It shocks me when someone says, “What in the world were you doing there? We didn’t have anything to do with that!“ I did what I had to do. Did you do what you had to do?

We are lucky to live in Canada because the only bad war experience we have – except for families who have lost someone – is that gasoline, butter and sugar were rationed. In other countries, it’s not rationed, there just isn’t any.

My name is Bernard Irenée Charland. I served with the 3rd Battalion of the Royal 22e Regiment in Korea, in theatre, and in Europe during the occupation. I was crazy about a career in the military. I was raised in a home along the banks of the Richelieu [river]. My father was very, very strict. I don’t think he really wanted me because my mother died while giving birth to me. It wasn’t my fault. But my stepmother, she didn’t like me either. So, it wasn’t a very loving home. Then when I joined the army, I encountered discipline that saw you and rewarded you based on your merit. You know, if you accepted the discipline, you were a good soldier. And if you did not, you had to get out of there because it wasn’t bearable.

I enlisted in the Canadian Army at the 4 Personnel Depot of at the end of July 1950, with the intention of going to Korea.

I got married on January 31, 1953 just before leaving for Korea because I was leaving for Korea. “If I am going to get battered, we might as well get a pension.” That’s the idea that I had! We loved each other, of course, it was obvious.

I left for Korea toward the end of March of 1953. My lieutenant, Lieutenant Burstall, a great guy, he had left for Korea on the advanced party. Often, they sent an advanced party before the first unit. And then, while he was coming back from a patrol, he was injured by an American patrol. He was seriously wounded, and he spent the rest of the war in a hospital in Japan. So, I arrive in Korea, I don’t have an officer, and all along the train tracks, I see people living in shacks made of corrugated metal and cardboard boxes. I had never seen that before. I said to myself, “What in the world is this?” We had heard of the war, of course. But when I was little, the war stories I read were about kings and knights. Apparently, they were all good guys. But it was nothing like that. I had never seen misery. I had seen poor people, but I didn’t know anything about poverty. There was nothing there. The ladies, the Korean women, they waited for trains to pass so that they could gather coals that fell. They used them to cook their food. It was a sight – I think that it’s worse than war to see things like that.

The fighting in Korea was static starting at the end of 1951. In other words, you live in trenches, holes in the ground. You don’t go on the attack, you repel attacks if there are any. You occupy a defensive position. You are well armed, evidently, with everything you need to defend your position. At night, you’re “on” at 100% and everyone has to work, of course. You cannot fight during the day because they can see you coming. At night, you go on patrol to see what is happening around your section. You have to patrol almost every night. When it wasn’t me, it was someone else. You patrol to figure out what’s going on in front of your position. Sometimes, it’s reconnaissance. You leave with two or three guys. You have to make yourself unseen, which is very difficult because there are ponds everywhere. And they are full of frogs that make noise if you step in them by accident. And then the other side can hear you and they know what’s going on – they’re used to it. We would go out with about 10 guys, maximum. We did not do big patrols with hundreds of people. The North Koreans, they went out on patrol with 15 – 30 men. They walked around in a horseshoe formation. And, they also knew their landscape very well. Us, not so much. There aren’t too many rice paddies in Québec! They were very familiar with the terrain and they knew how to function within it. Chinese soldiers were exceptionally trained and armed. The North Koreans, though, their army was not very good or well-equipped. They also weren’t necessarily professional soldiers. But the Chinese were excellent soldiers. They were carrying burp guns, which is about as destructive a weapon as you can get. It was very little. Even if you were firing in the mud, it would still work and not get jammed. It shot 9mm [bullets]. And when you heard “brrrp”, they had just emptied a magazine, and the 32 bullets were on their way. If you hear the sound, you’re not dead, you’re alright.

One evening… I had a friend, Sergeant Guy Desjardins. Guy was a piano player. He was a small guy from Saint-Boniface, Manitoba. We were good friends. We chatted a lot and things like that. That evening, we had’t gone out because there was another patrol in no man’s land. It was important to not have two patrols out at once, in case they ran into one another. So that evening, I was in my position and around – the exact time I don’t know, it must have been 10 or 10:30 pm, I think – we heard a burp gun go off close by. It meant one of two things: the beginning of an attack or a patrol had been ensnared. So, I asked my major, “Are we going to go look?” He said, “Go ahead.” So, I went down with five or six other guys to see what was up. We went at a breakneck pace after the Chinese. There is nothing we didn’t do. By the time we got there, the earlier patrol had gathered two injured Canadian soldiers. Then a weird thing happened – I asked myself if it was a dream or not, if what I saw real. One of the injured soldiers was lying on top of a rice paddy. The water is about two and half feet deep and you actually walk on top of the rice paddy, you walk on the paddy to sow the seeds. It also makes a good defense since you can lie behind it. Anyway, it looked like the guy’s face was so white that it was shining. It looked like there was no longer any blood in his face. And there wasn’t a moon that night. We didn’t patrol when the moon was out because they could see us. Then this guy, I was only a few steps away from him, he was so white that I could seem him [in the dark]. So, we picked him up since he was injured, I don’t remember where though. We did not know where the commander of the patrol was, Guy Desjardins. Oh…

A few days later, during the day, we had this sort of outpost, where we had these huge artillery binoculars. In fact, you could see a license plate from a mile and a half away with them. We had them to see what was going on on the hills occupied by Chinese troops. So, we scanned the hills and any movements in the valley in case something was amiss, or to see if they were preparing something. And then, a soldier called me, “Sergeant!” So, I went over, “What is it?” He said, “Someone put something in the stream. There is a large rock in the stream, a big rock.” Well, no one was moving rocks around. I took the thing and looked carefully, and it was a body, a body that had bloated in the sun. They sent out the mine clearers with a special patrol, as the sun had set. And it was Sergeant Desjardins. They retrieved him and brought him back. That was… It’s not the way to lose a friend. Why am I like this? Damnit. Anyway, Sergeant Desjardins had died, and we were able to recover his body. And that’s that. Things continued. I continued to do my job and the guys did too.

Being a young sergeant… who had the desire to be a platoon commander in theatre. Without any experience. It’s the sort of work that you learn as you go. I learned one thing during all this: that if you have responsibilities, at any point in your life - and at 88, I’ve had the chance to take on a lot of responsibilities – if you have a big responsibility, your task becomes easier because you can ignore your feelings, your fears, because you have a mission to accomplish and it is what counts above all else. All the ranked people I know, who are worth their salt, and they are all good at what they do, they live this way. It is so true that for the rest of my working life, I oversaw something. I was in charge of people, I was in charge of something. It is thanks to what I learned in the army; how to lead and how to be a leader.

Both Koreas want a united Korea, but they do not want the same thing. So, they will never agree. It will always be like this. They want a united Korea, but “I want it like this” and “I want it like this.” They will never be united. Politically speaking, it’s impossible! The proof is that it has never worked. It was supposed to be divided in two countries leading up to elections. There was an election in South Korea, but there was never one in North Korea.

I had a tough time after the war. I don’t know… I met “Mr. Cognac.” I never really understood how much it was caused by the stress of the war, command. Or maybe I’m just the type of person that if you have a bit of Cognac, you automatically become an alcoholic. I don’t know. Apparently, it is an illness. I can believe it. But it is an illness that… you can’t… you cannot control yourself. I was never able to control what I drank, right from the start. Before I left for Korea, I had a hard time having one beer a week. And you had to offer it to me, and almost twist my arm to get me to take it. But when I came back, I got out at the armoury, on the Grande-Allée. Uh, my wife came to pick me up and one of the first things I asked her was, “Where is the liquor commission?” She didn’t know what that was. I didn’t drink before. “Let’s go buy a bottle of Cognac,” I said. I arrived, and I had not had anything on the train for five days. I didn’t drink on the boat over either. So, it has been 10 or 15 days that I hadn’t had a drop. And you know, I have thought about this a lot. It must have been a… no one in my wife’s family (Paulette who has passed away) drank.

Why do they call Korea “The Forgotten War?” Canadians were indifferent to that conflict, and I don’t understand why. We are part of the United Nations and we have a responsibility. Also, it was one of the Prime Ministers of Canada, Louis St-Laurent, who helped to get the United Nations going. And it’s clear that if a country in this world needs help, NATO [the North Atlantic Treaty Organization] will help them. And the contribution of our government, well it must contribute what it can, and what it wants to contribute. You cannot say to these guys, “What in the world were you doing there?” It’s our job.