



April 2003

## The Forgotten War: How the first "Cold War war" affected Colby

Gerry Boyle  
*Colby College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Boyle, Gerry (2003) "The Forgotten War: How the first "Cold War war" affected Colby," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 92 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol92/iss2/7>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the Colby College Archives at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Magazine by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

# THE FORGO





# TEN WAR

*How the first “Cold War war” affected Colby*

BY GERRY BOYLE '78

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE MORNING SENTINEL







*Colby Air Force ROTC cadets (preceding pages) pass in a parade and review on Seaverns Field during outdoor ceremonies in May 1952. Above, from left, Dean of Faculty Ernest Marriner consults with Colby's resident Air Force ROTC officers; Staff Sgt. Frederick Pupier*

When Donaldson Koons was growing up in Seoul, there was one Korea. North designated a direction, not a regime. The 38th parallel was just another line on the map. "There was no physical or cultural basis for that split," said Koons, emeritus Dana Professor of Geology, whose father ran a high school for Korean students. Koons, who followed the Korean War from Mayflower Hill, where he began teaching in 1947, said, "The grain of the country ran north-south, not east-west, and the 38th parallel was wholly artificial. No basis in history, no basis in ethnology, in climate, in anything else. It need not have been done."

But it was. As Japan's surrender ended World War II, Korea was freed of its Japanese occupiers—and immediately was lopped in half at that now-famous boundary. In what Koons and some historians argue was a tragic blunder, Russia was given control of the northern section of Korea in return for having entered the war against Japan. A U.S.-backed government was put in place in the south. The newly invented country of North Korea was minted as a communist state. While the South Korean government fell short of Western-style democracy, it was a far cry from the rigid authoritarian rule of the north.

That was the groundwork for the Korean War, which lasted three bloody years before ending in a stalemate in 1953. In a war that gained no ground, more than 33,000 Ameri-

cans died, an estimated 3 million Korean and Chinese soldiers were killed or wounded, and, according to some estimates, more than 3 million civilians were killed. When the truce was signed, the survivors found themselves at the pre-war status quo. A half century later, the border between North and South remains one of the most impermeable in the world, the two Koreas continue to skirmish as the world looks on with alarm and North Korea threatens the world with its nuclear weapons program. And 50 years since the "the first Cold War war" ended, the details are largely forgotten.

At Colby, as in the country as a whole, the Korean War was tucked between World War II, the war that galvanized the U.S. unlike any other, and the Vietnam War, which split the campus and the country apart. The College suffered 63 casualties in World War II, including a missionary couple executed by Japanese forces in the Philippines. Three Colby alumni were killed in Korea or in preparation for it. The Korean War is represented in Ernest Marriner's *History of Colby College* in one sentence.

Why so little attention to a war that caused millions of deaths, that pitted superpowers and ideologies, that flirted with World War III?

"Because it was a mess without any clear result," said Robert Weisbrot, the Christian A. Johnson Distinguished Teaching Professor of History at Colby and an authority on the Cold War. "There were no famous cities. For

Americans there was no sense of shared cultural heritage, as with England during World War II. There was no familiarity whatsoever with Korean history. There was only a sense that we're fighting for principles—Korea happens to be the place. There was no clear resolution. There wasn't even a peace treaty at the end. There were only countries that suffered, but none that officially lost."

At Colby, a microcosm of middle-class America of the time, lives would quietly change as the country settled into a Cold War mindset that lasted for decades. One irony is that the military détente of the Cold War developed not long after the world was relieved of the burden of World War II, "the war to end all wars." At Colby, World War II veterans paying tuition with GI Bill benefits lived in "barracks" erected below Roberts Union, where the woodsmen's team now practices. "There were baldheads around there then," recalled Jack Deering '55, a retired salesman living in Falmouth, Maine. "We had guys thirty, thirty-two, with kids, living in the barracks and selling sandwiches at night. For them, this was the trip out of the mills."

In the glow of post-World War II prosperity, working-class kids set out to become middle-class college graduates. But before many had even earned diplomas, the newly perceived threat of the Soviets and Chinese emerged. As the opposing ideologies squared off, anti-communist fervor grew at home. If



*issues clothing to Cadet Sgt. Lee M. Larson '55, who then signs out his stripes. Uniforms were issued to all first-year male students. In photo at right, Cadet Robert S. Johnson '55 checks his military uniform in a mirror in a dorm.*

Americans didn't know precisely what was going on in Korea, they did know why it was happening. North Korea was communist and communists were a threat to the American way of life. "The only television coverage I can remember was when we used to be glued to the McCarthy hearings," said Karl Dornish '54. "There was one snowy [TV] set in the Zete living room. . . . There was very little TV coverage of the war."

But colleges like Colby didn't need battle-front reports from Korea to bring the war home. At mid-year, in January 1951, a front-page story in the *Echo* reported that 23 students had withdrawn to enlist in the military. Most had been drafted, just a month before President Truman signed a bill providing deferments to most college students. "I got to take three of my exams and couldn't take the other two," said Peter Pierce '56, who enlisted in the Navy. "When you take a course and you get all the way up to the final and you don't get credit for the course, that's a little annoying." But Pierce, who would go on to become an educator and founder of a Maine aquaculture company, didn't protest very loudly. "Everybody else in my family served in World War II. I wouldn't find much sympathy if I complained."

The sense of duty that pervaded the World War II-era Colby campus lingered during the Korean War and allowed for changes at Colby and other campuses that would be unheard of

during the Vietnam War a dozen years later. "I don't think anybody protested in those days," Pierce said. "Nobody in our group did. I didn't know anyone at Colby who did."

Harry Wiley '51, a crew chief for an Army artillery unit in Korea, remembers that there were no demonstrations, no one angry at the country for going to war. "I've often said one of the reasons the war was forgotten was because people who fought the war were very quiet about it. It was almost like, 'This is my job. I'm an American. I'm a citizen. If my country calls me to go to war, I go to war.'"

Not so during the Vietnam era. Sid Farr '55, who returned to Colby as a development officer from 1960 through 1995, recalls the Vietnam years as "the saddest time. A lot of people felt guilty, angry, all kinds of things. You didn't have that feeling when I was in school. There was an awareness but there wasn't that tragic sadness."

In fact, the two eras couldn't have been more different.

In the fall of 1951 an Air Force Reserve Officers Training Corps was established at Colby. Participation was compulsory for all able-bodied male freshmen and sophomores. Students took courses in air science and tactics, a military program that included everything from world history to drill. The courses were taught by Lt. Col. C. Philip Christie, a World War II veteran and survivor of the Bataan

Death March. Several alumni recalled Christie's World Political Geography as one of the most interesting courses they took at the College.

ROTC candidates pulled duty manning a lookout post in Lorimer Chapel, phoning in every aircraft sighting to the Air Force, recalled Dave Roberts '55. On Armistice Day every year, Colby men marched downtown to take part in the city parade. One day a week was designated as uniform day on campus and students marched in formation and underwent inspections on the lawn in front of Miller Library. "All over campus you'd see Air Force blue," Farr said.

As many as 30 ROTC candidates were commissioned after graduation, including Farr, who missed the war by a year and spent his Air Force stint flying tanker aircraft that refueled Cold War B-52s. Others did serve in the war, including Wiley, who pre-dated ROTC and was drafted four months after graduation. His mathematics background landed him a job as a crew chief for an Army field artillery unit. Wiley's unit accompanied the 2nd Infantry Division and other troops as they fought some of the most famous and bloody battles of the war: Old Baldy, Pork Chop Hill and Heartbreak Ridge.

"The lieutenant up front would have us fire," Wiley said. "Sometimes he'd say, 'Left five-zero,' which meant left fifty yards. 'Add five-zero,' which meant to elevate our plot fifty yards. God forbid if anybody plotted





*In photos taken in the spring of 1952, from left, Colby Air Force ROTC cadet Douglas M. Harlor '55, who had the highest average on the rifle team, gets pointers from Staff Sgt. Richard Ramsey; Colby cadets receive drill and parade instruction on the Colby athletic fields;*

incorrectly and you had a short round. That was suicide over there.”

Did that happen? “Oh, yeah,” he said.

In a war that produced heavy casualties early, on both the battlefield and among American prisoners of war, some soldiers fell before they even reached the Korean Peninsula. Others, through the chance of the battle plans, drew safer assignments than others.

Deering recalled a reserve unit from Michigan that was stationed at Fort Williams in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, near his home. He befriended some of the young recruits and had several to his home for dinner. That unit was dispatched to the front lines in Korea and suffered 70 percent casualties. Deering spent his time in the war warning his fellow airmen in Libya that they shouldn't complain about the heat and flies because “there was an alternative.”

Some were plucked from the ranks of Deering's unit and sent to Korea and combat. Others remained far from the war. Like Deering, who was able to finish his degree at Colby, they returned home and resumed their lives. “I was terribly lucky,” he said.

Colby casualties included David Avery Dobson Jr. '50 of Lawrence, Mass. A Navy cadet, Dobson died in the crash of his F6F Hellcat fighter while training in Texas in March 1952. At Colby Dobson was an accomplished skier; a memorial trophy was established in his honor.

John E. Thompson '51 was killed in April of that same year when his F-84 Thunderjet fighter was hit by ground fire while flying reconnaissance over Wonsan, Korea. Thompson ejected but his parachute didn't open and he was lost at sea. His wife, Joanne Thompson, was notified that he was missing in action. The couple's son was born after Thompson's death.

The third casualty was a World War II veteran from the Class of 1940 who was recalled to active duty in Korea in 1951. His widow wrote to Ellsworth W. “Bill” Millet '25, then alumni secretary at Colby:

“Dear Mr. Millet,

My husband, Lt. Charles Graham, was killed in action in Korea July 18th by fragments from an enemy mortar shell while defending company positions in the vicinity of Chorwon, North Korea. He was with the Second Inf. Division. Last April he was wounded and received the Purple Heart. . . .”

Graham '40, a star athlete from Calais, Maine, was survived by his wife, Laura Davis, and a 5-year-old son, Billy. Billy was eligible for a scholarship provided by Colby for children of alumni who die in their country's service.

That Colby students were dying was sobering news for students on Mayflower Hill, who could lose their college draft deferment if their grades were poor. And there was no guarantee that the Selective Service deferment

policy would stand if the war went badly. In the *Echo* of Jan. 16, 1953, a story appeared with the headline: “Students Won't Face Draft Before September.”

“Assurance comes from the office of the Dean of Men that, contrary to rumors, there has been no change in the Selective Service policy in regard to the drafting of college students. Captain Paul Merrick . . . has informed Colby authorities that students presently enrolled will not be drafted during the coming year. . . .”

The *Echo* also included some discussion of “Chinese Commies” and “the inside story on Soviet tension.” But for an occasional exception, there was little discussion of the events of the war itself. “Nobody understood the Korean War,” said Deering, who spent his active duty building radar stations in Libya. “Nobody knew where Korea was, frankly. It was not a destination.”

In contrast, the *Echo* and *Alumnus* during World War II were filled with reports on Colby students, faculty and alumni in the war. The curriculum during World War II was restructured to prepare women students for service in or to the military. One *Alumnus* cover photo depicted the launching of the Jeremiah Chaplin, a Liberty ship named for the first president of the College.

The Korean War was far less consuming. The *Echo* did publish an article by a student



*above, Lt. Col. C. Phillip Christie, a World War II veteran, teaches a military science course in world geography at Colby; ROTC cadets stand for inspection by Christie and President J. Seelye Bixler during Armed Forces Week.*

who attempted to explain that the U.S. and U.N. “went into Korea with limited objectives. We are fighting to repeal aggression. . . . Political considerations are at least as important as military in the Korean question. We must remember the long-range problem,” wrote Max Singer ’53.

Truman and Gen. Douglas MacArthur clashed over the objectives in Korea, MacArthur determined to drive north to the Chinese border and Truman ordering withdrawal. The president prevailed, MacArthur was relieved of command, and the “limited war” became a Cold War model. But as in Vietnam, the strategy left even soldiers occasionally perplexed and frustrated. “I used to have a real problem in Korea about capturing a hill and then giving it back,” said Wiley, the artillery gunner. “We had a little bit of the Vietnam psyche over there. But overall, I thought that stemming communism was the only objective our military and our government had, and I supported it.”

In July 1953, the armistice was signed—the same agreement that North Korea’s leader, Kim Jong Il, in recent months threatened to disregard. But 50 years ago the feeling was that communist aggression had been turned back and that the U.S. and U.N. had prevailed. Soldiers, sailors and airmen returned with the sense that they had done their duty even if that fell short of outright victory. “The

forgotten war” immediately began to recede from memory.

“Everybody went over, they served their tour of duty and when you came home, there was no fanfare,” said Wiley, at his home in Scarborough, Maine. “We didn’t even get coffee on the ship that took us out of there, which irritated a few people a little bit. We sailed home, you got discharged and it was over. I went back to work for the phone company.”

Pierce points out that veterans weren’t resented, as in the Vietnam era, “but on the other hand, there were no parades when we came home or anything like that. I don’t think the country really got behind the Korean War. They sort of accepted it and didn’t complain, but it wasn’t like World War II where everybody, regardless of his age or position, was involved.”

Deering, in Falmouth, recalls being welcomed in Waterville restaurants and hangouts (“Hey Red, you’re back. Where you been anyway?”). Veterans in general were treated with respect by the community, and Colby student-vets were included. On campus, they were given a wider berth, Deering said. As an older veteran, he was asked by a dean to live in a fraternity house, where misbehavior (profanity in front of the house mother) had been reported and there was a general lack of discipline. Veterans assumed a status and role somewhere between younger

students and older administrators.

Pierce, the Navy medic, said he came back to Colby with a new appreciation of America and life at the College. “It was kind of nice to have a roof over your head instead of a tent, flush toilets instead of an outhouse, hot showers instead of a bath out of your helmet,” he said. “And it was humorous to hear kids complaining that they had to wait in line for a shower for a couple of minutes. Having waited in line for everything for four years, it was kind of amusing.”

But Pierce said he kept his thoughts to himself, for the most part. After graduation, he went to work, married and raised a family. In hindsight, he said, he’s not sure “we did Korea a favor.” Like Koons, who grew up in Korea and immersed in its culture, Pierce says the mistake was made at the close of World War II when Korea first was divided.

Weisbrot believe decisions that could have changed the course of the Korean War would have to have been made in the 1940s. At one time the U.S. supported the Japanese over Korean reformers, he noted, then backed a reactionary faction in South Korea that had very little popular backing. The two Koreas were created, polarized, separated, “and then things played out tragically,” Weisbrot said.

As North Korea rattles sabers, the schism born in the final months of World War II continues to play out today.