

# Reg Saner

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an excerpt from

## *Back Where the Past Is Mined*

I.

While clearing out our mother's Illinois home after her death in 1993, my sister Rose Marie found, and then mailed to my Boulder address, a plump package containing letters I'd written home from Korea some forty years earlier. Grateful but with mixed feelings I put the unopened bundle of ancient history on a bookshelf, thinking, "Someday . . . maybe." I kept thinking so each time it caught my eye. Years passed.

Then in February of 2000 Martin Jenkins, longtime director of radio drama at the BBC, phoned me from London. He'd come across a literary magazine featuring "soldier poets of the Korean War," including a photo of me as second lieutenant in a burr haircut, age twenty-three, my hand on a jeep-mounted heavy machine gun.

When I voiced surprise at such a publication turning up in England, he said he'd been gathering material for the BBC's annual Armistice Day program, would soon be in Denver, and wondered if I'd participate. Though I've written very little about my share in that undeclared war, officially called a United Nations "police action," his invitation was flattering. Yes, I'd been an infantry platoon leader, but I had done nothing heroic, not even been seriously wounded, just nicked. "That's beside the point," he assured me, saying he'd phone again from Denver.

Put off balance by the call, I spaced out on an embarrassing fact. Whenever I get too near certain memories from that era, I enter the outer fringes of an uncanny magnetic field. A vague grief gains intensity the further I move into its charged zone, verging on tearful emotions I don't want to have. If, however, I turn aside, the rising grief recedes. Among the few poems I've done on my

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experience in Korea, a prose poem places it “Back where the past is mined,” and an unrhymed sonnet, “Flying Iron,” admits that certain memories won’t go away without tears. But my male identity recoils from weepiness, despite assurances that keeping a stiff upper lip is outmoded.

U.S. casualties in Korea made the war there far deadlier on a per diem basis than those in either Vietnam or Iraq, but how many people know that? Taking the lowest estimates available—the *lowest*—civilian and military casualties on both sides totaled just under two million. The civilian toll alone was horrific. Yet it’s all so faded from memory that some call it the Forgotten War, which may explain why the BBC decided to depart from its Armistice Day tradition: instead of featuring World War II, it would honor the fiftieth anniversary of the fighting in Korea. I agree it should be remembered, even if I’d rather forget.

In early April of that year I found myself a guest of the Air Force Academy as keynote speaker at a spring ceremony honoring outstanding young teachers on the faculty there. Because my talk dwelt on Aeschylus as a soldier poet and Socrates as a citizen soldier of ancient Athens, my personal experience wasn’t relevant. Moreover, every uniform in the large audience of faculty and their friends was air force blue; however, when I spoke with members of a small-group workshop, the camo fatigues of the young cadets sent me toward that magnetic field and into a mounting sorrow that waned only when I looked elsewhere. The reaction surprised me, but I dismissed it as a cheap indulgence in self-pity.

I recently heard television football commentator John Madden say of the sport’s violence: “If you play so much as one down of NFL football, I guarantee you’ll feel it for the rest of your life.” Hyperbolic as that might be for football, soldiers feel their combat experience lifelong, often to their cost.



In the summer of 2007, expecting to unearth a detail or two for this essay, I at last opened that trove of gone time—a full fourteen years after receiving it. Onto the dining room table spilled several postcards from Fort Riley, Kansas; a couple of old-fashioned telegrams, their messages in teletype caps on little strips pasted to the sheets; a fat envelope postmarked New York, though its many pages were written on a troopship in the Pacific, then mailed from Japan; and thirty-one letters.



*I rarely felt as tranquil as I look here, in August 1952. Out of sight on my right hip is a holstered .45 caliber pistol whose daily weight cured me of ever wanting to own one.*

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Frayed at the edges of their red-white-and-blue borders, the envelopes bore instead of postage my block capitals, FREE AIR MAIL. A quick scan of the first half dozen, pencil-written in a large hand, made it disappointingly clear that I'd avoided any fact or event that might worry a mother. "Up here at the front," I wrote shortly after arrival in the combat zone, "things are so quiet unless I slip on a rock I can't get hurt." This claim set the tone, letter after letter, with me telling one story while I lived another. Late in my Korean tour of duty hints of lower morale began to creep in.

The letters' transparent resolve to spare familial nerves was abetted by their callow style—as if I were still the gee-whiz freshman writing home from college. Good news included my meteoric rise in the military. My company commander's five-minute ritual had removed from the collar of my fatigues the yellow bars of a second lieutenant, replacing them with the silver bars of a first lieutenant. He then told me I'd also been promoted to lead D Company's platoon of 81mm mortars. Only then did I mention in my letters risks associated with our machines guns. To further make light of it all I sometimes ended with a goofy diagram. Clumsily drawn by candlelight, one meant to show how our mortars fired from "defilade," hidden behind a hill, with their rounds bursting in enemy terrain. Its botched perspective seems, however, to show them exploding sky high. Naturally, the fact that enemy counter-fire kept trying to knock out my mortar platoon never appeared in my homeward dispatches.

My disappointment with the revisited letters soon gave way to relief. "It's just as well," I told myself. "Why exhume all that now?" On release from active duty I hadn't joined the reserve, or any vets organization; nor had I, though personally invited by the organizer, attended reunions of my old unit, a good one: First Battalion, Fourteenth Infantry Regiment, Twenty-fifth Infantry Division.

With the public relations buildup to Operation Shock and Awe, memories long dead had begun to stir in their graves. I plastered antiwar stickers on my pickup and grieved for the poor guys who would be bringing home wounds they didn't even know they had. The consequences wouldn't end with them and their families but would diffuse throughout society, and down generations. Few people referring to "the cost of war" have any idea.

Just last year, yet another talk I gave, to a local civic organization of men, went okay—for a while. My topic, which I thought urgent, was PTSD among Iraq returnees. Once I began reading from first-person accounts of afflicted combat soldiers, that did it. My listeners got a firsthand example of how buried grief can crawl out of its grave, and I finally learned my lesson. Never again in

public. And, as I say, I was one of the lucky ones, with war's aftereffects on me having been among the mildest possible. Nonetheless, their troublesome longevity spurs my concern for our soldiers in Iraq. Already by 2006 the suicide rate in the U.S. Army had risen higher than ever in twenty-six years of record keeping. If Vietnam veterans are anything to go by, more Iraq vets will die by suicide than in combat.

Perhaps my anguish—and it has been that—for soldiers returning with wounds they're unaware of admits indirectly to the very aftereffects I've just now denied feeling. Perhaps it's the displacement of a sympathy I've never shown myself. It could even stem from reasonable concern pure and simple. Whatever its origin, I found myself—after more than fifty years of near silence on the matter—returning to those intense, chancy months I spent in Korea.

