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## Soldier

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imprisoned in North Korea. The disease, caused by malnutrition, often results in permanent heart damage.

Mr. Salerno also struggled for many years with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The syndrome affects people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event or events.

The war "took a devastating toll on him, physically and psychologically. The punishment of the prison camps never left him," Fantigrossi said during his eulogy at Mr. Salerno's funeral Mass, May 20, at St. Lawrence Church in Greece.

"I often wonder if I could endure what Steve went through, and still carry on," another eulogist, Frank Nicolazzo, remarked. Both he and Fantigrossi, close friends of Mr. Salerno, served in Korea as well.

## Wartime

Mr. Salerno grew up in Rochester and joined the U.S. Army at the age of 17. He was part of the 24th Infantry Division, 5th Regiment combat team, A Company.

He arrived in Korea within months after North Korean Communist forces first crossed the 38th parallel into South Korea on June 25, 1950. Two days after that invasion, President Harry S. Truman ordered the U.S. military into action. They were to be joined eventually by 20 other countries aligned with the United Nations.

"A lot of us were gung-ho about going to war. But once you were there, you realized what could happen to you," Mr. Salerno recalled. "We were in the front line for about three months."

Jim Cannioto, a resident of Waterloo, Seneca County, is another Catholic who became involved in heavy fighting during the war's early days. Cannioto, 70, arrived in Korea less than two weeks after the war began, as part of the 24th Infantry Division's 34th Regiment — the first American unit to fight in the war. He served as a combat medic in the 34th and 19th regiments, and saw most of his troops get wiped out as North Korea intruded deeper and deeper into South Korean territory.

"We got wiped out in Taejon," Cannioto said of the North Koreans' assault on the sixth-largest city in South Korea.

By late 1950, numerous Chinese Communist forces had stepped in to aid the North Koreans. On April 23, 1951, Mr. Salerno was captured in the "Iron Triangle," about 10 miles north of the 38th parallel, during a 300,000-troop Chinese attack — its strongest offensive of the war.

Mr. Salerno spent the next 28 months as a prisoner of war. During the June 15 *Courier* interview, Mr. Salerno revealed scars on his leg from an injury suffered during that period. He tripped and fell, he recalled, after his captors blew a whistle — the signal for them to run and get their daily meal.

Mr. Salerno said his rations usually consisted of rotten sorghum and pig's feet: "We got no milk, bread or fruit. We missed all our nutrition." Though he contracted beriberi, Mr. Salerno fared better than many fellow POWs, who died from malnutrition and lack of treatment for injuries.

"We saw (dead) guys taken out every day," he said. Survivors endured both physical and mental suffering, he added. "Some guys would crack up."

Mr. Salerno found comfort from his ordeal by reading daily from a Bible, the only valuable item he was allowed to keep.

"The one thing I needed, they left it with me," he remarked. "I had a lot of faith in God; I still do. You have to have something to believe in."

He became separated from his Bible at the time of his release. Up until his death, Mr. Salerno had maintained hope that he would someday recover the book.

The war raged up and down Korea until an armistice was reached between North Korea and the United Nations on the morning of July 27, 1953. The cease-fire took effect that night.

Mr. Salerno recalled that he sensed a



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

From left, Diane Spackman, Sally Buck and Stephen Salerno Jr. were among relatives of Korean War POWs at a 50th Anniversary Commemorative Program June 24 at the Korean War Veterans Memorial at Pittsford's White Haven Memorial Park. This memorial bench was dedicated during the program.

peace agreement had been struck because "we didn't hear any airplanes flying over." He was released Aug. 15, 1953, at Kaesong.

"What a feeling that was, seeing the American flag up there," Mr. Salerno said. "That was the happiest day of my life."

"You don't know freedom until you're deprived of it."

## Reflections

According to the U.S. Department of Defense, the Korean War involved more than 1.5 million American soldiers. The United States, though suffering far less human loss than its enemies, incurred more than 33,500 deaths and 100,000 casualties.

The Korean War did not yield a clear-cut victory for the United Nations. In fact, after three years of battle, the demilitarized zone (DMZ) separating North and South Korea was established near the 38th parallel — roughly the same border that existed at the war's beginning.

Even so, Mr. Salerno felt his military duty was well worth the hardships.

"The purpose was to stop Communism, and we stopped it. Because the step after that (for the North Koreans) would have been Taiwan and Japan," he commented.

"What we understood was, Communism was bad," added Ed Weeks of Rochester, who was friendly with Mr. Salerno through veterans' groups.

Weeks served as a B Company rifleman in the Army's 45th Infantry Division, 179th Regiment. He was stationed in Korea from 1952 until after the cease-fire, fighting at Heartbreak Ridge and Christmas Hill.

"The Communists were going to take over this country and enslave it. We were fighting to preserve the same rights that we had," said Weeks, 65, who attends St. Jerome's Church in East Rochester.

The Korean War is commonly referred to as "The Forgotten War." Some histori-



In recent years, Steve Salerno had become more successful in dealing with aftereffects of the Korean War.

ans refer to it as the Korean Conflict or a police occupation, because a war was never officially declared.

"I get angry. Where I was, women and children were killed. That's a war," Mr. Salerno commented. "If you talked to parents (of a U.S. soldier) whose son was lost and you said it was a conflict, I'll bet they'd get angry."

However, attempts to keep the Korean War in the public consciousness have apparently increased in recent years. In 1995 a national Korean War Veterans' Memorial opened in Washington, D.C., and in 1996 the Korean War monument at White Haven Memorial Park was dedicated.

In recent years, Mr. Salerno had done his part to ensure that future generations remembered "The Forgotten War." He and other Korean War veterans made guest appearances at schools in his town, sharing

their experiences.

"Some of the kids didn't even know the Korean War ever existed," he said.

Regarding recent unification talks between North and South Korea, Mr. Salerno said that "it's a good thing" but questioned whether a government could exist that would ensure a harmonious future.

## Post-war struggles

Mr. Salerno had returned home from the war in late 1953. He was discharged and got married three years later. He and Angela have three children and three grandchildren.

But Mr. Salerno said he had trouble keeping a job, and became addiction-prone. (He and his family asked that details of his addiction be left out of this story.)

"I kept having anxiety attacks. Every time things were going good for me, I thought something bad was going to happen," he said.

"It was survival guilt. You made it back, but why didn't your buddies make it back? A lot of people said, 'You've got to put it behind you.' But there's certain things you can't put behind you."

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder's symptoms include recurring memories and dreams of a traumatic event(s); reliving the experience; rapid breathing, sweating or increased heart rate; trouble sleeping; angry outbursts; lack of concentration; and avoidance of dealing with the initial trauma.

Weeks observed that nearly all combat soldiers carry elements of PTSD. "When we get together, we talk about the good times we had there," he said. "Very few of us talk about the actual combat. It's something you want to forget."

But he also noted that POWs, such as Mr. Salerno, are especially affected by PTSD. "They were in captivity for so long, and they lived under a lot rougher conditions — bad weather and the threat of brutality," Weeks explained.

Mr. Salerno said he received psychiatric treatment almost from the time he was discharged. As the years went on, he was encouraged to get his feelings out. He chose to do so by writing an autobiography that was published and sold over the last year.

Angela Salerno felt it wasn't until the late 1980s that her husband finally turned the corner.

"He fought and fought, until he finally got the right help," she said. "He led a good life and did a lot for his family."

## Unforgettable

The Korean War monument at White Haven Memorial Park contains some striking images. Among them are a large stone that lists the names of 135 Rochester-area men killed in the Korean War.

"I've got buddies of mine I played baseball with on that stone," Mr. Salerno remarked during the June 15 interview.

Another stone depicts an Army medic recording a death, while a man grieves in the arms of another soldier over their fallen buddy. Jim Cannioto, quoted earlier in this story, was the medic in the actual photo on which the engraving was based.

And one of the flags flying above the memorial contains the emphatic message, "We Will Never Forget."

On June 24, Mr. Salerno's only son, Steve, made the dedication to Korean War POWs at the ceremony which his father had planned to attend. Earlier that week, at Mr. Salerno's wake, his family erected displays of the book he had written, and photos and newspaper articles from his service days. Mr. Salerno, who was buried in Rochester's Holy Sepulchre Cemetery, was given a military funeral June 20.

The following day, back at the Salerno residence, Mr. Salerno's beloved American flag continued to wave outside.

"The flag's going to stay up," Angela Salerno stated.

**EDITORS' NOTE:** This is a first of a two-part series on Korea. Next week staff writer Rob Cullivan examines how Koreans, Catholic and non-Catholic, view the recently concluded summit between leaders of North and South Korea.