

My Real Infantry School

Our retreat - which was destined to continue through December all the 200 miles back to Seoul, South Korea, with our Company K soldiers road marching at least 100 of those miles in the dead of winter - was a real test of our Army, and my 'platoon level' leadership.

The pattern kept being repeated - 15-20 miles marching while carrying full packs, with rifles - M1's, Browning Automatic Rifles (BAR) and one squad carrying a machine gun and its ammunition passing through a blocking unit, then being trucked for perhaps 20 more miles, dropped off, where we set up a temporary encampment out in the open, soldiers eating their C-Rations and resting all night. Some times being a blocking force while other companies passed through us. Then repeating the cycle. It took over 20 days to arrive north of Seoul, and the Han River south of the 38th Parallel border, while staying ahead of the Chinese Army, whose infantry soldiers were suffering as much as we were. And they did not have down sleeping bags.

But there was a repeated nightly gathering that became my REAL Infantry School - the one I and all my West Point Classmates from '50 didn't get before being thrown into the Korean War. That took place at an early or later time to eat, after the Company was looked after by we

leaders - sometimes making our men take off their boots and socks so we could check the condition of their feet and order remedies from our Medics for men whose feet really looked bad.

Captain Flynn would have all we platoon leaders together, sometimes with good heat, sometimes not, but always with Coleman Lantern Light and we inside a blacked out abandoned Korean Hut abandoned by its owners. We would heat up and eat our C-Rations (and sometimes when rations were short and all the men could not be given a canned C-Ration, I ate local rice stirred up as Korean dish named 'Go Hung'. which gave me intestinal worms for years afterwards)

There was no mail from home reaching us during the retreat. When any did arrive, it came in bunches.

I had no letters from home yet. Though I sent probably 4 or 5, including to my sisters as well as my mother. I knew they would be intensely interested in, and fearful of what I was going through.

But the memorable 'fireside' chats (sometimes with no real fire to watch) were led by Flynn who talked to each of us in turn learning what went on of importance that day in our platoons, and listening to recommendations from each of us. Then Flynn would explain another valuable 'tactical' lesson, usually pertaining as to how to fight the

Chinese units - the craft and art of Infantry war. He would add some general comments on the general war and our situation, with what he learned from the Battalion briefings he attended also.

I soaked it all up. One very striking recommendation - to use 'marching fire' in the assault more than 'aimed' fire - stuck with me. I had never thought of it, nor really knew what substituting volume for accuracy of fire could accomplish.

I did remember back at West Point in one Military History course reading S.L.A. Marshal's "Men Against Fire" researched in WWII. In which he pointed out that, for a variety of reasons only a FEW men actually fire their rifles in combat. That was a surprise to me when I read it. But Marshal had interviewed many men, NCOs, and officers in many Rifle Companies in Europe.

The reasons were many. Some men didn't want to 'give away their position' by firing. Some couldn't settle down and aim at a man-target, because enemy men would be ducking and bobbing around, as well as shooting back. Some were just so rattled and frightened by the battle they literally forgot what they were there for. And a few, very few, couldn't bring themselves to shoot to kill another man, even an enemy.

Flynn pointed out that the American Army had for too

long stressed making men go to a rifle range, and shoot at stationary targets all day long. Pursuing only 'accuracy.' But combat is not a series of stand up and wait targets, but fleeting figures shooting back, who can be intimidated by the deady crack of incoming fire.

What was the antidote? Flynn said 'use marching fire' - get everyone to fire at the outset of an assault at the area where enemy soldiers are likely to be, even if hidden, and keep it up while the attack lasts. He pointed out that the US Army can afford the expenditure of ammuniton (while many other nation's Armies cannot). That massed fire is a US Army strength. Accurate fire is not. That is a job for Snipers and those few soldiers who - usually from their early years on farms, ranches, or hunting - learned to fire very accurately.

THAT lesson not only stuck with me but became my salvation months later in a very harrowing operation. Its application was so significant in the success of one of our missions against superior Chinese force holding a dominant hill, that that I wrote it up after I left Korea while teaching at the Infantry School in Fort Benning. It was published and featured in the Army Combat Journal as "Surprise and Marching Fire"

I was beginning to find my writing tongue in the first two months of my being immersed in the hard combat actions of the Korean War. For I had something of importance to

say. About life and death, tactical military matters and human drama, and even about the philosophy of war, and of the obligations of leadership.

My Bahavagad Gita

Now I can't remember where or when I got my copy, or why I carried it with me in my back pack. But I started, almost every night when we had light and fire, to read versus from the Bahavagad Gita. The sacred 700-verse ancient Hindu epic.

To this day I am not sure why I started reading it. Being in the Orient? Looking for some solace from something else than Army Field Manuals? Or because it was, I knew from my general West Point education, was one of the great philosophical and literary works of the world. In a very small book, easy to carry in my backpack.

I did not carry a Bible. Or any other reading material.

And I wondered, if I were killed in action, what the report back would say, or what my family would think when my 'personal effects' came back to them, and the Gita was there.

But I read it and part of my mind dealt with the greater philosophical issues of the war we were in.

I was beginning, in my mind, to compose ideas that I wanted to write down. All I had was a pencil and a little

paper. And was about to start scribbling when, if ever, this retreat would end.

What If We, Like Custer, Are Surrounded?

Then in one of these nightly meeting, Captain Flynn told us two things.

What we should do if he were killed, wounded and evacuated, or captured what should be the the chain of command when he is gone. Who does he want to be first in command, second, third, and fourth, after he?

Both his answers stunned me.

First, if we are surrounded, cut off, and he is out of action, for us to head NORTH, not south in the direction the Chinese were moving. Reach and cross the Yalu River, get across Russia - Siberia - and come out in Europe. Try for occupied Germany!!!

Secondly, after him, if he is gone Flynn wanted Lt Shanks to command the company, then Lt HUGHES to command, then Sgt Abaticio.

Even though 1st Lt Ryan was the Executive officer and higher in date of rank (which decides who outranks whom when both officers are the same rank) than all the others

except Captain Flynn, he was back at the Battalion Trains area, where company mess - cooks and stoves, supply, including weapons, and administration where the Morning Reports had to be filled out and sent on. If things got that bad in combat up front, it would not be clear he would even be able to get to the fighting elements of the company to take over. Someone on the ground had to take command until the immediate combat actions were over, and the normal 'chains of command' based on seniority, starting with the Battalion Commander could decide who should command K Company from that point forward.

So I was 2d in line, in case of loss of Captain Flynn.

The full weight of the possible burden of 'command' in a war we were losing, by retreating, became apparent to me at that instant. I was really surprised Flynn had that much confidence in me after only one month in combat, during which I was in several minor actions, but also what a responsibility that would be - Commanding 200 men, the ENTIRE K Company command - the rifle platoons, the weapons platoon, the headquarters, the other more junior officers - everything - having not recieved even the Infantry Officers Basic course at Fort Benning before being thrust into combat.

Young, inexperienced men die in war. or fold, while some grow. In the eyes of my Company Commander John

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Flynn I obviously was maturing as a combat leader.

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