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State Power, Cultural Exchange and the 'Forgotten War': British Veterans of the Korean War, 1953-2013

Grace Huxford

In 2012 John Preston-Bell, a former British Army officer who had served during the Korean War (1950-3), was interviewed about his experiences by a leading UK national museum, the Imperial War Museum (IWM). After leaving school in 1950, like the majority of men his age, Preston-Bell was required to serve eighteen months conscripted national service in the military.¹ That summer, his unit was posted to Korea, where war had broken out in June. Before he was demobilised in August 1951, Preston-Bell saw action at the infamous Battle of the Imjin River (April 1951), the most well-known British action of the war. When he returned to Britain and began an undergraduate degree at Cambridge, he described himself as a 'nine-day wonder' whom fellow students treated with great interest. But, he said, 'on the tenth day, people [had] forgotten and I forgot too and began living the rest of my life'. He subsequently destroyed all his letters home ('it was all a bit *Boys' Own Paper* stuff') and only sought out other veterans during the fiftieth anniversary commemorations of the war. As part of a small group of veterans, he returned to South Korea and was astonished at what he saw: 'They had, in the biblical sense, they had *magnified* me and I was so grateful to them that they had made my life worthwhile, made my contribution worthwhile and I suddenly realised that what I'd been keeping inside was, I think, love'.²

Confronted with the skyscrapers and urban development of modern-day, globalised Seoul, Preston-Bell felt that his military service had been vindicated. He was heartened to see a 'buoyant, optimistic, cheerful, wealthy, *vulgar* society'. He finished by stating his wish that British people could have exhibited as much gratitude as the South Koreans. For him, as for many other veterans, the British commemorative effort had been woefully small. The biggest monument to the war in Britain was only unveiled in 2014 and the most famous Korean War veteran was still a fictitious one – John Cleese's Basil Fawlty.³ For much of the twentieth

¹ This later went up to two years from October 1950, due to the Korean War.

² Interview with John Preston-Bell by James Atkinson, 2012. Accession no. 33315, Imperial War Museum (hereafter IWM).

³ Joe Shute, "Britain's Korean War veterans win their final fight", *Daily Telegraph*, 29 November 2014; *Fawlty Towers*. Directed by John Howard Davies (Series 1) and Bob Spiers (Series 2). Written by John Cleese and Connie Booth, BBC, 1975-9.

century, the Korean War was known in Britain as the ‘Forgotten War’ and seldom memorialised in national remembrance culture.

Preston-Bell was one of many Korean War veterans interviewed by the IWM and his case shows us how veterans’ lives – and even their very subjectivity – were formed in relation to a seemingly apathetic British public and state. Historians too neglected the subject of the British experience in the Korean War until the late 2000s: it attracted only a few detailed military histories and post-war British historians tended to overlook it in their analyses of post-1945 Britain, as it sat awkwardly alongside the creation of the post-war welfare state.⁴ Veteran history too rarely featured in histories of post-1945 Britain or in late-twentieth-century British politics.⁵ But Korean War veterans are an important case study in veteran history. Faced with a void in public remembrance, British Korean War veterans developed a distinct memorial culture of their own. From the late 1970s, although the Korean War remained largely forgotten by wider British culture, its veterans claimed a remarkable degree of ownership over the conflict and placed both South Korean gratitude and British ‘forgetting’ at the centre of their wartime remembrance.

This chapter explores how this small group of veterans understood, defined and owned ‘their’ war, from 1950 to the early twenty-first century. It does so through three interpretive lenses: forgetting, state power and cultural exchange. To most veterans, forgetting seemed the most common response to their service after 1950. Korea’s forgotten status remains the most frequently repeated – and, conversely, the most well-known – fact about the Korean War in contemporary Britain.⁶ But veterans’ post-war lives were also heavily rooted in their changed relationship with the state. Whilst sociologists have explored the state-led transformation of civilian *into* soldier in depth, few consider the inverse process.⁷ Korean War veterans were confronted with their changed status in the late twentieth century: no longer were they Cold War warriors, but the *object* of state support in their old age and retirement. Yet it was through organisations like the British Korea Veterans Association (BKVA), Britain’s leading Korean

⁴ Some post-war historians mention Korea briefly, although largely in the context of rearmament debates or the famous resignation of the post-war Labour Government’s Minister of Health, Aneurin Bevan, over the reintroduction of prescription charges due to the economic pressures of the Korean War, see David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain, 1945–51* (London, 2008), 545 and David Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain 1920–1970* (New York, 2006), 5.

⁵ Deborah Cohen traces this ‘marginal existence’ back to the 1920s in Britain, see Deborah Cohen, *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914–1939* (Berkeley, 2001), 12.

⁶ Grace Huxford, ‘The Korean War Never Happened: Forgetting a Conflict in British Society and Culture’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 27, 2 (2016): 195–219.

⁷ Stephen McVeigh and Nicola Cooper, ‘Introduction: Men after War’, in *Men after War*, ed. Stephen McVeigh and Nicola Cooper (New York and Abingdon, 2013), 3–6.

War veterans association, that they were able to reclaim some degree of agency. Their associational activities were often consciously transnational, as with the extensive 'revisit' programme to South Korea. This chapter thus tells a simultaneously domestic and transnational story about one particular veteran community in the second half of the twentieth century, exploring how it established itself and ultimately how it viewed the British state for which they had 'given their youth'.⁸ This veteran community forged a particular identity and set of relations as a result of the wider popular forgetting of their conflict. This chapter first examines Britain's role in the Korean War before asking how and why it came to be forgotten within British national memory. It then explores the post-war experience of British Korean War veterans and their relationship with the state, before highlighting how the BKVA offered veterans a new opportunity to reclaim agency and to exert an unusual level of influence over the post-conflict memory of Korea.

This chapter is based on extensive research using veteran memoirs, life-writing and oral history interviews. Oral history and veteran history are intimately connected: Alistair Thomson's *Anzac Memories* (1994) first used oral history interviews with Australian Great War veterans to trace the collective memory of the war in Australia and the foundation of the heroic, 'Anzac Legend'.⁹ Thomson's moving and detailed interviews, perhaps most famously with veteran Fred Farrall, demonstrated how the construction of memories and identities shifted over time.¹⁰ Together with Penny Summerfield and Graham Dawson, Thomson's work continues to be a mainstay for oral historians examining how wartime narratives are 'composed' in interview settings.¹¹ But veteran memories are not always in a state of flux: Juliette Pattison has suggested that testimony can be more 'resilient' than oral historians think and that certain identities remain intact throughout the interview process.¹² For instance, in the case of Korea, many veterans maintain they are still 'forgotten', even though they have been

⁸ Interview with Malcolm Barker by Peter M. Hart, February 2008. Accession no. 30636, IWM.

⁹ Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend, new edition* (Monash, 2013; orig. edn 1994). Anzac stands for Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZACs).

¹⁰ Alistair Thomson "Anzac Memories Revisited: Trauma, Memory and Oral History", *Oral History Review*, 42, 1 (2015): 1-29.

¹¹ Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London and New York, 1994), 22-6; Penny Summerfield, "Dis/composing the Subject: Intersubjectivities in Oral History" in *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*, ed. Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield (London, 2000), 91-4; Juliette Pattinson, "'The Thing that Made Me Hesitate...': Re-examining Gendered Intersubjectivities in Interviews with British Secret War Veterans", *Women's History Review*, 20, 2 (2011): 245-623, 247.

¹² Pattinson, "'The Thing that Made Me Hesitate...'", 258.

explicitly recruited by the museum to tell their wartime story.¹³ How stable veteran memories are therefore continues to be a matter of debate among oral historians.

The interviews at the heart of this chapter were conducted by the IWM between the 1980s and 2000s and represent an important, if overlooked, evidence base for historians of the Korean War. They emanate from a specific institutional oral history acquisition policy. The IWM's Department of Sound Records was established in 1972, inheriting the museum's gramophone recordings, collections of sound effects and 300 cans of interviews from the BBC's landmark series, *The Great War* (1964).¹⁴ Although the museum's primary focus was gathering interviews with First World War veterans, by the late 1980s its interviewers began to turn to post-war conflicts, including Korea.¹⁵ Interviews were conducted either by oral historians from within the museum (including Dr Conrad Wood and military historian Peter M. Hart) or donated by organisations and individuals.¹⁶ The Korean War interviews thus form part of a rich and diverse oral history collection.

The motivations for using archived interviews are both practical and theoretical: in December 2013, coinciding with the sixtieth anniversary of the war's end, the BKVA announced that it would be closing the following year, due to its dwindling and ageing membership.¹⁷ Although many members remained active after this date (some defiantly so) those veterans who remained represented only a small sample of the veterans who were active in the organisation a decade previously and were largely composed of those who were young, low-ranking soldiers or conscripted national servicemen during the war. The IWM collection is thus an opportunity to access not only these servicemen, but also the viewpoints of those who were older, held more senior ranks or have since passed away.

But the archived oral history interview has a value all of its own too. During the 1990s fierce debates raged in sociology about the merits or dangers of re-using qualitative research

¹³ Interview with Benjamin Whitchurch by Lindsay Baker, 2003. Accession no. 26098, IWM; Interview with John Preston-Bell by James Atkinson, 2012. Accession no. 33315, IWM.

¹⁴ Conrad Wood, "Ten Years of the Department of Sound Records of the Imperial War Museum", *Oral History*, 11, 1 (1983): 9-12, 9; Anthony Richards, "The Imperial War Museum Sound Collection", Imperial War Museum Research Blog, 6 January 2016, <http://blogs.iwm.org.uk/research/2016/01/the-imperial-war-museum-sound-collection> (accessed 20 May 2017); Rebecca Coll, "The Department of Sound Records at the Imperial War Museum, London, in the 1970s", Imperial War Museum Research Blog, 24 September 2014, <http://blogs.iwm.org.uk/research/2014/09/the-department-of-sound-records-at-the-imperial-war-museum-london-in-the-1970s/> (accessed 10 May 2017).

¹⁵ Margaret Brooks, "The Department of Sound Records at the Imperial War Museum", *Oral History*, 17, 2 (1989): 56-7, 56.

¹⁶ Wood, "Ten Years of the Department of Sound Records of the Imperial War Museum", 9.

¹⁷ BKVA, "The Future of the BKVA", <http://www.bkva.co.uk/closure.htm> (accessed 22 May 2017).

data.¹⁸ As Joanna Bornat, Parvati Raghuram and Leroi Henry note, there were ethical concerns about using other researchers' interview data, as well as the gaps in knowledge that a 'secondary' researcher would inevitably face when analysing interviews they had not conducted themselves.¹⁹ These debates posed an important question: do oral history interviews have a limited shelf-life? And should they only be used by the original interviewer? Historians were perhaps less sceptical about the re-use of such material, familiar with re-using old 'data' from archives.²⁰ In her study of Millennium Memory Bank interviews that touched on single motherhood in Britain, held at the British Library (London), historian April Gallwey demonstrated the tremendous potentials of using 'secondary' interview material – of using 'old data in new ways'.²¹ Equipped with enough information about the production of interviews, 'secondary' researchers can make original reflections on the 'inter-subjectivity' at work between interviewer and interviewee, or analyse the historical context in which the interviews took place.²² For example, Noah Shenker has argued that, as the Holocaust passes from living memory, historians should continue to use survivors' recorded testimonies but must pay attention to the institutional 'infrastructures' in which they were created and continue to be curated.²³ As the oral history interviews of the early and mid-twentieth century themselves become history and digital technologies make an increasing number of oral history collections instantly accessible, it is vital to develop appropriate methodologies through which to examine archived interviews.

Interviews with Korean War veterans were produced within charged frameworks of collective memory. It is this context, as much as the war itself, which shaped veteran experience after the war. The IWM's collection and curation of oral histories across the last quarter of the twentieth century make it an ideal prism through which to analyse how veteran memories interact with wider collective memory. As the World Wars became more famed within British national life, Korean War veterans repeated their belief that they had been cast aside and forgotten. But their testimonies tell more than just the cultural amnesia surrounding the war:

¹⁸ April Gallwey, "The Rewards of Using Archived Oral Histories in Research: the Case of the Millennium Memory Bank", *Oral History*, 41, 1 (2013): 37–50, 38–39.

¹⁹ Joanna Bornat, Parvati Raghuram, and Leroi Henry, "Revisiting the Archives. Opportunities and Challenges. A Case Study from the History of Geriatric Medicine", *Sociological Research Online*, 17, 2 (2012).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Gallwey, "The Rewards of Using Archived Oral Histories in Research", 37–50; Bornat, Raghuram and Henry, "Revisiting the Archives. Opportunities and Challenges. A Case Study from the History of Geriatric Medicine", *Sociological Research Online*, 17, 2 (2012).

²² Ronald J. Grele, 'On Using Oral History Collections: an Introduction', *Journal of American History*, 74 (1987): 570–8, 571.

²³ Noah Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony* (Bloomington, 2015), 1. My thanks go to Professor Tim Cole for pointing me in the direction of this research.

these far-reaching interviews highlight how their relationship with the British state changed profoundly after the war and how the currents of global change shaped veterans' views of Korea and Britain. Furthermore, they describe a vibrant and transnational associational culture that to some extent lessened the resentment at their forgotten status.

Korea: Britain's 'Forgotten War'

When the Korean War first broke out in late June 1950, the British people were highly alarmed.²⁴ Coming just five years since the end of the Second World War, some worried that they or their families would be required to fight once again in a total war. This anxiety soon dissipated, as it became clear that Korea was a very different conflict. The Communist North, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) had invaded the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the South on 25 June 1950. The two had been separate states since 1948, following the temporary division of the peninsula at the end of the Second World War, with the Soviet Union overseeing the north and the United States the south. This division had followed thirty years of Japanese colonial rule. Historian Bruce Cumings argued that the war was in effect a civil war, although others have argued that the international Cold War context was crucial in stoking the tensions and influenced the course of the war.²⁵ The United Nations (UN) pledged its support to the ROK and, led by US, sent forces from member nations to protect the ROK and repel the invasion. Britain was among these forces, first pledging naval support and later troops, eventually forming a central part in the 1st Commonwealth Division.²⁶ The war resulted in over 1000 British casualties, with a similar number taken prisoner of war.²⁷ In the first year, British troops were involved in many dramatic advances and retreats up and down in the peninsula, facing the massive Chinese Spring Offensive in April 1951, as the People's Republic of China had joined the war in the previous autumn to support the DPRK. Fighting later concentrated around the 38th Parallel, the dividing line that the US and Soviet Union had first used in 1945, and British troops were involved in patrolling, skirmishes and larger battles around this area, such as the Battle of the Hook (May 1953). By this time the peace negotiations, which had

²⁴ Matthew Grant, *After the Bomb. Civil Defence and Nuclear War in Cold War Britain, 1945–68* (New York and Basingstoke, 2010), 38; Huxford, 'The Korean War Never Happened': 195-219, 208-9.

²⁵ Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: a History* (New York, 2011), 66; William Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War: a New Diplomatic and Strategic History* (Princeton and Oxford, 2002), 1-3.

²⁶ Jeffrey Grey, *The Commonwealth Armies and the Korean War: an Alliance Study* (Manchester and New York, 1988), 104. The UK contributed 58 per cent of the forces for the Division.

²⁷ 1,078 British servicemen died and 1,060 taken prisoner, see Anthony Farrar-Hockley, *The British Part in the Korean War, Volume II: an Honourable Discharge* (London, 1995), 486 and 491.

been rumbling on since 1951, resolved the thorny issue of repatriated prisoners of war and an uneasy armistice was signed between the two sides.²⁸

When British servicemen returned from Korea after the armistice, many felt that their welcome was muted. Some newspapers had been calling it a ‘slumbering’ war during the conflict itself and commentators noted that English people were more concerned with their cricket team’s victory in the Ashes than the return of their Cold War warriors.²⁹ It was not helped by the scant knowledge of the peninsula in Britain: as one veteran, Kenneth Black, put it, ‘we didn’t even know where the damn country was’.³⁰ Preston-Bell claimed that there were ‘no histrionics’ when he arrived back: ‘I think people in England were fed up with war by then. They had the First and Second World War and Korea was an unnecessary war, far away, place where nobody knew, fighting for people one didn’t know why.’³¹ The sentiment that ‘everybody else had just had a war’ was commonly expressed by Korean servicemen, both before and after their time in Korea.³² Many were content to ‘get on’ with their pre-service lives, but others found the transition harder. In his interview with Lindsay Baker, Benjamin Whitchurch – a former national service conscript with the Gloucestershire Regiment and prisoner of war – described heavy-drinking sessions in his local pubs in Bristol. Although he returned to the butcher’s shop where he had worked before he was conscripted, it took him a long time to settle back into the ‘world of living’, as he missed the army and had no friends in ‘Civvy Street’.³³ Critical military theorists Sarah Bulmer and David Jackson note that this image of the war-ravaged veteran is recurrent in late-twentieth century Britain.³⁴ The veteran, in returning to ‘civil society’, is a troubled and contradictory figure: he is, to use Jenny Edkins’ words, ‘a promise of safety and security’ but also of ‘abuse, control and coercion.’³⁵ We are not surprised – and indeed, perhaps even *expect* – servicemen to be troubled by their wartime

²⁸ The destination of repatriated North Korean and Chinese prisoners of war, held by the UN, was a recurrent issue throughout peace negotiations: North Korea and China insisted that prisoners should be repatriated to their country of origin (in line with the Geneva Convention), but the US was reluctant to force the return of those unwilling to go back to North Korea or China. Eventually in 1953, it was agreed that 14,235 Chinese and 32,500 North Koreans would not be forced to return. See S.P. Mackenzie, *British Prisoners of the Korean War* (Oxford, 2012), 134.

²⁹ Anon., “The war wakes up”, *Daily Mail*, 25 June 1952, 1; Anon., “The war which was forgotten in excitement of the Test Match”, *Bury Free Press*, 31 July 1953, 1; Huxford, “The Korean War Never Happened”, 212.

³⁰ Interview with Kenneth Black by Conrad Wood, 1998. Accession no. 18022.

³¹ Interview with John Preston-Bell by James Atkinson, 2012. Accession no. 33315, IWM.

³² Interview with Robin Bruford-Davies by David Smurthwaite, 10 February 1989. Accession no. 1989-05-163, National Army Museum (hereafter NAM).

³³ Interview with Benjamin Whitchurch by Lindsay Baker, 2003. Accession no. 26098, IWM.

³⁴ Sarah Bulmer and David Jackson, “‘You Do Not Live in My Skin’: Embodiment, Voice and the Veteran”, *Critical Military Studies*, 2 (2016): 25-40, 27.

³⁵ Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge, 2003), 6.

experience and to be a ‘problem’ when they return to civilian society.³⁶ Scholarly analysis has tended to focus on the veteran’s re-integration into society and ‘solving’ this apparently problematic status.³⁷

But this is only one way to analyse veteran experience and, in the case of Korean War veterans, the cultural and commemorative aftermath of the war is integral to understanding veterans’ responses. I have written elsewhere about why Korea has been forgotten in British culture.³⁸ We can attribute its widespread omission from British popular and commemorative culture to several factors. First, even during the war itself, the Second World War exerted a discursive dominance which overshadowed Korea. The Second World War became the twentieth century’s most morally unimpeachable war and offered Britain an edifying and unifying moment around which to construct its national identity in the late twentieth century.³⁹ This process was underway even during the 1950s. The Second World War was constantly referenced by those at home and in Korea. This discursive dominance was entrenched even further in national memory by the time of the interviews in the 1980s and 1990s. Another factor that complicated the British experience in Korea was the ambiguous legacy of the Korean War and wider Cold War in Britain. Charles Young has argued that the unclear war aims of the Korean War meant that the war’s ending was not greeted with celebration in the United States and we can see a comparable response in Britain.⁴⁰ Korea, like other aspects of the Cold War, failed to capture popular imagination in Britain or to provide a narrative as powerful as the Second World War. Although moments of the Korean War – such as the infamous Battle of the Imjin River – represented British stoicism, commitment and even irony (one British commander noting to American HQ that the increasingly alarming situation was ‘a bit sticky’), the war soon slipped from public consciousness.

Korea was thus forgotten before the war even drew to a close. Preston-Bell recalled how: ‘We came back forgotten war soldiers.’⁴¹ This sense of being forgotten heightened over time, as the memorialisation and cultural recognition of the First and Second World Wars

³⁶ Especially with rise of the emergence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The term PTSD was ratified by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980, see Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* 3; Nigel C. Hunt, *Memory, War and Trauma* (Cambridge and New York, 2010), 123.

³⁷ Bulmer and Jackson, “‘You Do Not Live in My Skin’”, 37.

³⁸ Huxford, “The Korean War Never Happened”, 195-219.

³⁹ David Reynolds, “Britain, the Two World Wars and the Problem of Narrative”, *The Historical Journal*, 60, 1 (2017): 197-231, 217; Geoff Eley, “Finding the People’s War: Film, British Collective Memory, and World War II”, *American Historical Review*, 108, 3 (2011): 818-38.

⁴⁰ Charles S. Young, “POWs: the hidden reason for forgetting Korea” in *The Korean War at Sixty: New Approaches to the Study of the Korean War*, ed. Robert Barnes (Abingdon, 2012), 155-70.

⁴¹ Interview with John Preston-Bell by James Atkinson, 2012. Accession no. 33315, IWM.

became more widespread. One veteran wrote three times to the Queen about their lack of remembrance, noting how his son's exam papers had questions on the World Wars and Vietnam, but not Korea.⁴² In particular, Korean veterans resented the lack of public, state-led remembrance. Local memorials were erected (largely instigated by veterans' organisations) and small monuments were unveiled in 1987 in the crypt of St. Pauls' Cathedral and at the National Arboretum, Staffordshire, in 2000, but it was not until 2014 that a large-scale national memorial was unveiled on the Victoria Embankment in London. Prior to this, many veterans felt excluded from the very state that they had been compelled to defend. This phenomenon is perhaps not unique to Korean veterans: Peter Coleman and Andrei Podolskij have examined how Soviet war veterans from Russia and Ukraine have adjusted to social change since the fall of the Soviet Union. They argue that, as well as experiencing material loss (with pensions failing to keep pace with hyper-inflation, if they were paid at all), these veterans also 'suffered from a loss of national and individual self-esteem'.⁴³ The system for which they had fought had been dismantled and their place in national remembrance diminished. Whilst Britain did not experience such a dramatic shift in its political system, the end of the Cold War and Britain's increasingly nostalgic vision of its past conflicts has arguably made it harder for veterans to make their efforts in an ambiguous conflict seem worthwhile or integral to British national life.

State Power and the Veteran

But the aftermath of war is not just shaped by the cultural context of post-war society: for the veteran, it is built too on a realigned relationship with the state. Sociologist Paul Higgs argues that modern citizenship, predicated on both state and individual responsibilities, excludes those who cannot fulfil their duties and denotes a very different relationship with the state.⁴⁴ How then do veterans, formerly active defenders of a state, position themselves when they no longer fit that role?

To unpick the relationship between state and veteran further, it is first worth examining the terminology used to describe these former service personnel. Christopher Dandeker, Simon

⁴² 'Harry still campaigning to get country to salute Korean veterans 50 years on', *The Star (Sheffield)*, 2 July 2003.

⁴³ Peter G. Coleman and Andrei Podolskij, "Identity Loss and Recovery in the Life Stories of Soviet World War II Veterans", *The Gerontologist*, 47, 1 (2007): 52-60, 52-3.

⁴⁴ Peter Higgs, "Citizenship and Old Age: the End of the Road?", *Ageing and Society*, 15 (1995), 535-50; Jenny Hockey and Allison James, *Social Identities across the Life Course* (Basingstoke and New York, 2003), 74.

Wessely and others have noted that the term 'ex-serviceman' is preferred to 'veteran' in Britain, as the former can describe any man with military experience, whereas the latter implies active (usually front-line) involvement in military operations.⁴⁵ However, in much post-1945 warfare, this definition presents a problem. As R.W. Connell notes, the majority of servicemen in twentieth-century warfare could be categorised as 'technical specialists', not infantrymen in hand-to-hand combat.⁴⁶ Paul Higate too argues that 'it is difficult to identify ex-service people through their common stock of military-biographical experiences as these are too inconsistent to serve as an anchor.'⁴⁷ The term veteran cannot then just relate to specific battle experiences and frontline action. Recent advances in veterans' history have shown how veteranhood can be a political category too. In the United States, for example, veteran organisations in the late twentieth century acted as an important political force, calling for fairer treatment and memorialisation, as with campaigning for the Vietnam Veteran's War Memorial.⁴⁸ The term veteran, although still reliant on military service, implied a new political position (and power) in society after that service ends. By contrast, British 'ex-servicemen' have historically wielded no such collective power in society and their label refers to their former status (an 'ex' serviceman), rather than a new social or political role.⁴⁹ Britain's hesitant relationship with the term 'veteran' thus further complicates an already multi-layered term.

But despite this preference in Britain toward 'ex-serviceman' rather than veteran, those who served in Korea *did* refer to themselves as 'veterans'. The purposeful use of the term was exemplified by the founding of the BKVA, an organisation which, through its strong links with US and particularly Korean veteran organisations, defined itself in a transnational setting rather than simply a British 'ex-service' tradition.⁵⁰ From the start, the BKVA was also composed of a variety of different service personnel. Korean War servicemen had included regulars, but also volunteers for the Korean campaign and conscripted national servicemen. National service complicated both Korean veterans' relationship with the state and their social position. As Peter

⁴⁵ Christopher Dandeker, Simon Wessely, Amy Iversen and John Ross, "What's in a Name? Defining and Caring for 'Veterans': the United Kingdom in International Perspective", *Armed Forces and Society*, 32 (2006): 161-77, 165. Christopher Dandeker et al. also identify more external factors which shape the definition of veteranhood, including pre-existing civil-military relations and state resource allocation. Their case study of UK provision for veterans in 2006 showed how some wanted veterans to be those who had served 'more than one day' in the military, because it fitted with the Labour Government's wider political agenda of tackling social exclusion and would have been easy to implement, see Dandeker et al., "What's in a Name?", 168-9.

⁴⁶ R.W. Connell, "Masculinity, Violence and War" in *Men's Lives*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner (2nd edn, New York, 1992), 181.

⁴⁷ Paul Higate, "Theorizing Continuity: from Military to Civilian Life", *Armed Forces and Society*, 27, 3 (2001): 443-60, 445.

⁴⁸ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 73-9.

⁴⁹ Cohen, *The War Come Home*, 12.

⁵⁰ Reuben Holroyd, "'In the Beginning' - The Morning Calm", *Morning Calm*, 60 (2009), 3.

Reese argues, one was less likely to categorise a healthy young man who served two years in his late teens as a veteran, particularly in the immediate aftermath of war. Reese, himself a former conscript, notes that '[a] veteran needed some grey hairs and a limp; a national serviceman joining at eighteen would be released before his twenty-first birthday.'⁵¹ Of even more significance to Korean veterans, national servicemen also did not qualify for military pensions due to the length of their service. At the time of the Korean War, service personnel had to have served sixteen years from age twenty-one (officers) or twenty-two years from age eighteen (other ranks).⁵² As a result, national service conscripts who served two years failed to qualify for pensions. This was a common cause of grievance mentioned in many interviews. Whitchurch described how he and other veterans went to 'various places' to complain about their pension: 'They paid us a lump sum because we were one point under pensionable. Forgotten army, whenever you hear about the Korean War, it's the forgotten army[.] ... Even King George recognised the war but the government wouldn't. And that's it. So you get nothing.'⁵³ The veteran community, although bound by memories of shared experience, was thus a heterogeneous mix of ages, ranks and periods and terms of service, with different grievances toward the state.

To some extent, we can argue that these Korean War veterans were a 'problem' for the state. First, veterans were an ageing community. Sociologists Jenny Hockey and Allison James argue that in a welfare state, on the whole, when people reach old age they become objects of surveillance instead of active citizens of the state.⁵⁴ In other words, the state was no longer something to protect, but something that offered you protection. The changed relationship stems largely from the developmental processes at the heart of ageing.⁵⁵ Whilst this change is not unique to veterans, the transition was perhaps more marked for veterans, and those of the Korean War, given the emphasis placed on their role in *protecting* the state and democracy in the early Cold War. By the early 1950s, military authorities held that the ideal soldier was a

⁵¹ Peter Reese, *Homecoming Heroes: an Account of the Re-assimilation of British Military Personnel into Civilian Life* (Barnsley, 1992), 213–14. Dandeker et al. note that the British public support this distinction, with 57 per cent believing that the term 'veteran' should only be used to describe those who fought in the World Wars, see Dandeker et al., 'What's in a Name?', 166.

⁵² Ministry of Defence, "Guidance: Pensions for Veterans", 12 December 2012. <<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/pensions-and-compensation-for-veterans>> (accessed 31 May 2017).

⁵³ Interview with Benjamin Whitchurch by Lindsay Baker, 2003. Accession no. 26098, IWM.

⁵⁴ Hockey and James, *Social Identities across the Life Course*, 74.

⁵⁵ Joan M. Cook, "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Older Adults", *PTSD Research Quarterly*, 12, 3 (2001): 1–7, 1; Hunt, *Memory, War and Trauma*, 140.

‘soldier-citizen’, who was well-versed in the details of the democratic system.⁵⁶ In January 1951, the commander of the Eighth United States Army Korea (EUSAK), General Matthew B. Ridgway (1895–1993), asked for a memorandum entitled ‘Why We Are Here’ to be read to all UN servicemen, which reiterated that they were fighting for societal, political and even religious values which underpinned collective Western society.⁵⁷ Korea was not justified in operational terms, but in ideological terms. Nor was this emphasis just restricted to the American leadership. Chief of the Imperial General Staff William Slim said to returning soldiers from Korea: ‘you have helped to strike a blow in the defence of the free world’.⁵⁸ For some veterans then, this message contrasted painfully with the lacklustre response from those at home when they returned from Korea and, as they aged, their switch from protector of the state to an *object* of it.

Among injured servicemen, the switch to being an object of state welfare was even more pronounced. In an interview with the IWM, a former NCO in the Northumberland Fusiliers, Thomas Ashley Cunningham-Boothe (1927–2001), argued that his chronic arthritis originated in the cold winter in Korea in 1950/1951, where provision of warm clothing had been poor.⁵⁹ In an earlier autobiography, he also blamed his condition on malnutrition and other illnesses he contracted during his military service.⁶⁰ He noted that: ‘It was the price to pay for all my mischief.’⁶¹ Cunningham-Boothe produced a significant amount of autobiographical material, from an IWM oral history interview to poetry to a very frank autobiography. His writing conveys an evident frustration at his changed circumstances. Following Korea, Cunningham-Boothe served in Hong Kong and spent a year in Canada after leaving the British Army. Upon returning home to his mother’s home in Leamington Spa, Warwickshire in the late 1950s, he started to experience great joint pain, keeping to his room and even occasionally shouting embittered insults at passers-by. ‘My life became one long introspection, serving to

⁵⁶ Such belief emanated from Second World War education, as represented by the famous pamphlet series, *British Way and Purpose*, see Directorate of Army Education, *The British Way and Purpose: Consolidated Version* (London, 1944).

⁵⁷ Papers of Lieutenant R.S. Gill, Memorandum by HQ Eighth Army United States Army Korea (EUSAK), ‘Why We Are Here’, 21 January 1951. Docs 13204, IWM.

⁵⁸ Papers of Lieutenant R.S. Gill, Personal Message from Field Marshall Sir William Slim, CIGS, to Officers and Other Ranks of the Army Reserves who are returning to Civil Life after serving in Korea, November 1951. Docs 13204, IWM.

⁵⁹ Interview with Thomas Ashley Cunningham-Boothe by Conrad Wood, 8 December 1999. Accession no. 19913, IWM.

⁶⁰ Ashley Cunningham-Boothe, *One Man’s Look at Arthritis* (Leamington Spa, 1993), 13.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

distract me from my misery’, he noted; it was an existence full of ‘Walter Mitty-like escapism’.⁶²

But the case of Cunningham-Boothe also shows another aspect of veteran experience. Arthur Frank argues that illness narratives are often an attempt to regain some sense of agency.⁶³ Cunningham-Boothe’s interview and autobiography certainly describe his reduced circumstances, but he also produced other writing that painted an altogether more positive and active picture of veteran life. Under the auspices of a small veteran company, Korvet, based in Leamington Spa, Cunningham-Boothe wrote and published histories and memoirs of the Korean War. Many other veterans’ memoirs were published by Korvet, primarily with a veteran readership in mind.⁶⁴ They told stories from the ‘sharp end’ and tales of ‘human endeavour’ that only those who had been there would understand.⁶⁵ Cunningham-Boothe even published his own poetry about the visceral realities of warfare, under the pseudonym ‘John Briton’.⁶⁶ In the face of the apparent apathy of the wider public, veterans like Cunningham-Boothe started to write for one another and to develop a small but vibrant community publishing scheme. Through such action, Cunningham-Boothe and others were able to exert a significant degree of ownership of ‘their’ war. It is this veteran agency that forms the final strand of this chapter.

Veteran Agency

Critical military theorists increasingly acknowledge both veteran agency and their role in the shaping of memory and even academic discourse: as Bulmer and Jackson summarise, the veteran is not simply a ‘problem’ to be solved by scholars or policy-makers.⁶⁷ The first major way that British veterans demonstrated their agency in the face of public apathy and a troubled relationship with the state was through the foundation of the BKVA. Mick Geoghegan, who had served with the 14th Field Regiment of the Royal Artillery in Korea described how in 1976

⁶² Ibid., 18–25.

⁶³ Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics* (Chicago and London, 1995), xii.

⁶⁴ Korvet’s publications included *British Forces in the Korean War*, ed. Ashley Cunningham-Boothe and Peter Farrar (Leamington Spa, 1988); Ed Evanhoe, *Dark Moon* (Leamington Spa, 1995) and the memoir of a Korean War ‘volunteer’ John Martin, *K-Force: to the Sharp-End* (Leamington Spa, 1999).

⁶⁵ Thomas Ashley Cunningham-Boothe, ‘“Drummer Eagles: Fragments of History”, in *British Forces in the Korean War*, ed. Ashley Cunningham-Boothe and Peter Farrar (Leamington Spa, 1988), 93; Cunningham-Boothe, *One Man’s Look at Arthritis*, 3

⁶⁶ Ashley Cunningham-Boothe (John Briton), *Shapes of War by the Schizogenesis John Briton*, (Leamington Spa, 1999).

⁶⁷ Bulmer and Jackson, ““You Do Not Live in My Skin””, 37.

he became aware that there was no central Korean veterans' organisation. He began to make enquiries at the Korean embassy and, together with an ex-policeman and fellow veteran Alan Moody, began to send out advertisements to local papers or organisations trying to gather other veterans. He recalled how they funded all this themselves, with no public money.⁶⁸ The organisation grew, with different branches forming in London and across the country. Many met in local pubs or British Legion clubs. Barry Summerfield, a former NCO in the 8th King's Own Irish Hussars, described the moment he walked through the door as 'the most incredible experience of my life'.⁶⁹ The BKVA itself was officially formed at Imphal Barracks, York, on 26 September 1981 and was an amalgamation of the National Association of Korean War Veterans (UK), and the smaller British Korean Veterans Association. Geoghegan, a member of the latter organisation, explained the rationale for choosing with their name for the new organisation:

Many of the members, they wanted to forget the Korean War and they said do we have to have war in the name, which we wanted to have to say where we had been, like the Burma Star association and stuff like that. But there was so many people didn't want war in it, so we dropped the war.⁷⁰

Once again the terminology that the veterans used to refer to themselves was significant and an integral part of their identity as a community: although keen to include the more active term 'veteran', the group nevertheless decided that the war itself was too unpleasant to include. By 2004 there were fifty-nine branches across the UK.⁷¹ In Wessex Branch alone, membership was 60 in 1989, increasing to 151 in 2005 and 185 in 2009.⁷²

The fact that this activity began in the late 1970s and early 1980s is crucial to understanding wider veterans' history, as it was in these decades that many veterans retired from their post-Korea jobs. Psychologist Nigel Hunt has argued that retirement is a significant moment for veterans. They had 'avoided' their experiences throughout busy working and family lives, so retirement is often the first moment that former servicemen address their wartime experience.⁷³ Dan Raschen, a junior officer in the Royal Engineers in Korea, mused

⁶⁸ Interview with Mick Geoghegan by Peter M. Hart, July 2008. Accession no. 31425, IWM.

⁶⁹ Interview with Barry Summerfield by Peter M. Hart, November 2007. Accession no. 30395, IWM.

⁷⁰ Interview with Mick Geoghegan by Peter M. Hart, July 2008. Accession no. 31425, IWM.

⁷¹ John Dutton, *The Forgotten Punch in the Army's Fist: Korea 1950–1953. Recounting REME's Involvement* (2nd edn, Aborfield, 2007), 225.

⁷² Brian Burt, "In the Beginning: Branch Formation Histories: Wessex Branch", *Morning Calm*, 60 (2009), 15.

⁷³ Hunt, *Memory, War and Trauma*, 149.

about his retirement: 'Perhaps it was due to the silence, but now that I had time to reflect on my excursion to Korea, gunfire came quickly to my mind'.⁷⁴ This sentiment is echoed in the IWM oral history interviews: Summerfield stated that before his retirement he 'didn't have time. My life had taken a different turn'.⁷⁵ Even very active veterans like Geoghegan were caught up with family and work commitments in the late 1970s.⁷⁶ Preston-Bell stated that it was only in his seventies that he acquired the confidence to speak about his military experience and even then, as a former conscript, he did not feel like a 'real' soldier.⁷⁷

Many veterans recalled their involvement in one particular kind of activity: the 'revisits' to Korea. Subsidised by the South Korean government, the official trips of the veterans' organisations back to South Korea began in the early 1980s.⁷⁸ Many veterans visited on multiple occasions, sometimes with their wives and children.⁷⁹ For some veterans, the journey itself was part of the adventure: many of the IWM interviews contain lengthy descriptions of the airplane and its route (which changed over the years after the fall of the Soviet Union and end of the Vietnam War), despite the interviewer's effort to move discussion onto Korea itself.⁸⁰ Once again, aspects of veterans' narratives and anecdotes remained impervious to change in the interview setting. The trips themselves followed a fairly standard format, starting with an official welcome at the airport at Seoul, then visits to key places including 'Gloucester valley', Pusan, Kapyong and the Demilitarized zone.⁸¹

Every returning veteran also got a return visit medal and this, together with the series of events put on for them, prompted many veterans to expound effusively on how grateful the South Koreans were. Michael Barker, who served as a private in the 1st Battalion, Northamptonshire Regiment immediately after the war, recalled being approached by a man in the street. His initial thought was that he going to be mugged, but then the man, in Barker's words, said: "'Thank you for my country, thank you for my family, thank you for my children, my grandchildren, thank you for coming all that way as young men to save us'".⁸² Another former British private stated that 'all the old boys, the old soldiers, wherever you go there, they stop and salute you. Every shop you go into, if you've got your blazer on and that, they give

⁷⁴ Dan Raschen, *Send Port and Pyjamas!* (London, 1987), 245.

⁷⁵ Interview with Barry Summerfield by Peter M. Hart, November 2007. Accession no. 30395, IWM.

⁷⁶ Interview with Mick Geoghegan by Peter M. Hart, July 2008. Accession no. 31425, IWM.

⁷⁷ Interview with John Preston-Bell by James Atkinson, 2012. Accession no. 33315, IWM.

⁷⁸ Interview with Mick Geoghegan by Peter M. Hart, July 2008. Accession no. 31425, IWM.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*; Interview with John Preston-Bell by James Atkinson, 2012. Accession no. 33315, IWM.

⁸⁰ Interview with Michael White by Peter M. Hart, November 2006. Accession no. 29065, IWM; Interview with Malcolm Barker by Peter M. Hart, February 2008. Accession no. 30636, IWM.

⁸¹ *Ibid*.

⁸² Interview with Malcolm Barker by Peter M. Hart, February 2008. Accession no. 30636, IWM.

you a discount'.⁸³ Summerfield returned for the first time in 1994 and even said of the South Koreans: 'They worship you, they actually worship you. They can't do enough for you.'⁸⁴ Part of the gratification veterans felt emanated from the very different response they perceived from British people, but it also centred on the modernising of South Korea. Many reported how 'developed' South Korea, had become in the intervening years, Seoul and Pusan in particular – 'everywhere you look there are skyscrapers'.⁸⁵ The economic 'success' of South Korea was all the more marked, to veterans and the wider world, by the increasing difficulties in the north of the peninsula.⁸⁶

South Korea's modernisation and later integration into the global economy elicited a specific response from veterans and a commitment to cultural exchange. Preston-Bell was so keen to keep in touch with South Korea and its successes that the British Embassy gave him a "pen-pal" – Mrs Min, a sixty-year-old schoolteacher, with whom he corresponded almost daily. The BKVA too sought to promote transnational links. Until 2006, it funded undergraduate students from Britain to attend South Korean universities, under a joint scheme with the British Legion and the South Korean technology company, Samsung.⁸⁷ Samsung in turn supported some of the 'revisits' of veterans.⁸⁸ In 2012, the BKVA proudly sponsored South Korean artist Jihae Hwang, winner of the Royal Horticultural Society Chelsea Flower Show Best in Show to for 'Quiet Time: DMZ Forbidden Garden'.⁸⁹ British veterans of the Korean War purposefully embraced transnational activities in their association, revelling in the development that had taken place in the post-war years and South Korea's eminent place within the late twentieth-century globalised world. As Preston-Bell had stated: 'They'd taken my contribution and had made something wonderful out of it'.⁹⁰

Conclusion

In one interview conducted by the IWM in 2007, Fred Brett, a former British national service private in the Royal Norfolk Regiment, described one incident from a 'revisit' to Korea. He recalled how when his group visited Gloucestershire Hill, the Brigadier guiding the group

⁸³ Interview with Fred Brett by Peter M. Hart, July 2007. Accession no. 30009, IWM.

⁸⁴ Interview with Barry Summerfield by Peter M. Hart, November 2007. Accession no. 30395, IWM.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Adrian Buzo, *The Making of Modern Korea* (London and New York, 2002), 144-5.

⁸⁷ BKVA, "Samsung / Royal British Legion / British Korean Veterans Association Scholarship", 2006. <<http://www.bkva.co.uk/samsung.htm>> (Accessed: 4 February 2017).

⁸⁸ Interview with Mick Geoghegan by Peter M. Hart, July 2008. Accession no. 31425, IWM.

⁸⁹ Alan Guy, "The Royal Horticultural Show", *Morning Calm*, 67 (2012), 3.

⁹⁰ Interview with John Preston-Bell by James Atkinson, 2012. Accession no. 33315, IWM.

started to tell the history of the battle there, but one man kept saying ‘He’s got that wrong.’ Brett then ‘said to this chap: ... “Why do you keep saying he’s wrong?” He said, “See just there? That’s my dug out”.’⁹¹ Brett called out to the Brigadier, who had not served in the war, telling him he had got his facts wrong and asking the other veteran to tell his story. Brett reflected on it how ‘it was quite interesting then to really hear from a normal soldier, really what did happen, because everyone tells a different story’.⁹² To some extent, *all* veterans own the memories of ‘their’ war: as Yuval Harari observes, veterans act as ‘flesh-witnesses’ who believe that only those who were physically there and bodily experienced war can truly understand it.⁹³ But, as this chapter has demonstrated, this specific group of veterans forged a particular sense of ‘ownership’, built on a changed relationship with the state, their omission from cultural memory and the transnational links they sought to create with South Korea in the 1980s and 1990s. Through this combination of factors, veterans were able to exert more agency than veteran history-writing or modern British history has hitherto acknowledged. This is not to argue that all veterans of Korea engaged with the BKVA or its activities: leading torpedoman aboard HMS Birmingham, Joe Hardy stated in a 2008 interview that he had ‘never been to a meeting’, but got all the information he needed from the newsletter.⁹⁴ The BKVA was also time-specific: by the mid-2000s the British Legion had taken over the administration of welfare provision to Korean veterans and in 2013, the BKVA announced on its website that it would hanging up its standards, due to its diminishing membership.⁹⁵ But once again, the Korean veteran displayed a remarkable tenacity in the face of apathy or discouragement, as those remaining who wished to carry on formed the British Korean War Veterans Association (BKWVA), which still continues to this day. Acknowledging veteran agency and the different forms it could take in the post-1945 world should therefore remain a central concern in veteran history-writing of this period.

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⁹¹ Interview with Fred Brett by Peter M. Hart, July 2007. Accession no. 30009, IWM.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Yuval Noah Harari, *The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture 1450-2000* (Basingstoke and New York, 2008), 7-8.

⁹⁴ Interview with Joe Hardy by Peter M. Hart, 2008. Accession no. 30650, IWM.

⁹⁵ Interview with Mick Geoghegan by Peter M. Hart, July 2008. Accession no. 31425, IWM; BKVA, “The Future of the BKVA”, <http://www.bkva.co.uk/closure.htm> (accessed 22 May 2017).

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