

Company K

The regimental and battalion staffs were so busy that day of the Regimental Ceremony, they didn't get around to getting we replacements to our units until after dark and we had eaten the rations they had for us.

The temporary encampment of the 7th Cav near Kuna-Ri was hardly like a stateside Army post. It was all tents from soldier pup-tents to larger ones, trucks small and large. And all three Infantry battalions, the 77th Field Artillery Battalion, and the various headquarters and supply companies were bivouacked in clusters, with a well guarded outer perimeter. About 5,000 men.

The defeated North Korean Army threat was so slight by this time, the Regiment was not even worried about long range Artillery fire hitting their camp. If NK artillery had been a credible threat, no way would the Regiment have had a massed ceremony such as it did. Too tempting a target. But getting administrative 'office work' done was not easy under such cold and remote area conditions.

I vividly remember to this day when Company K's First Sergeant led me to a small tent in the dark, where he said were Captain Flynn, the company commander and Lt Ryan, the executive officer. When he asked permission to enter, someone said 'Ok, Sergeant' and he opened the flap to let me in. I saw a low-light Coleman

lantern on a table, two wooden cots, and in them two figures on their backs inside their sleeping bags zipped up to their necks. They could see me standing there in the low light with my helmet on, wearing my Field Jacket with my duffle-bag hanging down from one shoulder and my .30 Caliber Carbine hanging from the other.

The First Sergeant said 'Sir this is Lieutenant Hughes, the replacement officer Battalion said we were going to get.'

Flynn thanked him and said 'Welcome to Company K, Hughes. So you came from West Point?' He chuckled.

I said 'Yes sir.'

And both he and the executive officer sort of guffawed, like they were sharing an inside joke. My heart sank. These sounded like they were non graduates who had some kind of 'attitude' against West Pointers, especially green lieutenants.

But then Flynn said "That's alright. We will take all we can get. I am assigning you to the Second Platoon, which has no officer platoon leader, just Sergeant Ingram, a good man."

And with no more said, and nothing asked of me then, he said "First Sergeant, take Lieutenant Hughes down to the 2d Platoon and turn him over to Sergeant Ingram. I'll

see you in the morning. Goodnight."

I answered "Yes sir" Saluted in the dark, turned and left with the First Sergeant.

I was at the beginning of my learning curve. I now 'commanded' a 40 man platoon of American soldiers.

The 2d Platoon, K Company, 7th Cav

On the short way to where Sgt Ingram's - a Sergeant First Class - SFC - pup tent was, the First Sergeant, who seemed pretty young to me said "Captain Flynn is a great company commander. He has a sense of humor. He is also from West Point."

That gave me a start, but that was settled. Sense of humor in the middle of the war that was never supposed to happen.

SFC Ingram was pretty lanky, seemed older than the First Sergeant. He was 32 and was a career soldier, who had enlisted during WWII.

He jumped up from his tent and saluted me and immediately was concerned for my welfare - like where was I going to sleep. He called out two men from their pup tents and sleeping bags - it was at least 9PM by now. They helped get another tent up for me.

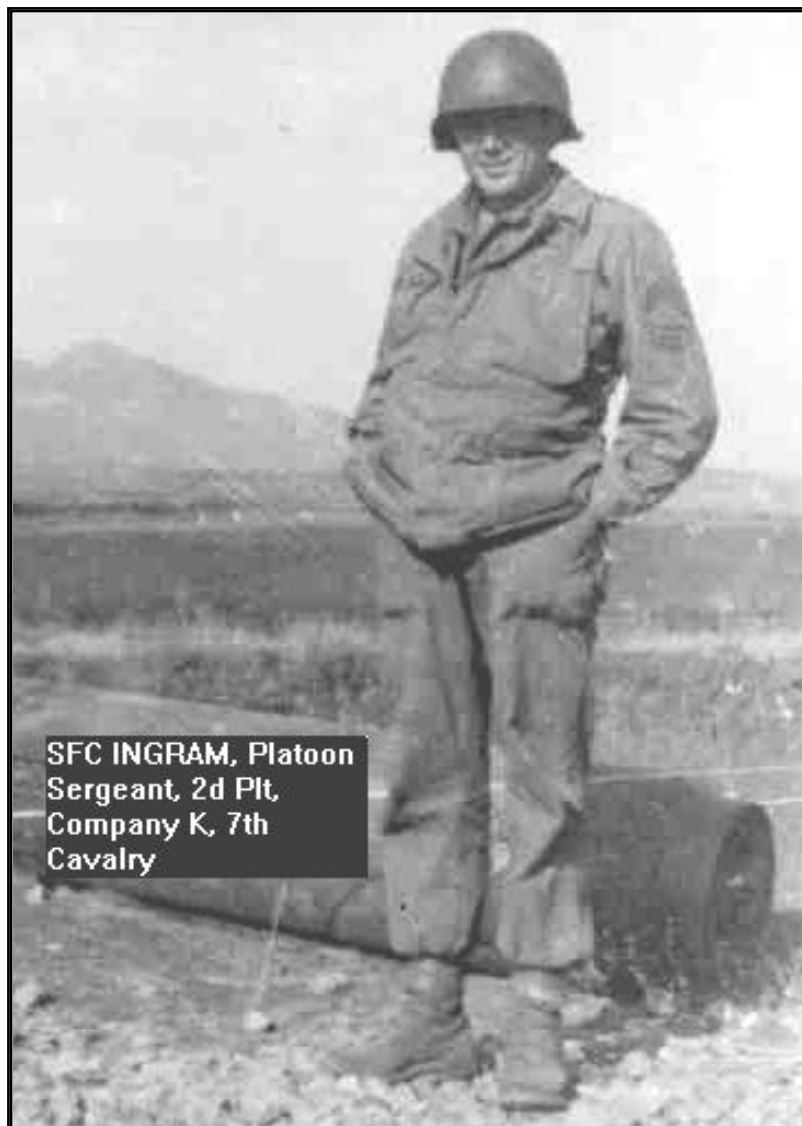
Korean War (2)

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Typical Pup Tent in
summer

I soon was sacked out in my own pup tent, sleeping bag, my dufflebag with the only personal belongings I had with me occupying the other half of the tent. About the only time I would, as an officer, share a pup tent would be with my platoon 'radio operator.' So critical is quick communications in combat, that I would soon have my platoon radio operator shadowing me where ever I went,

day or night.

I slept until the noise of men getting up woke me about 5:30 am.

Before I even had a chance to warm up the can of 'C Rations' beans and coffee and a tin of fruit salad that constituted my breakfast, I was summoned to Captain Flynn's 'CP' – company command post. Just a space with a wooden table near his tent.

The other three platoon leaders had been called together also. It was the first time I had to see who they were and what they looked like. And to see Captain Flynn and Lt Ryan, the exec, out of their sleeping bags.

Flynn was taller than I expected. From West Point he would have been a cadet in one of the 'flanker' companies. And solidly built. He was about 30 years old, it seemed. With a smiling Irish face. I later learned he graduated in the Class of 1944 and saw the tail end of WWII in Europe.



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Captain John Flynn, CO, Company K West Point Class '44

Captain Flynn as he looked as Company K commander during summer on the Pusan Perimeter. Only picture I have of him in Korea.

Lt Ryan's flaming red hair and sharp tongue was what struck people about him. Maybe in his mid 20s.

The other two Rifle Platoon Leaders were Lt Richard Shanks and Master Sergeant Abaticio. I don't remember

the Weapons Platoon leader, a warrent officer. He made no impression on me even though he was there.

Shanks

The thing that struck me about Shanks from the beginning was that he was carrying a full sized obsolete Springfield Rifle instead of the .30 Caliber smaller Carbine that officer Platoon Leaders like me were issued normally - one of which which I was carrying on my back with the sling over my right shoulder. The 1903 Springfield which he was carrying was a WWI model which was made in quantity in 1944. It was not the same semi-automatic M-1 Garand – which his men were carrying - same model M1 rifle I paraded with at West Point, and fired on the rifle range during Camp Buckner to earn my Expert Rifleman Badge. I wondered why he carried that obsolete, bolt-action rifle.

I learned later three things about Shanks, already a 1st Lieutenant with some prior troop experience. He had come over from being stationed in Okinawa when the 8th Army was still locked into the Pusan Perimeter and short on manpower. He was given the 1st Platoon. He carried that bolt-action rifle for its renowned accuracy and near immunity from cold. It was taken off a dead North Korean soldier. It was his personal preference for his personal weapon.

I was thus introduced for the first time, up close, to the propensity of American soldiers - officers and men - to get their hands on weapons and equipment that they were comfortable with when the time came for deadly combat action. Even if they came from dead enemy troops. They have to be sure they will fire the same ammunition that is in the supply chain, but experienced soldiers want to fight with weapons that they think will protect them best while killing or wounding armed enemy soldiers and defending themselves.

I wondered, uneasily, what did Shanks find wrong with the .30 Caliber Carbine I was carrying and which was issued to him when he got to Korea.

It was no time for me to ask such questions as we gathered around Captain Flynn

I also later learned from Sgt Ingram that Shanks had won a Silver Star for his personal actions around Osan, South Korea, in September, destroying two Russian built T-34 Tanks manned by North Koreans, with just his Rifle Platoon and the newly arrived 3.5mm Rocket Launchers. He was already a seasoned and very respected officer among his men, which is the most important thing that counts in combat.

He also had an easy smile and often whistled happily as

he walked.

Abaticio

When I saw MSGT Abaticio he was wearing only his field jacket, with his bare right hand stuffed into its pocket, while others wore pile lined coats, like me, that everyone were being issued in the arriving bitter cold. His left arm carried an M1 rifle with its sling over his shoulder The M1 was what all his soldiers were issued and fought with. He always looked that way when I saw him later, no matter how cold it got. He too had had been in many firefights all the way from the desperate defense days at Pusan to the breakout.. He had a reputation for being a rock of a platoon leader, even though only a Sergeant. Flynn was obviously quite satisfied with him as the 3d Platoon Leader. Abatecio was always serious-faced and kept to himself. His officer platoon leader had been killed during the Pusan Perimiter actions, and was never replaced.

Then Me, Combat Platoon Leader

Then there was me, with new uniforms, a brand new light .30 caliber M-1 Carbine on my shoulder, a yellow metal 2d Lieutenant's bar on my right collar. I still had a set of metal crossed rifles – denoting Infantry – on my left collar which I got at West Point before graduation. An obvious 'new guy.' As soon as I could I replaced the crossed rifles with crossed Sabers – after all we were the 7th

Cavalry, right? Even if we fought as Infantry. For heraldry and military tradition of famed units are kept as much intact by the US Army between wars. Soldiers are known by the Units they have served in.

At this time in that War, officers were still wearing metal insignia on their uniforms, rank on one collar, branch of service on the other. As well as on soft caps or, as in Korea, ear-flap pile caps as protection from the cold. It would be some time before those important symbols of rank were made of cloth, and dark - easily recognizable by other soldiers and officers up close, but not an inviting target by North Korean snipers. who knew well enough if they kill the leader, the unit will be weakened.

New Mission

The purpose of Flynn's meeting was to inform the Company that the Regiment had new orders, and it was to move into a forward assembly area further north, and prepare to go on line with other units to halt the enemy advancing. For the 8th Cav Regiment had been in contact with a new enemy force as it reached Unsan, and had taken tremendous number of casualties, one battalion was virtually overrun, and many prisoners were taken by the enemy. The new enemy seemed to be Chinese. We were also to watch for lost American soldiers scattered by the Chinese assault. We were to get ready to move out in 1 hour.

That was the first time – November 27th, 1950, that I heard the term ‘Chinese’ instead of ‘Korean’ with reference to the enemy in front of us. The entire world would know it soon - that China had massively entered the Korean War, and crossed the Yalu River international border to oppose the United Nations forces, especially the American Army and Marines.

I returned to my 2d Platoon area and passed the word. Sgt Ingram translated it into specific orders to everyone in the platoon. There were no upbeat faces or comments from my soldiers when they heard the news of their new mission. For this had been their only really good break in months, MacArthur had promised all the soldiers home ‘For Christmas’ it was getting damned cold, and now the 7th Cav was going back ‘into the line’ of fire and combat action, against a new enemy.

My Platoon's History

While we were waiting, after our 30 man platoon (which was supposed to have 40 men) got packed and ready to move out on trucks, Ingram and I talked. I learned two important things.

I learned that Captain Flynn had relieved - fired - the previous 1st Lieutenant, 2d platoon leader. I was his replacement. Sgt Ingram didn't venture an opinion why

he was relieved and I never found out.

Then Ingram said that the 2d Platoon was not too well regarded by the rest of the company officers and NCOs. I asked why.

Ingrams's answer surprised me. He said that at least half of the platoon were jail birds. That when the rifle companies at Fort Benning, Georgia were 'levied' to provide so many soldiers with such and such MOS's (Military Occupational Specialties), to fill up what would become a newly formed 3d Battalion, 7th Cav which would be shipped to Korea, some company commanders - whose units were staying on at Benning - were understandably reluctant to provide their best men. They attempted to palm off their worst. So they went to Judges in Columbus, Georgia who were responsible for jailing their men for minor to more serious charges, and asked if the Judges could give their men a choice – stay in Jail or go to Korea. Several judges obviously agreed to make the offer.

So the Korean War helped empty the Columbus, Georgian and Phenix City, Alabama jails. And the 3d Battalion, 7th Cav, got a bunch of soldier jail-birds.

Then, over time, within Company K there seemed to have been requested shifts in men from one platoon to another, which is not unusual when men want to be near

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their buddy, or to get out from under an NCO or officer that they can't get along with. So the 2d Platoon was not left with the best men. It had become the "Jailbird" platoon.

It became clear SFC Ingram and I had our work cut out for us. I was faced with my first 'commander' challenge. I wasn't about to follow in the footsteps of my predecessor lieutenant who was fired.

I didn't know much about field manual Infantry combat yet, but I knew quite a bit about leadership. I had spent the last 4 years at West Point learning it.

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