

UNDERWOOD, JOHN

RANK: MARINE (ASSAULT ENGINEER)

DECORATIONS:

YEARS OF SERVICE: 1948-1953

SHIPS:

OPERATIONAL SERVICE: KOREA (POW), CTCRM, MEDITERRANEAN

UNITS: 41 INDEPENDENT COMMANDO

Born 1931, enlisted Deal 1948, 532 Squad. Trained at Eastney and Bickleigh, attended Assault Engineers School – details given. To 41 Commando. Two raids on tunnels/bridges in N. Korea. Wounded in mine explosion.

Details of Battle of Hellfire Pass (Nov 1950). References US Major Maclaughlin. Taken prisoner, three week march north to indoctrination camp, across the Taebaek Mountains. Cold, rough conditions. Three months later all were marched back to Pyongyang.

Prisoners transferred to a camp beyond the Yalu River. Underwood contracted yellow jaundice/anaemic dysentery. Describes camp life, conditions and food. Indoctrination continued. No Red Cross parcels received.

Peace talks began in 1951; prisoners only heard Chinese version. Many comments about Marine Condron – selected by Royal Marine prisoners to negotiate with Chinese; then chose China, not repatriation. Describes daily routine/further attempts to indoctrinate POWs.

Repatriation: Describes 'burial' and re-burial of POWs and 'body-swaps'. Taken to 'Freedom Village', released in August 1953. Returned to UK, leave and medical checks followed by draft to Chatham. Difficult to settle (no offer of help for mental problems); dietary change caused medical problems. To Lympstone as Assault Engineer Instructor but badly burned own face with a phosphorous charge. Medically discharged.

Korean War left scars. He summarises thoughts on the war, subsequent political thinking, reunions at 41 Commando and 1st USMC Division and also, in Seoul, the 50th Anniversary of the Peace agreement.