COPPER AND CHANCE

A Railroad Man's War

Kermit LeRoy Fredrickson
1923 – 1989

Written by Ellen Forderer
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Prologue

You knew your grandfather LeRoy — his precision with tools, the way he approached work with care and method. What you may not have known is how those qualities were shaped by his time in the Korean War. He rarely talked about those years, even with me. What I knew came in fragments: a hernia that changed everything, a converted chicken coop in California, classes of young soldiers heading to combat.

It took years of piecing together military records, family stories, and historical research to understand what he actually did during the war, and why it mattered. This chronicle is my attempt to show you a side of your grandfather you knew but never fully understood — a man who did essential work with precision and care, even when no one was watching. The man you knew was shaped by these years in ways he never talked about.

The story of how Kermit LeRoy Fredrickson spent his war begins with invisible work — the kind that keeps systems running, that no one notices until it fails. Railroad lines. Communication wires. Pack animal loads balanced to the ounce. The precision and care required for work that, if done right, no one ever sees.

In January 1949, when Kermit LeRoy Fredrickson received his draft notice in Minneapolis, the United States was still trying to figure out what peacetime meant. World War II had ended less than four years earlier. The country had demobilized rapidly, slashing military budgets, bringing troops home, converting factories from tanks to refrigerators. The Cold War was intensifying, but most Americans believed the shooting war was over. The draft continued, but it was supposed to be temporary — a brief obligation before men returned to civilian life and the work of building postwar America.

Kermit was twenty-five, older than most draftees. He was born on 19 April 1923 in Ismay, Montana. By 1949 he was a railroad lineman in Minneapolis, part of the workforce that kept America's transportation infrastructure running. Railroads were still the backbone of American commerce in those years: moving grain, livestock, manufactured goods, coal. The work required precision and technical skill. You climbed poles in all weather, strung wire for signals and communications, maintained the systems that kept trains on schedule and passengers safe.

Basic training at Fort Riley, Kansas taught him how to march, shoot, and follow orders. After basic training, the Army sent him to Camp Carson, Colorado, a mountain training facility where soldiers learned to operate in terrain where trucks couldn't reach. Pack animals were still essential military equipment in 1949, especially for mountain warfare. Kermit worked with mules, learning the patience and precision required to load panniers — bags slung over the back of an animal — balance the load exactly, secure every rope and strap, understand that carelessness on a mountain trail could kill the animal, the handler, or the soldiers depending on the supplies getting through.

On 25 June 1949, between assignments at Camp Carson, Kermit married Mayre Alyes Hansen in Colorado Springs. They went out to eat. Kermit forgot to put money in the parking meter. By the time they came back, there was a ticket on the windshield. When he went to pay it, he mentioned that he had just gotten married. The officer looked at him, smiled, and said, "You've gotten into enough trouble today," then tore up the ticket.

They were part of a postwar marriage boom — millions of young couples starting families, buying houses with VA loans, building the suburbs that would define American life for the next generation.

The pack animal work continued through the rest of 1949. By the time Kermit received his honorable discharge on 25 January 1950, the Cold War was shifting from abstract tension to concrete threat. The Soviet Union had tested its first atomic bomb in August 1949, ending America's nuclear monopoly. China had fallen to Communist forces. Washington was ramping up intelligence operations, security screenings, loyalty investigations. But most Americans still believed they could avoid another

shooting war.

Kermit returned to Minneapolis with Mayre. He went back to railroad work in a city that was booming with postwar prosperity. Minnesota's economy was growing, agriculture modernizing, manufacturing expanding, new suburbs spreading outward from the Twin Cities core. For young couples like Kermit and Mayre, the future looked stable. They had a small apartment, steady work, and plans for starting a family.

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25 June 1950 — their first wedding anniversary — North Korean forces crossed the 38th parallel in a full-scale invasion of South Korea. This was a decisive act that turned a political division into an international war. Within days, the United Nations intervened, and the conflict quickly expanded, drawing in U.S. troops and later Chinese forces. By October, the Army was recalling men, and Kermit's name appeared on the list.

Kermit's orders arrived with no room for negotiation: report to Fort Lewis, Washington. No dependents. No personal vehicles. Preparation for deployment to Korea. Fort Lewis was the primary embarkation point for the Pacific — soldiers arrived there, received final processing and equipment, then boarded transports for the war zone. Kermit understood what the orders meant.

In Minneapolis, Mayre kissed her husband goodbye and watched him head west with only what the Army allowed. What she felt in that moment isn't written in any record, but the strength it required is unmistakable. She was newly married, suddenly alone, and facing a future shaped by forces far beyond her control. There was no dramatic farewell, no certainty of when or if he would return. What remained was resolve: the quiet, steady courage to let him go, to hold the household together in his absence, and to carry the weight of waiting without complaint.

At Fort Lewis, during the medical screening, doctors found the hernia. Surgery was required. It was a common condition, easily correctable, but it meant delay. While Kermit recovered, other men from his processing group continued through the system. They received their final assignments, boarded transports, and headed to Korea. And somewhere over the Pacific, the plane carrying troops Kermit would have traveled with crashed. No survivors.

The details of the crash are incomplete. Its significance is not. Survival turned on timing, paperwork, and a medical note that could easily have been overlooked. War did not always sort men by bravery or strength. Sometimes it sorted them by clerical lines. What followed was not clarity, but waiting. Whether it was the surgery that kept him grounded, or the scheduling that followed, the outcome was the same. Kermit Fredrickson survived a plane crash he never boarded.

After surgery, Kermit's records went missing. In an Army scrambling to expand after years of postwar downsizing, misfiled paperwork was common — lost somewhere in the bureaucratic machinery of a military processing thousands of men simultaneously. For weeks, he waited. It was the kind of

institutional limbo that wartime created constantly: men falling through the cracks of an overwhelmed system, waiting for paperwork that would tell them where they were supposed to be.

Kermit waited. And when his records were finally found and reviewed, a single detail changed his trajectory entirely.

His civilian occupation: Railroad Lineman.

New orders arrived: Camp Roberts, California. Communications instructor, 7th Armored Division training program. This time, dependents and personal vehicles were authorized. Kermit called Mayre. The rules had changed. Not long after that phone call, Mayre boarded a train to California.

Camp Roberts sprawled across forty thousand acres of dry, rolling hills covered in chaparral and oak. It had been mostly shuttered after World War II, but the Korean War brought it roaring back to life. By late 1950, the camp was processing roughly three hundred thousand troops — turning civilians into infantry and armor specialists in compressed training cycles before shipping them to Korea. The 7th Armored Division ran much of the training, and the Army chose Camp Roberts specifically because the terrain resembled Korea: steep hills, limited roads, the kind of country where communication lines meant the difference between coordinated operations and chaos.

Housing was a chronic problem. California was experiencing explosive postwar growth: new suburbs, expanding cities, industries converting from wartime production to consumer goods. Military installations like Camp Roberts created sudden demand that overwhelmed local housing markets. Rental houses near Paso Robles and San Miguel were expensive and scarce. Many military families settled for whatever shelter they could find. Kermit and Mayre moved into a converted chicken coop. It had walls, electricity, and running water — features that mattered. Mayre set it up to live in. Meals were made. Days settled into routine. Whatever permanence was supposed to look like would come later.

In the converted chicken coop, Mayre watched her husband review lesson plans at night, check training schedules, prepare for the next day’s classes. She understood what he was doing even if he never said it explicitly: teaching with the precision and care of someone who knew that small details could mean life or death, that invisible work mattered, that doing it right was not optional.

Kermit’s day began at 0600 hours. The training schedule left little margin. Signal Corps casualties in Korea had to be replaced, and replacements had to be ready fast. New classes arrived every few weeks — draftees and reservists, many with no prior exposure to military equipment. They were trained in compressed cycles, then sent on.

Kermit taught all of it. Mornings were classroom instruction: communication theory, Army doctrine, how the equipment worked and why proper procedures mattered. Afternoons were field exercises across Camp Roberts’ hills — stringing wire that wouldn’t break under stress, troubleshooting dead lines,

operating radios while infantry companies maneuvered, maintaining communications nets under simulated combat conditions.

His teaching philosophy came directly from railroad work and pack animal handling: precision mattered, shortcuts killed, invisible work was essential work. He was methodical and demanding but never cruel. Sloppy work earned correction and repetition. Good work earned quiet acknowledgment. The trainees learned that communications specialists were the invisible infrastructure of combat operations — if the lines worked, units could coordinate fire and movement; if they failed, soldiers died isolated and unsupported.

By fall 1951, Kermit had trained hundreds of Signal Corps specialists. On a warm October afternoon, he stood outside the barracks and watched another class load onto an airplane bound for Korea. The trainees carried packs, rifles, field equipment, and the knowledge he'd given them about field telephones, wire-stringing, radio procedure — skills that might keep them alive or might not be enough.

Kermit watched them go. He was not a hero. He had not seen combat. He had survived by accident — a hernia, lost records, and bureaucratic details about railroad work. But he had spent the life that chance gave him doing the invisible work correctly: teaching young men how to keep their units talking, how to maintain lines under pressure, how to understand that shortcuts could get someone killed.

In the mathematics of war, there was no way to measure the value of that work. Some of those trainees would die in Korea regardless of what he'd taught them. Some would survive because of it. Kermit would never know which was which. But he had done what railroad work had taught him to do: maintain the invisible infrastructure with precision and care, understanding that if it worked, the world kept moving, and if it failed, everything stopped.

The plane crash that killed the men he would have traveled with remained an unspoken fact. The hernia that saved him required no acknowledgment. Kermit Fredrickson had learned long ago that some things — the most important things — were invisible, essential, and required no recognition beyond the knowledge that you had done them right.

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About the Author

I'm Ellen Forderer, and I live in North Dakota. I'm the daughter of Kermit LeRoy Fredrickson, and I wrote this story for my boys so they could learn about their grandfather's service in the Korean War — sharing stories they had never heard about.

For decades, I've preserved our family history through genealogy scrapbooks, combining photographs and journaling. Writing short chronicles captures what pictures alone cannot. This story is part of my effort to make sure those memories are remembered and passed on.

A Note on AI Assistance

This chronicle was written with the assistance of Claude, an AI tool developed by Anthropic, as part of the Chronicle Makers 10-Day Writing Sprint. The author assembled the research, provided the source material, directed the narrative, and revised the final text. Any errors in the finished work are the author's responsibility.

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