THE FIRST TEN YEARS WERE THE MOST FUN

by Maj. Gen. John E. Hoover, U.S. Army retired

I was inducted into the Army at Camp Lee, Virginia, in February 1943, along with about twenty other guys from Bridgewater College in Virginia. I was lucky from the very beginning. The company I was assigned to was playing in the finals of the post volleyball championship, and when the First Sergeant saw me he had only one question: "Can you play volleyball?" For the next ten days I did little but play volleyball, catching an occasional glimpse of my cohorts who seemed to be on KP every day. I never will forget my first Company Commander. He was a Captain, about 50 years old with a sleeve full of World War I wound stripes!

At Camp Lee, I took the "ditti-dah-dit" test, was classified into the Signal Corps and ordered to Ft. Monmouth, New Jersey, for basic training. It was the end of February when I departed by train for Ft. Monmouth, wearing my long OD overcoat and carrying two overstuffed barracks bags full of government issue equipment. I arrived at the railroad station in Little Silver, New Jersey, at about three o'clock in the morning in the midst of a complete blackout! There were about two feet of snow on the ground, and it was coming down so hard you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. The station was closed and locked, and there was no indication of where the town was, much less the fort. Fortunately for me, there was one Sergeant on that train who got off there; otherwise my military career might well have ended on the train platform in Little Silver, New Jersey, in 1943.

The next day I traveled to Camp Edison at Sea Girt where I took my three weeks basic training under a Platoon Sergeant who was actually an Acting Corporal. Then I was selected for the Code Clerk's course. There were some interesting people in the school at Sea Girt. One of my instructors was Billy Halip, who starred in the Dead End Kids. Daschel Hammet, the great mystery writer, was a T-5 who used to read until all hours in the shower

because that was the only place where the lights were left on. After completing the Code Clerk's course, I was made an instructor and became an Acting Corporal. It was a great life - I worked from midnight until eight in the morning and spent the rest of the time on the beach at Point Pleasant, just outside the gate.

In August I received orders to the U.S. Military Academy Preparatory School at Amherst College in Amherst, MA. The Army had selected 360 men from all over the world to send there. All ranks were represented, from Privates like me to Master Sergeants. There were guys who had been flying as tail-gunners in bombers out of England, representatives from most Army divisions in Europe and the Pacific, amphibious engineers, glider pilots; you name it, they were there. Most had had a couple years of college, and some were college graduates. There were only a handful of civilian students at Amherst (25-30) and about 75 Navy V-12 students. It appeared that we were about the only available eligible males in Western Massachusetts in 1943 - 44, and we were literally surrounded by girls. What was then Massachusetts State was also located in Amherst. The student body was made up of several thousand girls. Mt. Holyoke College, with another 1500 or so girls, was ten miles to the south, and Smith College, with more thousands of girls, was just about ten miles to the west in Northampton, MA. To top it off, the Navy had taken over a large hotel in Northampton to use for a WAVE OCS.

The Army had thoughtfully provided a captain, a staff sergeant and a clerk to supervise our activities. It was about like life on any college campus, with some minor differences. Basically, we had to make reveille in the morning and be in class on schedule, and that was it. After about six months, the Army decided to "straighten us out" and brought in six brand new Second Lieutenants, fresh out of Military Police OCS. It took us about a week to make converts of them.

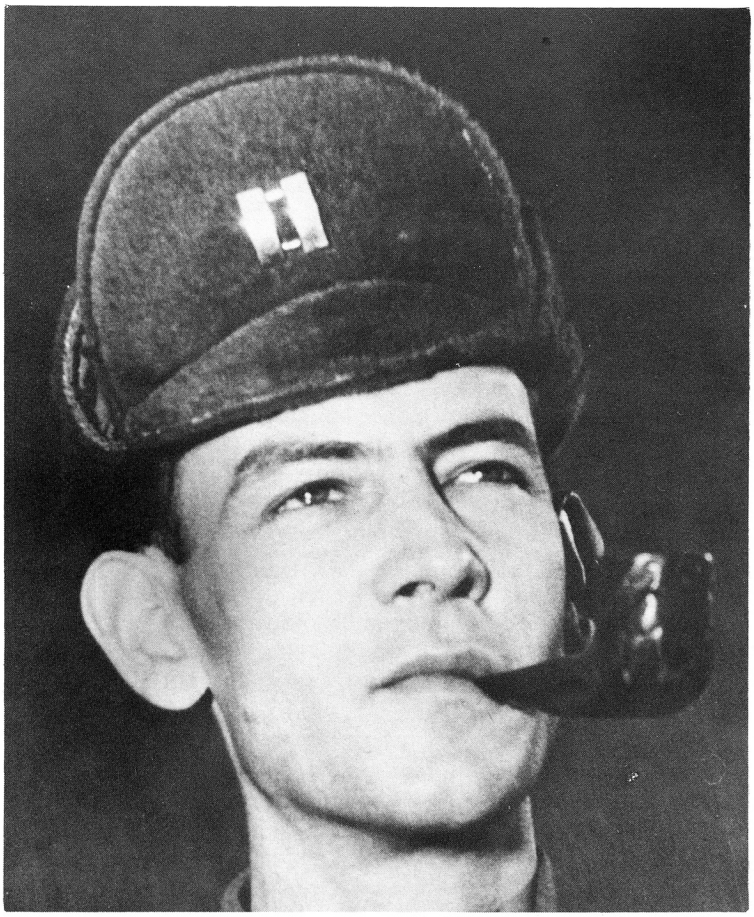
Life at Amherst was living proof that you could thoroughly enjoy yourself and learn at the same time. It was a real educational experience as well as a frolic. In most cases we were taught by full professors — everybody else had gone to war. The Professor and Head of the Department of English taught me English grammar. The Professor and Head of the Department of Geography taught us geography and had us in his home for informal discussions in the evening.

In the spring of 1944, we took the entrance exams for the Military Academy, and those of us who were accepted reported to West Point to be discharged on 30 June 1944 at the convenience of the government in order to enter the Military Academy on 1 July. Thus ended my enlisted career. I had spent one year, six months and twenty-eight days as an enlisted man in the largest U.S. Army in American history and never got promoted to Private First Class.

After three years at West Point — we took the short course during the war — I graduated in 1947 and was commissioned a Second Lieutenant in the Signal Corps. The most memorable thing that I remember about those three years was the fact that as a cadet, I never saw Army lose a football game.

After the Ground General School at Ft. Riley, Kansas, I was sent to the Basic Course at Ft. Monmouth. The thing that I remember about that duty was life in the BOQ. The winter of 1947-48 was one of the worst in history. We were living, two to a room, on the second floor of a wooden barracks building. The furnace was at the opposite end of the building. We had strips of paper hanging over the heating vents in our room; they never moved. There was no such thing as inadequate quarters and no choice as to where you lived. You lived in the BOQ as is, and you forfeited your rental allowance — period.

After the Basic Course, I got orders to Japan. I traveled on the USAT Hope, and it took sixteen days. The Hope was an old hospital ship with no recreational facilities. The only place you had to sit down was on your bunk, and it had a six inch rail around it. We spent sixteen days and nights playing bridge and poker, sitting on those bunks, and figuring out ways to keep from completely cutting off the circulation in our legs.



Korea 1951

When we got to the Replacement Depot at Camp Zama in Japan, we Signal types got a break. We were put up at the Yuraku Hotel in Tokyo by Brig. Gen. G. I. Back, who was Chief Signal Officer of the Far East Command. We spent about ten days touring the Signal facilities in the Tokyo area and enjoying the Yuraku roof with its 20-piece band that played every night and its ten cent mixed drinks. From Tokyo we went to Yokohoma to see Col. J. D. O'Connell, Signal officer, Eighth Army. He decided to send me to the 24th Infantry Division on Japan's southernmost island of Kyushu, far from the flesh pots of Tokyo and Yokohoma.

I spent two years in the 24th Signal Company in Kokura. During that time I had a crack at every platoon in the company except the radio and radio relay platoons. I also served about three months as the Communications Officer of the 21st Infantry Regiment. In parallel with the "technical" jobs, I had an opportunity to serve as Mess Officer, Motor Officer, Training Officer and Company Supply Officer. In addition, I was the Trial Judge Advocate for the Special Court and the Assistant Trial Judge Advocate for the General Court. I also picked up my share of assignments to do Line-of-Duty Investigations and as Surveying Officer for Reports of Survey. I organized and trained a company boxing team and an honor guard platoon. A Second Lieutenant really didn't have time to get into trouble.

From the time I had entered the Army, I had heard the old saw, "never volunteer". Don't believe it. In early 1950, our Division Signal Supply Officer was ordered back to the United States unexpectedly (in those days the Division Signal Company was authorized two Captains, a Company Commander and a Division Signal Supply Officer). I told the Division Signal Officer that I would volunteer to take the job because it seemed to me that I ought to know something about Signal Supply, and I might as well learn it early on. I got the job, and when the Korean War came along about five months later I was serving in a Captain's job. Thirty days after the war started, I was promoted to Captain.

Those few weeks in June just before the 24th Division deployed to Korea were quite an experience. One night in late June, I got a telephone call at the BOQ from the Division Commcenter Officer requesting me to come and help him out. It was a madhouse; every teletype machine in that commcenter had a bell ringing and was typing out an endless stream of messages, each one headed: FLASH! FOR THE EYES OF GEN DEAN ONLY! As soon as each message was decrypted, one of us would personally run it upstairs to the Division Chief of Staff. I really felt sorry for him; he had only been in the division about two days or so. Both the Division Commander and the Assistant Division Commander were miles away supervising the reception of the American evacuees from Korea, and there he was, all alone in the middle of the night with two idiot Signal Corps lieutenants running in and out of his office dropping FLASH messages on his front desk faster than he could read them.

I was aware that we were in a sad state in the Division as far as Signal equipment was concerned. Almost all of it had been across every beach in the Pacific, so I made a trip to the Yokohoma Signal Depot to see what could be done. While I did not come back with any equipment, I did come back with authority to requisition a complete set of Signal equipment for the Division. I submitted that requisition by teletype, the longest teletype message I ever wrote. I packed up the Division Signal Supply operation for shipment to Korea. As each soldier in the Signal Company emptied his foot locker, he brought it to the Signal Supply warehouse where we filled it with spare parts or other supplies. I cleared my post accountable property records by issuing all of the supplies and equipment I had on hand from myself as Post Accountable Property Officer to myself as Division Signal Supply Officer.

Once my operation was ready to move, I was sent on to Korea so I could begin getting things organized there. I went to war on a Japanese Ferry Boat, sitting up all night on a woven straw mat on the floor. I got to Korea just as the sun was rising over Pusan Harbor on the morning of the 4th of July 1950.

Pusan was something else! I never will forget the bright red and gold fire truck from the Seoul Fire Department that had been abandoned in the Pusan rail yard. One of the few places you could get any decent food was in a dining hall operated by the Seaman's Relief Society. Meanwhile, back in Kokura, every effort was being made to get the company to Korea. A Japanese LST had been dispatched to pick up the company, but when it arrived, the Japanese Captain wouldn't bring it into the dock. Lt. Jim Gay (who is retired now and lives in Savannah) commandeered a boat and with his trusty M-1 rifle proceeded out to the LST where he persuaded the Captain that it was in his best interest to dock the LST. Shortly thereafter the company arrived in Pusan. In the meantime, I had found a couple of signal people who were engaged in establishing a Signal Depot in Pusan — that is to say they had found a building. I never did get that Division's worth of Signal equipment I requisitioned. Instead, it was used to stock the Pusan Signal Depot!

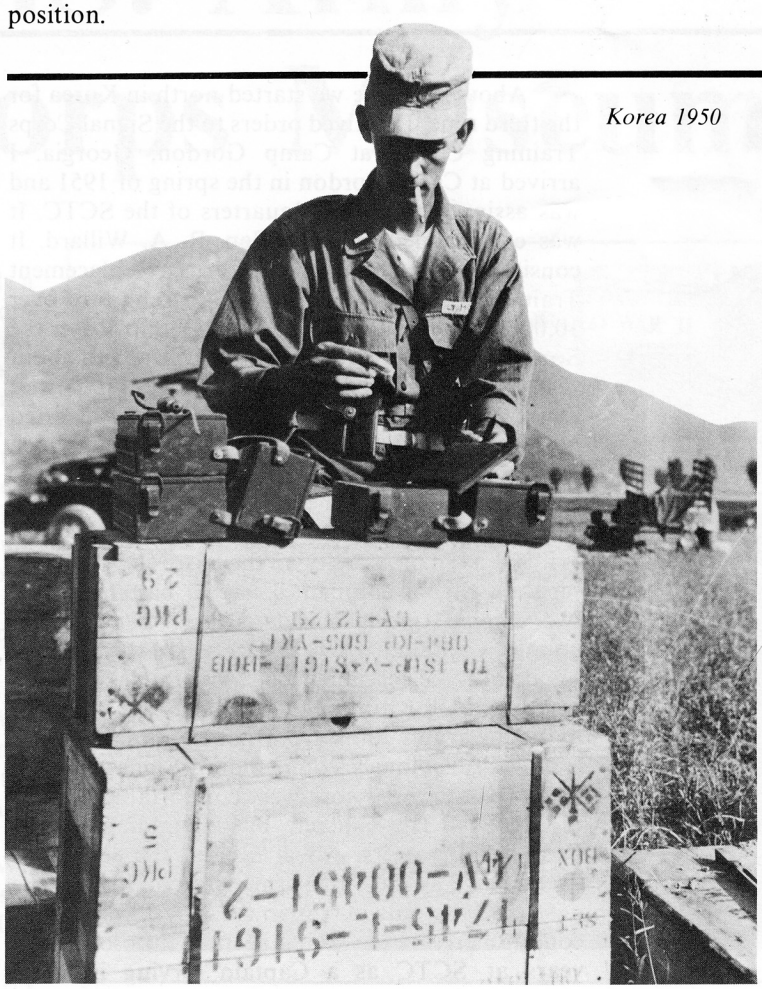
We loaded the company on flat cars and made our way to Taejon. We had been there only a day or two when we lost our construction platoon leader in an ambush. His driver, Cpl. Billy D. Jones, showed up about three days later with nothing but his fatigue pants and his M-1 rifle.

We were soon back in the Pusan Perimeter, and I found the Division consuming over 3000 miles of field wire a month which I couldn't begin to deliver with my four 2 1/2 ton trucks. Fortunately, one of my drivers "discovered" a lowboy and a tractor about which I asked no questions, and which solved my problem very nicely. About this time, I was promoted to Captain on the first promotion order issued by Eighth Army in Korea. Company grade officers needed only thirty days in a TO&E vacancy to be eligible for promotion. I was immediately given the job of running the radio platoon and the radio relay platoon (you will note that these were the only two platoons which I had not had in the preceeding two years in Japan.

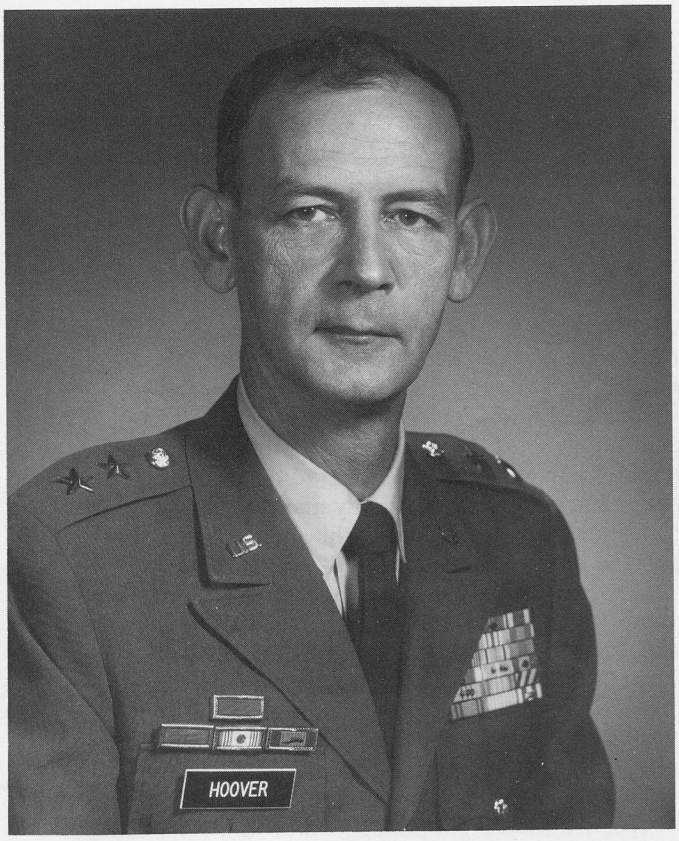
During the next six months I had some great times with those two platoons as we seesawed up and down the Korean Peninsula. As we broke out of the Pusan Perimeter near Waegwan, I was told to get a radio relay terminal as close as possible to the end of the bridge we were about to throw across the river. I took off in my jeep, a team in a 2 1/2 ton following me. We went traipsing up the road past a regimental CP, then past an advanced party looking for a new regimental CP and finally into Waegwan. As I was driving down the street, a jeep came whipping around the corner. It was Lt. Frank Stilo, the 3rd Engineer Commo, out looking for a new battalion CP. He advised me to go no further as we had reached the limits of the liberation of the town. We retraced our route a few hundred yards and set up the radio relay terminal just to the rear of an 81mm mortar position. Once the radio was up, I called the Division Signal Officer and reported in, informing him that the construction platoon was in the process of laying wire several miles to the rear of my position to provide telephone service to the regiment.

The Division established its northernmost CP north of the Chongchon River near the west coast of North Korea. On the day that we had the Division Advance Party mounted up and preparing to follow the 21st Infantry (which was in a mounted column moving up the main west coast road toward the Yalu River) we got the word to halt and prepare to withdraw because the Chinese were about to outflank and cut off the entire Division. Fortunately, we had dispatched one of the Division's long range radios to accompany the 21st Infantry column with instructions to stay on the air continuously; still we spent a couple of rather frantic hours trying to raise that radio in order to get the column stopped. We finally made contact when the radio truck in the column hit the crest of a hill, and the regiment returned to safety.

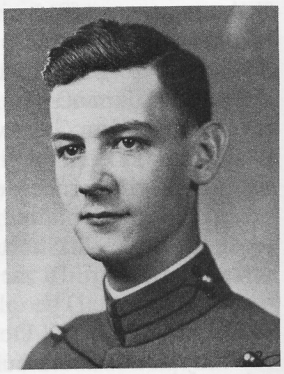
There followed a mad dash to the South in some of the coldest weather I have ever encountered. The Division finally ended up south of the 38th Parallel near Uijongbu, not far from Seoul. I was soon sent south of the Han River to begin putting up the necessary wire and cable to support a Division defensive position behind the river, but we never got to use it. The next time the Division moved, we went a good many miles south of that position.



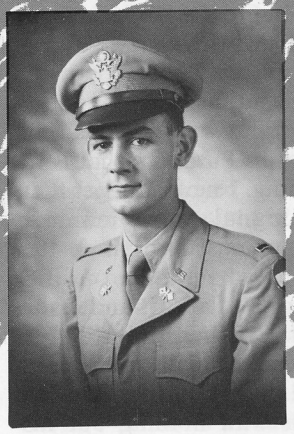
Korea 1950



1971



1946



1947

About the time we started north in Korea for the third time, I received orders to the Signal Corps Training Center at Camp Gordon, Georgia. I arrived at Camp Gordon in the spring of 1951 and was assigned to the headquarters of the SCTC. It was commanded by Brig. Gen. R. A. Willard. It consisted of the Signal Corps Replacement Training Center (SCRTC) with a strength of over 10,000, commanded by Lt. Col. Phillip Rose; the South Eastern Signal School (TSESS), with about 3,000 students commanded by Col. John Tower; and a Unit Training Group (UTG), which consisted of all the Third Army TO&E Signal units which were assigned to Camp Gordon and attached to the SCTC for training. In those days we had a Chief Signal Officer, and the SCTC belonged to the CSO —it was a tenant activity on the post. The UTG had separate Signal companies, Signal battalions and two Signal group headquarters. Thus, as a young Captain, I was provided the unique opportunity of serving in a headquarters which was responsible for training the entire spectrum of individuals and units from newly inducted basic trainees to colonels commanding Signal groups. Camp Gordon was not a very comfortable place in those days. The concrete block building behind Post Headquarters, which housed the telephone exchange, was the only permanent building on the post, and the only person in the SCTC with an air conditioner was the CG. I spent a little over two years at SCTC as a Captain serving in three successive Lt. Col. positions: Chief of the Operations Branch, Chief of the Training Branch and Chief of the Plans and Requirements Branch. It was one of the best assignments I ever had. Among other things, I met my future wife at Camp Gordon and married her in Louisville, GA, during that assignment. In 1953, I left for the Graduate School of Georgetown University to pursue a graduate degree in International Relations. I had applied for this training four years before but had not had much success in getting there until the Army made a grave mistake in the Summer of 1953. They called the civilian employee in the Chief Signal Officers Office who was responsible for graduate training, to two weeks active duty. Somehow or other he got assigned to me, and shortly thereafter I was on my way. It had been a great ten years.

Now retired, Maj. Gen. Hoover has served in a wide range of assignments in the United States, Europe, Japan, Korea and Vietnam. Among his many citations and decorations are the Legion of Merit (with OLC), the Bronze Star (with OLC) and the Joint Service Commendation Medal. He has eight service medals. A West Point graduate, Hoover also holds an M.A. from Georgetown University. He and his wife, the former Mary Jo Cox, have two daughters: Mary Kathryn and Holly.