

My Maximum Defense Test - Hill 339

Hill 339 became the biggest test for me, and my Company K, 7th Cavalry.

First of all that isolated round top hill, far out in front of the 3d Battalion lines, and very close to the Chinese forces east of the Imjim River in their main defensive line was like a thumb in the Chinese eye. They did not want it occupied by US Forces. I later saw why.

First of all, G Company from the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry was first unit ordered up there to establish a company sized Patrol base in order to send patrols deeper into enemy territory and at the same time keep the patrols within range of supporting weapons.

From the first day it was clear the Chinese didn't want that thumb so deep in their eye. They started firing on it with their indirect weapons that they had, at last, been able to bring down the peninsula from China, dig in, and employ.

Company C, from the 1st Battalion relieved Company G on the 5th of September on Hill 339.

At 2200 the night of the 6th, Company C was attacked by a superior sized force. Company C was overrun, suffered heavy losses in both men and equipment. The company completely disintegrated. A heavily reinforced company

from the 2d Battalion jumped off from Hills 321 and 343 to recapture Hill 339. Which it managed to do again on the 7th.

They had to carry down the many US soldier's dead bodies from the area around the peak of the hill.

It was becoming clear that the Chinese were not going to let the Americans close to their lines without a fight. And that 339 was a bloody piece of real estate.

Why Me?

Col Gilmer, the 7th Cavalry commander got into the act. First he ordered the 3d Battalion to prepare plans for a battalion sized patrol base well out in front of Wyoming, in which one company would occupy and defend Hill 339.

And he directly ordered Lt Col Haldane, 3d Battalion Commander, to put Company K and its Dave Hughes Commander on, and defend, Hill 339. So Col Gilmer apparently thought I was one subordinate commander he could rely on to win important battles.

In an 8 page letter I wrote to my old Company Commander, John Flynn, after he got back to the US, and as I was on the way home in February, 1952 after having been Gilmer's Operations Officer, but was wounded by a mortar attack, I spelled out that battle of

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Written by dave

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339, and the worst battle to seize Hill 347. You can read that letter. I won't repeat it all here, just the high points.

When I went up Hill 339 - it was uncontested that day, September 21st. The Chinese chose to stay off that magnet for US heavy artillery and mortar fire, and attack at night, as they did Company C, destroying it.

I went up there with my present Company K strength of 6 other officers, 5 on the hill, and 169 enlisted men, and a squad of 10 South Korean Soldiers, called Katusas - from the shattered remains of the Korean Army from the earlier battles. They were to augment US combat units.

The hill was very steep all around. Here is a glimpse of one view.



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The other two Rifle Companies I and L completed the perimeter of the Battalion Fire Base. 339 remained, however, the key. Who held that hill dominated all the rest. You can see the entire layout here. "MLR" shows the trace of the Chinese Front Line.

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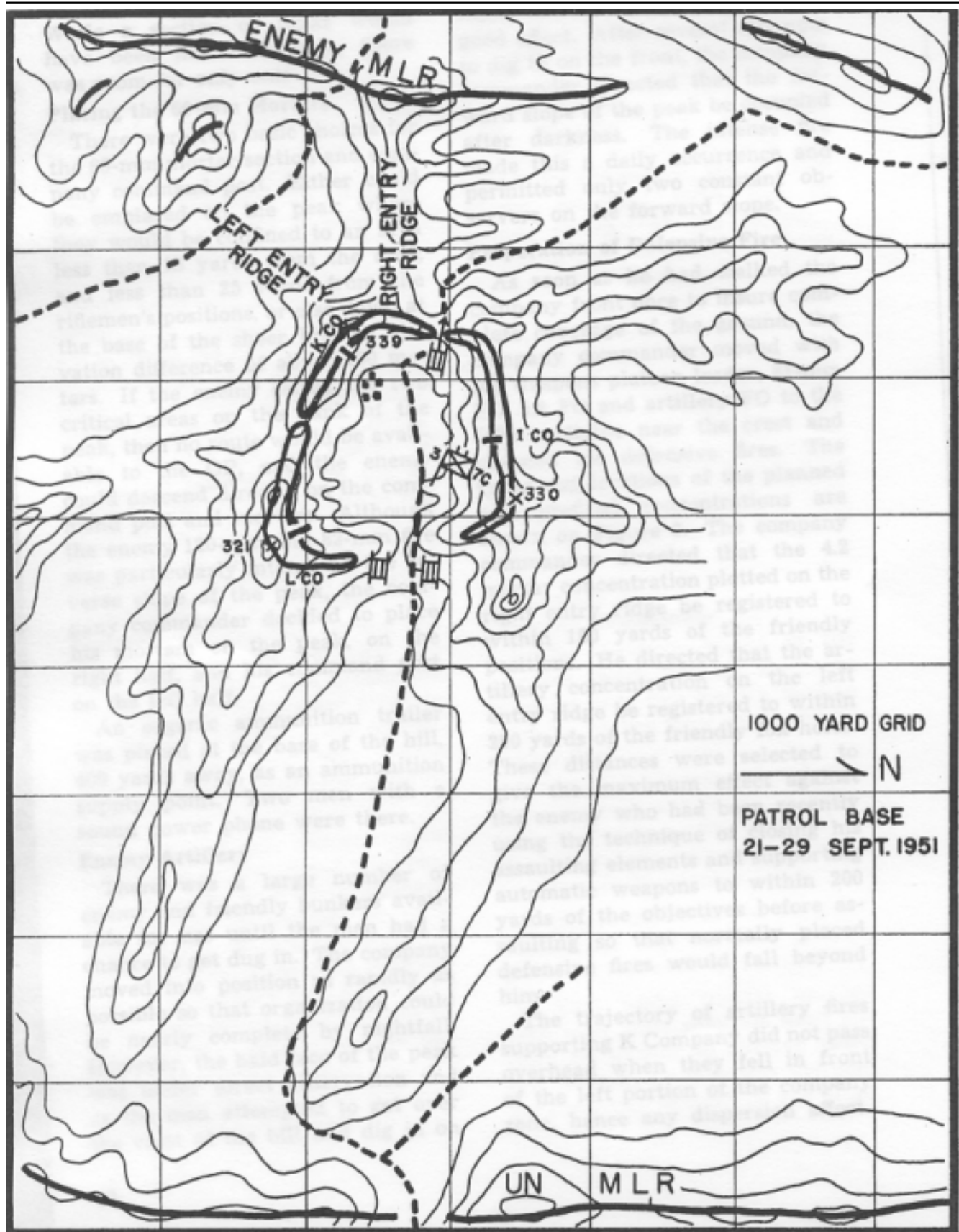


Figure 1. Patrol Base, 21-29 Sept 1951.

— Hester Caffey

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I quickly saw why the Chinese were so determined to get us and keep us off that hill. For not only was it close to their main line defenses, we could see down into the rear of their support areas - and direct artillery, heavy mortar, and air strikes on them.

Immediately we started getting what we would be subjected to for the next 7 days and nights - incessant 81 and 120mm mortar fire aimed right at the peak. We began to take casualties right away.

By 2200 hours that first night we had the first assaults from both the left flank, the right flank of the L-shaped mountain with apex at the peak, and down the north slopes to the road on which we had a 70th Armor M4 Tank and a few men around it, that broke up their first attack there.

Starting the next morning I had ordered more barbed wire, napalm for our two flame throwers, three more heavy machine guns brought up. And lots of ammunition. The Koreans were very helpful at that, since they are used to carrying huge loads. (But I kept them away, at night, from our front line - I did NOT want any of them walking around our foxholes at night - with almost no command of English, with oriental faces, and off color uniforms.

I placed one of the water cooled .30 caliber machine

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guns right on top of my command bunker, just down off the highest peak. If that had to be used it would be my last line of defense.

I was ordered then to send out a patrol on the 23d to determine just where the closest enemy lines were. I did not like it, for I could see where those lines were, and a patrol, with little maneuver room, was bound to be the focus of lots of fire from dug in Chinese soldiers.

But orders were orders. And I sent the most experienced officer I had, Lt Radcliffe to lead his platoon on that patrol.

He only got a few hundred yards when automatic fire rained down on his platoon. Radcliff was killed immediately,

A Sergeant who was in the rear of the platoon, took this picture of PFC Bernal just minutes before he to was killed on that patrol.

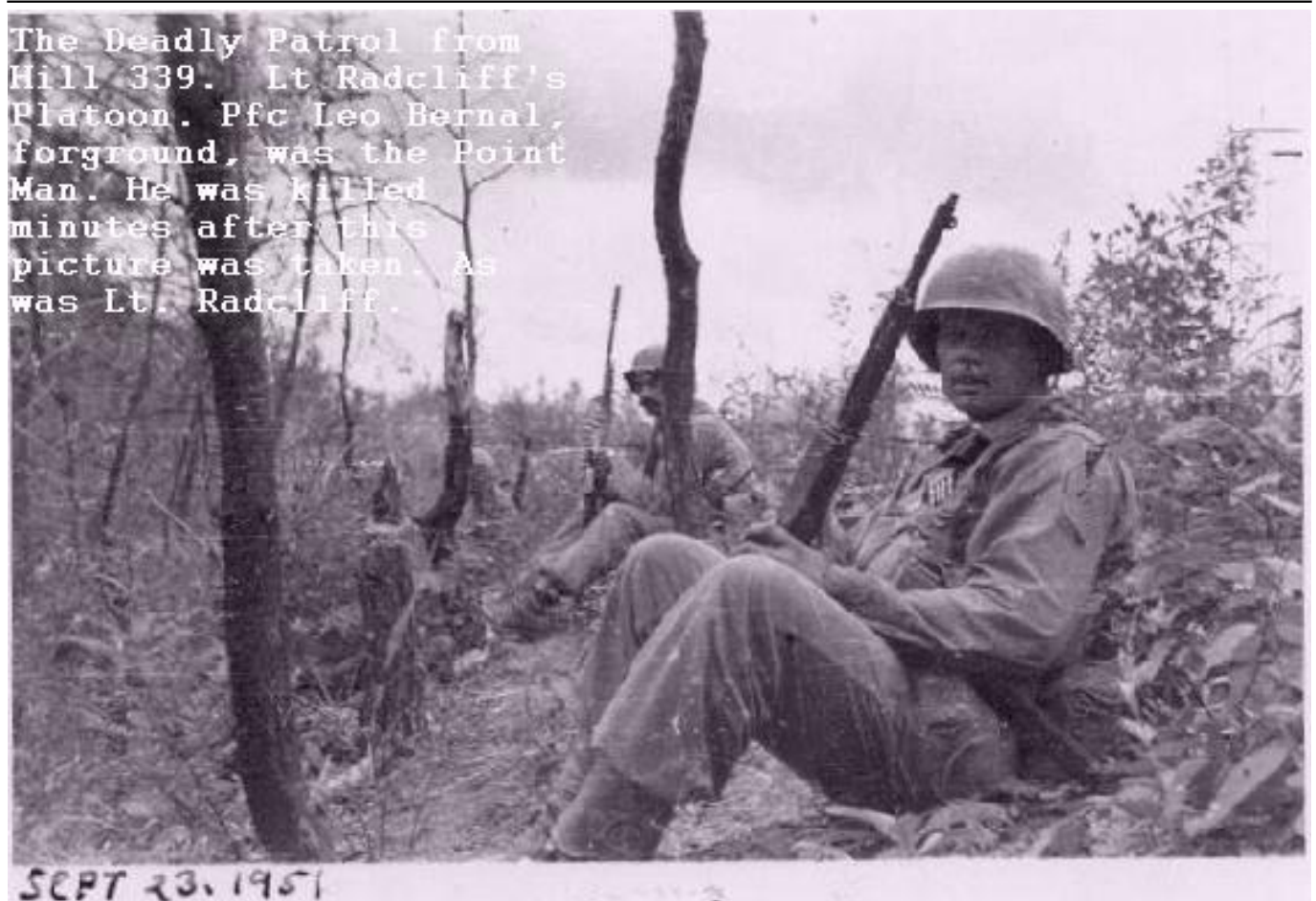
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This cat and mouse game went on for 5 more days and nights. The night of the 27/28 was the climatic battle I had prepared my men and unit for. We had already suffered 39 killed or wounded from the bombardment alone over the seven days and nights leading up to their great push.

The Chinese attacked my reduced strength (less than 125 men on the hill itself) company to seize Hill 339, with a 600 man, 5 rifle company, Battalion coming at us after a huge mortar preparation at midnight. primarily over what the diagram shows as the Left Entry Ridge, and the

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Right Entry Ridge.

The next pages will show how the attack developed all night long.