

# Don Rodewald and the Korean Conflict Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

Regular readers of this column will recall several stories about American wars. Not so much about battles and strategy, but about individual service men usually. We've visited the Civil War and both WWI and WWII, Vietnam, and even the Spanish American War briefly. Noted also were burial sites in the county from Napoleon's Moscow fiasco.

Missing, however, has been the Korean War, largely because of lack of local references. It is not from lack of interest, for this author, after more than three years of service in WWII, was nearly recalled for the Koran affair. That important conflict rivals Vietnam in casualties, and ended in an uneasy division of that Far Eastern Nation with lasting repercussions yet today.

Ours was not an oversight, but general lack of information on local implications. True, many citizens served well and with honor, but we found no flash point of city or county involvement, such as the Baraboo 21 in WWI, Company H in WWII, made up largely of local men, or the Blue Spaders during Vietnam.

There is, however a significant contribution of one local man, also recognized for service in WWII. He remained in service after that war, and made significant contributions to the Korean endeavor. He was, of course, Baraboo's Don Rodewald. We consider

now his significance in Korea, and subsequent achievements.

## Early Failures.

A graduate of Baraboo High School in 1937, Rodewald is said to have nearly failed to graduate. A farm boy in the days of Charles Lindberg, and goaded on by seat of the pants flights at local fairs and airports, he caught the flying fever early, and retained it all his life.

Flying lessons in a Piper Cub in Spring Green whetted his appetite, but like high school, he flunked his first year at the University in Madison, followed by failing to pass the Air Corps Cadet program. A year in Co. H, the National Guard, provided maturity and military knowledge, and then he was accepted into the Air Corps, significantly in the Eddie Rickenbacker 94<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron.

Don's rise in the air Force is chronicled in his very readable book, Tiger Tenacity, and we must skip many events in his career before and during WWII. Although he again failed the Air Corps Cadet program, he became a ground crewman. Opportunity to fly came with attendance at a somewhat secret meeting.

The result was that Rodewald was officially dismissed from the army "for the convenience of the government" but for a far more significant role in our National Defense--China! Now he was an aviator!

We've previously written of Rodewald's service in the pre-war and later exploits of the Flying Tigers, and their service to the beleaguered Chinese before WWII, flying supplies over the Burma Road area. Our high school and University of Wisconsin scholastic failure had found his calling, well recounted in his book.



Don Rodewald

### Korea

But this article concerns Korea, so we will fast forward. Now we find that our high school and college and Air Cadet failure has become an Air Force Major! His service in the Pacific Area was significant. Though he states that he had caught some ground fire while flying in WWII, he never had met an enemy in the air. This was to change in Korea.

We cannot recount in a short newspaper article the battle exploits of Rodewald in Korea, which far exceeded his experiences in WWII. Rodewald's Korea experience featured frequent contact with the Russian MIG plane piloted by North Korean or Chinese pilots.

As an expert airman, he flew 27 missions on his first tour, downing one MIG, and then reported his findings on the quality of our planes, and particularly the gun-sights, to the Pentagon. Several pages in the book are dedicated to the development of new firepower for the planes, as well as well-written tales of air combat.

### A Plane Crash

Now a Lt. Colonel, Rodewald's life changed abruptly when he suffered a power failure and crashed while landing at Shaw Air Force base in South Carolina. Extensive injuries including his spine resulted in the loss of both legs. Rode proved that you can't keep a good man down, and he soon had a significant job with Lockheed. On a trip to China he and fellow Flying Tigers were honored by President Chiang Kai Check.

Soon Rodewald was flying again, despite the loss of both legs and other complications. We've already detailed, in another article, the story of how he flew around the world alone, the first

paraplegic to do so. To stay on a snowmobile, he had Velcro sewed to his pants and the seat!

This Korean Veteran, who nearly failed high school, flunked out of UW Madison, and twice failed the Air Cadet's entrance requirements, went on to serve his country well in WWII, and exceedingly well in Korea. He dealt admirably with his handicap for the rest of his life. Rodewald died in Sept, 2002 following a life of adventure and achievement rarely accorded to one man.

He exemplified the spirit of the men of the Korean conflict, too often ignored in our nation's military history. He brought honor to his generation and to his community.

The Korea conflict was more significant than one might think. We lost 627 Wisconsin men, compared to 760 Wisconsin men in Vietnam. The Korean losses were in the 25 month period of war in Korea, while the Vietnam losses covered several years.

Sauk County lost four men in Korea: Laverne Gruber, Lawrence Scott, John Thorn, and Clarence Weiss. We might want to fly the flag in honor of them on Armistice Day.



**Note:** After publication of this article, Frank Terbilcox Jr. contacted us with information on another Korean Veteran, Keith Borck of Baraboo and N. Freedom.

Terbilcox writes “Keith was a helicopter pilot and was sent to Korea in 1953. During a hot battle he was shot down by enemy fire, got into another copper and was shot down a second time...This fire-fight lasted eight hours with Keith going forward to rescue survivors and treat their wounds.”

“During this series of battles he set a world record in a Chinook Helicopter of 7 hours and 20 minutes in Korea. For his bravery Keith was to be presented the Distinguished Service Cross by General Douglas McArthur at the pentagon .. On the day that this was to happen, General McArthur died” and the presentation was made later.

Terbilcox reports that Keith Borck became a lobster fisherman in Key West, and has had some contact with the famous Jacques Cousteau who was researching lobsters. Terbilcox rightly comments: So “Baraboo had another great boy that survived a rough war.”