

Blocking the Chinese

The 7th Cav moved out from its Army Reserve position, near Kunu-ri the end of November toward and into the new 'assembly area' to the North behind the 8th and 5th Cavalry Regiments who were still 'on the line.' With truck shuttles it took all day and into the night to reach the 'assembly' area it was ordered to occupy.

Information and Rumors began to fly. While on the move K Company – including me – could not hope to keep up with the 'news' or what the current situation was around us. The 'Fog of War.'

There was no question now that the Chinese Army was massively on the move. China was in the War in a big way, replacing the defeated and dispersed North Korean Army. And it was coming due south to and through the 1st Cavalry Division and the adjacent – to the east - 7th Infantry Division. And it was attacking the Marine Expeditionary Force that was north east of the 8th Army, driving it toward the sea. In between had been the II ROK (Republic of Korea) Corps that the Chinese hit in large force shattering it.

The threat was obvious – split the UN army, drive south and trap the 8th Army major forces, including the 1st Cavalry Division.

Rumors abounded about the 8th Cavalry having had an

entire Battalion overrun. In fact the 1st Bn lost 15 officers and 250 men, the 3d Bn ceased to exist, and in all the Regiment lost over 800 men the first week of November killed, wounded, or captured. In fact Cav units following up behind them found many soldiers trying to escape to the south toward our 7th Cav after their units were overrun or bypassed. Three soldiers were found dead in the main road north, executed with their hands tied behind their backs. An indication of how the Chinese were likely to fight.

My first mission, while our 7th Cav was on the line, was to take out a patrol and see if we could rescue any American soldiers who had escaped from the 8th Cav bloodletting. We found none.

While it was years before I learned all the facts, two of my West Point classmates, one of whom I knew later - Mike Dowe - was captured when a battalion of the 19th Infantry Regiment, 24th Division was overrun, and Mike was a POW for 3 years. In all, 40 of my Class of '50 Classmates were killed in action during the Korean War. The highest number of any class which served in that war - or any other war.

It was also at that time that a Catholic Chaplain, Fr Kapauan who was in the 8th Cav, refused to escape to

the south when the units he served were being overrun. He chose to stay behind, tend the wounded, give last rites - and be captured himself. And he died as a Chinese prisoner of war, never giving up his faith. His bravery and devotion were so great, that, urged by fellow POWs after they were released in 1953, Chaplain Fr Kapauan was, in 2014 awarded posthumously, the Medal of Honor, by the President himself. He remains the only Military Chaplain who was awarded the Medal of Honor in all American Military History. Mike Dowe, (my classmate) in the Prison Camp, observed Fr Kapauan's strenuous efforts to help his fellow soldiers to survive - in body and soul. And he aided in the recommendation for award.

Thus by December 1950 the 7th Cav went, now formed as a Regimental Combat Team, with its own Armor and Artillery, started into what can only be described as a 'Blocking Position' astride the invasion route at Kujong-ni. But that was soon changed to protect the east flank of the 8th Army at Pukchang-ni since the ROK units were collapsing to the east, and the Chinese could come around behind or flank US Units.

I only had fragmentary information that painted the alarming situation. And no maps. Originally the only maps of such areas were Japanese maps. It took a long time before the Army Map service was capable of getting

1:50,000 scale maps with readable information to the units. We were flying partially blind, so to speak.

Dante's Inferno

Company K and the 3d Battalion moved into position behind the 1st and 2d Battalions to act as a counterattack reserve force. It was dark. I looked to the north where there were mountains between us and the Yalu River, just over those mountatins.

Every mountain within sight had a Ring of Fire around it! About a quarter to a half way up. That was a stunning sight – and memorable. It was Dante's Inferno all over again in this godforsaken place called North Korea! And I was in Hell.

The Chinese had set those fires to burn out the South Korean units defending those hills.

Whether it worked or not, I never knew. But I was struck with the extent the Chinese were willing to go to win – decisively, once its mass military power was unleashed.

Then I set to the task of insuring my soldiers were digging in to await the inevitable attacks against us.

Refugees as Cover

Another problem emerged that made movement along the roads very difficult as the Chinese Armies advanced.

CIVILIAN Refugees. Thousands upon thousands of refugees fleeing. Even though they were North Koreans, they feared the Chinese. So fled south.

Controlling them was nearly impossible. Closing Check Points to stop them clogging the roads so American units or trucks had to pass didn't work. They just streamed by by moving away out into the fields and flowed around the checkpoints like water.

Worse, both Chinese and North Korean agents took advantage of that flow, and concealed themselves as Refugees to sneak through while carrying under their clothes weapons and ammunition and weapon parts. All of them could not be searched - too many. Those few discovered with such, were detained as prisoners on the spot.

Few Americans understand that such a tactic - as infiltrating agents and armed soldiers dressed as civilians has been a cardinal strategy by Communist and then later Islamic insurgents forever. Americans would 'never do that.' For several reasons - we bend over backwards to not risk or impersonate innocent civilians. We don't hesitate to use CIA agents and their contract locals to 'infiltrate' into foreign countries or areas controlled by them. But we do that strictly in accordance with US laws that limit what such government agents can, and can't do - such as carry weapons or explosives to kill, not only

enemy government persons and equipment, but also innocent civilians - the latter for the purpose of intentionally either causing an propaganda 'incident' or to terrorize the populace. (That's called "Terrorism" if you missed the point.)

That tactic had been used earlier - in July, when the 2d Battalion of the 7th Cav was just moving inland from its landing craft from Japan, the North Korean Army was still attacking and moving south through South Korea. The North Korean agents not only 'infiltrated' into the rear areas, they sometimes fired on green 2d Battalion soldiers from the roadway, and prodded soldiers to fire back, hitting many innocent civilians and creating the No Gun Ri INCIDENT, that the clueless press loved to report on.

It was just that scenario that triggered a reporter 60 years later to interview some old South Korean civilians, many communist who lived in the area, who claimed, in 2006, there had been a civilian 'massacre' by US soldiers at No Gun Ri, South Korea, in July 1950!

One savage incident happened to the 7th Cav during our December retreat from far North Korea. As refugees piled up at a Check Point the 29th of November, a Lieutenant Sheehan, Company E Commander of the 2d Battalion tried to go forward of his check point in a jeep into the crowd with an interpreter and a bull horn. He got

up on the hood of his jeep with the interpreter, a South Korean soldier who spoke some English and started to reason with the crowd. Either a Chinese or North Korean 'agent' from close inside the crowd tossed a grenade onto the jeep. It went off, killing Sheehan, the interpreter, two other US soldiers at the jeep and several civilian refugees close by.

The Chinese didn't give a damn what civilians they killed also. They used such opportunities as an excuse for a propaganda incident, to try and paint American soldiers as civilian killers.

The profound difference between Chinese soldiers and their Communist leaders, and Americans and theirs, are the differences as to who goes out of their way to avoid harming innocent civilians. And make restitution if they do. American's follow the internationally agreed to - as in the Geneva Convention - Rules of War. The North Korean, Chinese, and Soviet governments do not follow such rules.

So throughout the Korean War, that difference was apparent to me in my first war.



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Bitter Cold Field Conditions, the Winter of 1950-51

The Frozen Retreat

Then came a grueling 200 mile frozen foot marching Retreat for the 7th Cavalry. It had been ordered to continue to be the covering force in the western side of North Korea, as the entire 8th Army started a planned

'Retrograde' movement all the way back to Seoul.

First of all there were not enough trucks to carry all units, including the 7th, simultaneously. So men had to march, continuously day and night over the deteriorating frozen roadway and shoulders. And then periodically we had to set up blocking positions, with rifle companies trudging up to a mile left and right to extend the line so the Chinese could not easily flank even the blocking units. Then when the order was given, to trudge back down and continue the endless march southward. Sometime Army 2 1/2 ton trucks shuttled units part of the total 200 mile way south.

That was exhausting. While the temperature dipped to 30 degrees below at times. Especially in the late night hours while we had to march, and not stay in our down sleeping bags.

And Company K still did not have cold weather gear for every man.

Those damned Shoe-Pacs were issued for Rifle Company men. They were designed to keep the feet warm of men who stood around a lot - like artillerymen - cooks, or in headquarters or drove trucks and jeeps. Not for hard marching Infantry soldiers. Their felt padding got wet inside, and the frozen rubberized boots came apart at the seams from being creased constantly as men

marched. They fell off the feet of some men. At least half of my platoon, already reduced to less than 30 by sickness and frostbite, had those things. And I would see some men holding their Shoe-Pacs on their feet by twine and rope.

Some Army Quartermaster genius back in the US who never saw a Rifle Squad in the field designed them and contracted with US companies to manufacture them. I am sure he got a boost in his pay for that 'invention' to solve the problem of the unanticipated Korean winter cold.

I refused to wear them. I stuck with my standard GI leather boot, as did Sgt Ingram and most other of my men, even though we were risking frostbite. I had to work hard to keep my worn socks dry when we had breaks. Even so, my feet became raw.

I appreciated what Napoleon's soldiers went through in their thousand mile retreat from Moscow. The majority of them never made it back alive. We lost some men, but US Army medics and the medical support structure of the Army really earned their pay.

I never saw a television episode of MASH 50 years later that portrayed Doctors in the Korean War which covered the frostbite problems of the 8th Army during its long retreat in the winter of 1950. Not romantic enough.

Those forced marches were brutal on all of us. And we

were conscious we might be fired on from out in the dark at any time, by Chinese soldiers trying to race us south, so they could set up road blocks to cut us off. - even by 'guerilla' units formed in our rear, among South Korean civilians, who looked forward to a North Korean - i.e. Communist - victory in that war.

Even when the Japanese occupied the Korea's, there were plenty of underground communist movements throughout the country. They looked forward to defeat of the South Korean government.

The Attack on L Company Near our K Company

During one 8 hour period, Company K was ordered to set up blocking positions on the slopes of a sloping hill mass to our east, while L Company was astride the road, and M company was stretched out on the other side of the road. L Company's Command Post was right on the road, and they had been able to erect a stand up tent, lights inside it. 3d Battalion Headquarters was further behind L company, also on the road itself, where its few 3/4 ton trucks and command jeeps - 1/4 ton - were able to park next to it.

My platoon was strung out, with two man positions, up the sloping ground where the forest was fairly thick to the north of us. We started digging into the frozen ground. The exhausted Commo Platoon carried wire on carrying

spools with crank field telephone to my position, and the other two platoon positions and then back to Company Hq, where Captain Flynn, his radio operator and a few others were huddled. Our already flakey 'walkie talky' hand held SCR536 radios had long since lost their battery charge. So wire was the only way to communicate, other than by runner.

I thought to myself, if the Chinese come through those trees, this would be it - my first combat engagement. While I was shivering I was calm. It was about December 10th. I wondered what my mother and sisters were reading about this war, and the defeat of the 8th Army, that was retreating.

Later I realized they learned little about the 8th Army retreat. What they did read about was the Marine force retreating in another sector under our same conditions. Reporters flocked to cover them. But then the Marines always have had a big publicity machine. They get the press. So the public always publicly pitied the poor, cold, Marines. While much larger force, the 8th Army, was not even mentioned in the reports.

I started to call it a 'Second Page War.'

About 10PM, firing started down on the road, about 200 feet down below us to the left. Tracers split the air, machine guns and rifle fire suddenly opened up without

warning. I never heard mortar rounds landing at first. It was a surprise attack. An enemy force was ramming its way at, and through the L Company guarding the road. I could look down and see the firefight. It raged for at least 20 minutes and then the Chinese pulled back to lick their wounds and drag off some of their dead.

The Chinese had overrun a platoon of L Company, and got into the tent behind it. Several L Company men in the tent were killed, others wounded. They had not broken through the last line of defense at Battalion Headquarters with a platoon guarding it. I wondered if I should be doing anything with my soldiers, such as fire down on the road with my Platoon machine gun to a point on the road beyond where I last saw in fading light where L Company was dug in.

But I had no orders from Flynn to do that, and it just might expose my platoon to those coming through the trees. I was trying to think tactically. I did nothing, while some Americans died 200 yards to the side of me.

The Chinese never came through the trees. Quite a few rounds went over our heads, with the characteristic 'crack-thump' sound, except the firing was so close that the thump merged with the crack.

I learned a lot from that brief engagement. I could hear and largely see when flashes of gunfire illuminated for a

second the scene, to the side of me. The different sound of the different rifles, machine guns. And 60 mm mortar fire outgoing to where the Chinese came from along the road. I never noticed the cold. I guess my blood was churning, producing heat.

That fire fight started my realizing how much my hearing, in the dark, was so important for me to understand what was happening. And the Chinese Army almost always attacked at night, to minimize the effect of superior American firepower during the day.

I was begining to accumulate combat experience.

I don't know whether it was right then that night in my first Infantry combat experience, but I soon realized I was getting eligible for the prized - by soldiers - the blue 'Combat Infantry Badge.' For that badge can only be earned and worn by Infantry officers, full colonel or below in rank, and enlisted men, whose official MOS was Infantry (not artillery, or signal or anything else), and who were subjected to 'small arms' (i.e. rifle) fire by an armed enemy of the United States.

At the time I thought one had to be in such combat for 30 days or more, but unbeknown to me was that Captain Flynn, already had put me in for the CIB, which all his officers and men were eligible for from the first time they were fired on.

The blue field Combat Infantry Badge - CIB - with its wreathed musket - of the type used by the first Americans during our 1776 Revolution - is the most coveted Infantry badge - which implies no 'bravery' per se - but exposure by Infantrymen and Infantry Officers to direct deadly enemy rifle fire.



Our Own Dante's Inferno

The Battalion Commander had decided to pull back along the road to set up another blocking position. The failure of the Chinese to break through and cause much more mayhem seemed to give them pause, before they would attempt again. The Regimental Commander would have had to approved. He obviously did, for the Battalion Commander put out a novel plan quickly.

The order was to use some deception. We were, now

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that the firefight was over, to start bonfires - out in front of us far enough that 60mm mortar fire would not hit us. Americans are famous for starting warming fires at the drop of a hat..

We were to start bonfires AS IF they were warming fires. And to move around as if we meant to stay.

THEN, at exactly 1 AM and as quietly as possible slip back and away, down to the road behind where L Company still was, blocking the road. And the entire Battalion would then march hastily south, toward the next blocking position.

I remember taking one last look at the 10 or so 'warming fires' still crackling - with nobody around them. Our own Dante's Inferno.

IT worked. we were miles further south before the Chinese, planning their next attack, woke up to the fact there was nobody there to attack.

Two can play with fire, not just one.

We continued on our retreat.

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