



PRIVATE FIRST CLASS JOHN KINLEN UNITED STATES ARMY KOREAN WAR

United States Army Medic. One of the most dangerous jobs on the front lines. Only lightly armed if at all, these heroes dash out under enemy fire into open combat, risking their lives to save the lives of their wounded brethren. With bullets flying through the air, and mortar rounds and grenades exploding all around them, the medic puts his life on the line for other soldiers every moment in battle. This level of bravery in the face of great personal peril illustrates the character, heroism, and devotion exhibited by combat medics.

John Kinlen was born in New York City, New York in 1931. He enjoyed his childhood as a city kid. As the oldest, he stood up for his siblings when they got into trouble. He always enjoyed helping other people. From a young age he understood that there were many choices to be made in life, and only the right choices would take him down the right path. Not sure of his future plans, one of his friends in a college ROTC program got him thinking about serving in the United States Army. He decided he wanted to enlist. It was 1948, a time of relative peace for the United States despite the tension caused by the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe, the civil war in China, and the turmoil in Palestine.

His mother consented to him joining the military at age 17. Kinlen attended his Basic Combat Training locally at Fort Dix, New Jersey. Upon graduating, the other openings for cook or stenographer not appealing to him, he chose to become a combat medic, and attended his Advanced Individual Training at the medical school in Fort Sam Houston, Texas.

Although in the Army for only a relatively short time span, John learned many things. The first bit of advice that he was offered, which a relative had told him, was to never, ever, volunteer for a chore. The



second, which he learned through experience, was to “never hang around the barracks during your off-time. If you’re on break, take off. Go do something else. If you stick around, they’ll find something for you to do.” Finally, he discovered that the Army could send a person anywhere they wanted without needing to provide a reason. He figured, upon his graduation from Fort Sam Houston, that he would go back to the East Coast. After all, he mused, that was his home. Instead, they shipped him across the country to Fort Lewis, Washington, over two thousand miles away.

He was assigned to an Infantry company as one of their medics. He took care of the soldiers, and went with them on hikes, “to make sure they didn’t get any blisters or other injuries, and make sure they took their salt pills and everything else.” When the company was sent to Makua Valley in Oahu, Hawaii for maneuvers, John went with them.

“We said to them, ‘we’re medical personnel, we don’t carry firearms.’ We were told, ‘in Korea you do, because they don’t honor the Geneva Convention’.”

Seeing for the first time the beautiful green and rolling foothills at the base of the towering Waianae Mountains, surrounded by four thousand acres of beautiful landscape the United States government set aside for training soldiers, made Kinlen congratulate himself on his smart career decision. At the foot of a dormant volcano, this vast area turned out to be the perfect place to prepare for the firestorm about to erupt on the Korean Peninsula. Their training was to serve them well for the dangers ahead.

In 1950, at the outbreak of war, John was sent to Korea for his first tour. Along the way, on board a ship with nothing but ocean all around, John and the rest of the medics received their first taste of the reality of war. “The medical team got called to the fan-

tail. We figured it was just another exercise. When we got there, we were given carbine rifles. We said to them, 'we're medical personnel, we don't carry firearms.' We were told, 'in Korea you do, because they don't honor the Geneva Convention.' We could do nothing else but practice by firing off the fantail out into the ocean. We already knew about firearms from Basic Training, but we hadn't practiced with them since then."

In August, they reached Busan (Pusan), Korea, the largest port city of South Korea. "We landed, hopped in trucks, and went right up to the front lines. Our entire division was attached to the 8th Army. From then on it was just doing your job, taking care of the guys that were there. We had to go out on patrols, reconnaissance, and if somebody got hurt, we had to be there to take care of them.

"I had one harrowing experience, which troubled me really badly. We were under heavy mortar fire, and one of the mortars landed near a foxhole with four men in it. We had been instructed to take the most badly wounded soldier first. In this case, none of them made it. I had seen death before, but four of them at one time, it really hurt.... I was only 19 years old."

When John returned to the Battalion MASH unit (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) in the rear, he observed six Jeeps, filled with wounded soldiers, waiting on a hill a good distance from the hospital. As he watched, "the enemy started lobbing mortars in our direction. There were explosions all around. I turn around to look, and nobody's moving the Jeeps. So I dropped all my stuff, got into the first Jeep, and took off. I drove down the hill all the way to the hospital. When I looked back, the other five drivers in the Jeeps had all followed me down the hill, bringing the soldiers to safety out of the range of the mortars. I hopped out of the Jeep, picked up my stuff, and rejoined my company.

"Three weeks later, a sergeant stopped me as I was doing my daily duties. He took me into his tent, and ordered me to shave and shower. When I came out there was a fresh uniform on the bed. I got dressed, and was taken into a mess hall. Inside were the battalion commander, and the other five guys who had driven the wounded soldiers to safety three weeks prior. The five guys got a citation; I was awarded the Bronze Star with a V." It was the bravery and heroism of Private Kinlen that inspired the other drivers to bring the wounded soldiers to safety, and possibly saved their lives in the face of enemy fire.

"When I got wounded, I was behind the lines, tending to a captain and a sergeant who were wounded... I patched them up, and we were moving along, I had to carry the captain, be-

cause he couldn't walk. I had him on my shoulders. Our soldiers had called in an airstrike, because we were being counter-attacked. When the strike came in, I dropped to the ground and covered myself and the other two guys. It was bad. I felt a little sorry for any enemy who ever gets caught in one of our airstrikes. This is when I got wounded. It's friendly fire, but it's not like the guy in the aircraft can see who he's shooting at. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"A .50 caliber burst blew out my knee. There were only two stretcher-bearers. They were taking me, but I said, 'no, you take those two first, then you come back for me.' I insisted, so they took the other two guys down, and it was a long time before they came back to get me, and gangrene had already set in. When they got me down to the Battalion Aid Station, I saw one of my guys down there, he had gotten hit. They took me inside, and the next thing I knew they had taken off my leg at the knee.

"I was airlifted to Osaki, Japan. By that time the gas pocket in my leg had gotten so big they had to rush me straight into the operating room. After the operation, I was only given a few days to live because of the gangrene. Obviously they were wrong, and to this day I believe the Lord simply had other plans for me."

Private Kinlen was shipped back to California, to the Army hospital. "They had taken me out of the ambulance, and two sergeants came over. They said to me, 'John, I told you to keep your head down.' I replied, 'I did, but I stuck my leg up.'" Those two sergeants had been Private Kinlen's previous instructors before he had been sent to Korea.

"They got me in a bed, and the next morning an admiral, accompanied by Harry Truman, came through the hospital, on their way to meet General Douglas MacArthur. That's when I got the Purple Heart and Silver Star, awarded to me by the President of the United States. The President said to me, 'Son, where do you live?' I told him I lived in New York. The next thing I knew they had shipped me to the Naval Hospital in Philadelphia so I could be close to my family and home."

In Philadelphia, his mother, a registered nurse, visited John at the hospital. She requested that the hospital release John, so that he could spend Christmas with his family. As soon as the doctors learned of his mother's profession, they released John on the spot. "I got to go home for Christmas."

John struggled to readjust to civilian life. He had Post Traumatic Stress (PTS) which was called shell-shock in those days. Very little was known about this illness, and many veterans with shell-shock received little sympathy from a com-



munity that did not understand the graveness of the affliction. John had nightmares often, and any loud and sudden noises would often “set me off.”

“One night, I got up out of bed, I took my crutches, and went outside. I went for a walk. I don’t know what happened, but the next thing I know a police officer is shaking me. I guess I was lying there and he thought I was a drunk. He took me to a holding cell at the nearby police station. He wouldn’t allow me to call anybody until the morning. Luckily, the lieutenant at the precinct recognized me; when I was younger I would bring the officers coffee when they walked the beat, and he was one of those officers. When I had come home from Korea, the lieutenant was at my house to welcome me home.



“So the lieutenant tells the officer, ‘this man is a veteran of Korea, and I know him personally. Take him home now, and, if you see him outside again like you did today, take him straight home.’ I still didn’t know what had happened, but at that point, all I cared about was going back to my apartment.

“On another occasion, I went to church, to the Mass. It was very crowded, and there were no seats. I was in uniform, and in walks the mayor and his family. The mayor says to the usher, ‘why is that man standing over there?’ The usher replied that there were no more seats. The mayor says, ‘there’s always a seat for that man in my pew.’ He invited me to sit with him. He also told me that he was meeting Gen-

eral Douglas MacArthur, and asked me if I wanted to meet him. Of course I accepted, and I got to meet the general.”

Three years after John left the service, he met his wife. During their youth, John’s sister had been a best friend with his future wife. The two married in 1954. John decided to raise a family and settle down in New York City. His brother, superintendent of the commercial department at Building 3 of the World Trade Center, found John a job as a handyman. Through hard effort John worked his way up to become superintendent of a high-rise. Jokingly, he recalls, “I could have been building manager, but then I would have had to eat, sleep, and live in that building. So I chose to remain a superintendent.” John stayed on the job for thirty years, until all of his children grew up. He decided to retire to spend

more time with his wife. They had a very happy life together. She passed away from old age after their 53rd anniversary.

John currently resides in Orange County, New York, with his daughter. He is the proud grandfather of fifteen grandchildren, and great-grandfather of seventeen great-grandchildren. He is a member of the American Legion, and an active member of the Military Order of the Purple Heart (MOPH). He continues to serve dutifully at his position within Purple Heart Chapter No. 1782. Their chapter meets at Washington’s Headquarters, in the same spot where, in 1782, General George Washington created the Badge of Military Merit, the forerunner to the Purple Heart.