

My Korean War Tour Ends in Japan

When I came off Hill 347 with 192 Chinese Prisoners of War the evening of October 7th, I knew that my Company Command Tour would be over soon. Because of the losses from casualties the last 15 days - all my officers dead or wounded, and 169 enlisted men dead or wounded - leaving Company K with only 15 effective men left, I knew that my beloved soldier unit of Company K was no more. It would have to be filled up with replacements. They had been asked to do the impossible - defeat two full strength Chinese Army Battalions, one in defense of Hill 339, and one in taking Hill 347 - and they did.

Custer would have been proud. I call the battle for Hill 347, Custer's Revenge. I know Col Gilmer was - I lived up to his very high expectations of me as a West Point graduate.

My only regret was that he chose, instead of submitting Company K for an Presidential UNIT Citation, he recommended that I, personally, receive a Silver Star for Hill 339, and a Distinguished Service Cross for Hill 347. I would have traded both for recognition for my Cav Troopers by a Presidential Unit Citation rather than individual awards to me, on their behalf. They, not I alone, did the job.

So my dream when I chose straight Infantry coming out of West Point, a year and a half earlier, was fulfilled. Those American soldiers, over half being drafted, not volunteers, and none being elite Rangers or Airborne qualified performed exactly the way I thought they could right out of Middle America - with the right kind of leadership, organization, weaponry, and training - even if much of that took place during combat itself.

My learning curve was quite steep in the absence of formal Infantry Officer training which was supposed to happen to all my classmates before the war started, but because of the North Korean aggressive invasion, that didn't happen. And 40 of my Classmates were killed in the Korean War. So my learning curve had to be greatly accelerated by Captain Flynn, the other 1st Lieutenant officers of Company K and NCO's starting with steady Msgts Ingram, and Abaticio. And of course I would not have had the clarity of purpose, determination, superior physical fitness, and sustained mission focus, without my four apprentice years at West Point, regardless of my academic class standing, and spotty disciplinary record.

Staff Appointment

So it was no surprise to be ordered by Colonel Gilmer to be appointed the Assistant S-3 - operations officer - at the 7th Cavalry Regimental Headquarters. Two levels above my Company position, even though I was still just

a first lieutenant. I guess you have to grow into the jobs you are handed by the Army.

There was good reason for that secondary staff position to be filled. For the entire 1st Cavalry Division - all three of its Regiments - 5th, 7th, and 8th - were to depart Korea by the end of December after the fighting died down once 8th Army had shoved the Chinese Armies back over the 38th Parallel and inflicted a large number of casualties on them. It was then time to go back to Japan, back into the same locations in Japan they left from a year earlier. They were to be replaced on the front in Korea by Regiments of the 45th Division - Oklahoma National Guardsmen who had been called to active duty when the war started, and who had occupied and trained - in the posts that the 7th Cav had previously occupied. (It was a Sergeant in the 45th Division which replaced the 7th Cav on Hill 347 who took the two pictures of the Hill and Trenches in April 1952)

I was to be on the 'Advance Party' of the 7th Cav, and travel to Japan, to make the changeover run smoothly. So I only spent two weeks at the 7th Cav headquarters in Korea near Uijongbu, before heading for Camp Crawford, Japan.

That duty was much less pressure-filled than I had as a Company Commander during those extreme combat operations. I could decompress. I would also have some

time to do two things - first to compose and deliver recommendations and sworn statements in support of a large number - over 20 – of my personal recommendations for Combat Awards - from Bronze Stars with V/Device, and Silver Stars, to Distinguished Service Crosses - both for the living and dead Company K troopers who fought with me, and I witnessed, their extremely brave acts during those last 15 days. Secondly, with access to the Regimental operational records, I could learn just how Company K's operations fit into the bigger Regimental scheme during the same time.

I had an intimate knowledge of what went on in my Company K, but I only had a general idea of how the rest of the 3d Battalion, the other three Battalions including the Greeks, and the Regiment and Division as a whole fared during those intense combat periods.

What I learned from that study of records during December and January at Camp Crawford, permitted me to write the 8 page report while I was on the boat coming back to the to the United States in my normal 'rotation' tour. I would send it to Major Flynn then recovering from his wounds at Fort Benning, Georgia. He had written twice to ask me what happed to 'his' Company and Regiment after he was gone. I had no chance to answer him during operations.

Korean War (26)

Category: Korean War

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Written by dave

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My ability to write clearly appears not to have diminished during my year in Korea. While I wrote that letter to Major Flynn, just for his use, mailing it from the port of Seattle on the 3d of March, 1952, he returned the original to me decades later, but also had taken the liberty of circulating it in the 1960s and 70s to people he thought could better understand what American soldiers went through in that 'Forgotten War.'

To my complete surprise, that letter was included in 2002 in the book "The 50 Greatest Letters from America's Wars" by David Lowenherz. It shared impressive neighbors - letters from Abraham Lincoln, Gen George Washington, John Kennedy, and General Dwight Eisenhower.

That letter is included here after these first 27 chapters in this biography of the Korean War. It is in 'Korean War (28)'

'Korean War (27)' the next item after this one is called 'The Fickle Gods of War' about all the recommendations I made that were destroyed in a fire after I left Japan.

Christmas on Hokkaido

The three months I spent at Camp Crawford on Hokkaido was a welcome respite from the stressful year from landing at Inchon through the fights on Hills 339 and 347.

Besides the staff job of helping make the incoming Cav, and outgoing Guard process - which took over a month - go smoothly, and my writing down recommendations for awards, I was given one other important mission to carry out before I departed for the states.

Hokkaido is the most northern Japanese Island. And it is very close to Soviet Territory including Sakhalin Island. With the Korean War going on, with Soviet support for the North Koreans, there was US Government nervousness about any activities that the Soviets might undertake, from illicit entry into Hokkaido from the very furthest and isolated tip of the island to intelligence gathering about US units. It would be the responsibility of the 1st Cavalry Division, as an occupying authority on Hokkaido to make contingency plans for any eventuality.

What was needed was a physical reconnaissance of the north western shoreline to the tip of Hokkaido opposite Sakhalin. Also to provide an opportunity, with armed protection for US Army intelligence personnel from the CID to visit the small fishing village at that extreme tip. If anybody knew what the Russians were up to, Japanese villagers and local officials would.

The practical problem was that there is no simple road to drive to that location, no airstrip, and only the sea - in the snowy dead of winter.

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I was tabbed to make that reconnaissance in the December winter, using 7 full tracked, three person Army M29 Weasels which could navigate over the snow. They were developed by the Army for operations in Alaska in WWII.



Tracked Arctic M29 "Weasel"

It was also desirable that the 160 mile trek from Sapporo to the village of Wakkanai be taken right along the seacoast to be able to spot anything unusual. There was a reputed horse or animal cart trail that followed the contours of the coast, not at shore level - for there was no shoreline, but up from 25 to 100 feet above the water line,

Of course that trail would be under several feet of snow. It would be quite a navigational challenge. But then if I had handled North Korea roads in the winter, somebody was sure I could deal with snowy coastal Japan.

So we did. 21 Persons, 18 were Army soldiers - drivers, mechanics, radio men, and 3 NCOs with me as the only officer. And 3 civilian American CID men who knew the language. All in 7 Weasels.

Everything went ok the morning we left until one Weasel broke through the snow crust around a turn at least 30 miles deep into the trip and along the coastline with its deep ravines. The driver cut a corner too sharply where the roadway was invisible under the snow. The Weasel fell through and then bounced nose down at least 75 feet in a gully. Simple matter of manhandling it around, pointed uphill, and let it crawl its way back to the trail. Right? Wrong. The engine would not start being flooded with oil.

So it was time for me to use my ingenuity. After several suggestions were made to me, I came up with a solution that would place one Weasel on the trail but where it could crawl down one gully, while it pulled on the dead weight of the other weasel by cable up to the roadway. Then turn around the weasel now at the bottom whose engine could run, and let it climb up using its winch as an assist.

That worked. Within 45 minutes the mechanic got the dead weasel running again.

Geisha and Teriyaki

We got to the village of Wakkanai late in the afternoon. They knew we were coming. And so besides having rooms to sleep in, they got a modest feast up, with a dish I had never tasted before - Teriyaki! And oh yeah. Fish. After all this was an isolated fishing village which probably was as little affected by the war with America as any remote spot in Japan.

And they had their own version of three Geisha girls to entertain us while we ate and drank a rice wine.

We turned in, tired from the day's exertions. If the Geisha girls offered themselves to any of my men, I was not aware of it.

The CID men gathered the information they were seeking, and we set off the next day about noon for the uneventful trip back to Camp Crawford. Mission accomplished. Lesson learned? Teriyaki tastes good. And the Russians had not landed.

Homeward Bound

After lots of Christmas Holiday cheer, with plenty of pretty Japanese ladies around, a well-stocked Commissary to browse for the cash flush war-weary returnees, many of whom were due to rotate, while those who only got to Korea in the last 6 months would stay in Japan with the

Cav until their normal – longer than a year – rotation.

News About the West Point I Left Behind

I packed to go home, just as I learned, for the first time, about the first ever major cheating scandal within the Army football team at West Point that had taken place the year - 1951 - after I graduated and was in combat.

Years later in the 1990s - Bill McWilliams, Class of '55 researched, wrote and published a book "Return to Glory" about the Cheating Scandal and how West Point and the Corps of Cadets recovered from its stain. As he researched it he wanted to juxtapose the scandal with exactly what West Point was for - honorably leading Americans in war. So he researched prior West Point Classes, including our Class of 1950 which was immediately plunged into the Korean War - suffering more killed in action than any Class serving in that war. He ran across something I wrote and was published, and the fact that I was the most highly combat decorated member of the legendary Class of '50. I had been doing what West Point was created for.

So he made me the 'poster boy' for his book. Interviewing me extensively, reading what I had written in 1950 and 1951, including my 8 page description of the battles for Hills 339 and 347, and reading the sworn statements my soldiers made that supported awards made to me for my

actions in Korea.

When published in 2000, and serialized in the West Point graduate magazine, that, more than anything I can think of, led to my being nominated in 2001 and then in 2004 selected and honored as a 'Distinguished West Point Graduate' - only the 9th Colonel ever to receive that honor which generally was given to retired very senior West Point graduates as general officers. Ironic. As of 2014 I am still the only living West Point Graduate who has received that high honor out of the more than 1,000 retired graduates who live in Colorado.

I had come a long way from being confined to my room in 1950 for cadet violation of rules, and graduating without academic distinction, to become highly decorated and successful in combat in an American war, to being honored for my entire life of service.

But whatever I am credited for in my military service, it is West Point that gets the credit for not only educating and inspiring me to do my sworn 'Duty, Honor, Country' but to take a chance on me at Graduation.

On February 7th, 1952 we sailed on the Oturu Maru for Seattle. The boat was full of Korean War returnees who had been in one regiment or another of the 1st Cavalry Division - the 7th, 5th , or 8th.

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While we all swapped war stories the first days and nights out, I went looking for, and found one of the few upright Typewriters on board. So I spent time slowly thinking about and then typing out the 8 page letter to John Flynn about what had happened to 'his company K' after he left, wounded. And I wrote some other letters to distant members of my family. They were all relieved I survived that bloody war in which 34,000 Americans were killed and 8,000 are still missing in action. And that my West Point class suffered 40 killed in action.

It took us, as I recall, a whole 15 days on that boat to reach Seattle, where we were in-processed at Fort Lewis. My orders were to report to Fort Benning, Georgia

Then I was on my way home to Denver for a month and then Fort Benning.

With that, my experience in the Korean War was over.

The Full Text of the Letter I wrote, and mailed, to Flynn is at Korean War (28), two items after this one. The next item - Korean War (27) is about the 'Fickle Gods of War' where 22 of my soldiers were denied recognition because of that accidental fire in Japan. Incidentally, I learned, over a year later, that when the 7th Cav Headquarters burned down the only thing saved were the US and 7th Cav Colors, when the Sergeant Major rushed into the burning building to save them. The honorable tradition of

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Army selfless service continues on, regardless of rank or position or wars.

POSTSCRIPT -The portion describing our defense of Hill 339 has been reproduced and included in the 2002 Book by David Lowenherz, "The 50 Greatest Letters From America's Wars." Crown Publishers