The War in their Lives

Haning Z. Hughes

I was watching them, with much amusement and fascination. Sitting on my left was my father—a retired doctor and senior colonel from the Chinese People's Liberation Army, and on my right, was my father-in-law—a retired US Army Colonel from West Point. It was a hot summer day in Dalian, China, in 1995.

My father lived in a retired army colonels' housing complex. It was a gated military community equipped with a medical clinic, a Tofu mill, and military guards. There were several gardens, resting areas, children's playgrounds, and a basketball court. These retired colonels were considered China's "national treasures." They were the vanguard of the new communist China's revolutionary frontiers, and were considered to be key contributors in the formation of the new nation—the People's Republic of China. They were well taken care of by the Chinese government. They usually resided with their wives and one of their children. Each family had a live-in house maid to take care of cooking, cleaning, and other daily chores.

I served as their translator, terribly nervous, and had no idea how these two head-strong colonels were going to behave.

"You had better sleeping bags," my father stated. "We pushed you all the way to the north," my father-in-law chuckled. I watched them laughing like two old friends, talking over each other in their own languages, pointing at a couple of old maps, sipping some Chinese tea, and chatting about the war, the Korean War.

My Father, Baba, and His Early Years

Zhou Benli, my Baba, was born in a village in eastern China, in Shandong Province near the Eastern Sea. He grew up in a large extended family with his great-grandparents, grandparents, parents, three uncles, and their families. Baba's father was one of the very few in the village who could read and write. He was well-versed in Chinese herbal medicine and was a well-known doctor of traditional medicine. He was often called to the homes of the people in his village, as well as to those in neighboring villages, to provide treatment for their ailments. Most of them were too poor to pay in cash, so instead, he was often offered a bowl of hot noodles with an egg in it, a sign of great respect, for his kindness. Baba's primary school education was provided by an old-style private teacher who taught him mostly classical poetry, essays, and simple math. By the time Baba reached middle school age, he tested into the only middle school in the county. His father, my Yeye, sold the family cow and sent him to the boarding school. Baba went to high school in Jinan City, the capital city of Shandong Province. His education there was mostly sponsored by his cousin who he called "Dage" (older brother). Dage was a talented artist whose mentor, Qi Baishi, was one of the most famous watercolor artists in China (Xiao, 2005).

"If you can be a doctor, be a doctor; if you can't become a doctor, be a carpenter," Yeye told my father when he left the village. Although these two occupations seemed to be very far apart, they were actually both skilled professions that would always guarantee the practitioner a comfortable living. Baba remembered his father's words. Years passed. One day, Dage suddenly became very ill, and soon died of complications from pneumonia. For the first time, Baba witnessed the death of a close family member, his beloved cousin who had supported him through high school, and who had opened his eyes to a whole new world outside his country

village. With much regret, and with a broken heart, Baba determined to become a doctor, a Western medicine doctor.

Japan invaded China as early as 1931 (Kingsberg, 2014). By the early 1940s, Shandong Province was occupied by Japanese forces, and Baba's Shandong Medical College was forced to move inland, and merged with the National Southwestern Associated University in Sichuan. After he graduated from medical school, he was hired in a hospital in Chongqing city, in Sichuan province, in the southwest part of China. He became a surgeon.

My Father-in-Law and His Early Years

My father-in-law, David Hughes, whom I called "Dad" from the moment I met him, was a third-generation Coloradoan. His grandfather came from Wales, and had a ranch. Born and raised a Christian Scientist, Dad's father, at 37, declined medical help, and died of a ruptured appendix. At the age of seven, Dad lost his father, and became the man of the house for his mom and three sisters.

Dad was later taken in by his Aunt Arleen and Uncle Edward, successful and wealthy investment bankers who had no children of their own. The couple then decided to send him to the Colorado Military Academy from 6th grade on until he graduated from High School. His first military training and education started at a very young age.

Upon graduating from the Colorado Military Academy, Dad was nominated by his Colorado senator and became a West Point cadet. Just as the Korean War began, Dad graduated as a 2nd lieutenant, and without attending the infantry school, was sent directly to Korea and assigned to the 7th Calvary Division, Company K, as a Combat Platoon Commander.

Baba, During the Korea War

Growing up, I was always enthralled by the three large velvet photo albums my parents carefully preserved. They were always wrapped with silk cloth and stored away in my mother's "treasure" cabinet. These photos were all black and white, although some were hand-painted with colors. The edges of some of the photos were yellowed and faded. But they looked so classic, and full of the flavor of old Hollywood glamour. To me, they were mysterious. Each picture was filled with many stories of the past, especially the tales of Mama and Baba's youth. These photos provided me with some answers as to where I had come from, and filled in the colorful background behind my family history. They always made me long to hear more stories and gain more insight and understanding into those friends and relatives I knew by name, but whose life stories I did not know.

Among their precious collection were many passport-sized photos that I often viewed through the use of Baba's magnifying glass. Many of these pictures were crowded with people in chaos. There were stretchers, ambulances, people in white hats and coats, and some people covered with blood or wrapped in stained bandages. Occasionally, I could spot Baba, sometimes his face, and sometimes just his back, treating his patients, most of which were army soldiers.

When the Korean War started in 1950, China formed the People's Volunteer Army, and called the Korean War the "War to Resist the US and Aid Korea" (Rawnsley, 2009). The new People's Republic of China desperately needed a medical staff for the military, and Baba was recruited into the Army. Mama was graduating from a medical school to become an OB-GYN, and her entire class was recruited to join the Army. Mama and her classmates all decided to change their "girly" names to be more patriotic and revolutionary. Mama's original name,

“Fuxiu,” a very feminine name meaning “elegance,” given to her by her conservative professor father, was replaced by “Zhongmin,” which meant “loyal to the people.”

Two new army doctors, as yet unacquainted, Baba and Mama went to the same general Army hospital in northeast China, in a city close to the Yalu River.

Baba was a young trauma surgeon. His mission and responsibility during the Korean War was to first save the soldiers’ lives, and then, if possible, to avoid amputating their limbs. Besides the horrendous injuries resulting from gunfire and explosions, another severe problem these soldiers faced during the war was frostbite.

Baba once told me that he could still see the face of a 17-year-old soldier, named Wang Gen. He was from a small village in Shangdong Province, the same province Baba was from. When he arrived at the field hospital, not only had he suffered a severe wound on his back, but both of his feet were black and brutally damaged due to frostbite. Baba said that when Korean War started, the People’s Republic of China had just been established, and the entire country was impoverished. Some of these troops had come directly from army bases in southern China, and they were not issued warm clothing in which to face the cruel Korean winter. Numerous troop trains passed through his location from the south, and many of the soldiers stationed in the local areas were shocked to see the arriving “elite” soldiers from the south wearing their summer uniforms. Many of the local soldiers took off their own warm quilted jackets, and handed them to the soldiers on the trains heading to the Korean border.

Wang Gen, like many other soldiers, suffered severe frostbite during Korea’s 30-degree below zero winter weather (Gao, 2016). “Wang Gen was one of the lucky ones. Many others didn’t die of gunfire, but instead froze to death,” Baba recalled.

“Nevertheless, Wang Gen’s feet could not be saved.” I listened to Baba recollect that time when Wang Gen begged and pleaded with him, and fought to save his feet, but unfortunately, there was nothing Baba could do. “It was a choice between saving his life or saving his limbs,” Baba said. “We were searching for all kinds of ways to save their hands and feet, but by the time they arrived at the hospital, the frostbite was too severe, and it was too late to save them.” On Baba’s bookshelf at home, there was a thick book published in the 1960s on frostbite treatment. Baba was one of the authors.

Following his experience as a trauma surgeon during the war, Baba decided to specialize in orthopedic surgery, and became well-known in the region. Although I never asked, and he never explained, I know that he chose this specialty because of the many orthopedic surgeries he performed, as a young doctor, on the soldiers during the Korean War.

My Father-in-Law, During the Korea War

My father-in-law entered the Korean War on 26 November 1950 as a brand new second lieutenant. His infantry school commenced on the battlefield in Korea, and he quickly learned that “marching fire,” in which advancing units fire their weapons without stopping to aim, in an attempt to pin down enemy defenders, was a much needed tactic in this war.

There are many chapters in Dad’s memoir. But the Korean War stories especially fascinated me. I repeatedly read the letters Dad wrote to his mom as he rested during a lull in the battle, and his descriptions of his men and the action on the battlefield always appeared as motion pictures. The story of “Shank’s Bootees” (see Appendix 1) shined a cheerful light in the trenches of the cruel war. Their pain and joy and hope, their sufferings from the freezing nights, and their delight over a simple Thanksgiving meal of warm turkey and beans brought tears to

my eyes (Hughes, 1952). President Barack Obama later referenced Dad's letter and Shank's Bootees in his speech dedicating the Korean War Memorial on July 27th, 2013, the 60th Anniversary of the signing of the Korean War Armistice (Obama, 2013).

I read his stories of the "Hills." Hill 578, 899, 878, 487, 399, and especially, Hill 347. "On the 7th of October, 1951, we advanced on Hill 347, with all the elements of the battalion committed," he recalled. After three attempts, they "had only six riflemen and one Master Sergeant left up on the hill, so [he] took all the rest of [his] small headquarters, with the mortar crew as riflemen, and the remaining Forward Observers. Loaded down with grenades, [they] all went forward. That was all who were left standing in Company K—30 men" (Hughes, 1951a). He led the last possible assault personally, as he "single-handedly advanced against the enemy positions. Disregarding the concentrated fire of the foe, he charged to the crest of the hill, fired his automatic weapon until it no longer functioned, and then pressed the attack solely with grenades. His audacious assault completely demoralized the enemy and, as he moved among them fighting fiercely, his men charged up the slope and engaged the hostile troops in close combat. Imbued with his fearlessness, the friendly troops fought their way over the crest of the hill, inflicting heavy casualties on the foe and securing the objective" (Army, 1951).

The enemy had been forced back into their tunnels, and tunnel by tunnel Dad and his few remaining men got them out. By dark, "We had 192 [enemy] prisoners, all that remained of [an] [enemy] division and regimental artillery headquarters" (Hughes, 1951a).

On the notorious Hill 347, Dad's valor and heroism in combat was recognized as he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, an award second only to the Medal of Honor, for his "extraordinary heroism in action against enemy aggressor forces" (Army, 1951).

The Reunion after 45 Years

"You didn't translate the whole thing I said," my father-in-law suddenly noticed. Of course I didn't. I also deliberately omitted some parts that my Baba had said. Thank goodness they were unable to speak or understand each other's language. I carefully sheltered their sentences, to avoid any unnecessary cultural and political misunderstandings. I was the diplomat, and I was doing a good job of it!

There was a knock at the door. In came several of my neighbors whom I called "uncles". They were all retired colonels, and all served in the Korean War. They were, however, not doctors. They were officers from the infantry and the artillery. They were "real soldiers," Baba said as he introduced them to Dad, "just like you were." I watched them shaking hands, patting each other's backs, and sitting around the round table, pointing at the maps, and laughing and chatting in different languages. I stood there on the side, as an outsider and an observer. They didn't need my translations. Everything was understood.

As I watched them chatting and gesturing, I thought of one of the letters my father-in-law wrote to his mother from his trench during a break from the battle for Hill 578 (see Appendix 2). "I was cold, wet, miserable, tired, hungry and discouraged a few minutes ago, when I saw some sturdy soul come trudging up the mountainside with mail. Now, I am only cold, wet, tired and hungry. Your letter gave me a great lift in the midst of all this chaos and confusion" (Hughes, 1951b).

I gazed at the two old colonels, the two dads whom I loved dearly. Both retired, one from the West, and one from the East. One who dedicated his entire life to serving his country as a professional army doctor, while the other chose to sacrifice for his country as a professional infantry soldier. Forty-five years ago, while still in their early twenties, one was required to

destroy his enemies, and the other was making all effort to save their lives. If one's achievements can be measured by the medals he earned—one Distinguished Service Cross, three Silver Stars, two Bronze Stars, three Purple Hearts, and 14 Air Medals, then the other's accomplishments are indeed recognized by the myriad surgeries he performed, the innumerable lives he saved, and countless limbs he salvaged. "What more could one ask in the way of service to those of lesser rank? The only guide I must religiously keep, is the principle of humility; decide with confidence; lead without fear; listen with compassion; and remain humble. It is a far greater, more rewarding life on this hill, Mom, than all the successes of what we call 'Civilization'" (Hughes, 1951b). Dad's words to his mother encompassed the thoughts and feelings of all soldiers, including those on either side of the Korean War.

I watched them. Under the dim light in the small dining room, they were still chatting excitedly, with Baba's broken English and Dad's hands waving in the air. Enemies, maybe, while fighting for their own beliefs at one point in history, but family now, unified by a marriage that produced their precious grandsons. From young, 22-year-old military officers to elderly grandfathers, the Korean War remains a critical chapter in their individual memories and in the lives they later chose to live. I felt especially lucky to have them both in my life. Now my own two sons are grown, and in their veins the blood runs equally from both of their grandfathers. In their appearances and in the intelligence they share, the noble heritage from both the East and the West which they have inherited is reflected. I feel very proud.

APPENDIX 1

"Shank's Bootees"

Lt David R. Hughes

Shank's Bootees

Sometimes a soldier's morale is lifted by a very little thing.
A letter from home, maybe,
or the unexpected sight of . . .

By LT. DAVID R. HUGHES

IT was during the dark days of the December retreat when I first saw them. They were hanging from the cold muzzle of an old battered Springfield rifle—a pair of tiny blue baby bootees. Their pale silk ribbons ended in a neat bow behind the front sight, and each little boot hung down separately, one slightly above the other, swinging silently in the wind. They reminded me of tiny bells, and even though one had a smudge of dirt on its soft surface, and part of the ribbon that touched the barrel had lost color from scorching heat, they seemed to me to be the freshest, cleanest objects in all of drab Korea.

At first the bootees had fixed my attention, but after the surprise of seeing these symbols of home in such an incongruous place had worn off, I let my eyes drift unobserved to their owner.

He was a lieutenant, young, I could see, and tired; not so much from the exertion of the trudging march, but with the wear of long days and nights in combat. He was talking to a group of men from his platoon, all of them together watching the core of a little blaze in their center, and I could tell that he was answering some of their disturbing questions about the war. There was a tone of hopelessness in the men's voices, but the lieutenant sounded cheerful; there was a glint in his eye, and a squint that melted into an easy smile when he spoke.

As my companions moved on, I glanced back briefly to the blue bootees, still fresh, still swinging. Often in the next few weeks I saw the lieutenant and his bootees while we moved southward before the massive Chinese armies, and around the ever-present warming fires I heard the simple story of the officer and his boots.

The lieutenant was named Shank and he, twenty-two years old, led a rifle platoon. He had come over from Okinawa while the Army was clamped in the vise of the Taegu perimeter, short on man power. Shank had his baptism of fire on the hills outside Taegu. His youth and fire helped keep his decimated platoon intact while the North Koreans frantically tried to crack the American lines. Then came the breakthrough, and Shank's company riding on the record-breaking tank dash northward. He picked up the Springfield rifle then, and kept it because of its renowned accuracy and apparent immunity to the cold weather. A violent day south of Pyongyang won Shank his Silver Star for gallantry, as he led his flesh-and-blood infantrymen against T-34 tanks and destroyed three of them. The Chinese intervention and beginning of the retreat brought him up to where I met him, south of Kunari.

The bootees? That was simple. He was an expectant father, and the little boots sent by his young wife in the States reflected his whole optimistic attitude while the battle was the darkest. I also learned that when the baby came it would be announced by a new piece of ribbon on the boots—blue for a boy, pink for a girl.

Then I forgot about him as we prepared to defend Seoul from above the frozen Han River. We were hit hard by the Chinese. They streamed down from the hills and trampled the barbed wire. They charged again and again, piling up by the hundreds before our smoking guns. And the days were but frantic preparations for the nights. Companies dwindled, and my platoon was halved, then halved again as cold and enemy took their toll. I neared the end of my mental reserve. Names of casualties were rumored, and I heard Shank's among them. I wondered where Shank's bootees were now.

Then the endless night of the retreat from Seoul came. When we got the word my few men were too dulled to show any emotion at the announcement. Most were too miserable to want to retreat again for twenty-five miles, Chinese or no. But we did, and the temperature dropped to thirty below zero as our silent column stumbled along the hard ground. It was the most depressing night I had ever endured—pushed by the uncompromising cold, the pursuing enemy and the chaotic memory of the bloody nights before. I, as a leader, was close to that mental chasm. Only the numbness prevented my thinking myself into mute depression.

We plodded across the cracking ice of the Han River at four-thirty in the morning, and marched on south at an ever-slowing pace. Finally the last five-mile stretch was ahead. We rested briefly, and as the men dropped to the roadside they fell asleep immediately. I wondered if I could get them going again. Worse yet, I didn't think I could go myself—so tired, numb and raw was my body.

Then in the black despair of uselessness I looked up as a passing figure brushed my inert shoe pacs. What I saw in the early light sent such a surge of hope and strength through me that tears streamed down my face.

There walked young Lieutenant Shank up the Korea road, while every waking eye followed him to see the muzzle of his old battered Springfield. There, swinging gaily in the first rays of the morning sun, were Shank's bootees, and fluttering below them was the brightest, bluest piece of ribbon I have ever seen.

THE END

Lt. David R. Hughes
the day after Hill 339

(Since Shank's Bootees came to us through the author's mother, we asked for more information about her son. Her brief, factual reply tells, by understatement, a story so typical of the courage expected and accepted from our young men—and their mothers—that we asked her permission to share it with our readers. Ed.)

DENVER, COLORADO

DEAR Editors: Lt. David R. Hughes, age 23, was born and raised in Denver, Colorado. His father died when he was six years old, and he attended the public schools until he was ten, when he entered Colorado Military School.

He received an appointment to the United States Military Academy in 1946. Among many other activities at West Point, he was a member of the Pointer staff for two years, and associate editor his last year.

He graduated from the Academy with the class of June 1950, and was assigned to Fort Riley, Kansas. In October of that year he was ordered to Korea with the Seventh Cavalry Regiment, First Cavalry Division. After two months in battle he was promoted to First Lieutenant. Later he was made commander of his company.

For his actions in Korea, David has been awarded two Silver Stars, one Bronze Star, the Greek Cross of War, comparable to our Silver Star—this for close fighting with his company beside the Greeks—and the Distinguished Service Cross. He has, also, been awarded two Purple Hearts.

Sincerely,
HELEN HUGHES

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Image of the "Shank's Bootees" as it appeared in *Ladies' Home Journal* in July 1952
(Source: Provided by Library of Congress, History & Genealogy Section, "Shank's Bootees,"
Lt David R. Hughes, *Ladies' Home Journal*, July 1952: 69, 7, 38-39. ProQuest 2015)

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separately, one slightly above the other, swinging silently in the wind. They reminded me of tiny bells, and even though one had a smudge of dirt on its soft surface, and part of the ribbon that touched the barrel had lost color from scorching heat, they seemed to me to be the freshest, cleanest objects in all of drab Korea.

At first the bootees had fixed my attention, but after the surprise of seeing these symbols of home in such a place had worn off, I let my eyes drift, unobserved, to their owner. He was a lieutenant, young I could see, and tired; not so much from the exertion of the trudging march, but with the wear of long days and nights in combat. He was talking to men from his platoon, all of them together watching the core of a little blaze at their center, and I could tell that he was answering some of their disturbing questions about the war. There was a tone of hopelessness in the men's voices, but the lieutenant sounded cheerful; there was a glint in his eye, and a squint that melted into an easy smile when he spoke.

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Then in the black despair of uselessness in a second-page war I looked up as a passing figure brushed against my inert shoe-pacs.

There walked young Lieutenant Shank up the Korean road, whistling softly, while every waking eye followed him to see the muzzle of his battered Springfield rifle. Swinging gaily in the first rays of the morning sun were Shank's bootees, and fluttering below them was the brightest, bluest, piece of ribbon I have ever seen.

Lt David Hughes
Near Seoul, Korea, Dec, 1950

Published in *Ladies' Home Journal* in July 1952.

APPENDIX 2

Letter to Mrs. Helen Hughes

Lt David R. Hughes

Lt. David R. Hughes

Mrs. Helen Hughes

Shirley-Savoy Hotel

Denver, Colorado

Korea

Dear Mom:

I was cold, wet, miserable, tired, hungry and discouraged a few minutes ago, when I saw some sturdy soul come trudging up the mountainside with mail, Now, I am only cold, wet, tired and hungry. Your letter gave me a great lift in the midst of all this chaos and confusion.

I am now well down in a foxhole on the top of the highest—I swear—mountain in all Korea, except, of course, for the one we were over yesterday, and the day before, and, the day before that. We gallant cavaliers of the First Cavalry are trying to break the backs of the Chinese right now, and upon the reflection of the last week. I do not see how the bodies and minds of men keep going so long without losing their elements of control and composure.

I do not kick too much for myself, for all I must carry is weapon, ammunition and rations—but these men of my platoon. Who must stagger up the slopes with 40 pounds of machine-gun ammunition—and the machine guns—and the rockets only to be shouted at, shot

at, and cajoled into running the last fifty yards through machine-gun bullets, grenades, mortar fire—are men of the highest discipline. And discipline for what?

To be carried off the hill by four other men, and suffer smashed heads and broken bodies, thinking they are the unluckiest men in all the world until they see the dribble of others into the Aid Station with their heads smashed in a little deeper, and their bodies broken a little more? I don't know. It's hard to see the forest for the trees here. And it is a question greater than all questions, when I look over that hill and watch the placid face of the Chinaman, with the flap-eared cap on his head and the quilted coat, and wonder what he is thinking, and—what is more important—why he is thinking it.

In an hour or so I will be there where he is, and he will be dead, with a hole in his head much larger than you would expect from my little .30 caliber rifle. That he will be dead, I am very sure, because I have confidence in my men and in myself.

As I have been writing here, six men (two from my own platoon) have passed my foxhole, hit by a mortar shrapnel. They are on their way down to the Aid Station … and rest—some for weeks, and some for months.

I wonder sometimes how much luck there is to the game, or is it luck? And is it a game? Back on Big Hill 578 we got pinned down close to a strong position, and they grenaded us. I was lying in the open when they yelled "Grenade" so I rolled over and felt something against my leg—looked down just in time to see the handle of a potato masher grenade against me. Blam! The handle of the thing gave me a real Charlie Horse and a bum eye for a while. But not a puncture in me anywhere while the man next to me was killed by it.

What is the answer? Luck? Prayer? I won't even hazard a guess. SOMETHING is making it possible to live. And yet I would rather be here than anywhere in Korea now. It is life in its rawest

form. It reduces sham to NOTHINGNESS, and here men are themselves. Here the values of life are returned to us; the simple act of making a cup of coffee is a worthwhile accomplishment. As a leader of 40 men I have the good feeling of responsibility, and aside from the close-in fighting, it is for me to provide many of their needs; minister to their hopes and fears; raise their morale; deal with their misbehavior; listen to their feelings as they express them; and try to direct their lives so that they will function with a will and a purpose.

There is no democracy on a hilltop; but as a platoon leader, there is no troop leading quite as intimate or as thorough; and it is a responsibility. There is no officer below to pass the buck to. What more could one ask in the way of service to those of lesser rank? The only guide I must religiously keep, is the principle of humility; decide with confidence; lead without fear; listen with compassion; and remain humble.

It is a far greater, more rewarding life on this hill, Mom, than all the successes of what we call 'Civilization'. Mahatma Gandhi said once, about this business of leading, and very accurately. "There go my people—I must hurry and catch them, for I am their leader."

Korea is tough, but what worthwhile reward is gained without some price? Perhaps now you can see why I chose West Point. If not, someday I will explain. Since I have discovered an important truth, I suffer much less. That is, that fear is only the emotion of ignorance. If I keep informed, fill the gaps of knowledge with educated guesses, fear disappears—and I can do my job as coolly as tho I were in Denver.

And that's all from Korea today.

Love,

Dave

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