During the Korean War, the United States for the first time shipped home for burial the bodies of Americans killed in action. With little by way of ceremony or pomp, the remains of soldiers who died in Korea were interred in simple graves that merely identified the person’s name, rank, and date of birth. Only later did Americans think to add “Korea” to the stones, ascribing a time and place, if not a meaning, to their deaths. More than thirty-six thousand American soldiers ended their wartime tours of duty in Korea this way while another 1.8 million returned home alive but alone and shrouded in the same anonymity, the forgotten soldiers of a forgotten war.¹

Unlike their older brothers and cousins who served in World War II and returned to ticker-tape parades and welcoming bands, Korean War veterans returned quietly to a country that in their absence scarcely missed them. Though Americans initially rallied to the war drum when President Harry S. Truman called on the nation to defend South Korea from communist aggression, the lack of meaningful home front participation in the form of rationing or other personal sacrifice soon made Korea only a minor distraction for the American public. As soldiers still green to battle clung to the Пusan Perimeter, as marines fought their way out of Chosin Reservoir with frozen feet and staggering casualties, and as GIs tried to hold the line in a bloody stalemate half a world away, Americans at home went on with business as usual, concentrating on making the most of the prosperous post–World War II economy. Fearing wartime shortages, they snapped up furniture and televisions, refrigerators and cars.² In Fords and Lincolns and Chevrolets, the war drove right out of the minds of many Americans and into the middle and back pages of newspapers. Returning veterans could only wonder at the world that seemingly had forgotten them, surprised that “there was no evidence that the civilian population of the USA even knew (or cared) that those of us getting off the ship had seen desperate combat.”³

Perhaps understandably, average Americans found themselves too busy to pay attention to the conflict raging thousands of miles away in Korea or to the soldiers trickling home, but movie makers, novelists, and even historians proved no better at acknowledging the sacrifices made by those American
servicemen and women. Throughout the war and in the years following, Holly-
wood produced a number of war movies, but most of them looked back to
the “good war,” World War II, for inspiration. The silver screen showed John
Wayne, Henry Fonda, Humphrey Bogart, Robert Mitchum, Randolph Scott,
and a host of other stars heroically battling Nazis and “Nips” in such clas-
sics as *Flying Leathernecks* (1951), *Battle Cry* (1955), and *The Bridge on the
River Kwai* (1957). To be sure, Korea did provide the backdrop for a number
of films, but with few exceptions these failed to catch hold of the popular
imagination and often simply reused themes and storylines from World War
II pictures. Forms, such as *Bamboo Prison* (1954), *Prisoner of War* (1954),
Young and the Brave* (1963), and *Sergeant Ryker* (1968), that broke from the
World War II model tended to focus on Korean War POWs, feeding the pub-
lic’s appetite for tales of “brainwashing” and collaboration but doing little to
educate the audience on the real war or to bring a measure of positive atten-
tion to those who served. Later films, like *M*A*S*H* (1970), which set out to
portray the lives of doctors and nurses in a mobile Army surgical hospital
during the Korean War, proved more adept at reflecting the values and issues
belonging to the Vietnam War era than at depicting life in Korea. More
recently, the trend remains the same—movie studios and television networks
churn out new World War II classics like *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *Pearl
HBO’s ten-part miniseries *The Pacific* (2010), but largely ignore the Korean
War and the men and women who served in it. When Paramount Pictures
remade *Manchurian Candidate* in 2004, originally a movie centering on a
prisoner of war brainwashed by the Chinese, they stripped the story of its
Korean War setting, placing it instead in the Gulf War.

With its dependency upon public interest for earnings, one can readily
appreciate Hollywood’s reasons for paying such short shrift to the Korean
War and its veterans, but academics and scholars also have shown great
reluctance to tackle the first hot war of the Cold War. Historians have written
hundreds, even thousands of books on Vietnam, the second major flare-up
of the Cold War, but they have produced only a handful of volumes dedi-
cated to the Korean War. The majority of these works concentrate on the
military campaign itself or on the foreign policy that failed to prevent hostili-
ties. Some look at the American home front during the Cold War, but gener-
ally these focus so narrowly as to preclude any real analysis of the impact of
the Korean War on domestic life. Elaine Tyler May’s landmark study on the
Cold War family, *Homeward Bound*, talks at length about the structure of
the American family in the 1950s but never addresses the millions of families
who sent husbands, sons, and fathers overseas to fight in Korea. Not surprisingly, with so little attention paid in general to the conflict, the scholarly literature all but excludes Korean War veterans. Only a few works, like Rudy Tomedi’s *No Bugles, No Drums*, Linda Granfield’s *I Remember Korea*, and Donald Knox’s two-volume oral history of the Korean War, take a close look at those who risked their lives on the peninsula. While these books do a good job of allowing veterans to tell their stories, they provide little analysis, focusing primarily on wartime experiences and leaving the Korean War soldier turned veteran shrouded in mystery.

With the sixtieth anniversary of the commencement of Korean War now past, the time has come for a fresh and more comprehensive look at the men and women who marched to the “land of the morning calm” from June 1950 to July 1953. Of the 6.8 million survivors of the Korean War era, only 3.9 million remained in 2000, and in that year the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs estimated that by 2010 only 2.5 million would still be alive, none under the age of seventy. The generation is passing and with it the opportunity to give a face to those who served and to understand the impact that this war had on veterans and on the world to which they returned.

This study focuses on the veterans of the Korean War, their upbringing, training, and wartime experiences, attitudes, and post-Korea lives. Chapter 1 explores these veterans’ generational background. Raised during the Great Depression and the Second World War, the men and women who served in Korea learned first-hand the sacrifices that Americans might be called upon to make in the name of country. After the defeat of the Nazis and Japanese, however, few expected that one day Uncle Sam would ask them to participate in a ground war of their own. Still, situated between World War II and the Vietnam War, this generation patriotically heeded the call to colors as they had seen fathers and brothers do in the 1940s rather than seeking to avoid the draft and shunning volunteering like their sons and daughters in the 1960s and 1970s. Following up on these themes, chapter 2 discusses the various circumstances compelling Americans to accept military service and chronicles the experience of mustering into the armed forces in the early 1950s. This chapter also examines the Korean War draft, demonstrating that while the burden of military service fell fairly equally upon Americans regardless of socioeconomic status, it also set the stage for some of the draft inequalities associated with the Vietnam War era.

Chapter 3 evaluates the military training given those who served on the Korean Peninsula. Entrusting the nation’s security to atomic deterrence and air power, President Truman pared down the military in the 1940s with the terrible result that the military had to secure manpower for Korea by calling
up National Guardsmen and reservists and shortening the training cycle for new inductees. Effective at putting an army in the field, these measures also ensured that many soldiers and marines rotated into the war zone armed with a “can do” spirit but questionable and untested military prowess. However, military training as a whole did successfully begin preparing GIs to tolerate racial integration as the need for faster training outweighed the need for racially segregated housing and instruction.

Chapters 4 and 5 follow Americans as they entered the dirty, bloody war on Korea’s hills. Wondering if the land and people on whose behalf they had been summoned could be worth the price, men fought not only against the enemy but also against frigid winters, blazing summers, terrifying scenes of brutality, and the lesser-known reality of life in a war zone, boredom. As the war dragged on, it became increasingly clear to those fulfilling their obligations overseas that the American public had little interest in the struggle over real estate in Korea, fostering a sense of isolation from the home front. Most rotated out of the war after accumulating enough points, but those unfortunate enough to have been taken prisoner either died in captivity or suffered months or years of torture and mistreatment. Chapter 5 chronicles the experiences of American prisoners of war captured by the North Koreans and Chinese.

Chapter 6 provides a brief interlude in the narrative to explore the lives of women and African Americans in theater. Seldom exposed to the war in the same way as soldiers or marines, nurses and female support personnel nonetheless learned the effects of battle and suffered the uncertainties of living in a war zone. African Americans, meanwhile, often viewed the struggle as an opportunity to prove their worth and achieve equality back home. Manpower pressures on the peninsula forced commanders in the field to integrate units there, and by the end of the war blacks and whites regularly served together at both training and duty stations. Men of different races came to eat, bunk, and fight together, with the result that biracial friendships and a newfound respect for each other developed. Few Korean War veterans returned home to become civil rights activists, but their wartime exposure to different types of people led many veterans to question the morality of segregation at home and to envision the possibility of an integrated America.

Chapter 7 details the process of leaving Korea and looks at what happened to veterans once they returned to the home front. In contrast to previous wars, service members returned home individually, rotating out after collecting a set number of points based on length and type of service in country. Some did arrive to parades or welcoming bands, but most experienced a quieter homecoming. Rather than celebrating the end of the war as in 1945,
Americans seemed anxious to simply put Korea behind them as soon as possible. Congress passed a Korean GI Bill in 1952, but it was less generous than that of World War II in its readjustment benefits, further acknowledgment of the country’s tempered gratitude. So rewarded for doing their duty, many Korean War veterans, unlike their World War II predecessors, tried to forget their service and pick up their lives just where they had left off. Unfortunately, due to mental or physical injuries sustained in Korea, many found it impossible to return to normal life, suffering in silence for decades. Only after veterans of the Vietnam War began laying claim to expanded Veterans Administration benefits did Korean War veterans begin to seek and find available assistance in dealing with their own posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other war-related issues.

Pulling the narrative together, chapter 8 looks at Korean War veterans in recent years. Creating organizations such as the Chosin Few and the Korean War Veterans Association, these once “forgotten soldiers” rekindled their veteran identity and began to seek wider recognition for their service. Specifically, Korean War veterans successfully lobbied for a national memorial and for Veterans Administration medical benefits. Once labeled the “silent generation,” those who served their country in the Korean War era have come full circle, from ignoring their status as veterans to embracing it.

To some, the Korean War must seem long ago and perhaps irrelevant to the modern world. Given the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the cyclical return of veterans to American society, however, the endeavor to identify both the impact of war on participants and the impact of veterans on American culture remains a worthy one. More than sixty years since their war began, it is time to recognize the veterans of Korea, to move them out from under the shadow cast by the Second World War’s “Greatest Generation” and into the light of the national consciousness. Relying upon such diverse sources as statistical data from the Bradley Commission Report, Korean War Veteran Surveys, personal memoirs, oral histories, archival records, public opinion polls, Project Clear reports, contemporary newspaper and magazine articles, and studies on the draft, this work seeks to give a voice to those who served in the Korean War and to carve for them a place in the larger context of American history.
Americans who served in the Korean War grew up during the Great Depression and World War II. Like this schoolboy learning to use a ration book in 1943, they absorbed lessons of sacrifice and patriotism. Courtesy of the National Archives (photograph no. 535567).