

Big Hill 578

Having determined where the bulk of the Chinese Army units were from a series of 'Reconnaissance in Force' patrols Gen Ridgway determined that Hill 578 was important to be in 8th Army hands before any moves past it deeper into Chinese controlled areas could be risked.

The fight for Hill 578 became the first battle against a well dug in enemy on a large mountain that I got involved in.

It took all four battalions of the 7th Cavalry to accomplish that mission - which included the Greek Battalion that had won its spurs in late January on a series of smaller hills which were fiercely contested.

The Chinese were on the top of 578 in force. They had had time to fortify the top of the mountain.

The operation was to be proceeded by heavy bombardment by artillery, heavy mortars, and several air strikes with 1,000lb bombs.

Then the first attempted assault on the top of the ridge by the 3d Battalion was to go up a quite steep approach route on the west side of the mountain.

Short Round

Such a battle was bound to produce errors in indirect fire. I came very close to losing my life when I found myself

and my platoon pinned down from fire from atop the west side slopes of 578.

I was lying on the ground my face almost pushed into the dirt to get lower than the direct fire coming from the top, when I got word that several barrages of large 4.2 mortars would be incoming to try and suppress the fire from on top.

We were told to stand by and wait until after the barrage was over, perhaps 24 rounds.

The Sound of Incoming

Now by this time in this war I was getting used to telling what caliber mortar rounds 60mm company fire, 81mm battalion fire, or heavy 4.2inch rounds were incoming by the sound they made coming down.

A 60mm mortar shell comes down whiz-bang. Unless you are within 10 yards of that your chances are good of not getting hit. But you also can't beat it to the ground when you first hear it whizzing down.

A big 4.2 inch mortar round - or the Chinese equivalent 120mm, comes down with a whisper-whisper sound that starts so high up, if you hear that and flatten yourself, the chances are you won't be hit unless it is close.

But the 81mm (82mm Chinese) is the real man's weapon. It whistle bangs fast enough that only if your ears are

cocked to listen for it - perhaps because you hear the chug-chug of the mortars coming out of the enemy tube about 10 seconds before it starts down, and you hit the deck fast, you might evade being hit.

I got very good at telling what was going on, especially at night, by the sounds the various rounds made. I also developed a bad habit, when I heard incoming mortar fire, of yanking my helmet off so my hearing was more acute.

Bad Round

So when I and my platoon were flattened out on the slopes of Hill 578, waiting for the 4.2 mortar salvos, ONE round was a dreaded SHORT round. It whispered its way down and hit less than 3 feet from me! But it was a dud, a bad round that was also short of its intended target. It dug a hole but the tail fin broke off and tumbled hitting my left arm, leaving a scratch on my arm and a sore bruise. No other injury. BUT had that 'short round' been good ammunition, I wouldn't be here.

Continued Assault

After the salvos were over, we continued up the hill firing while being fired at. The preparatory fires had done their work. So many Chinese soldiers were killed in their foxholes that we seemed to outnumber them as we neared the top. And they could still throw grenades.

Fortunately their grenades are crude, compared with the 'fragmentation' US Army grenades. Sometimes they just break into two or three, rather than 10 or 20 and you won't get hit unless you are in the path of those two.

I got my first Purple Heart when one of their 'potato-masher' grenades landed next to my leg, went off, but the iron end went away from me, while the wooden handle slammed my leg, giving me a painful bruise, with some blood that had to be staunched and cleaned by a medic when I limped past the aid station coming down a hill.

Then came one of the defining moments in my life on Hill 578.

My Obsolete Thompson Sub-Machine

My platoon guys were spread out crossing a series of foxholes with dead Chinese in them and firing on further hitting those who popped up. i.e. we were making progress working through a wide maze of defensive works.

I was behind the line of them, holding my radio in one hand and my carbine in the other when I heard a sound behind me, I turned to see a bloody Chinese soldier rise up and start to aim at me. He fired and missed. I fired and missed. But my carbine then jammed as its automatic light action couldn't seat the next .30 caliber shell! I had to yank it back and jam it forward again while

he took a bead on me, again. My second shot killed him.

But at that instant I lost all confidence in that light officer's carbine. It can't handle the blown dust and grit on the typical Korean hill top that has been pulverized by preparatory fires.

I walked over to the foxhole where that Chinese soldier, and a second dead one was in the bottom of the hole were. I saw a Thompson .45 caliber submachine gun on top of him. I reached down and got it. It still had a magazine about half full in it.

From that moment on I carried that submachine gun with me and got rid of that carbine. It was obsolete according to the US Army. They issued something called the 'Grease Gun' to replace it. I hated that one.

Ironically the Thompson, our WWII Army issue sub machine gun, was given to the Chinese Nationalists after the world war. After Mao defeated them those weapons were carried into Korea by his communist Army. We were fighting against our own American weapons!

But the heavy bolt action on the Thompson would crunch through grit and always seat the round. So after the fight on Hill 578, I put a sling on it, over my shoulder so it would hang, its muzzle aimed at the belly button of the man in front of me. And I kept the verticle rather the round drum magazine below to balance it. I hung it on my

side, so could fire it left handed. (Only problem was that a Thompson is made for right handed shooters. So the slide with a projection for your hand to push it back comes back on the right side. When I fired it from my left side that damned handle would repeatedly gouge my hip bone. I had a sore hip for a long time after I was out of Korea)

Finally, the strike of that heavy .45 caliber slug made such a dirt puff on the kind of hills we kept climbing and assaulting, that I did better by firing single shot and 'walk' the rounds to my target from my hip, rather than put it on full automatic and let the burst go - who knew where.

That Thompson Sub Machine gun, the famous 'Chicago Typewriter' of the Capone gang, saved my life once more in my time in Korea. On Hill 339. Both my leader's hands could still be free holding a radio and map while I moved with my assaulting platoon in attacks. Yet I could reach down and fire instantly from my hip when I needed to.

I thought back to Lt Shanks and his non-standard Springfield rifle.

I simply continued the US Army tradition of soldiers adapting to their tools of their trade in war when the differences between killing or being killed were often when an adaptation worked or not.

Corporal Stephanak the Runner

Korean War (12)

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Written by dave

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One other thing happened I sadly remember on Hill 578.

I had gotten pretty well known by my Jail Bird Platoon members by Hill 578. After my taking the top of the machine gun nest by myself their respect for me went up. We joshed and joked at times. I was still an 'officer' and not their buddy. We talked about physical conditioning and I remarked I was a pretty good 440 runner when at West Point. Stephanak challenged me to a race.

About 6 of us guys raced, about 100 yards. The only soldier who could beat me was Stephanak.

Corporal Stephanak was killed in action that Feb 14th, 1951