

**The Forgotten History of the Forgotten War  
Korean War's Home Front Service on Radar Hill  
By Debbie Neece, Bartlesville Area History Museum**

Turmoil seems to be a natural state of being. The political fight against imperialism, communism, nationalism and dominance has been, and continues to be in the world's forethought. The list of wars fought on North American soil is extensive; however, the U.S. has also engaged in world-changing wars on foreign soils.

**WWI (July 28, 1914 – November 11, 1918)** was an explosive reverberation across Europe, drawing the U.S. from her neutral sideline on April 2, 1917, and concluding with the signing of not a win, not a loss, but an armistice the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month of 1918.

**WWII (September 1, 1939 – September 2, 1945)** was a bloody six-year global war involving more than 30 countries. Stemming from Germany's invasion of Poland, the U.S. was drawn into battle when Pearl Harbor was attacked December 1941. WWII ended in 1945 with the surrenders of Germany on May 7 and Japan on September 2, after atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan.

However, tensions continued to simmer as the American-Soviet Cold War (March 12, 1947 – December 26, 1991) became an unsettled period of suspicion and political rivalry between the United States and Soviet Union that put the world on edge, in fear of nuclear war. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was a pivotal event in the history of Europe which led to events that ended the Cold War in 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed.

*"After 1948, the Cold War entered a new phase. Moving beyond the borders of Europe, it spread to Asia and even into Space! At the same time the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. greatly increased their nuclear arsenals."*

**The Korean Conflict (June 25, 1950 – July 27, 1953)** occurred upon the heels of WWII and laid the path for the Vietnam War. It was not the first time the U.S. had been involved in conflict with Korea. The SS General Sherman, an armed merchant schooner, was sent to Korea in 1866 on a trade pursuit to gather cotton, tin and glass. However, the General Sherman was disabled and presumed lost. In 1871, under President Ulysses Grant, the U.S. State Department dispatched five naval vessels in search of the General Sherman and to establish a trade arrangement with Korea. This "Korean Expedition" resulted in a "chest-puffing" match, but no trade treaty.

Since 1910, Korea had been under the rule of Japan until Japan's 1945 WWII surrender. At that time, the U.S. and Soviet Union agreed to a cease-fire zone and divided Korea at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel with North Korea supported by China and the Soviet Union, and South Korea supported by the United Nations, mainly the United States. Although operating as separate countries, Korean border tensions erupted into war between North and South Korea 1950-1953, involving the supporting countries as well. After in-depth political power struggles and negotiations, an armistice was agreed upon July 27, 1953.

Under the guidance of President Truman, America's ultimate goal was to contain communism while preventing the "domino effect." America and Japan held trade agreements and Truman's concern was if Korea fell, Japan would fall, and others would follow.

During the Cold War years, the United States and Soviet Union were in a constant race...an Arms Race to develop nuclear capabilities and a Space Race to accomplish the first space mission. This competition required diligent radar surveillance to protect America's homeland. Radar installations "blanketed" the United States from sea to sea, covering the Pacific and Atlantic coasts with the "Texas Towers" offshore covering the Gulf of Mexico. In addition, radar stations were posted at the 55<sup>th</sup> parallel, 500 miles north of the Canadian border which



extending to the Arctic Circle. The U.S. mainland was peppered with Air Force radar stations, creating an early warning network.

The 20<sup>th</sup> Division of the Air Defense Command was responsible for the radar surveillance of Nebraska, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Illinois, Iowa, and virtually all of Kansas and Missouri. Late 1950, the Air Defense Command selected Bartlesville, OK as a site for one of an estimated 266 Air Force Aircraft Control and Warning Stations (AC&W) across America. Under the direction of the Secretary of Defense, the Corps of Engineers expedited the construction of an Air Force Station, 1,000 feet above the Bartlesville Municipal Airport, upon "Radar Hill."



*Aerial Photo of the 796<sup>th</sup> AC&W Squadron Base on Radar Hill, West of Bartlesville*



The 796<sup>th</sup> AC&W Squadron began operations May 1, 1951 with a pair of AN/FPS-10 radars and the role of "guiding interceptor aircraft toward unidentified intruders picked up on the unit's radar scopes." In 1958, the radar was upgraded to an AN/FPS-6 high-powered height-finding radar.

*U.S. Radar detection Air Force Stations were different from bases. Although the Bartlesville Municipal Airport was a "hop, skip and jump" from the Air Force Station on Radar Hill, military air flights did not leave our airport, which only received supplies and equipment for the station.*

Growing from a small activation crew to a full-fledged Air Force Station with 200 personnel, initially, the "hill" overlooking the Caney River Valley was divided into three areas. **The Operations Area** contained the AC&W Operations building, generator power plant, boiler house and tech supply building. **The Cantonment Area** contained the Bachelor Officer's Quarters, six enlisted barracks, orderly room, dining and recreation hall, tennis courts, motor pool and other support buildings. South of the main site, off the crest of the hill, were nine **Family Housing Units**. Due to security, the Receiver Building, Transmitter Building and Radar Towers were separated in three areas.

It was not unusual to see Air Force planes arrive at the Bartlesville Municipal Airport delivering supplies, equipment or personnel. However, in celebration of Armed Forces Week, May 1958, a special joint effort was arranged by the U.S. Air Force, Charles Cummings of



Phillips Petroleum Company, Major J.C. McCullough and Captain Gregory Briggs, commander of the 796<sup>th</sup> AC&W Squadron. Thousands of people waited in line to explore the interior workings of an Air Force C-124 Globemaster cargo aircraft.

Inspections and drills were constant companions of the airmen as they protected the peace of America from a perch over Washington and Osage Counties. One such inspection came October 17, 1958, with the arrival of “brass.” Colonel Theron Coulter, commander of the 20<sup>th</sup> Air Division, stationed at Richards-Gebaur Air Force Base, Missouri, was joined by Colonel William Hornsby, Deputy Chief of Staff; Lt. Colonel Richard Ayersman, Operations and Training Officer; Major U.T. Henderson, Administration Officer; Major R.M. Winn, Inspector General; and Captain Clifford Overfeld, Division Surgeon General’s Office.

*The Grandview Airport opened in 1941, 17.7 miles south of Kansas City, MO. During WWII (1944), the airport was used as a military training airfield and became the Richards-Gebaur Air Force Base February 1945, later closing in 1994.*

After a ceremonious welcome at the Bartlesville Municipal Airport, Colonel Coulter enjoyed a presentation by the 796<sup>th</sup> AC&W’s precision drill team, commanded by Airman Second Class George H. Abbott, followed by a fire drill and later a sabotage drill which forced the installation into full security lockdown. While the drill operations were conducted, the Air Force servicemen did not waver from their duty as eagle-eyed watchmen tracking flying menaces.

Three hours after Colonel Coulter’s arrival for the “ship shape inspection,” base commander Major Frank Gallagher classified the general housekeeping and maintenance of the entire 89-acre facility had exceeded expectations. The inspectors were impressed with the airmen’s appearance, barracks and dining hall, and noted the need of a non-commissioned officer and airmen club.

The ever-watchful servicemen not only protected the skies, they were also part of the Bartlesville community. Christmas 1958, the airmen and non-commissioned officers opened their hearts to play Santa Claus for 91 under-privileged youngsters at a Christmas party on base. In addition, their basketball team entered the YMCA/City league competing against teams like Cliff’s Sporting Goods, Johnston’s Drive-in, National Zinc and others. And in 1959, the 796<sup>th</sup> Blue Eagles Air Force softball and basketball tournaments called challengers to the “hill” from other Air Force Bases and Stations. The squadron newsletter for social happenings was “The Scope” which detailed weddings, stork visits and personnel changes.

For Pablo Alvarado, being assigned to “Radar Hill” for his Air Force service was a divine intervention. His accidental meeting of Phillips employee Ann Allen at the downtown Flat Iron Diner allowed him to find the love of his life. He later became a minister and the couple retired to Bartlesville in 1995 where she passed away March 11, 2018 and Pablo followed her just two days short of a year later.

And, for off-site recreation, the service men created “Echo Park” at the base of Radar Hill, just off Highway 60. Dewey resident, Richard Kayholm was stationed with the AC&W on Radar Hill from 1956-1960. He said, “Bartlesville was ‘dry’ but the bootleggers were an open source and the airmen invited ladies to party on the hill or rendezvous at Echo Park which had a few picnic table and benches.”





Standing sentinel, operating million-dollar electronic radar equipment, the Air Force Aircraft Control and Warning Station was inactivated June 1, 1961 due to budget constraints. A few personnel remained onsite as cleanup crew for a few months, until being redirected.

Seasons change and so has the view from Radar Hill, once barren of trees and vegetation. Traveling west on Highway 60 to Road 3235, turning north to traverse the winding paved road to Radar Hill, on the left, visitors pass a cluster of rural homes at Maude Lane, which was once Air Force family housing. Gone is the ever-diligent radar installation performing a beacon task 1,000 feet above the Bartlesville Municipal Airport. After 1961, the property was sold by the General Service Administration for reportedly \$106 thousand dollars to Texas businessmen, Troy Dutton and Arthur Jeske, who parceled the property to others, with the Osage Tribe retaining all mineral rights.

While some buildings have remained, some have been repurposed or moved. The recreational facility/gymnasium became the location of Ed and Alice Ririe's Keepsake Candles in 1975. And, the Red Dirt Soap Company occupied the Operations Building. Founded in Oklahoma City in 1996, the soap company is now web-order operated by Doug and Melinda Lucas of Lenapah with a small retail presence in stores. In addition, other buildings were repurposed as residential homes and several of the two-story barrack buildings have been relocated; one to Okesa and two to the airport area, repurposed as private homes. The remaining derelict radar installation buildings have weathered time and now offer only a glimpse of their once useful purpose.

Locals remember seeing the large white rubber Radome that covered the sophisticated radar antennae, the cement pad remains. Otis "Ed" Ririe, Jr. enlisted in the United States Air Force and was stationed at Gallup, NM, as a member of the 769<sup>th</sup> AC&W Squadron. In 1963, after



*The Recreational Facility/Gymnasium Became The Location of Ed and Alice Ririe's Keepsake Candles*



*The Operations Building Became The Red Dirt Soap Company*

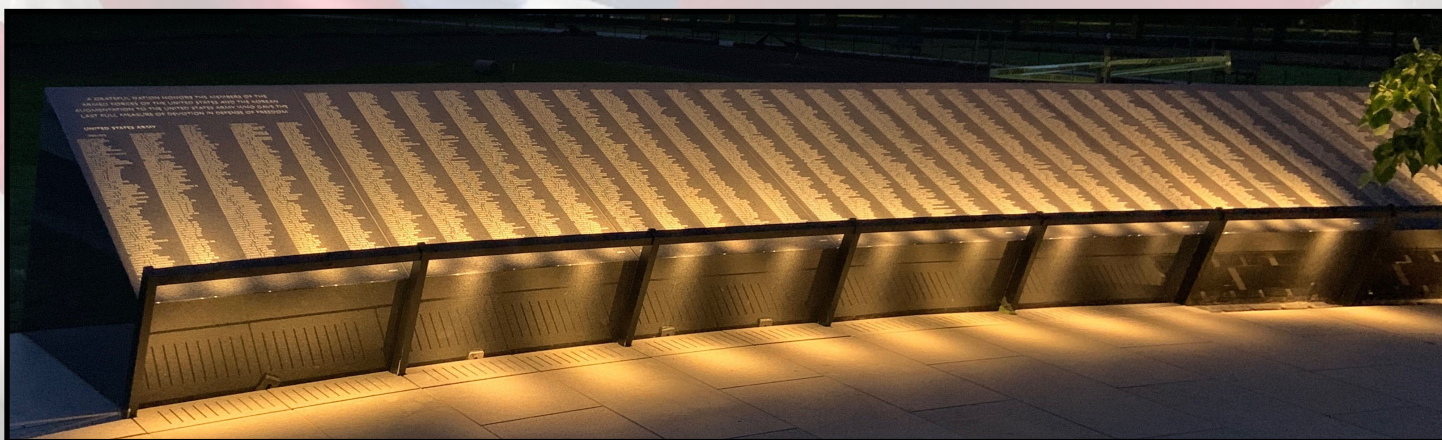


graduating with a B.S. in Mechanical Engineering, he accepted a position with Phillips Petroleum Company in Bartlesville. Ed remembered:

*“The AC&W Squadron was preceded by the Ground Observer Corps, a nationwide band of civilian volunteers who scanned the skies for airplanes with binoculars. The look-out post in Bartlesville was atop the Hotel Phillips. As an early warning defense system, the binocular plan had its shortcomings. So the Air Force built the radar stations. The shelter for the radar dish was called a Radome. It was a bladder made of several-ply rubber that was inflated, produced by Goodyear. To enter the Radome, airmen had to pass through an airlock so that the balloon wouldn't lose its air pressure. It was heated by banks of automobile lights.”*

Arkansas born but Texas raised, James P. Thomason was 19 when the military tapped on his shoulder in 1951. After a year in the National Guard, he joined the Air Force and received training at various locations before landing in Korea, January 1953. After serving ten-months, he was sent home on the USS Nelson, a 13 day trip to Seattle where his orders took him to Bartlesville's 796<sup>th</sup> AC&W Squadron for two years. His job was mess hall clerk and he, his wife and child had an off-base apartment near the entrance to Johnstone Park. Through his AC&W experiences, a sergeant helped him get his GED which paved the way to use the GI Bill to get his college degree. He found employment in Texas but returned to Bartlesville in 2004 to live in retirement. He has heavily researched radar defense and left a compiled history notebook at the Bartlesville Area History Museum.

Sandwiched between World War II and the Vietnam War, the Korean Conflict has been tagged the “Forgotten War.” Americans invested heavily in conserving resources in the name of the war effort during WWII and when that war ended, Americans were war weary and in need of normalcy. Jumping into another war was the furthest from our hearts, and many did not “buy in.” The Korean Conflict was a blip on the radar as America was conscious of the ever looming Cold War while plunging full-steam ahead into the Vietnam War. For those who served, for those who lost and for those who cared for the injured and cleared the devastation in the wake of the Korean War, they have not forgotten. They live and relive the memories and loss.



Symbolism has a healing power. The **Vietnam War ended April 30, 1975** and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall was dedicated in 1982, adding the Three Soldiers statue in 1984 and the Vietnam Women's Memorial in 1993. And then the realization...we need a Korean War Memorial...an afterthought because remember, the Korean Conflict was a blip on the radar. There was no place of peace and solitude to gather thoughts, morn or pray over our dead and missing. And so it came to be...the **KOREAN WAR VETERAN'S MEMORIAL**.

In the words of President Bill Clinton at the Korean War Veterans Memorial Dedication



Ceremony on July 27, 1995: *"In steel and granite, water and earth, the creators of this memorial have brought to life the courage and sacrifice of those who served in all branches of the Armed Forces from every racial and ethnic group and background in America. They represent, once more, the enduring American truth: From many we are one."*

As documented by the Korean War Veterans Memorial Foundation, *"During its relatively short duration from June 25, 1950, to July 27, 1953, 36,634 American servicemen and 7,174 Korean Augmentation to the United States Army died in hostile actions in the Korean War theater. Of these casualties, 8,200 are listed as missing in action, lost or buried at sea. In addition, 103,284 were wounded during the conflict."*



The Korean War Veteran's Memorial consists of five equally vital parts, exemplifying the healing power of symbolism:

**The Field of Service.** Appearing from the shadows, walking through a small field of juniper bushes representing the harsh terrain our soldiers endured in Korea are nineteen stainless steel warriors, standing eight-feet tall and weigh approximately 800# each. Represented are 14 Army, 3 Marine, 1 Navy and 1 Air Force servicemen and among them, a cross section of ethnic Americans: 12 Caucasian, 3 African-American, 2 Hispanic, 1 Asian, 1 Native American. Their grimaced faces show their pain and struggle as their ponchos seem to blow in the bone chilling winds of Korea.

**The Wall Mural** is a two-dimensional, 41 panel, highly reflective, 164-foot long, Academy Black Granite wall with over 2,400 photographs sandblasted into the panels representing our Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force and Coast Guard service personnel. The faces look out over the Field of Service and in turn, the reflections of the 19 statues glare back to create 38 statues, symbolic of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel that separates North and South Korea at the location of the signing of the armistice after 38 months of war. The U.S. Army employed about 1,500 K-9 sentry companions during the Korean Conflict and they are also represented on the Wall Mural.

**The United Nations Curb** is engraved with the twenty-two nations who contributed to the Korean Conflict effort, in alphabetical order: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Colombia, Denmark, Ethiopia, France, Greece, India, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Philippines, Republic of Korea, South Africa, Sweden, Thailand, Turkey, United Kingdom and United States of America (17 contributed combat units and 5 medical support).





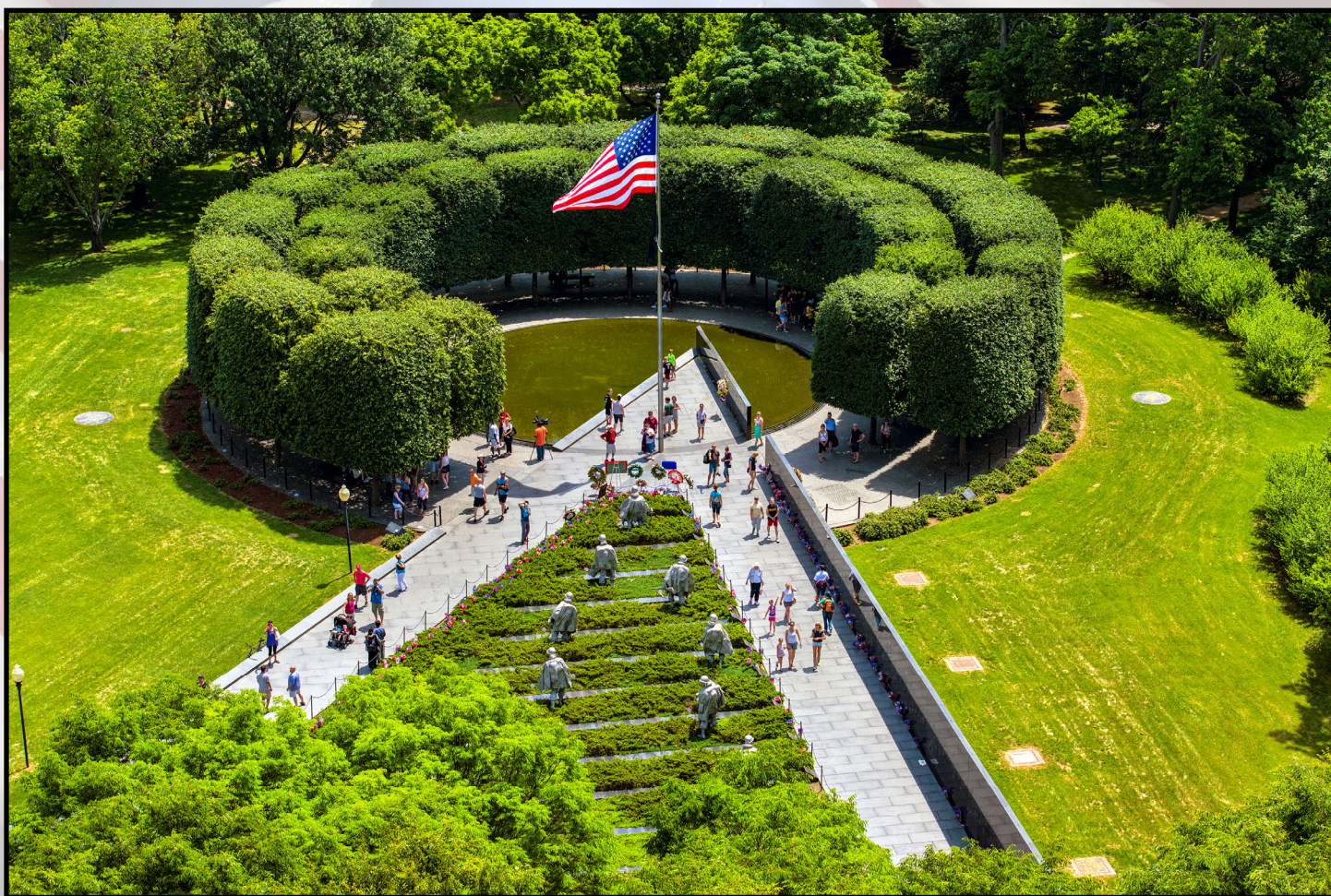
**The Pool of Remembrance** is 128-feet in diameter, granite reflecting pool encircling the “Freedom Is Not Free” wall; noted in this area is the cost of war, Killed in Action, Wounded in Action, Missing in Action and Prisoners of War.

**The Wall of Remembrance** was the final piece of the Memorial, completed July 27, 2022. The Wall consists of 100 granite panels, weighing approximately eight tons, featuring the names of 36,634 American war heroes and the more than 7,174 Koreans who died while supporting our U.S. troops. The names are by rank and service branch with the first 84 blocks Army, followed by ten Marine Corps blocks, two Navy blocks and four Air Force blocks.

The pièce de résistance is the dedication stone at the base of the American Flag with the words etched: *“Our Nation Honors Her Sons and Daughters Who Answered the Call to Defend a Country They Never Knew and a People They Never Met.”*

The Air Force AC&W Squadron stationed on Radar Hill holds a history some have pondered, while others have forgotten...the forgotten history of a forgotten war and her forgotten warriors.

***FREEDOM IS INDEED NOT FREE  
GOD BLESS OUR SERVICE PERSONNEL ONE AND ALL!***



*Korean War Veterans Memorial Photograph Credit National Parks Service.*