhonda was looking for. Well Rhonda I want to thank you for asking me to be a part of this investigation and tell you that as a son of a Korean Veteran myself, it's been a particularly special



investigation for me. I tell Rhonda that Ken Sr. was not on the list of Killed In Action because he survived his injuries.

Rhonda: I'm shocked that he survived because in my father's letter it said that he thought he would die at any moment.

Eduardo: You asked me to discover whether Kenneth Friend received the Medal of Honor. And I can tell you that he did not receive the Medal of Honor.

Kenneth Jr: He did receive the Purple Heart that you received when you get wounded in action. I remember him saying that he didn't even care about getting the Purple Heart. He did what he had to do at the time and he said it was five seconds out of a very long war. And he said, "So if I saved a few men from meeting their maker, and I ended up living through it then so be it. That's what it had to be."

Rhonda: I would still like to pursue and see that he receives the Medal of Honor. I wish that I had found this letter years ago and could have gone to see him.

Eduardo: You know there's one thing I'd like to share with you as well -- one other thing. Rhonda this is Ken Friend, Jr. Ken this is Rhonda.

Kenneth Jr: Hi.

Rhonda: I can't believe your dad made it. I can't believe that you're here. Omigod. You had some dad I'll say. Omigod.

Kenneth Jr: Thank you. I'm sorry about your father.

Rhonda: I'm glad that you got to see the letter. I knew it would be hard.

Kenneth Jr: Oh, it was real hard. It just verifies everything that I already knew.





Rhonda: Your father needs that medal. Your family needs that medal. I'm going to see what needs to be done.

Eduardo: The border between North and South Korea cuts across the 38 parallel of latitude, north of the equator. Since the War's end, that border area, also known as the demilitarized zone, or DMZ, has held a shaky truce. Nevertheless, since 1953, lives continue to be lost in skirmishes along the DMZ. Some 8,100 Americans missing since the war's end remain unaccounted for.