A Korean War Veteran’s Letter about the service provided by Veterans Affairs Canada

Jeep ambulance taking badly wounded soldier from the Hook position, November, 1952 – Photograph by Corporal Roley Soper, PPCLI

The Veteran who has written the below letter served with the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry in Korea. His company was detached and seconded to
Lieutenant Colonel David Rose’s 1st Battalion of the Black Watch, to participate in the counterattack of the Hook position in the Second Battle of the Hook.

Advancing up onto the Hook under mortar and shell fire the soldiers had to walk over the bodies of Black Watch soldiers who had been blown apart by shells and were strewn with rubble in the bottom of the trench. That is not an apocryphal remark, but horrid fact; the bones and the flesh of those slain rolled under foot – the Canadians had to walk on the sorry carpet of their remains.

Later, after clearing the main fighting trench with two comrades, the veteran crawled over the bleeding bodies of one of them and another soldier who had been killed by mortar bombs. The trench was narrow and exposed and under fire.

In that fighting trench one soldier lost a hand and an eye in the same mortar blast that killed another. One soldier from Nova Scotia received thirty shrapnel wounds in his legs.

The veteran who wrote the letter was with Sergeant Thomas Prince when he was wounded in the knee, and with Private Stanley Mudd from Moosomin, Saskatchewan when he was shot down by many bullets fired close in from an enemy soldier’s submachine gun. The patrol that had gone out from the Hook had been ambushed, but he advanced into the enemy instead of withdrawing with his comrades.

The veteran was also near Roger Leach from St. Catharines, Ontario when that World War Two veteran was hit by two successive mortar bombs and virtually blown to pieces.

Private Stanley Richard Mudd, Killed in Action on the Hook

He was with 16-year old Claude Petit when he was wounded by shrapnel. Decades later Claude would become the president of the
National Aboriginal Veterans Association, and be awarded the Order of Canada and the Saskatchewan Order of Merit.

One brave young soldier, Corporal Charles Pond, 19, lost both of his legs on that Hook position.

Charles Pond died in Winnipeg a few years ago while undergoing abdominal surgery. In Korea he had his left leg amputated at the hip in the field; the femur and shinbone of the other was rejoined using metal inserts and fasteners. Later, at the Sunnybrook Hospital in Toronto, surgeons removed his right leg as well.

Chuck told this veteran years later that, for all of the pain he had gone through, for all of the horrible psychological trauma, including pain and aggravation within the Sunnybrook Hospital for veterans, he could not in honesty say a single bad word about Canada’s Department of Veterans Affairs.

He said, at a time after the Department had become known as Veterans Affairs Canada, that every time he asked VAC for something, they responded quickly and courteously, and bent over backwards to help him. Of course he was remorseful about his terrible wounds, but he bit the bullet and he persevered and worked extremely hard to have a productive life.

He did not rant and rave and curse or decry the Ministry that was helping him, or the Government that had sent him to Korea – he had volunteered to serve, had wanted to go, and he appreciated how VAC was trying to assist him.

They provided him with prostheses for his legs and he had an electric scooter and they converted his pickup truck so that he could haul it around as needed.

But what he did for himself should have won him the pride and the respect of all veterans in Canada, of everyone at VAC, of everyone in the Canadian Government - of all Canadians!

Chuck Pond acquired an over the road tractor-trailer rig, had it equipped with special hand controls, and for five years he drove it himself in his own freight hauling business serving a route from Winnipeg to Montreal.

He was extremely well respected in veterans and business circles in Winnipeg. He ducked limelight and was always reticent to speak to news media. He just wanted to get on with his life and he did admirably well.

This veteran tried to get him some recognition and the Government of Korea awarded him a special medallion of merit. Chuck quipped that he had done nothing to earn it and was reluctant to accept it!
He was asked again and again if he would accept an invitation to fly to Korea with his wife as guests of the Korean Government, but he could not do that. He did not want to return to face memories of the war, and he also had developed a fear of flying.

On a fishing trip into the Manitoba wilderness his plane had almost crashed. Though he had lost both legs in the Korean War, this intrepid Canadian veteran was an avid outdoorsman and spent much time in the wilds.

Charles Pond died undergoing abdominal surgery for an internal bleeding condition and for the last year of his life he was unable to wear his prostheses.

But he never slurred the people at VAC who provided him with service and support and he never, never, said that he regretted serving his Country in the Korean War.

Bill Newton (left) was the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps corporal assigned to C Company when it counterattacked and then held the Hook
position in Korea. He is shown with Claude Petit when the two met for the first time since the Korean War at a ceremony in Vancouver in 1998. Newton had treated Claude when he was wounded by shrapnel. Newton was awarded a Mentioned in Despatches decoration for his dedicated work under fire. In all he gave medical aid for wounds to more than 24 servicemen on the Hook, mostly Canadians, but treated British soldiers and South Korean porters as well. He examined the bodies of nearly as many who were killed in action, including Canadians, British and South Koreans. He ran out under fire to help Claude Petit and he did the same to help Corporal Charles Pond. With both arms saturated in Chuck Pond's blood clear to his arm pits, Newton lashed Chuck's broken and torn legs together so that the shattered bones would not cause more damage. He amazingly was able to apply tourniquets and stop the bleeding, just short of death. The medical officer said in another minute there would have been no hope for Chuck Pond's survival. Just a few miles behind the lines in the echelon units, few would believe that such steady carnage was taking place.

The company held the Hook position for three days and nights, then returned a week later and held it for an additional 14 days.

Of the small company of 70 men who went onto the Hook that first morning, some twelve of them, killed in action on that position and in a few cases in later actions, are buried in the United Nations Memorial Cemetery in Busan.

The wives and children of those who were married have been served by VAC ever since – more than 60 years – although many of the soldiers who fell were quite young and most were single. They are remembered only in the hearts of their families and their comrades who served with them.

Through the years, the health condition of veterans who were wounded, injured or contracted disease in Korea, has worsened with age.

The wounds of some never showed much and the soldiers took them in stride, but as years past, muscle tissue shrank, joints seized up, pain returned. In many cases the effects of other injuries and diseases contracted in Korea were a long time in manifesting, including cancers from various carcinogens and complexes which have sent many veterans to their graves.

Some contracted diseases like malaria, which may have recurred and caused significant damage, or dysentery, which scarred the colon and later evolved to significant colon disease that may have affected the veteran for the rest of his life and caused him to have a painful surgical resection, with later complications.
An injury that seldom showed acutely then but had its onset was cold weather disease, with arthritic deterioration of bone tissue setting in the hands, feet, spine, after many hours lying on the icy ground, holding steel weapons in subzero weather. Many experienced the aches and pains then but doctors would often act bemused by those who complained, and the soldiers themselves thought it was something transient; subtle but irritating aches they thought they would get over.

So the disease and its damage is not on many of their service records and maybe did not manifest for one or more decades. Today, though, many are plagued with aching, arthritic finger joints, with feet that have lost much of their feeling and therefore can sustain damage without much notice and compromise the veteran’s gait and balance. Many suffer with backs that ache chronically.

Unless a soldier was treated for acute cold weather injury like frostbite – and very few ever were – or ran the gauntlet of castigation from medical doctors who typically scoffed at mere aching backs and gave the serviceman aspirin - there is little chance of connecting current day arthritic malaise to the Korean War experience.

Arthritis does not manifest in a matter of weeks, in the period the soldier served under fire. When it showed up in a debilitating way, in most cases the veteran had left the service years before; even decades, before.

In the infantry, where soldiers as young as 16 carried 50 or 60 pounds on their backs, laid out all night on rock hard icy ground, aching backs were sloughed off as normal – even by the young soldiers themselves.

But not so today. Throughout the years the veterans’ maladies gradually became progressively worse.

And, thankfully, throughout those years the veterans who needed or received support have witnessed how the services and support that VAC provides have grown magnificently.

In the 1950’s, the same programs and allowances were in place that applied to veterans of World War Two – and many Korean War Veterans had served in both of the wars.

Veterans did not get a diagnosis or examination or treatment in those times by their own family doctors and civilian specialists for service connected disabilities. They were examined by Veteran Affairs doctors in VAC hospitals. There they would have their review boards, or undergo surgeries or other treatments.

Some of the old codger former medical corps doctors were gruff and patronized the youngest veterans, scoffing at them as though they hadn’t been in a “real war,” as
if their injuries, both to body and to mind were any less than those suffered by soldiers in the Second World War, or in the First World War.

Still, the veterans did not decry them, nor VAC, nor the veteran hospitals. The veterans and the caregivers were all one, spliced together in the same proudly patriotic service, as it were.

When veterans were admitted to one of the VA hospitals for treatment, they appreciated the expertise of the surgeons and other specialists, and the dedicated care of the splendid nurses who helped them regain their health and dignity. In many cases these same hospitals had provided them with acute care while they were in the service and were recovering from wounds, or from training accidents, or from other illness and disease.

The veterans were all there together, from Korea, from World War Two, from World One, from the South African War, even one British veterans of the 1906 Zulu rebellion war in Natal, South Africa – a grand mixture of hurting warriors from all ages and all walks of life, receiving this Nation’s good care.

The disability pensions were almost nominal and assuredly did not provide significant compensation, surely not akin to sustainable income that would support a family well.

Few who received them grumbled, and certainly not to news reporters. Most of them appreciated what their country could do for them and though it could have been better, in those times jobs were few and income was low and those who had served under fire remembered how lucky they were to return home.

Those still alive and receiving such support today are astonished by the level and diversity of service that is now provided, and by their ability to simply pick up a telephone to ask for help.

Most of them keep quiet about it. They never talk about it, even amongst themselves, for fear that somehow or other they might jinx their present favorable circumstances and that the support might go away again.

It was truly horrible for many of them in the earlier years, and the earlier decades, though they accepted their bitter lot and bit the bullet hard.

When the troops returned unsung from Korea and silently went to their homes or other assignments in Canada, the nation became sewn with many young men who were suffering desperately with what is now known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Many reeled and suffered helplessly through the decades, their disease breaking families they were set on raising, making them lose job after job, causing them to
abuse alcohol, drugs, tobacco for self-medication, and for some who remained in the military, keeping them from rising to their potential, no matter the strong service experience they could draw upon.

The veteran who wrote the letter has seen aged veterans shudder and weep when they return to Korea as guests of Korea’s Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs, and he can recognize far too often the hurt and the anguish that has blighted their lives since their active service ended, or went with them in their continuing military service after the war.

When they visit the United Nations Memorial Cemetery where comrades are buried, some are speechless, some get inexplicably angry.

Until recent years the aid for them was not available. Those who have asked for help recently often have done so with great reticence, having been urged on by comrade veterans who have taken the action for themselves.

For all of them, the Korean War did not last for three years, it has been with them throughout their lives.

For all of them, they were proud to have served, and they are proud of their Nation for which they fought and risked all, and do not decry it.

They would never decry it.

Here below, is a letter written this date by that veteran:

To My Friend
cc:
Ms. Mary Chaput
Deputy Minister
Veterans Affairs Canada
P.O. 7700
Charlottetown, PE C1A 8M9

Today I telephoned Veterans Affairs Canada using their central contact number, which is located in Kirkland Lake, Ontario. I pressed “One” in response to an automated question, which would identify me as a veteran with a disability.

A representative answered in less than one minute!

That is remarkable, and this very kindly lady named “Shirley” immediately looked up my file electronically. There was some complexity to my question, but she had
complete access to everything, including my earlier inputs and the actions taken internally by those who were working on my file.

She also explained that the rapid telephone response likely was a factor of Family Day being observed as a full holiday in many provinces, as Monday usually was the most intense day for inquiries with the phones ringing non-stop throughout the day.

She not only took care of everything but said she was going to personally visit with a specialist in the area of my concern and make certain that everything was covered well, and that she would telephone me later in the day to confirm that everything had been taken care of.

I complimented her for the excellent service and she responded that she was very appreciative, because hard as they work, they continually hear veterans denigrating their Ministry and the service that they provide.

She suggested that I might contact my elected representative, that it would mean so much if veterans who appreciated VAC and had good things to say about the service, would do it.

I responded that the majority of Canada’s Veterans are absolutely appreciative of the good service provided by VAC.

Moreover, I explained that I had good insight into veteran services provided in other Commonwealth nations and in the United States, and that the very comprehensive services provided by Veterans Affairs Canada sets a high model for all of them!

And it does!

The local office that services our files closed at the end of January. However, that had zero impact on me as a VAC client – or on any other VAC client that is personally known to me in this region.

That is because two years ago our files were consolidated into another district office in a city that is about 200 kilometers distant.

It would be puerile to think that VAC would leave everything in place and begin transfer of services only on the eve of the office closure. It was done two years in advance of the closure of the office, beginning even before the closure plan was publicly announced in 2012.

The local office has not serviced our files for two years.

And for most of the past decade all of us have obtained services or received information by calling the central number in Kirkland Lake.
Some of us – *many of us* – require services from audiologists, physiotherapists, psychologists, dentists, nurses, optometrists, other service providers.

None of the service providers work for VAC.

They are all independent professionals. VAC authorizes them to provide the service for the veteran and the service provider submits claims to VAC and VAC pays them for the service.

None of these services resided in the now closed VAC office.

There is in this region other veterans who do not have pensionable disabilities but who are aged and in need. VAC has taken many of them under its umbrella and provides them with a pension and medical services, under the War Veterans Allowance provisions.

This Country is so progressive that it provides services to veterans of other nations that were allied with Canada in the various wars, including Canadian Korean residents who served in the ROK Armed Forces during the Korean War.

While the veterans I know are “grandfathered” under the Pension Act and are pensioned and none come under the New Veterans Charter, here is the service that one of them has received - not this writer, but the level of service being provided, if needed, is not atypical.

This particular veteran has a mobility problem and also is pensioned for PTSD. The level of his disabilities placed him in the Veterans Independence Program (VIP).

He receives a monthly disability pension payment deposited directly into his bank. VAC provides him with a high-end electric scooter for mobility and modified his personal vehicle so that he can transport it from place to place. VAC paid for modifications within his home to enhance his mobility and make it safer for him.

He receives regularly scheduled counseling for his PTSD.

Because of his disabilities that limit his mobility, under the VIP program he also receives these services:

A housekeeper regularly visits his home to perform four hours of cleaning work, all paid for by VAC (VAC deposits money in his bank account every six months for this service and he pays the service giver directly, either in cash or by cheque).

A groundskeeper visits his home every month and helps with yard work, small maintenance jobs.
VAC provides snow removal service at his home, through a contractor.

Further, VAC will pay his taxi fare for medical appointments if he cannot drive himself, or will pay for transportation by a caregiver.

VAC will pay for his eyeglasses, for prostheses or other living aids, for a nurse’s service, oxygen therapy equipment, medical supplies, special shoes or orthotic devices, and incontinence pads and other supplies if his condition requires them.

I am a Korean War Veteran and a majority of my comrades in this region are able to hear because VAC has provided them with audiology testing and with hearing aids, including highly advanced systems that can help to screen out some of the tinnitus many are afflicted with.

When compared to the days when we were young soldiers just returned from Korea, and many were sour that their service and suffering was much unknown in Canada, he change in breadth and depth of services provided is astonishing.

Within the past week or so, I asked a fellow veteran for his opinion of VAC service. Here is what he said to me:

“I cannot believe how well VAC is taking care of me.” Then with a humor reflecting the times of his service, he quipped, “They are treating me so well that I wonder if I am really worth it!”

Well, that veteran is worth it.

So are all of my other friends who served.

And so is our country worthy of that service.

- A Veteran of the Korean War.