

Uncertain Trumpet, Captain Lewis, and Company K

By mid 1951 the Korean War was stretching the manpower resources of the US Army. Especially in the junior officer ranks. Because of that, and the intensity of the war, for the first 18 months, the Army adopted a new way to lessen the strain on soldiers and officers. It had never been used before at the level it was adopted for those serving in Korea.

It was called 'Rotation.' After so many months - averaging 13 at the beginning, that men had served in Korea, men were shipped home, and guaranteed they would not be sent back to Korea for a number of years. Men were awarded 'points' which added up to the equivalency of 'months' depending on their jobs. Men in combat units got more 'points' than men in rear areas, such as in supply and transportation.

But that policy cut into the experience level of units - especially the fighting Divisions and their combat support units. By taking out all the officers who served on the Pusan Perimeter, then the breakout to the Yalu River, then the winter retreat, and rotate them out in June of 1951, the combat effectiveness of their units could drop greatly.

One way the Army could beef up the Company Grade

officer pool - 1st lieutenants, Captains, and Majors - was to tap the Reserves who were released at the end of WWII, but required to remain in a 'Reserve Status' for a number of years, for which they could draw 'training pay' and other benefits. And there were a large number of 'Gangplank Promotions' of men who were Lieutenants in Infantry, Artillery, Armor units in the last months of WWII, and, for their 'reserve benefits' but were promoted to Captains at the very end.

Such was a Captain Lewis, who had served as a Platoon leader in WWII, never had commanded a company, had no combat experience but who, when called up for Korea, was shipped there, and was given 'command' of a rifle company in the 1st Cavalry Division. Thus, he was assigned to the 7th Cav, with its three battalions and 9 Rifle Companies - the heart of experienced combat power of the 'Garry Owen.'

I was experienced enough to command K Company, and had all the credentials for battlefield promotion, but I could not be promoted to Captain, for with all the 'recalled' Captains from WWII there were too many Infantry Captains in the Army. Promotions stopped. (Classmates who had reached and fought in Korea from August 1950 on, were often promoted to Captain before their year was up. No such luck for me, having arrived in Korea in November, 1950. I remained a 1st Lieutenant through the my year of war.)

That is how and why Captain Lewis, in his 30s. with a great handlebar mustache, become Company K Commander, after both Lt Ryan, the Executive Officer, and Lieutenant Shank 'rotated' out of the company. And long after Captain Flynn had been promoted and moved to a higher headquarters. That left only me and numerous NCO's with less than 1 year in Korea in Company K, but with a lot of combat experience to serve under Captain Lewis, who had none. The war was still going on, and major operations would still be undertaken.

It was unfair to him to be thrust into such a position, but that's the way it was.

It took only the first combat patrol operation to reveal his lack of tactical savvy, especially in that war against a very different enemy than he had been prepared for in Europe.

In May, 1951 I was ordered to patrol to find the enemy out to 10 miles in our Cav sector. We made the patrol out to the point we drew fire from the enemy - pretty long range rifle and machine gun fire which was ineffective. And we reported the new location where we contacted the enemy.

But it took a long time, far too long a time, for Lewis to radio me to tell me what he wanted us to do now - return or continue patrolling. So I had to remain in my position,

the enemy, knew where we were, and they acted on that information, while we remained in the open, under their view. I asked whether Lewis wanted us to start digging in. I got no answer.

As I feared, the Chinese cranked up a fire mission, and then quickly zeroed in on my platoon's position, spread across three wet rice paddies. The first enemy salvo was off line, but the second landed right in the middle of my Platoon one of whose members was a highly combat experienced member of WWII's famed Asian 'Merrill's Marauders.' He was the closest we could get to a highly knowledgeable fighter against Asian soldiers.

One 82 mm mortar landed right in the middle of my 1st Squad, above ground they couldn't dig in killing him and two other men instantly.

On my own I ordered the Platoon to get moving toward the enemy to get out from under their steady surveillance and fire.

The last I saw of our Merrill's Marauder, who had been sitting up against the rice paddy berm when the mortar hit, and it laced his body and obliterated his face, killing him instantly. He didn't even fall over when the mortar round hit and perforated his body. He died motionless. I saw the proud patch on his left shoulder, a man who had fought the Japanese for years, staying alive in the

unforgiving Burmese jungle, until he was the victim of an inexperienced Company Commander's lack of orders in Korea. And I blamed my self for not just telling Captain Lewis what I was GOING to do next, and start out to continue the patrol deeper into enemy territory and let him change my orders if he needed to later.

We completed the patrol and retured to base, but I was bitter about what happened and why.