

A letter to Capt. Flynn - 7th Cavalry

At Sea on the Oturu Maru out of Japan

KWP - this is the letter I wrote (typed out hunt and peck) while on the boat Oturu Maru out of Japan back to the States in Feb, 1952, after a year in combat in Korea. I mailed it when we landed in Seattle. It was to my first combat company commander - Captain John R Flynn, who had been my company commander of Company K, 7th Cavalry Regiment thru the winter of 1950 and spring of 51, before he became a battalion S-3, was wounded and sent home to teach at the Infantry School.

I had forgotten the letter entirely until then retired Lt.Col. Flynn returned it to me, - 45 years later! just before the 1995 Korean War Memorial's dedication, and a reunion of the Korean Chapter of the 7th Cavalry.

I had forgotten the letter entirely, but since it is a vivid and accurate report of what one company went through during the violent days of September and October, 1951, as both armies battled to control the best terrain as the armistice talks went on.

I have the original typed text.

David R Hughes

7 Feb 1952

Capt Flynn:

There is lots to say in bringing you up to date since you left. Here beside me I have several false starts on letters to you.

But they were inadequate and out of perspective. So I will not say I am sorry I did not mail a letter sooner, for I am glad I held off until this day, when I am sure unhurried and can write one letter for 15 days with no place to mail it [on this boat] and can now speak from more authority and experience.

I changed jobs at a lucky time. In the S-3 shop, [Regimental headquarters operations staff] I was in one the post-battle discussions and writings of the Regiment, and talked with the generals and the staffs, and read. So now I can say what there is to be said.

I learned and saw enough since you left to write ten books, all of them different. Personalities rose and fell, battles swelled and diminished, boys became men, and men became memories.

The Regiment fought like a demon for some pieces of ground and suffered incredible casualties defending it. And then, partly because of the casualties, the division was pulled out and replaced. It was time. The 1st Cav Division was left only with a smattering of real strength.

In the big picture, of course, the whole Army moved forward in the October [1951] offensive. Before that time, the fighting had diminished in the west, where we were, to constructing a great series of barbed wire obstacles and extensive patrolling. When I left the division, the Army was still in the same area, the same front as when you were there.

After you were hit, the division went back to the Kansas line and dug and wired in for a few weeks. The 25th Division had our sector. The 24th Regiment had the old 7th Cav sector and fared pretty badly. When we came back up they had lost the patrol base on the 487-477 hill mass, which the 3d Battalion had for so long. We were not to get that hill mass back until four months later after five well planned attacks - two of them regimental size - had failed.

Actually , in the final analysis we prepared the Wyoming line more thoroughly than we did the Kansas line. As a matter of record, the 7th laid more wire on that line than the 8th and 5th together. We had up to ten double aprons all across the MLR (main line of resistance), 20 in places, and six on the OPLR, not counting protective and tactical wire. It was never tested.

The Chinese started digging in on a line from Hill 487 in front of Hill 347 and on down to the Imjin. So we kept patrolling out farther and farther until that line was

established; then we sent out the patrol bases again. That set the stage for the offensive.

Back in Company K, I was getting the outfit shaken down and ready to fight. A few of the tactical ideas I told you about, such as numbering the draws, later paid off. My real problem, of course, was getting those squad leaders, platoon leaders, and riflemen who were left after rotation into the proper jobs. At one time I was the only officer left in the company, but I got a few shortly before the big fight.

We were involved in one of the battles for 487. The line generally paralleled the road to from Yonchon to Chorwon, and at this time the 3d Division had the sector down to opposite 477. The 3d Battalion of the 7th was given the job of a dawn attack in a flanking move around the north and east of 487. It was up the two tough sides of the mountain, but was probably the least defended too.

We moved and jumped off on schedule; at least Company K did. Companies L and I were late, and we had seized our first objective before they reached the line of departure. But we pulled up and soon were on the two fingers. The peak and its approaches had been plastered day and night for a long time by weapons of all calibers up to 8-inch. The peak was bare, but the Chinese were too well dug in. Three thousand rounds of 4.2-inch mortars were used in preparation.

Up we went and learned the defenses were simply impregnable. On K Company's approach, the last 300 yards was a 45 degree slope, with no cover. The Chinese laced into us with five machine guns, and we were so placed that we were attacking the rim of a teacup from inside the bottom. At the high point of the attack, 200 yards from the top, the whole assaulting platoon was under direct observation on a concave slope, I had everything in the book going in at the bunkers - precision registered 155mm, direct fire from five tanks, and all the rest - but not one machinegun was silenced.

We were ordered off in late afternoon with 23 casualties, 20 of them gunshot. Company L had about the same. Two weeks later the entire 65th Regiment tried to take the peak and failed.

One of my platoon leaders was badly shot up in the arm, which left Lieutenant Radcliffe, 1st Platoon leader, and me again. But the new Company K had been bloodied; the men were more ready to fight and knew what to expect.

For another couple weeks, we ran patrols from near Yonchon, and I got in five good officers.

Then we watched the two patrol bases out in front of us get it in the neck. One was on Hill 343 and the other on 339. Hill 339 was key, and about halfway between lines.

It was lost and gained by patrols every few days. One day Company C was sent out to hold a perimeter on it, which they did for two days and on the night of the third was completely overrun in a mass attack. We got the hill back again with the 2d battalion and then they were ordered off. This yo-yo game continued until 21 September when they ordered the 3d Battalion out to hold a patrol base from 339 to 343 and back over to 321, a 4,000 yard perimeter.

Company K got the delightful mission of holding 339, and 1,000 more yards of perimeter.

We moved out and after plastering the hill from an OP [observation post] on 321, 1,500 yards away, we went up, but the Chinese set off a red flare and pulled off. I topped the peak and about five minutes afterward learned what the score was going to be for the next two weeks. They suddenly began shelling us and mortaring until I thought the roof was going to come off the hill.

They kept working the front slope over with a battery of 75mms and self-propelled artillery and they shook us to pieces with more 120mm mortars than I thought we had in 4.2-inch. The rain of 82mm and 60mm was just incidental. The fewest incoming rounds we ever reported for 24 hours was 350, and we estimated 1,200 on the second day.

It took me until the second day to see why they had targetted us while hardly touching the rest of the perimeter. Once on the peak OP, I could see more of their positions and gun positions and access routes than they could afford to have me see.

So it went. We dug in amidst dead enemy troops from earlier battles and tried to organize the hill. They watched us like hawks, though, and could see our rear slope from the flanks. We could not top the ridge or put a single man in position on the forward slope during daylight; they would just open up with the SP [self-propelled] and dig him right out of the hole. From bombardment alone, with very little movement on the hill, we took 33 casualties in a week from direct hits on holes with mortars and the midnight dose of 120's.

The first night, we had a scrap. They came across a little saddle from which they had hit Company C, and they came down the road on the extreme right flank. On the road they ran into a tank, and it scattered them while the mortar fire kept them dispersed. But on the peak they plastered us with everything they could, and came in right under their own mortar fire to hit the right shoulder of the hill and smack into Sergeant Malloy's machine gun. He waited until they were ten yards away and then cut loose. They did not definitely locate him in the confusion and noise, and he stopped them cold. They crawled around and poured machinegun fire on us for a few more hours

and then pulled off their dead and withdrew. In the morning there were five dead enemy within those ten yards of Malloy, and one had his hand draped over the parapet. We took no casualties from the small arms.

This cat and mouse game went on for seven days while we took the brunt of all the fire in the battalion.

I made out a little card on the company positions and numbered the draws and worked the 60mm gun crews until they could get a round off on any concentration in 30 seconds. We were all up on the peak. It was only about 1,000 yards across the high ground, and nobody was more than ten yards from the crest, including the mortars. That paid off later too.

We sent out daily patrols that only got 600 yards before getting hit. On the 25th, I had to send out a platoon toward positions I knew were there. I didn't like it at all because the enemy had been gotten cagier and cagier and had been holding their fire. But out went Lt. Radcliffe and his 1st Platoon. The Chinese let them get 200 yards from the peak before opening up with cross-firing weapons. Radcliffe was killed instantly. The platoon sergeant, a corporal, didn't hesitate. He ordered marching fire, and the platoon took half the peak so the rest could get out. There were three dead. Sergeant Brown was cut down by a grenade near Radcliffe. He rolled over and took Radcliffe's .45 pistol and the maps

and took them all back as he himself was carried out. A machine gunner who could not find a vantage point to set up his machinegun went up with it cradled in his arm with one belt of ammunition. He had to be evacuated for the burns on his arm.

Every night, enemy patrols would crawl up and feel us out. They plotted our weapons and counted our men. Every night I would have to get up and calm down a squad that thought the whole Chinese Army was out there. But this had one good effect. The men dug in tight. They kept their weapons spotless. They slept in the daytime and watched at night. The 60mm mortar crew got faster and faster under colored platoon leader Lieutenant Walker. I collected heavy machineguns and on the 28th had five heavies and seven lights across the front. But because of the fire and dwindling number of men, we had been able to put out only a few rolls of concertina wire on the two easy approaches. The engineers all but refused to work laying mines in front of us.

The night of the 28th came. The day had been quiet and it seemed as good a time as any for the big show.

At 2330 a bombardment came in. It was deadly accurate and concentrated on the positions controlling the two approaches. It continued until 2400 and then, for a few minutes, stepped up to a frenzied firing of all kinds of

shells.

Then I heard the rip of a burp gun on the left. At the same time, just as I popped out of my bunker, a purple flare went off on both flanks of the peak. I yelled off a series of concentrations to the FO's (forward observers), and the first sergeant roused the 60's on the phone. But before I had even given a command to the 60's, two plop plops came out, and in a second a flare was burning over each flank. They had fired in about 20 seconds from the enemy flares.

All hell broke loose. A company hit each flank, and even with the 4.2's dropping right in the draw they came up, they overran the tie-in with Company L and rolled up the flank of the understrength 1st Platoon. On the right they were stopped for a while by the automatic weapons and the 81mm and 60mm mortars, but there again they punched through a squad front and overran that squad turning toward the peak through the 2d Platoon. Not a man bugged out, and all our dead soldiers in the morning were found in their holes.

By this time, all the defensive fires were going full blast, but I was waiting for the Sunday punch. It came in about 20 minutes later at 0110. The Chinese only had a strip of our territory about 150 yards long on the right and 200 yards on the left, but they sure filled it up. They moved a mortar onto the ridge of each flank and began peppering

the CP (my command post). They got a couple of machineguns up there and fired overhead for their next attack. And they never stopped pounding the top of the hill with those 120s. Then they jumped off again. The Chinese companies that had penetrated sent people around behind us,, and they raked the back slope with small arms and cut off our communications with battalion.

I did not know this at the time, but two things had happened. One was that they had attacked neatly, the first time, just to the left of the two machineguns on the right flank and thus never touched any part of the 3d Platoon. Only two rifle platoons were involved all night long! The second thing was that at the beginning of the attack, the battalion S-2 (intelligence) section had been monitoring the SCR 300 (captured US radio) stations, and their Chinese interpreter picked up the command channel of the battalion that was attacking my company. So all night long battalion headquarters had a running account of the battle and knew how we stood, from the talk on the company radios the Chinese used and their command radio.

When the big attack came at 0110, the two companies on the ridgeline on both flanks started the attack toward the peak. Just when they were exerting maximum pressure on the heavy machineguns at the shoulder of the peak on each flank, two more companies came at us on those two saddle approaches we had wired in. I was waiting for

that, and on the left, as they started across the wire, we opened up with the 57mm (recoilless rifle) at 20 yards on the wire, and I called in the 155s at a range of 150 yards from us and the two fires caught the company on the move.

On the right they attacked across that little saddle, and we were waiting there too. At the first sign of the attack I called in the 4.2 mortar fire to 125 yards, and it played havoc with the supporting troops. I started the 60mm mortars firing at top speed (by this time we were getting artillery flares) and then, as the first grenade throwing wave hit our positions, we turned on the two flame throwers. The first wave just expired [fried] where it was. In a short time we were out of flame thrower juice, but it had scared them and the next waves walked across instead of running. I kept dropping the 60mm fire closer and closer until we went to 83 degrees - firing nearly vertically - when firing on a gun to target range of 65 yards and we were dropping shells only 15 yards in front of the machinegunner. It finally broke them, but only after they had got the 2d Platoon CP and had the platoon backed up to our mortar position.

On the left they got much closer. They killed the crew of one of our heavy machinegun sections, broke through the refused flank, and came steaming up the hill at our CP about 35 yards up. I had every man I could spare on the perimeter, including the 5th Platoon (South Koreans)

which did good work that night, so I asked my personal radio operator to commit the reserve. That consisted of one heavy machinegun that was sitting on top of my CP bunker. He set it up and stopped the attack 15 yards from the CP, which was full of wounded. Then I sent my first sergeant to the 57mm recoilless rifle section, which was now in an untenable position. As the section soldiers came up the hill a Chinese soldier came up with them, and after a tussle was killed in the CP. [I shot him with my submachine gun after he jumped into the hole with me].

That was the high point of the attack. They had captured three of our men on the left. One of them they took off the hill immediately; the second and third were pushed up in front of them toward us during the attack, but one - seeing that heavy machinegun kill all of their mortar crew and cut down on the attack wave - kicked his captor, jumped over the side of the steep ridge, and escaped. The third GI went on up and was killed by our fire.

At about 0330 the artillery was out of flares, we were low on ammunition, even with our stockpile, when a flare ship arrived and helped us see to counterattack the high points of the attack.

The reserve heavy machine gun had done its work, but its water cans were full of holes. Our urine had run out, but a can of cold coffee lasted the rest of the night.

The enemy radios had reported that three of their company commanders had been killed and they could not get the GIs off the hill. They asked permission to withdraw but were told they had to have the hill "tonight." Then the reserve company, the fifth one, claimed they had so many wounded from the artillery that they could not carry them back and therefore could not attack. Of course we didn't know any of this.

Then our Regimental Commander hailed a flight of B-26s, and under flare light and by radar they dive bombed the ridge 600 yards in front of us.

We drew up in a tight perimeter at 0430 and waited out the day. In the morning we cleared the the flanks and bombarded many enemy trying to flee over the hills with their wounded and dead.

We still could not move around very well, because the enemy fire was still coming in, but by 0800 we counted 77 dead within our positions. We had suffered 10 killed, 15 wounded, and 1 captured.

We were pretty beat up by this time, having taken - with attachments - 54 casualties in the seven days on Hill 339. On the 29th, we were rotated around the battalion perimeter and Company I took over.

Four days and no replacements later, we jumped off in the attack launched by the Eighth Army.

Company K had a series of objectives that culminated in Hill 347. We jumped off on 3 October with the 4th Battalion - the Greek Expeditionary Force, on the right of us, and Company L on our left.

At the end of the first day's fighting, the rest of the 1st Platoon was destroyed and two of my officers had been critically wounded. Company G had taken 130 casualties, including 4 officers, on Hill 418, and the Greek company on my right had taken 135 casualties. No units had gained their objectives. The 2d Battalion won and lost Hill 418 five times.

On the 4th of October we did the same thing with all the support we could muster, but again we were in the trenches and the Greeks were in theirs, but the tremendous mortar fire and unlimited number of enemy through us out with still more casualties.

I got 30 replacements that night. [and never saw their faces in the light, before sending them into the attack]

On the 5th, the Greeks made it and we tried again. We couldn't make it until all the companies of the battalion attacked just after dark, and we captured the two little hills with 17 more casualties including the artillery and 4.2-inch mortar FOs (forward observers). Sgt Malloy was wounded, shot through the shoulder that day.

On the 6th we reorganized while the Chinese threw 3,000

rounds into the Regimental zone. I only had two rifle platoons and a mortar section left to fight with.

On the 7th of October we advanced on Hill 347, all the elements of the battalion committed.

We, Company K, reached the trenches and then were blown off the hill, losing another officer and 20 more men. Company L and I were on the other side of the peak, while Company L was fighting up the hill, Company I had to stop a counterattack against the battalion OP (observation point) behind them. And the senior officers and men in the OP were fighting off grenade attacks on their flank.

The second time up we fell short of the trenches again, and were grenaded and mortared off the hill, losing another officer and more men.

The third time the same thing, and my last officer was wounded by a grenade and our attack was broken.

I had six riflemen left up on the hill, so I took all the rest of headquarters, the mortar crew as riflemen, and the remaining FO's. Loaded down with grenades, and unable to coordinate distant fires anymore, up we all went. All that was left of Company K.

There were about 30 of us in all, and we hit the hill. I could see the mistake earlier assaults had made. The

Korean War (28)

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Written by dave

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men were not charging up over the trench at all costs and then turning and working down from above. The Chinese [many, many more than should have been there] were standing in four-foot trenches, where the direct fire from below, even tank fire, didn't bother them. They just threw an unlimited supply of grenades, including big anti-tank grenades, down the slope.

So when I took the last of Company K up - effectively just one platoon - I ordered everyone to run through the grenade fire and cross the trench, and try to keep their fire down by massing our, largely carbine, fire.

It worked. Two more FO crews were killed by the rain of antitank grenades, and we lost about 10 more men who didn't make it. But we got across, and above that trench, and then met the lead men of Company L coming up the other side.

We threw all our remaining grenades in the battle on top, which forced the Chinese back into their tunnels.

Then, one tunnel by one tunnel, we got them out as prisoners or dead men.

By dark we had 192 Chinese prisoners just from the area above the perimeter trench, which was only about 10 yards down, and 200 yards around the hilltop.

With all the attachments, including a 14 man Company M

machinegun attachment which joined us on top, I had 37 men, only about 15 left from Company K.

We discovered why they had held out so long. We had captured a Chinese division and regimental artillery CP, and supplies. The commanders had bugged out a few hours before we got the hill. We counted 250 dead. Days later the clerk of the Chinese battalion defending the peak was captured. I still have his exhaustive report confirming that we had attacked a reinforced battalion, and captured or killed all but 80 men.

We soon were relieved on the hill and went back to another part of the regimental front where the

1st Battalion had just been overrun; it was left with a captain as commander and had only 200 men.

Then we stayed rather stationary on the hills while the 5th and 8th Cavalry Regiments took ten more days to catch up and get their objectives.

The last of the men who had been with us at the peak of the fighting were rotated then, and the last of the old Company K was gone. I was the only officer in the company for a while longer until they brought in a few. Then I was made assistant Regimental S-3 (operations officer).

And thats how we were when the division went into

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reserve, and got ready to ship out to Japan. The 1st Cavalry Division had taken a real pounding; it never suffered more casualties in an equal period during its tour in Korea.

Company K, which ran about fifth in casualties, lost 167 men and 6 officers.

But we won all our battles.

Although I held down a captain's vacancy for six and a half months straight, the Army did not promote me, so I am still a first lieutenant. But I am on my way home and hope to see you soon.

Lt David Hughes

Co K, 7th Cavalry

Postscript : The portion of this letter above, 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