

THE COLONEL AND THE PRIVATE

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THE GAZETTE

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THE COLONEL

AND THE PRIVATE

57 years later, two vets have become close friends

BY DAVE HUGHES

YOUR HUB CONTRIBUTOR

My wife and I just spent four great days with Mike and Colleen Verlarde from southern California. Fifty-seven years ago, Mike and I were also together, but under very different circumstances. I was “Lieutenant Hughes” and he was “Private Verlarde.” And we were in the middle of one of the bloodiest periods of modern war. I was a very recent West Point graduate and already had six months of combat under my belt leading my 30 man Infantry platoon through the bitter 1950 winter retreat from the Yalu River in the Korean War. Mike Verlarde joined us in the spring of '51. Soon afterward I was put in command of Company K, 7th Cavalry — the proud descendants of Custer’s out?t — as we squared off against the huge, dug-in, implacable foe — the Chinese 65th CCF Army — on the hills south of the Imjin River.

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Now this hub article is more about Mike than me. My record is well-known, played out over a long military career with many honors through two Wars during which I rose to the rank of full colonel before retiring. But Private Verlarde's story as a typical young patriotic blue collar American has always been interesting to me. Even though he still calls me "Lieutenant Hughes" — for that is how he remembered me in those violent days of 1951 — we are today as close as two men (he 75 and I 80) could be, We had gone through the Gates of Hell together and survived. During our days together just last week, I pulled out of him and his wife Colleen, his life's story I had never fully heard before, Mike was born of parents who had immigrated from Mexico to the vicinity of Hollywood, Calif. His father worked as a "pick-er" in the fertile produce fields of California — peach- es, cotton, walnuts — you name it. Mike, born in the US, worked in those fields alongside his brothers and sisters. It was backbreaking work: "The cotton cut our hands," he told me. When the Korean War broke, out, Mike was an American pursuing his own dreams. He had learned English in school. He was a hell-raiser, getting into the minor trouble kids of his age always did, like pushing over outhouses on Halloween night. He fooled his mother, who could neither read nor write English, by getting her to sign a form which he told her was for permission to play on his high school football team. Except it really was the form giving parental permission to let an under- age male be enlisted in the Army! He pushed it even further. When he was sworn in he was still only 16! His - older three brothers served later in the same war. But he was eager to go now. Soon he was in Korea as a basic infantry rifleman. Rifleman the point of the spear of American foreign policy — don't have very good odds of survival in combat. Frankly, I paid little special attention to the small, and pretty skinny Hispanic kid then. I had many men to command. Sixty—seven were killed in action in our company during that war. But I did remember he was the youngest soldier in Company K. And as reliable and upbeat as they come.

On one patrol in the spring, the Chinese opened up and he got shot through the hand. I lost the hearing in my right ear that same day when one of our tanks fired its main gun while I was standing in front of it trying to get its buttoned up crew to aim at the Chinese machine gun on a hillside

Verlarde was evacuated to a hospital in Sasebo, where he recuperated lying next to a soldier that later finished a full career as a Command Sergeant Major. Mike showed me, in a scrapbook Colleen kept for him, the ID card he used to go to town. Though he had already fought in a war for months, and had been wounded by the enemy, his card was marked in big red letters: "Minor." He couldn't enter bars in Japan!

After recovering, he was sent back to my Company K which was still in action. He said I looked at him when he reported in and only said "You're back?" I was businesslike, but obviously pleased. He was reliable, and now a combat veteran. He could teach and steady newer men. At that time, ready to go back into action myself, I had 170 enlisted men and six officers in Company K. Short-handed, but enough. Then we started into 15 days of the most hellacious

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combat any U.S. Army Rifle Company has ever endured and survived to tell about it. Many men did not. It started on September 21, 1951 when I was ordered to defend Hill 339, which had been over-run twice by human wave attacks. For seven days and nights we were mortared, artillieried, probed, attacked, and sniped at, until the Chinese finally threw a 7ve company, 600-man battalion at us the night of the 28th of September. It was a desperate fight. Corporal (by this time) Verlarde defended his foxholes, killed and saw his buddies killed. When dawn broke, 77 dead Chinese were inside our perimeter, Hundreds more were down the slopes. Over those seven days and nights, I had lost 54 men wounded or killed in Company K and one more of my officers. Verlarde was on the same patrol when he was hit. But we won that titanic battle and saved Hill 339. Mission accomplished, Then, without replacements, we were ordered into the attack to Line Jamestown. It took three days, and even more casualties even to fight our way forward. I lost two more officers and over 65 more wounded, and killed. On October 7, we were Ordered to seize the top of Hill 347, defended by a 600—man deeply dug-in Chinese battalion. Three assaults failed and my last officer was wounded. Verlarde was somewhere in the midst of the last 30 men standing at the base of the hill when I went forth and led the final extreme assault myself. He remembers me, his “commander,” about three men from him as we started up again. One of the innumerable potato-masher grenades hit him right on his helmet, bounced off and killed the man next to him. My submachine ran out of ammunition. But somehow we fought to the top, where over 250 enemy ended up dead in the trenches. I had lost all six of my officers by then and all but 15 enlisted men. But we had won and had 193 whipped prisoners. Mission accomplished again, but at a great price.

Verlarde had rescued wounded men on the slopes and was awarded a Bronze Star for Valor for his actions that violent day. I was separately highly decorated later. He, as I, were still standing. He was still only 17 years old. I was 23. Hill 347, ever after named “Bloody Baldy,” stills stands guard, 57 years later, right in the middle of the Demilitarized Truce Line, northwest of Yonchon, protecting prosperous, free, South Koreans from the harsh and still dangerous dictatorship of the north. Though we have long been separated by time and life’s “paths, Mike and I are " old friends, shaped by the crucible of war and those singular violent days and nights long ago.