

# The Conflict That Wasn't Called a War

**T**HERE'S BEEN a lot of fuss and fanfare about parades recently, specifically the parades in Washington and New York City honoring those who served in the Desert Storm war in the Persian Gulf. Those were parades with thousands of marchers, millions of cheering on-lookers, tons and tons of confetti and ticker tape.

Today, there'll be another parade in New York City. This one you haven't heard very much about. That's because it has to do with the Korean War, otherwise known as The Forgotten War.

I don't pretend to have a vivid memory of that war. I was only 16 at the time and not much more than a bundle of hormones and appetite. But, that aside, Americans really weren't supposed to have a memory of Korea. It was the first shooting conflict of the Cold War, and Harry Truman, our president, thought that with the scars of World War II so fresh in the public's mind, it was best to label this one as something other than a full war, so he and the United Nations called it "a police action." Officially, in fact, it was never considered a "war." The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, for instance, records it as the "Korean conflict." For a fight that wasn't a war, it shed an ocean of blood. In the three years of this nonwar, more than

54,000 American soldiers died. That's just 4,000 fewer than died in Vietnam in a decade.

By way of more immediate comparison, the dead in the Persian Gulf operation totaled 345.

There was no parade when the Korean fighting ended in the summer of 1953, no official welcome-home ceremonies. You don't get parades and ceremonies for a police action. And no national monument was erected. (One is finally in the works in Washington.)

Nearly 6 million Americans served and fought in Korea -- and the rest of America never got together to say thank you to them for putting themselves in harm's way to do their country's duty. Unlike the Vietnam returnees (who also didn't win but whose failure to achieve victory was more painful to Americans because it had played in living rooms every night on television), the Korean War soldiers weren't shunned or reviled or spit upon. They just came home and melted into civilian life.

Typical of Korean War veterans is Bernard Sarisohn, now a lawyer on Long Island, who told *Newsday* last year: "I'm not happy that I went to Korea but I'm proud that I was there. It never entered my mind then that you had a choice, to go or not to go. The Army called and you went, that's

## TOM DARCY

Good God! Who in heaven's name will be NEXT to complain about passive smoking?



how we were raised. I was a combat infantryman. I had friends that died there. There weren't big parades or fanfare when I got back. I was processed at Fort Dix and went back to law school. Every once in a while I'll talk about the war to my children, and I realize that they know very little about it.

At bottom, the problem for the public was the same in both Korea and Vietnam -- the inability to deal with not winning. In Korea, we only pushed the enemy back to the 38th parallel. That had been the stated mission: to drive them back to the truce line they had come pouring across on June 25, 1950. Regardless, we and our leaders looked on it as a standoff. We hadn't crushed the enemy; we didn't win. And you don't get parades for unofficial wars that you don't win.

Well, that's what today's parade is all about. To restore a little honor. To give a little thank-you. To unveil a memorial sculpture. It'll be a small parade by New York's three-ring standards, not a Lindbergh or Eisenhower show. Not even close to the parade for the Mets after they won the World Series in 1986. But it will be a respectable parade nonetheless.

Roughly 7,000 veterans are expected to march, mostly Americans and South Koreans but also small contingents from 10 of the 20 other nations who fought (or provided medical teams) on the allied side against the North Koreans and Chinese. Thirteen bands will be in the line of march, including the West Point band and the Marine Corps band from Parris Island.

It was originally going to be a bigger parade, starting at Chambers Street and moving for a mile down Broadway to Battery Park for the unveiling of the 20-foot-high black granite monument to those who served. But the war in the Persian Gulf intervened and eclipsed these plans; the city, saying there wouldn't be enough money left after the Desert Storm parade through the "Canyon of Heroes" on June 10, reduced the Korea march to three or four blocks and pushed it off Broadway onto side streets.

Korean veterans, having waited four decades, protested bitterly and now it's back on Broadway, though the original one-mile parade has been shortened by almost half.

Today is the 41st anniversary of the start of the war. Most Americans under 55 remember little about it, except the fictionalized satire they've picked up from the M\*A\*S\*H movie and television series. Still, some of the geography names and bloody battle sites have stuck in the cultural mind, at least as labels for the war -- Pork Chop Hill, the Yalu River, Pusan, Old Baldy, Inchon, Heartbreak Ridge.

Going down to the parade could be an occasion to move beyond labels and refresh our memories. And to correct our long oversight. For it was, indeed, a war.

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