

THE PURPLE HEART

K O R E A

Purple Heart - By order of the President of the United States, the Purple Heart established by George Washington at Newburgh, NY, August 7, 1782, during the War of the Revolution, is hereby revived out of respect to his memory and military achievements.

Gilbert De La Pena, Corporal, USMC "I" CO, 3rd Battalion 7th Marines, First Marine Division Rifleman/60 MM Mortar June 19, 1951 Punch Bowl area, Korea

Korea - the word means high and clear, high mountains, clear air and water. Winters are bitter cold and summers are hot and humid with abundant rain. The hills range from 100 to over 5000 feet. We chased the enemy or they pushed us. It seems we climbed every mountain, forded every river, trudged through the

snowdrifts and walked a thousand valleys, neither side giving any quarter. Blood

flowed, men died, and the war went on. I

served in Korea for one year - 1951. "I" Co 3rd Battalion 7th Marines, First Marine Division. I was a

rifleman when I arrived in January 1951, but was transferred to a 60 MM mortar section.

Who do I run into on the first day of mortars but two other Marines from Fresno, Lloyd Schmidt and Dan DiPierri.

Lloyd and I had gone through boot camp together. In the course of a year, all three of us were awarded Purple Hearts. June 19, 1951, was

my time to serve my country in blood. I had been wounded once before on May 25, 1951. Lloyd and Dan were walking along side a tank with me riding on the

fender. The tank rode over a land mine hurling all three of us into a gully. Dan and Lloyd spent time at field hospital and rejoined the Company in four or five days. I was treated for shrapnel wounds in the rump and neck. Having my backpack on prevented serious injury. Dan and Lloyd were awarded the Purple Heart. I really thought my luck would carry me through my tour of duty, which was up in January 1952. On a hill 12 miles northeast of Yanggu, close to Daeasan, I'm not sure which hill we climbed that particular day. We started climbing up steep slopes under artillery, mortars and machine gun fire, beckoning us to join the party. We reached the ridge about noon under full enemy attack. I was kneeling behind my mortar preparing to fire when a white flash from a short mortar round exploded in front of my position. I was covered in blood, sustaining wounds to my left foot, leg, knees, chest and nose. Everything hurt and I could not see. I stayed on the hill along with six or eight other wounded Marines. At the crack of dawn a Bell helicopter landed. I was loaded on a gurney and strapped to the running gear and someone else was strapped to the other side for balance. Each guy had to weigh about the same amount or the helicopter could not lift off. The wind rushed past my head as the Bell helicopter made its approach into the MASH unit. When the helicopter banked, I looked out and the field below me was covered with wounded--75 to 100--lying in the open field, in 90-degree heat.

They placed me in this field of wounded Marines for the next eight hours. I was then, one of them, to live or to die. They operated on me that night. The next morning the MASH unit personnel decided to send me to Pusan for further intensive care. The flight crew strapped me into a litter carrier along with other wounded Marines aboard a C-47 Dakota fixed wing aircraft. The only thing I could see was the very end of the wing tip and I watched it wave up and down and knew it was going to fall off. We were unloaded and transported to the hospital ship USS Hope. Forty-two days later I reported back to my company. When I finally got back someone said, "We thought you were dead. Have a cup of coffee." A Marine welcome!! Another winter came and I was relieved in late December. The forgotten War, maybe by the public, but not the Veterans who served.

