Category: Korean War
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Written by dave
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The Original Text

Shanks Bootees

It was during the dark days of the December retreat when I first saw them. They were hanging from the cold muzzle of an old Springfield rifle - a pair of tiny blue baby bootees. Their pale silk ribbons ended in a neat bow behind the front sight. Each little boot hung down separately,one slightly above the other, swinging silently in the wind.

They reminded me of tiny bells, and even

though one had a smudge of dirt on its soft surface, and part of the ribbon that touched the barrel had lost color from scorching heat, they seemed to me to be the freshest, cleanest objects in all of drab Korea.

At first the bootees had fixed my attention, but after the surprise of seeing these symbols of home in such a place had worn off, I let my eyes drift, unobserved, to their owner. He was a lieutenant, young I could see, and tired; not so much from the exertion of the trudging march, but with the wear of long days and nights in combat. He was talking to men from his platoon, all of them together watching the core of a little blaze at their center, and I could tell that he was answering some of their disturbing questions about the war. There was a tone of hopelessness in the men's voices, but the lieutenant sounded cheerful; there was a glint in his eye, and a squint that melted into an easy smile when he spoke.

As my platoon moved on, I glanced back briefly to the blue bootees still fresh, still swinging. Often in the next few weeks I saw the lieutenant and his bootees while we moved southward before the

Chinese armies. Around the ever-present warming fires I heard the simple story of the officer and his boots.

The lieutenant was named Shank, and he, twenty-two years old, led a rifle platoon. He had come over from Okinawa while the Army was clamped in the vise of the Pusan perimeter, short on manpower. Shank had his baptism of fire on the hills outside Taegu. His youth and fire helped keep his decimated platoon intact, while the North Koreans frantically tried to crack the American lines. Then came the breakthrough, and Shank's company,rode on the record-breaking tank and truck dash northward. He picked up the Springfield rifle then, and kept it because of its renowned accuracy and apparent immunity to the cold weather. A violent day south of Pyongyang won Shank a Silver Star for gallantry, as he led his flesh-and-blood infantrymen against T-34 tanks and destroyed three of them. The Chinese intervention and beginning of the American retreat brought him up to where I met him, south of Kunari at the Yalu River.

The bootees? That was simple. He was an expectant father, and the little boots sent by his

young wife in the States reflected his whole optimistic attitude while the battle was the darkest. I also learned that when the baby came it would be announced by a new piece of ribbon on the boots - blue for a boy, pink for a girl.

Then I forgot about him as we prepared to defend Seoul from above the frozen Han River. We were hit hard by the Chinese. They streamed down from the hills and charged the barbed wire. They charged again and again,piling up before our smoking guns. The days were but frantic preparation for the nights. Companies dwindled, and my platoon was halved as cold,sickness, and the enemy took their toll. I neared the end of my mental reserves. Names of casualties were rumored, and I heard Shank's among them. I wondered where Shank's bootees were now.

The endless night of the retreat from Seoul came. When we got the word my few men were too dulled to show any emotion at the announcement. Most were too miserable to want to retreat again for twenty-five miles,Chinese or no. But we did, and the temperature dropped to 30 degrees below zero as our silent column stumbled along the hard ground. It

was the most depressing night I had ever endured - pushed by the uncompromising cold,the pursuing enemy and the chaotic memory of the bloody nights before. I, as a leader, was close to that mental chasm. Only the numbness prevented thinking myself into mute depression.

We plodded across the cracking ice of the Han River at four-thirty in the morning, and marched on south at an ever-slowing pace. Finally the last five mile stretch was ahead. We rested briefly. As the men dropped to the roadside they fell asleep immediately. I wondered if I could get them going again. Worse yet, I didn't think I could go myself - so tired, numb,and raw was my body.

Then in the black despair of uselessness in a second-page war I looked up as a passing figure brushed against my inert shoe-pacs.

There walked young Lieutenant Shank up the Korean road, whistling softly, while every waking eye followed him to see the muzzle of his battered Springfield rifle. Swinging gaily in the first rays of the morning sun were Shank's bootees, and fluttering below them was the brightest, bluest, piece of ribbon I have ever seen.

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Lt David Hughes
Near Seoul, Korea, Dec, 1950

Next Korean War (9)