

The End of the Retreat

Somehow we got Christmas Dinner on the 25th of December, 1950, wherever our 7th Cav Companies was that day. I don't remember.

The Chinese Army cooperated by not launching attacks on that Day. But I think they did that because they were at the end of their tether - their supply lines. Which our Army Air Corps hammered relentlessly as they advanced. They needed a short break too. But then they will come at us again. In overwhelming numbers. Their supply line was 200 miles long. Ours was 2,000 miles.

Our Cav Cooks and Mess Sergeants and Truck Drivers worked their butts off cooking up all that was delivered, got them into 'insulated' containers, and delivered them together with the standard aluminum mess kits to every place where our men were posted. With the temperature still below zero, the turkey and gravies were not very hot, of course, but the chow tasted good. And a welcome break from the old C-Rations and its canned beans. And somehow some men and officers produced partial bottles of booze to go with the meal.

Somehow also mail, much of it pent up and undeliverable during the retreating weeks before, was delivered, along with the chow.

I got my first letters.

Then the holiday was over and the 8th Army had its plans in hand to make the final retreat south across the Han River and dig in for a major defensive stay.

The Arrival of the Greek Battalion

While often forgotten, the 8th Army, while all the American Army units were under command of American officers, all the way up to General MacArthur, the entire effort to rescue South Korea from both the North Korean and Chinese Communist Governments, was a United Nations operation. It was a UN 'Command' that MacArthur commanded under the United Nations Security Council Direction and Policies.

The Soviets, who held one seat on the Security Council with Veto power over anything it ordered, stupidly stormed out of a Security Council meeting when the majority of the other members wanted to vote to oppose the North Korean Invasion with UN Forces in June, 1950. With the Soviets absent, the vote carried, and thus the operation from that day on was a UN, as well as US war. (The Soviets didn't make that mistake again)

There were many other country contributions of forces,

from Brigade sized units like the British. The Australians, and Canadians provided, to Battalion sized units, like the Turks, French, Ethiopians fielded And then came the Greeks, fresh out of their latest civil war.

It took some months before the contribution of the 13 other countries arrived, were trained, and were equipped - sometimes with US Army equipment - well enough, to enter the fray.

On December 19th, the Greek Expeditionary Force (GEF) - one Infantry Battalion full of combat veterans from the Civil Wars in Greece, and commanded by Lt Col Arbouzis - who had 13 years combat experience - joined the 7th Cavalry as it '4th (GEF) Battalion' ready to fight. It was indeed welcome. And over the next 12 months Company K had repeated contact with them, and engaged in cooperative combat operations with them, right down to the Company level.

I will tell about a later operation where that contact with the Greeks was important.

Across the Frozen Han

The 1st Cav Division had been pulled back into an Army Reserve position behind the 2d and 24th US Divisions which were defending along the 38th Parallel - roughly the original North/South Korean border. The Cav was still

north of the Han River.

The Chinese launched their expected 2d Offensive right at the end of December, launching mass suicidal attacks especially against Republic of Korea - ROK - units, and the 24th and the 2d Divisions. They all started taking a mauling - and penetrating enough that the 1st Cavalry Division ordered the 7th Cavalry to cross some units south of the wide, frozen, Han River to go into blocking position to cover for those two Divisions if they had to retreat across the river through Seoul.

We had another hard, cold, march to reach the north side of the river. We saw some men from other units stopped by the wayside to rest before trying to catch up with their units. In other words there were stragglers from many units on the long, long, and bitterly cold, retreat.

My platoon came to the Han river - very wide and very frozen - almost at 4AM. There was a one-vehicle wide Army Engineer laid bridge, laying flat on the ice with pontoons just in case, for use by vehicles which had to cross and couldn't risk driving on the ice. They drove very slowly, while we crossed on the ice itself, listening to the cracking ice under our feet and under the bridge every time a spaced out truck drove over. I and my men were utterly exhausted. The river was at least a half mile wide there. The Han River dumped into the Tidal waters

around the port city of Inchon, through which I had arrived in Korea in November.

When we got to the other side we went down a roadway about half a mile, past where all the other platoons of K Company had gotten to before us - a linear assembly area. Men sat down, and most fell asleep immediately. In the chit chat between our men and the other platoon's men as we walked past, one question was asked.

"Anybody seen Lt Shanks?" No, we didn't. He may have stayed behind on his platoon's path to the river with a few men to be a rear-guard if the Chinese were following up closely. Or he could have been killed or wounded - or captured.

I felt depressed as well as very cold. This was one of the worst nights in my time so far in Korea.

The Bugle Call

Within about 20 minutes, everyone in K Company seeming to have gotten across the Han and into the stretched out assembly area, it was time to saddle up, and start marching the last 5 miles to our ultimate assembly area. It was beginning to get light. About 5:00AM. Getting all the men up and on the road again would be a chore for the NCOs, and if anyone had rested too far from the roadway to be seen and roused, he might, with hyperthermia just sleep forever.

So Captain Flynn, who told the little Company Bugler, who had the Company Bugle in his backpack, to blow standard "Assembly!"

Now at that time Rifle Companies had issued bugles, and one man was a trained bugler. There were almost no times or places in Korea where a bugle call, for unit purposes was used. As portable radios began to get down to the platoon, then patrol level, bugles, except for taps or reveille or in military bands, was going the way of the Horses in the 7th Cavalry. But Flynn had already used that bugle to offset the psychological use by the Chinese who blew their horns and bugles and whistles in the Assault - to intimidate Americans. I heard them being blown when Company L was attacked on the road a week or two earlier. Two can play that mind game.

So the Bugle called 'Assembly' and it worked! Men got up and on the road. When everyone who had crossed the river was accounted for we began to start our last 5 mile march in retreat.

Suddenly we heard a huge explosion back at the Han river. Were the Chinese attacking? Flynn got on the radio to battalion, and soon learned that the senior commander of the Army Engineer unit which laid the bridge across the Han, when he heard the Bugle, even though it was to the south away, and it was a recognizable US Army bugle call, panicked, thinking it was the Chinese coming

across the Han River. So he BLEW UP the bridge - setting off the pre-positioned demolitions that he had put there to destroy it if the Chinese tried to use it, even while a number of straggling 7th Cav men were still on it! They were killed.

Chinese troops did not reach the river for two more days.

The Engineer Lt Col who ordered the explosion, lost his job, for exercising poor judgment in the Fog of War.

The Shanks Part of the Korean War Story

The events of the last 30 days, the hard marches, the bitter cold, all seemed to have gotten to me. It was January 1st, 1951

But something happened that night also, that touched me. As soon as we got into our assembly area, another unit was in front of us, I got warm enough to think, and write, I wrote out something in pencil, along with a short letter to my mother saying everything was ok, so far. And I mailed both in the same envelope, handing it to the company clerk. So long the platoons were within short walking distance of the K Company Headquarters with its two jeeps, a 3/4 ton, and portable desks the clerk could put all the mail in a mail bag and get it to Battalion. As I

Korean War (7)

Category: Korean War

Published: Wednesday, 27 July 2011 14:37

Written by dave

Hits: 5748

dimly recall, by this time, six months into the war, we could send first class mail without stamps - just use the APO number on it.

At Korean War (8) I include that story, and the illustration with it, when it was over a year later published. I called it 'Shanks Bootees'

Next Korean War (8) "Shanks Bootees"