Memories of Korea flood back

WASHINGTON — Tony Zdanavage, of Berwick, Pa., was a field medic with the 2nd Infantry Division in Korea. The day his artillery outfit arrived at Pusan, it moved forward by train, then by truck convoy to a hill at the edge of the desperately defended perimeter, the last to hold on the Korean peninsula.

Within an hour, mortar shells started falling. At first, Tony didn't realize what that meant. "This dumb kid, the medic, just didn't realize what that meant. He sat there in a 3/4-ton truck writing a letter home," he remembers.

"I heard the explosions and saw people running. One kid called out, 'Medic!' He showed me where my hole was and I pointed to it. He ran for it. Before I could get out of the truck to join him, a shell landed in the hole at the same time.

"It became my first lesson of war and what was expected of me as the medic. We had only been in Korea for hours and no one even suspected we were in a danger zone. Yet a kid had just disappeared from the face of the earth in a split second."

Tony writes of that first day, and much more, in a self-published book that lets go a long-lost record of his experience. "The War America Forgot to Remember."

For several years, I have been searching the diaries and letters of Civil War soldiers, who left literally millions of them behind. Their accounts are almost interchangeable with theagnized memoirs of Tony and his friends from 1950. If we had individual soldiers' letters from the Peloponnesian wars 2,400 years ago, and if the soldiers of Desert Storm last winter had written more and telephoned less, their record would sound the same.

War is as old as man, and the stories of Napoleon and Grant, MacArthur and Rommel, Westmoreland and Schwarzkopf touch only the bare, impersonal surface of it. At that level, changes in weapons and technology may affect strategy greatly. For the man in the foxhole, with the spear, the musket or the M-16 — or the first-aid kit — hardly anything has changed.

Amid that mortar attack outside Pusan, Tony Zdanavage says, "I never knew what was happening because it was new to me." When the shelling stopped, he seemed in shock. "I picked up a trenching tool and a poncho and started to pick up pieces of what was a living human being just seconds before. Some soldiers were still crying and throwing up while others were very hysterical with pieces of flesh and blood on their clothing. Most just hid, not able to watch."

As he scraped away with his shovel, a sergeant named McDonald said, "Let me do that, Doc." But Tony said he was the medic and it was his job. McDonald helped anyway. "He held the poncho while I gathered the pieces. We carried the half-filled poncho over every inch of ground to be certain we had not missed a single piece."

After that, things got worse. McDonald became Tony's friend and adviser. "Without his help, I'm not sure I would have been able to do what I did," Tony says. For days and months, he shifted from unit to unit: "Each time I was the 'bastard child' ... As a medic, I was nameless and was nothing more than just 'Doc' or 'Medic!'"

Over and over, as he patched soldiers together, sliced sizzling phosphorus fragments out of men's flesh, tried to close their frozen eyes, the thought came to Tony as it comes to all who see combat: Why him, and not me? "Strangers became friends ..."

"As a buddy or friend would depart by death or wounds, the new would arrive. But the pain of each departure never left us. Some wanted to go with their buddies at any cost. Many felt guilty ... No one who has never been in that position could feel the hurt, the pain and shock and heartache of leaving your best friend to die or be captured."

And when Tony came home after being wounded, left for dead, captured and freed, only those who had been there could comprehend what he had been through. "There," of course, means Guadalcanal, St. Lo, Dak To, Khe Sanh, wherever men have had to fight.

"In war we must do things we would not do in normal life," Tony says. "Having done this and much more in combat, men and kids are unable to talk to others about it. First, they try not to remember. Next, they know they would not be understood ... That shell has to be opened, hard as it is to do."

Because it is so hard, men who have been there find each other to talk. Only in 1984, at such a gathering, did Tony learn that his friend Sergeant McDonald had been killed at the Kunuri-Sunchun roadblock, in the same battle where Tony was wounded. Thirty-four years later, he wept again.