

Barbed Wire and a Counter Offensive

The Chinese Army ran out of steam with their Winter Campaign before completely overrunning Seoul, again. It was still very cold. The first casualty in the war for the Greek Battalion was a communications man who froze to death.

Supplying our units was hard work - 7th Cav ammunition resupply was 70 miles south. It took 6 hours for Division trucks to drive one way to or from Supply. But, as UN forces built up, it was time to get ready for a UN Counteroffensive. And an Offense-minded new boss was in town.

While the Great Retreat lowered the morale of the American soldiers of the 8th Army, the top leadership, - Army, Corps, and Division Commanders were no longer inspiring or motivating the troops. At that very time, the 8th Army commander, General Walton Walker, was killed in a wintertime jeep accident. A new commander was called in from the Army staff in Washington- Lt General Matthew Ridgeway.

Now getting a new commander is not unusual. And one so far away in rank and position - 7 levels up - usually doesn't get the attention of the soldiers or junior officers -

like me.

But in this case, the new 8th Army Commander made an immediate impression. General 'Matt' Ridgway had been a very successful combat commander in Europe in WWII. When he attached two fragmentation grenades to his shoulder harness that everyone would see in any close up photograph of him, he visually signaled that he was in Korea to fight. Soldiers, seeing the pictures of him with his grenades, like Patton's Pistols, in their inimitable fashion, called him 'Iron Tits' Ridgeway. He was clearly a warrior.

When he wrote his first command letter - which had to be read aloud to every officer down to platoon leaders (like me) in the 8th Army, - that got our attention. Including mine. I still remember standing in our 3d Battalion Headquarters with other company officers, while that letter was read aloud to us. Because its authoritative tone was of an unmistakable leader, it directly said what we were going to do offensively, and communicated the clear expectation that each of us officers would motivate our men to fight, it was nearly inspirational. It made a big impression on me.

We now have a commander who means to whip the Chinese. They are not 10 feet tall. Now I knew what I could tell my soldiers, whose general motivation for this war was low.

But what also - for me - was noteworthy was that the medium for his motivational speech was in the form of a distributed paper that others would read, or read aloud to others. He did that because there was no way he could address all the officers of the 8th Army deployed across the entire front and rear area by an oral speech, as kings and battlefield commanders, and George Patton time immemorial have done. And it was effective.

Matthew Ridgeway, West Point Class of 1917, learned as a cadet, not only how to motivate as a leader face to face, but how to write an effective motivational speech! The power of the written word, which I liked. Somebody for me to emulate.

He also fired several Divisional and Corps Commanders whom he thought were burned out - had been in command in Korea too long.

Ridgeway also insisted the 8th Army Infantry units get off the roads and walk and fight along the high ridge lines like the Chinese did.

He quickly turned around the spirit and will to fight by the entire 8th Army. He shifted its emphasis on defense, to offense. He got it ready to take the fight to the enemy, and not wait for them. He did that through the month of January and February 1951.

Even though, when Truman later fired MacArthur, and

Ridgeway was moved up from 8th Army, to the Far East Command, he will always be credited in turning around the 8th Army from a defeated command in retreat, to an aggressive Army which would give the Chinese all they could handle.

More Barbed Wired than Anyone Else

And he did something else, either directly or indirectly. We soon got a new commander, replacing colorful Billy Harris, for the 7th Cavalry. Controversial (over time) Colonel Dan Gilmer, West Point Class of 1932.

Gilmer had been Ridgeway's Chief of Staff in Europe - not a commander. I'll bet he asked Ridgeway, who had been his boss in WWII, for a Regimental Command once he learned Ridgeway was going to command the Army in Korea. He got it. But Gilmer got that level of command, even over a foreign battalion - Greek - fighting troops, even though he had never himself commanded a Battalion, in peace or war.

That lack of WWII combat command experience came back to bite him.

I can't complain though. He thought West Point graduates walked on water - or he fired them. Very early in my career in my first experience at war he pushed very tough responsibilities on me at the Company Command level. He was not a 'motivational' leader. He was a tough

'relieve em' taskmaster. Even John Flynn, my old Company Commander, now a Major and Regimental Operations officer suffered under him until he was wounded by mortar fire and was evacuated.

That 'taskmaster' trait in Gilmer was exhibited as the Army dug in on what I remember was called the 'Wyoming Line'. It was a heavy defensive line against what was anticipated - a Big Chinese Offensive to retake Seoul. Part of digging in was laying barbed wire. LOTS of barbed wire. All across the front. Which takes a great deal of heavy truck transportation of the wire spools, and a huge amount of work by infantry - not engineer - soldiers on the ground to carry it - two men to carry an awkward and heavy spool (especially without work-type gloves) pound in the long stakes for it, and lay it. Hard, hard, work when rifle platoon and company soldiers have to do that, as well as dig their own foxholes and build bunkers for their automatic weapons.

My 35 soldiers hated it. But it was orders. And Col Dan Gilmer made his first impression on all the soldiers of the 7th Cavalry by trying to outdo all the other Regiments in the total amount of Barbed Wire laid. He succeeded.

To supervise its construction he first was driven around in his command jeep 1/4 ton, but with an elevated 'ring mount' he had over the passenger's side of the front seat. (He switched to jeeps with ring mounts already installed,

so a machine gun could be mounted on it during 'moving' patrols). So he could stand up on the seat and survey his domain. He was very tall, at least 6 foot 6 inches, though not heavy.

Ring Mount Dan the Barbed Wire Man

Between Colonel Gilmer's barbed wire reputation and riding around the Regimental positions standing up inside the ring mount on his command jeep, he started being called "Ring Mount Dan, the Barbed Wire Man"

Then he went further.

He got a hold of and kept under his control an H-13 one-passenger 'bubble' helicopter - the type, new to Korea used primarily to carry wounded back to MASH level medical services - which he would fly around in to, and over, his Regiment's positions and soldiers.

It got ridiculous - and ineffective - when, for a time, Gilmer even had a pair of sound speakers attached to the skids on the helicopter. He would sometimes fly over a unit's position, then hover over it quite low, and bark at the soldiers or officers standing on the ground looking up at him through his microphone and those speakers. Soldiers hoped he would be shot down if he strayed over the front lines.

The sound of the helicopter - engine and blades - were

so loud his voice rarely could be understood on the ground. So he finally stopped that.

Col Gilmer, for all he did for, and to me, was less a leader, than often a martinet.

After several combat engagements I went through, including as the K Company Commander in the fall of 1951, Gilmer obviously had been monitoring me. In one letter - the formal endorsement of the Efficiency Report on me, he wrote **"Lt Hughes is the most outstanding officer in my Regiment"**

That is saying something about a 1st Lieutenant below 5 Lt Colonels, 10 Majors, 30 Captains, and perhaps 140 other Lieutenants in the 7th Cav Regiment in time of war.

I still have that letter.

He didn't 'protect' me in any way. Instead he insured I was twice given the toughest combat missions the Regiment faced in the fall of 1951.

I had measured up - so far.