

CASEY UNIT BURNS BATTALION COLORS ANNUAL CEREMONY

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CAMP CASEY, South Korea — Eleven American veterans of a brutal Korean War battle watched their battalion colors burn Sunday at Camp Casey, commemorating a historic defeat that saw thousands of their comrades killed captured or wounded.

The annual Burning of the Colors ceremony is a re-enactment of the actions of 2nd Engineer Battalion Commander Lt. Col. Alarich Zacherle at Kunu-ri, North of Pyongyang on Nov. 30, 1950.

The engineers were guarding the rear of the 2nd Infantry Division as it retreated in the face of overwhelming odds, under attack from five Chinese divisions.



Cpl. Jeremy Bradley, Maj. Ivan Beckman, and Sgt. Major Thomas Gibbons (left to right), all from the 2nd Engineer Battalion, 2nd Infantry Division, burn the colors Sunday during an annual ceremony to commemorate a Korean War battle in which

According to the program for the ceremony, “Zacherle realized the 2nd Engineer Battalion would soon be overrun and unable to withdraw. In an effort to deny the enemy the Battalion colors as a trophy of war, he ordered the colors to be burned.”

All but one officer from the 2nd Engineer Battalion was killed or captured in the battles around Kunu-ri. More than 5,000 American soldiers were killed, wounded or captured. Many of those taken prisoner did not survive the harsh conditions of the North Korean prisoner of war camps.

Then-Cpl. Richard Morrison was one of the few men who saw the colors burn and lived to tell of it. He attended his first burning ceremony over the weekend.

Morrison was helping carry a wounded soldier to an aid station, when he came upon a group of other men from the battalion.

“There was a glow up ahead and a guy behind us said: ‘Those sons of bitches have got a fire going up there,’” Morrison recalled Sunday.

“Someone else said, ‘Shut up back there, the officers are burning stuff.’”

Morrison was captured during the retreat south and spent 33 months in a POW camp.

Morrison and other veterans of the battle read a few names of fallen brothers in arms at this year's ceremony. Morrison chose to honor his friend, Sgt. Litison Aetonu, who also was taken prisoner at Kunu-ri but died of pneumonia in a POW camp.

Another Kunu-ri veteran, Sgt. Edward Smith, attended the event this year to watch the colors burn for the first time.

"I was already a POW when the colors were burned so all this is new to me," he said.

For Smith, Kunu-ri marked the start of a traumatic experience as a prisoner during which the Chinese attempted to indoctrinate him with constant lectures extolling the benefits of communism.

Despite the bad treatment, Smith holds no grudges.

"I came back, and I am in one piece. A lot of people didn't come back," he said.

Cpl. Jeremy Bradley, a current 2nd Engineer who participated in the ceremony, said he was honored to be a part of it.

"While the colors were burning I was thinking about the past and what the veterans had gone through — about all their heartbreak and all the hard times they had," he said.

Second Engineer Battalion veteran and Honorary Sgt Major Lawrence Streeby Jr. said the real heroes were the men who didn't come back from Kunu-ri and those who were taken prisoner.

"They gave their lives defending their positions as the rear guard of 2ID even though they were outnumbered 10 to one," he said.

Second Infantry Division's current commander, Maj. Gen. John Wood, said the "great miracle" that is South Korea today can be traced back to the actions of the 2nd Engineers 53 years ago.