

A Marine remembers a year of deadly combat in Korea.

Korea And The Magic Line: Tripwire to Hell

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Chapter One
HIDE AND GO SEEK
The Great Guerrilla Chase
Korea, 1951

By mid-December, 1950, the fight around the Chosin Reservoir was over. U.S. forces had reached as far north as they would ever get in the three-year, up and back, seesaw movements of the Korean War. The evacuation of the U.S. Tenth Corps, of which the First Marine Division was a part, had been accomplished from a beachhead at Hungnam in North Korea. The remnants of the beat-up and frozen First Marine Division were sent far to the south on the peninsula, to a place about thirty miles west of Pusan called Masan. This was an area that, only six months earlier, had been part of what had been the Pusan perimeter. At Masan, the division lost hundreds of men—men who needed medical treatment for wounds and frostbite. Some of them were sent to Japan and some went to nearby hospital ships. Many never returned to the division.

It was at Masan that I joined the division and was assigned to a regular Marine rifle company. It was at Masan that the division refitted, re-equipped, licked its wounds, cleaned itself up, and took in many hundreds of replacements. After some organizing and training, we went aboard ships and did an end run around the south end of Korea, through the Korea straits, then north up the east coast. My regiment landed early one morning near the port of Pohang-dong. This area had been part of the north end of the old Pusan perimeter in the early days of the war.

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It was now into January and the weather was typical for that time of year. Many of the old salts complained that it felt as cold in the south as it had been in the far north. It snowed, the temperature dropped to very cold, and the wind off the Sea of Japan was relentless.

When the landings had taken place at Inchon the previous September, the North Korean Army had to abandon their attack in the south and make a run for it back north or face being cut off. Some North Koreans didn't get away, some couldn't get away, and some stayed in the south by choice. All those left behind were ordered to fight on, to go into a guerrilla mode and raise as much hell with the U.N. forces behind the lines as possible.

Our mission after the landing was to set up a base of operations and a headquarters. We were to patrol aggressively and search the area for North Korean "stay-behinds", and parts of the North Korean 10th Division that had slipped through some South Korean outfits and were trying to link up with the stay-behinds.

There had been reports from some civilians in the district that they had been robbed and threatened by these bandits. There had been several kidnappings, and extortion was becoming a way of life.

There were some South Korean police units operating in the area but they were not very well trained, nor were they very well equipped. These men had bits and parts of uniforms, and weapons that ranged from old Jap WWII leftovers, Chinese rifles captured from the North Koreans, and some mistreated American carbines and Garand rifles. The leadership of these police units was suspect at best, and for the most part left a lot to be desired. Needless to say, these units were not very effective.

We set up a perimeter of defense around our headquarters and our artillery, and began patrolling. Sometimes the whole company would be on a sweep, sometimes a platoon would be sweeping a smaller area, and there were times when we would be out on road patrol with only a squad in a couple of Jeeps, trying to draw fire from the local bad guys. But these Jeep patrols only managed to get us really cold and stiff. The roads were bad and the ride was painful, but now and then we would run into something worth checking on or shooting at.

While on a company sweep one cold day after several inches of fresh snow, our point picked up a trail of several people who were headed toward some high hills inland from the coastal flats. It looked like a trail

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worth tracking. There was no good reason why any civilians would be out roaming around the countryside at this time of year, especially with the weather being as it was. So the skipper checked his maps and worked out what he and our other company officers thought would be the direction these people would take, and their possible objective.

The company took off after the would-be guerrillas with our three platoons on slightly different courses. Sometime in the early afternoon, we came to a sharp bend in the frozen river that we had been following, which was probably a hundred yards wide. There were several small streams that fed the river at this point. Two of these streams originated in the hills to the west—the direction in which we were tracking our prey—and one came in from the south in a deep ditch. It was at this bend in the river against a west wall or escarpment that the skipper called a rest stop, and sent my squad forward to scout the flat land above the embankment. This wall was six to eight feet high, and we had a hard time getting up on top as it was very steep and consisted of packed and frozen rock and sand.

Once up on the flat, the three fire teams spread out over a fifty-yard front and advanced away from the rest of the platoon and the company. We were headed for a steep hill a couple of hundred yards in front of us, and had only gone about fifty yards when a shot was fired at us. No one was hit, and our squad leader shouted, “Move forward quicktime and take cover.” Then several more shots were fired at us. I could hear the bullets ricocheting off the frozen ground, spending themselves out in the distance. Then another burst of fire, and one of the guys in another fire team was hit in the leg. His teammates dragged him over to some large rocks while the rest of us opened fire along the ridge we were facing to cover them. The gooks dropped a couple of 60mm mortar rounds out on the open flat. The skipper called us back to the company line, so we covered the fire team with the wounded Marine as they helped him back. Our company 60mm mortars opened up and dropped some rounds along the ridge to hold the gooks down.

Word was sent to the platoon off to the far right to start a sweep to the right and forward for several hundred yards, and then they were to swing left and start an envelopment movement to try and catch these gooks out in front of us.

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The skipper was trying to contact one of our brother companies that was supposed to be operating off to our left, but he wasn't having any luck with his radio. I was near him at the time, and he looked at me and said, "Do you feel like taking a run?"

"Yes sir."

"Okay. Captain So-and-so's company is supposed to be over there some place. They should be about even with us on the north-south line, so you take that ditch across the river there--" and he pointed to the deep cut that ran to the south, "--and stay with it. You should find them in a couple of miles or sooner. Tell the captain what is going on here and that if he has nothing going on and could help out, I would like him to turn this way and envelop from the left. Maybe we can trap these guys."

"Yes sir, I'll try to find them."

About then, another mortar round landed out on the frozen river near one of our machine guns that was set up in some brush. This was not far from where I was planning to cross over to the ditch. I had about a one-hundred-yard open-country run to the cover of the ditch. After that last mortar round exploded out on the ice, the fear factor was multiplied.

I took a deep breath and took off. To my surprise, no one shot at me, no mortar rounds went off near me, and I didn't even get wet feet. Well, so far so good. Now to find Captain So-and-so.

I guess I was about a mile south in the ditch when I came upon a South Korean police unit of about fifteen men. One of them could understand a little English, and with the two of us grunting and gesturing with all sorts of sign language and broken English, I was able to determine that they had been on patrol a mile or so to the east when they heard the shooting that my company was involved in, and they took cover in the ditch. (I think they got into the ditch just to stay out of the way.) They also knew nothing about another company of Marines operating somewhere just to the south, so I left them and continued my trek down the ditch.

After another half-mile, things got very quiet. I climbed out of the ditch and took a good look around. I saw and heard nothing. I climbed a small hill that gave a good view of a large area. I still saw nothing. I figured there was no sense continuing south. There were no other Marines out on that side of the world, so I started back.

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When I came to the place where I had met the Korean police, they were gone. I took a look over the top of the ditch, and they were nowhere in sight. Well, maybe they went to help out my company (not likely). I could hear some occasional rifle fire, and now and then there would be the thud of a 60mm mortar round going off. I couldn't tell if the fire was us shooting at the gooks, or them shooting at us, or both.

I took another look over the top edge of the ditch and could see nothing but looking back to the east, I saw a Marine headed my way. He was out on open ground about 75 yards away and walking at a fast pace. I recognized him as one of my platoon's automatic riflemen. As he scooted along on the frozen ground, his B.A.R. slung across his back, he was eating a can of rations. I shouted to him and waved an arm to get his attention. Just as he spotted me, there was the sound of a 60mm mortar round headed in our direction. "Blam," the thing landed about thirty yards behind him and threw frozen ground and rock all over. I shouted to him again.

"Yeah, I'm coming, hold your shirt on." He paid little attention to the round that had just gone off near him. Somehow, he wasn't hit by any shrapnel.

"Come on, Becker, over here. Get in the ditch."

"Yeah, okay! I don't want to spill my chow."

When he got to the edge of the ditch, he stopped and knelt down, handed me his Browning Automatic and said, "Here, take this. And don't get it dirty." Then he passed down his can of beans with a warning, "Don't get dirt in this."

The can was warm. I had to laugh and said, "Hey, Becker, you talk like I was an enemy." I was still laughing as Becker slid over the edge of the ditch. He dusted off the front of his parka but didn't seem too concerned about how clean and dirt-free he was.

"What were you doing out there in the open?" I asked.

"The lieutenant sent me out to look for another outfit that he and the skipper thought may be back there," he said. "I didn't find them but I did find some R.O.K. police with a fire, eating their lunch, so I warmed up my chow too. Where have you been?"

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“I was sent out to the south in this ditch to look for the same outfit. I didn’t find them either. I wonder why the gooks fired a 60mm mortar round at a one-man patrol?”

Becker said, “I dunno, I must look valuable.”

We headed back down the ditch. When we caught up with the company, they were climbing a large hill to set up for the night. Becker and I found our packs at the foot of the hill near the trail the company was using for the climb. The shooting had stopped, we had patrols out, but the word was that the gooks were making a run for it and our attempt at envelopment hadn’t worked.

I found the skipper with my lieutenant. I reported my story about not finding our brother company. The skipper told me that he had finally got our battalion headquarters on the radio and found that the company I was looking for was in a very different area. There had been some change in the plan for the day and some outfits hadn’t gotten the word. He apologized for sending me off on what had turned out to be a wild goose chase.

While our patrols were out looking for phantoms, the rest of the company tried to dig in but we didn’t get very far in the frozen ground. A few small fires were started and we had a chance to try and thaw out some rations but it got dark fast and we had to kill the fires before the patrols were all in. The snow was like frozen powder, and as it got dark the air became very cold and still. We were in for a miserable night. The temperature continued to drop until morning. All of us were cold to the bone, and as a new day dawned gray and overcast, the wind picked up and more snow started to fall.

We spent the next several days walking, tracking and hoping we would turn something up, but all we found in those mountains was the cold. And we all suffered with frozen feet, frozen hands and frozen faces. We were always hungry. It was a big job to try and warm a can of rations, and it was almost impossible to eat our rations in their frozen condition. All of us were losing weight because of the lack of nourishment. We were all carrying a lot of weight, as our clothes, packs, weapons, ammo and boots were all heavy. It was tough to get around. Everyone was always tired.

One night we set up along a frozen river. I had a post near a point of land out on the ice. It was a wide-open area and the wind was never colder

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or more unforgiving. I have never been colder before or since in my whole life. I have no idea what the temperature was that night, but I can never forget the pain from the cold. I was wearing all the winter clothes I had and was inside my sleeping bag with my back against the wind trying to keep watch, and the one thing that kept running through my mind over and over was the wish that some gook would put a bullet through me and end this terrible pain. But the pain didn't end, and the night took a very long time to end. When daybreak arrived, it got very still and the temperature dropped a few more degrees. The sky reached a certain shade of gray and stayed that way. The sun had abandoned us for one more day, one more among many.

It was useless to try to start a fire. There was little to use for fuel. All the water we had was frozen. The best we could do for food was to eat the items from the dry packs that came with our regular rations: crackers, chocolate, soft candy. The small cans of jam that were part of our daily ration issue were tucked into our beltlines so they could thaw. Some of us split the frozen ration cans after removing the ends with can openers, breaking up the contents with a rock or a rifle butt, and carrying the frozen bits in a pocket wrapped in a rifle cleaning rag or stuffed in an old glove or sock. The small pieces could be thawed in the mouth and eventually a meal could be consumed. It was a long process and always left you wanting. And it tasted lousy.

On one trip into the field, we were out several days and were checking a very remote area when we came across a small settlement situated in a nice, quiet little valley. The skipper sent out a couple of patrols and set the largest part of the company up on a hill overlooking the area. We watched the buildings for a while. After seeing no activity, my squad was sent down to check the place out. The rest of the company could cover all the patrols in case there was any trouble. It was 300 yards to the settlement from the base of the hill. We approached in short rushes, covering each other as we went from rock pile to tree, to small hill or small ditch. We saw about a dozen buildings or so, probably belonging to a single family with a lot of relatives, and they more than likely owned the whole valley. A one-lane dirt road ran up the center of the valley and disappeared into a grove of trees at the south end. The whole area was developed farmland,

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and from the look of the buildings, it must have been a very prosperous place before the war.

Sgt. Wilson got the squad to within fifty yards of the buildings and we took cover in a small trench. He ordered my fire team to go forward into the compound to check the buildings for possible intelligence information, or to pick a fight if we could find a few gooks. So we dropped our packs, took our extra ammo and came together near Sgt. Wilson for further orders.

“Okay, Jack,” the sarge said, “you lead off and make for that wall over on the right of the yard. Once you get started, don’t stop running ‘till you get there. The rest of the fire team and I will be right with you at twenty-yard intervals. When you get there, check that first building as best you can. Watch for booby traps and mines.”

I sure wasn’t rigged for fast running with the clothes and boots I was wearing. I felt like a tank with a bad engine trying to do a wind sprint. It seemed like it took a week to cross that fifty-yard open area, but I made it and no one shot at me. I took a quick look around for any wire or disturbed ground that could mean a trap or mine, then started to the building just as the sarge came in behind me. The building was clear; it didn’t look as if anyone had been around for a very long time.

This place was like a postcard photograph. The war never got to this farm, but the people were all gone. They probably went to Pusan or Pohang for safety and never returned. The buildings were beautiful and well maintained, as were the walled courtyards.

We made a further search and found the place absolutely cleaned out and vacant. The folks that had lived there took everything with them when they left, including the oxen, pigs and chickens. Even the working tools and household goods were gone.

Terry, our BAR man, said, “We could set up housekeeping here and be nice and snug.”

The sarge said, “What are we going to do with the rest of the company?”

“Yeah,” I said, “that’s right. We would never fit the whole company in the compound. There is just not enough room for over two hundred men. We sure couldn’t stay well spread out. Too bad. We sure could warm up a little if we had a few days in a place like this.”

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We were about ready to start back to where the rest of the squad was covering us from when I heard an unmistakable hollow “thunk”, the sound of a light mortar being fired off in the distance. It had been very quiet except for the five of us talking in low tones. I think we all heard it. Only a few seconds later, the sound of the incoming round could be heard. All of us dove for the ground as the shell exploded about twenty yards outside the wall we were standing behind. Chunks of shrapnel ripped into the mud and stone wall, knocking pieces off the wall and spraying debris all over us.

“That round came from that hill out at the far end of the valley,” I said. “I’ll bet on it.”

“Yeah,” said the sarge. “The bastards have been watching us.”

At that time we started receiving machinegun fire from about where we thought the mortar round came from. From different places along the courtyard wall, we opened fire at the ridge where we thought the enemy fire was coming from. We couldn’t see where the gooks were, but we put out a good volume of fire, and with that much lead landing around them, it held them down.

Another mortar round came screaming in. The gooks had made an adjustment on their gun. This second round landed in one of the houses just behind us. It blew parts of the building all over us—bits of wood, dry mud dust and straw, and small chunks of rock—but no one was hit by any shrapnel. We continued to fire on the ridge at the other end of the small valley, hoping to shake the gooks’ aim up. The rest of our company up on the hill off to our right now cut loose with machinegun and automatic rifle fire on the gooks at the end of the valley.

The bandits got off two more mortar rounds at us. One of them landed near another of the buildings and set fire to the place. Their machine gunner kept up his fire along the courtyard wall, which we were using for cover. Some of his bullets were zipping right through the wall, which was made of rock stuck together with a sort of clay cement. So far, our luck held and his shots hadn’t found any of us, but it was definitely time to start thinking about getting out of there.

The gook mortar crew switched their efforts to the main body of the company up on the hill, but their gunner was making it hot for us, and now

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we had an out-of-control fire to worry about as the cold wind fanned the flames of the blaze that was burning behind us, creeping ever closer.

“We got to get the hell out of here before we get our asses cooked,” said the sarge. “Or that goddamned machinegun gets one of us.”

He went over to the corner of the wall nearest our other two fire teams, who were busy firing at the ridge.

“Hey,” he shouted. “We are going to try to get away from these buildings. Do any of you have a W.P. grenade?”

Someone had one.

“When we get ready to run for it, I’ll let you know. Toss it out there so that the smoke will cover our run.”

By this time, the fire was really cooking and we had all kinds of smoke. The straw that Koreans use to thatch their roofs with is always very thick, and when this stuff burns it makes a lot of smoke. With the wind fanning the flames, our end of the valley was filling with smoke.

The sarge shouted across the narrow strip of “no man’s land” to toss the W.P. grenade. All this really gave us some good concealment as the five of us spread out and made a run for better cover.

Our company mortars were in action up on the hill and they were doing a job on the gook positions. The gooks stopped shooting at us, so our guys must have had them pretty well zeroed in.

A small spotter plane showed up and was calling in artillery on the gook positions.

We climbed the big hill and reported in. The captain had sent out a couple of squads to try and take on the North Koreans, who were now on the run. The early patrols the skipper sent out were in the wrong places when the shooting started, so they weren’t able to do us any good as far as cover fire was concerned.

The farm settlement all but burned to the ground. It made an unbelievable amount of smoke covering the whole southern end of the valley, and the smell of the burnt straw was sickening.

The skipper had had a lot of trouble with the radio, probably because of the very cold weather, but he was finally able to get through to battalion and they sent the spotter plane so we could use our artillery. The gooks got out pretty quick once the plane showed up. The next day we found two

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dead gooks in their positions, but no weapons. After searching around with several patrols out, one squad turned up a small ammo cache.

Every now and then, the weather would warm a little during the day, but it always turned extremely cold at dark. We did a lot of walking and with all the clothes we were wearing, plus our packs, ammo and weapons, we were always exhausted. The heavy shoepack boots were real killers.

After having been out for over two weeks, we got a break and were assigned to battalion security. This put us back on wheels a little more often and got us into some tents, so we had a chance to thaw out when we were not on watch or patrolling the area just outside our battalion perimeter.

When we patrolled the roads by Jeep, we always had a four-man fire team and our driver in the vehicle. Sometimes, we would tow a trailer and could carry another fire team and our squad leader. Riding in an open Jeep or trailer all day in the cold was not what you would call a good time, but it was a break from walking miles, carrying all the weight of our heavy clothes and boots.

We still had to do some walking. We would be assigned an area to check on, and in certain places we would need to go on foot up a hill or a draw looking for signs of “gooks on the run”. We did get some results. By keeping dozens of units, both company size and smaller in the field on patrol and looking for enemy soldiers, and stockpiles of equipment, we kept a certain pressure on them. This kept them moving, and when they were on the run there was a good chance they would run into some of us; there was no real safe place for them. It was stand and die, or run and die, or give up.

One day, as we checked out a draw in a remote area well beyond the end of the road we had been using, we came across a war crime. We found three South Korean soldiers, their hands tied behind their backs with communication wire, shot through the backs of their heads. This was a scene that was to become all too familiar to us. The killings had probably taken place at the start of the war when this area was part of the Pusan perimeter. There was little we could do about the situation except report what we had found and mark the exact spot on our maps so the MP's and the South Korean Army could investigate the crime and recover the bodies

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of these brave men. Other units from our battalion found similar cases of criminal activity by the North Koreans.

This, of course, angered everyone and stiffened our resolve. We certainly understood the kind of uncivilized people we were dealing with. And we full well knew that in the battles to come, we would have to continue to deal with the same kind of savage behavior.

Then it was time for the Division to pack up. Load onto our trucks and head north to a big fight.

Our boss, General O.P. Smith, reported to the big boss, General Ridgeway, that we had “dispersed” the North Korean 10th Division and that they and the guerrillas were no longer “capable of a major effort in the south.” General Smith said we were “ready for another mission.”

Chapter Two
NORTH INTO THE MUD
Operation Killer
Winter 1951

While packing our equipment and ammo, and getting ready to move north from the Pohang area, I overheard a conversation between two of our company platoon sergeants.

Both men were veterans of several WWII Pacific battles. They had fought in places like Guadalcanal, the Marianas, and Okinawa. One of them had been in Korea since the Inchon landings. The other man had just arrived. They were schooling each other on their observations and experiences. When old salts like these spoke, the rest of us listened (even if it was only a sea story.) You could almost always glean some useful information out of what men like these had to say.

“Roberts,” Sgt. Wills said to Sgt. Roberts, “so you made the Chosin campaign. Must have been a rough one from what I’ve heard.”

Sgt. Roberts looked at Wills with a frown and said, “Rough? Rough! Why, I could really tell you some stories about rough duty up there. Hell, there I was, 15,000 feet up a mountain, standing knee deep in Mongolian pony shit, heating my coffee on tracers coming over the ridgeline, and you ask me if it was rough? You’re damn right it was rough.”

Then Roberts couldn’t hold back and started to snicker, and when he started we all started; no one could hold back a big laugh.

“I should have known some sort of b-s was going to come as an answer to a query like that,” said Wills. “Never again.”

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“The Japs were tough, no doubt,” said Roberts, “but their infantry outfits were Oriental piss ants compared to these monkeys. This is like having a hold of a real live fire-breathing dragon. The Japs were spread all over the Pacific, and they were thinned out for the most part. But the Chinks are concentrated right here on a peninsula only 85,000 square miles. Hell, that’s like fighting the Chinese army on a strip of land the size of the state of Minnesota. These Chink bastards are of the same mindset as the Japs were. You know how it was out there, Wills. A company or even a battalion of Japs would get nuts and throw themselves at our positions. Okay, no big deal. We can take care of that, but here the Chinks get crazy and throw two or three divisions at our lines, and any amount of casualties are okay with them. They don’t give a shit, they have all the people in the world so they could care less about how many we knock off. Wait—you’ll see. I’ll tell you it’s not real, the way they operate. But you know this isn’t much of a war, the way it’s all jammed up here in one place and half the world got invited here to take part. Hell, we even have two different enemies to shoot at. But as fouled up as it is, it’s the only war we got going right now, so we might as well enjoy it.”

“Yeah,” said Wills, “by the looks of things around here, I mean looking at the people in charge and the way this thing is being run up at the top, it looks like we are going to be here a hell of a long time, so it might be better than you think. This deal has been going on for over half a year and we still don’t have all the equipment or all the people we need to fight here—and Truman just got around to declaring a state of national emergency [November 16, 1950]. Yeah, you can bet on it, this thing is going to cook over here for a long time.”

The regiment, with all its personnel and accoutrements, started north and west from our bases around Po Hang and Andong in the way the regiment always moved: too many people and too much equipment loaded on too few trucks.

It was now into February and the weather was very cold and damp, with some rain or snow falling on and off, making all of us feel a chill. The roads were thick with mud and the several days and nights we spent on the trucks were miserable. There was no room for us to move around. The center of the truck bed was lined with our packs, ammo crates and other equipment.

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We sat on the fold-down wood benches that were along the sides of the truck bed. I pulled the hood of my parka up to keep the wind off my neck, and kept my iron hat on to shade my eyes. Now and then, I would nod off to a little nap, but there was always a deep rut that we would run over, which would bounce me on my perch and jar me awake.

Every now and then, we would stop for a long while, sometimes to let other priority traffic through and at other times, to let teams of engineers make repairs to the road or a bridge. Then sleep would work if we weren't too cold—and of course, we would always sleep sitting upright.

The roads, if you could call them roads, were very narrow mud trails. Here and there, the engineers were building passing areas. In some places, like up a switchback going over a pass, the roads were very slippery and dangerous. It was a scary ride.

There were a lot of men and equipment being moved north. I guess the front had stabilized, and now that the First Marine Division was back up to strength, we had been invited to take part in an upcoming land grab. As we continued north, we kept passing all kinds of Army units that were packing up. It looked like everything was being shoved north.

We could tell when we were nearing the front. Troops on the move began to thin out. We passed through several artillery outfits and there was a lot of activity there—unloading ammo trucks, digging in some big guns, and setting up fire control and radio systems. It was a wild, restless time, full of tension and excitement.

We were dropped off at a mud hole of a bivouac area several miles north of the last army artillery unit we passed. The place had been used and the trucks and tanks that had been through it had churned the area into a real mess. The brass figured to use us in the upcoming assault so they wanted us up close, handy, and near our jump-off point. We were just a mile or so behind the front line as it was being held at that time.

The Chinese entry into the war, and their attacks to the south, had carried them a long way beyond the Yalu River. They were now about fifty miles below the 38th Parallel, and this offensive had also recaptured Seoul for the reds. U.N. forces were about back where they had been seven months earlier, except now there were hundreds of thousands of Chinamen running around South Korea and there was a reinvigorated North Korean Army. There were also a lot of U.N. forces in Korea and the

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South Korean Army was much larger than it was at the start of hostilities. All the participants in Korea had taken many thousands of casualties from both combat and the weather.

Everything was in place to verify the observations of the two old warriors, Sergeants Wills and Roberts. These men were right on the button: all you had to do was look at the top of the chain of command and you could see there were some real problems. There was the U.N., Harry Ass Truman, Dugout Doug MacArthur, commanders and politicians from all the other U.N. participants—and there was the cantankerous president of South Korea, Syngman Rhee. What a group! Not necessarily the kind of people I would care to get mixed up with—but I was, and there we were.

Up to this point, the First Marine Division had been part of the two division X Corps under the command of one, Army Lieutenant General Ned Almond. Not a happy combination. The Marine division C.O., Major General O.P. Smith, along with most of his Marines, didn't like Almond because of his tactical incompetence and his hardnosed disregard for the well-being of his troops. Not only did the Marines have this opinion of Almond, so did many officers and men in his own Army units. General Smith held Almond with the utmost contempt, and after the poor generalship portrayed up north by Almond, General Ridgeway, the Eighth Army commander, promised Smith that his First Division Marines would never again be assigned to fight in Almond's corps.

Harry Ass and Dugout Doug were having problems way up at the top. Harry was trying to play the war down, like it was no big deal, and keep Doug Quiet. Doug was running off at the mouth about foreign policy, expanding operations into Red China with a naval blockade, bombing of the Chinese defense industry, and having Chiang Kai-shek invade mainland China from Taiwan.

So the leadership was a mess and we all knew it, and we had no clearly defined goal or objective—at least no one told us what it was if there was one. But it was always good for a laugh and some smartass remarks. It really didn't make a lot of difference to many of us. We were all volunteers, but it did have some effect on some of the older men who were reserves and had been called back to active duty. Most of these men had seen action in WWII or had been China Marines. These men now had families and children. They found out the hard way that the government

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didn't care. As reserves, they had received pay, and when payday came around they were in line with their hands out, and if you take pay or anything else from the government, even a thin dime, they will call on you some day to pay them back, big time. There is an old tradition in the Marine Corps: "Never volunteer for anything unless you are willing to pay the price."

While the First Marine Division was back south in the Pohang area licking its wounds, chasing guerrillas and busting up the North Korean 10th Division, Communist forces were kicking the Allied forces all over the peninsula. The U.S. Army 2nd Division had been backing up two R.O.K. divisions and giving them extra support with additional artillery fire. The R.O.K.'s were attacking just north of Hoengsong, which is in the central part of the country just south of the 38th Parallel. Initially, the South Koreans made some progress but then they were hit by very strong assaults by several Chinese divisions. The R.O.K.'s folded up and the whole area turned into chaos. Almost everything the R.O.K.'s had was destroyed, killed or captured.

With the collapse of the South Korean outfits, the American units were left wide open, and the chinks swarmed through the break. Although the American units involved set up roadblocks and other stops, they were to no avail for by the time they received permission to withdraw, it was too late. They were being overrun.

Second Division infantry led the way south, trying to cut a path for their artillery, but the chinks were having their way. American units were cut off and surrounded. They tried to fight their way out. Casualties mounted. All along the road to the south, trucks towing artillery were hit and disabled, and couldn't be cleared from the road. All this equipment had to be abandoned. Two dozen 105mm and 155mm howitzers, and about 120 trucks, many loaded with wounded, were lost.

By mid-February, all the surviving U.N. outfits had pulled back to the area around Wonju, and had taken up defensive positions. The R.O.K.'s, a Dutch battalion and the Americans had taken at least 1,200 casualties in the confusion. But now, turnabout was about to become fair play.

In the very early morning hours of February 14th, the chinks hit the U.S. Army lines with a vengeance, and what became known as the "Wonju Shoot" was on. The chinks took a real pounding, and when it was over the

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next day, there were over 5,000 dead chinks on the battlefield, with another 15,000 wounded. The U.S. forces had put the reds through a meat grinder.

First Marine Division units moved through Wonju and into positions north of the remnants of the town. The whole area smelled bad. There were some fires still smoldering, there were many dead not yet picked up, and the place was alive with rats. It was cold and very damp with rain and sloppy snow falling. Bridges were out and the roads were just mud.

Many of us went to Mass and church services there. The padre set up an altar on the hood of his Jeep. There were many Protestant Marines there as well, so we had several readings from the King James Bible—the padre's words were suitable for anyone—and we all sang like canaries as the chaplain led us like a choir. It was a service for everyone, Mass and communion, the King James Bible and "Bringing in the Sheaves".

On February 21st, the First Marine Division attacked out of the Wonju area north toward Hoengsong. We were glad to get away from the rear areas where the noise and milling around of troops and equipment, and the shuttling of ammo and fuel trucks led to confusion and scuttlebutt.

We had no idea where we were going for sure except that to the north, there were a hell of a lot of Chinamen and someone had decided that they needed to be killed. This job was to be called Operation Killer, and orders were to inflict maximum pain and destruction on enemy personnel and material, and while driving the chinks north, we were to keep ourselves from getting pulled into a problem and being destroyed piecemeal. The main objective was to hunt down and shoot Chinamen, all we could zero in on.

The objectives for the division were some high hills north of the town of Hoengsong, fifteen or twenty miles north of Wonju. We were the reserve regiment for the division in the assault, with the division having two regiments forward for the attack. The forward regiments were in the hills and running into light resistance.

The regiment moved forward along some low hills and along the road that ran through the valley that the 2nd Army Division units had been trapped in. We pushed our way through Hoengsong (the place was just a pile of rubble), and on March 7th, we entered the valley just north of Hoengsong. Like the area around Wonju, you could smell the place long

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before you were near it. It was a small valley with a single road running up the center. The hills on the east and west sides were very steep. You could see it was the perfect place for an ambush—a perfect place for a massacre.

In order for any combat outfit to get its heavy equipment through this area, the road had to be covered by troops on the flanks, on the ridges. The high ground was the key. But when we saw what had taken place a few weeks earlier, you could tell that the chinks had the high ground, and the American Second Infantry Division troops in the valley were on the receiving end of a horrible beating.

We found the valley full of dead men, rats and smoking wreckage. Some Second Division men had fought their way through to Hoengsong and from there to Wonju. What we were now seeing were the remains of all that didn't get through, and there were a lot of them.

Hundreds of American soldiers lay everywhere, some of them in the road, and we had to move them so our tanks and trucks wouldn't run over them. There were also hundreds of Chinese dead lying around the battlefield. There were many shot-up and burned American trucks, tanks and Jeeps, some still smoking. Wrecked artillery pieces were everywhere, many of them disabled by thermate grenades, their breeches melted into a blob of steel, probably a last act by a dying gunner as the chinks overran the positions. All the good, useable artillery was gone; the chinks had it. We found several men shot through the back of the head, their hands tied behind their backs with como wire. Many of the soldiers were stripped of their clothes, especially boots, shoes and parkas.

As we moved along, the valley became very quiet. Almost no one spoke. I know many of us were choked up. We really felt bad about what we were into. It was a horrible situation. A few Marines scavenging around the rubble found some wood and put a sign together. They marked it in honor of the Second Army Division men who fell there:

Massacre Valley, Scene of Harry Truman's Police Action. Nice Going, Harry.

Soon, many of us were sporting small five-point stars, like a policeman's badge. The stars were made from a flattened-out piece of

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ration can, cut to shape with a pocket knife or a K-bar and pinned to the jacket with a safety pin that came with every bandoleer of rifle ammo.

It turned out, as we found out later, the idea of the policeman's badge caught on and spread all through the division. In three or four days, thousands of Marines all over South Korea were wearing the little stars. The brass got hold of the conspiracy, if you want to call it that, and all officers were ordered to come down on the men in the ranks about not having respect for the Commander-in-Chief. So the badges were removed and the Massacre Valley sign was probably taken down too. But those of us who were there will always remember the place as Massacre Valley, and the words of Harry Ass will always live "in infamy".

Truman, when confronted with America's involvement in Korea at a presidential press conference on June 29, 1950, in an effort to downplay the situation said, "We are not at war." A reporter asked if what was going on in the Far East could be described as a U.N. police action. Truman agreed, and the police action tag stuck to the Korean War, and to Harry Ass.

We relieved one of our brother regiments and took the point. The chinks were pulling back, but in some places they would leave some strong defensive units to slow us as much as possible. The weather was cold with a lot of rain, and that made it tough to get supplies moved. Trucks were bogged down on the road and tanks were trying to pull them along. But for us on foot and up in the mountains, it wasn't so muddy and it was easier to get around. The packs were heavy but we needed all the ammo we could carry, and all our winter clothes.

We had to adjust our clothes properly and not wear too much during the day. You didn't want to work up a sweat while on the move because you would freeze at night if you didn't dry out. The higher we climbed, the colder it got. At night, it got especially cold.

On one hill, they waited for us to get well into their sights. There were a lot of chinks on this hill but then, there were almost always a lot of chinks. We walked right up on them and never saw anything. A machine gun cut loose and a mortar round landed close, and this was the signal for them to cut loose with small arms fire.

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I was knocked flat to the ground from the blast of the mortar round and rolled into a depression. It felt like I had taken a hard punch in the midsection of my body, and the concussion had me wondering where I was for a while. I don't know how I wasn't hit by a lot of stuff from that round, but somehow I got lucky. A burst from a machine gun had hit the ground in front of me just as the chink mortar round landed, and here I wasn't so lucky, as I found out later.

The chinks kept up a heavy fire. I was pinned in the ground depression where the mortar round had thrown me. Mike, my teammate, was off to my right and was in a better position to see what was going on, and he could move around a little.

The chinks fired another 82MM mortar round. It whistled in and dropped way short of us—landing well inside their own positions. It must have shaken them up because they stopped the mortar fire. Maybe it was green troops or bad ammo, or a worn out tube. It had to be their mortar because none of ours could have been set up at that time, and we only had 60MM guns with us, which didn't have near the zap the chink 82MM or our own 81MM's had.

Hurrah for the chinks, they dropped one on themselves!

There was a small bunker, occupied by a machine gun crew, only about twenty yards in front of us. A small trench connected the bunker to the chinks' rear positions. They had pulled some branches and brush over the bunker and trench so it was well camouflaged. Off to my right, Mike could see all this very clearly, and he could make out the opening to the side of the bunker. He shouted over to me.

"Hey Jack, do you have a grenade?"

"Yeah," I shouted back. "Only one, a W.P."

"Toss it over here. I think I can get it in the door." By then, everything was really flying hot and heavy, both ways.

I got the grenade over to Mike, who then elbowed himself forward another couple of yards and tossed it dead on into the chink trench right at the back opening of the bunker. The machine gun stopped hammering. The chinks tried to make a run for it but the grenade went off, killing them and throwing phosphorous and other shrapnel all over the place.

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After that first machine gun was taken and put out of action, we all moved forward quickly, firing into anything that looked out of line. The chinks broke and ran for it, and we got a few more as they left the hill.

Mike and I were both struggling with the shakes, from fear or fright and from the adrenaline rush. It took both of us to light one smoke—then we were able to light a second from the first one. Mike's iron hat cover was smoldering, as were both of our packs. I had some small grenade splinters across my shoulders and something in my left leg. I wasn't hit dead on but I caught something that the chink machine gun kicked up off the ground. It wasn't painful, though. I didn't even realize I had a hole in me until the fracas was over.

Doc Berman stopped to look Mike and me over. We were busy putting water in the burn holes that were still alight in Mike's parka, which had been rolled up and tied to his pack frame. Doc picked around and took a few small splinters of frag out of both of us. He cleaned the small wounds and put on small dressings.

"Okay Jack, drop your pants," said Doc. "I want to see what you have in your leg."

"Don't worry about it, Doc," I said. "It don't hurt and it's not bleeding. Besides, it's cold and I'll freeze my ass."

"I don't care if it is cold," he said. "I need to look at that left leg."

Doc cleaned the injury and stuck on a dressing.

"I think we are going to get relieved today," he said. "If we do, I'll take you guys over to battalion medical and get both of you a good shot of penicillin, or I'll send you down later on tomorrow. Okay?"

"As far as I'm concerned," I said, "there is no good shot of anything but if you say so, Doc, okay."

"Yeah, I say so. We need to watch out for infection, what with all the crap in the air and on the ground. I could put tags on you guys and send you down as evacuees. Then you can get purple hearts."

"No thanks, Doc. Screw the purple hearts."

We got our shots the next day and all was well, but the doctor at battalion wanted me to get an x-ray of my leg, so he sent me back to a M.A.S.H. unit near an air strip about ten miles south of our positions.

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I walked into the M.A.S.H. unit with a note from my doctor and turned it over to the M.A.S.H. doctor. A medic took me to the X-ray outfit, then back to the doctor with the pictures.

“Take off your boots, socks, trousers and long johns.” I did, and he looked over the injury, then the x-ray.

“Looks like part of a bullet jacket in there,” he said. “Does it hurt or is it bothering you?”

“No sir,” I told him. “I rode ten miles here in the back of a truck and then walked in here on my own. It’s a little sore but it’s not holding me back.”

“I think we’ll leave well enough alone there, at least for now. If it gives you any problems, turn in with it.” He was looking at my feet, and pushed a small bench over so I could prop my legs up. He sat on a stool and with a small flashlight, looked my dogs over.

“When did you have frostbite?” he asked.

“Hell sir, I don’t know. They are wet and cold all the time, and they hurt from those damn shoepacks. I suppose if I had frostbite, it was last month when we were chasing gooks around the Pohang area. There were some really cold days and nights in January.”

“Did they do anything for you?”

“Yes sir, they put some medicine on my toes and gave me some dry socks.”

He loaded a needle and gave me a shot.

“You are well on your way,” he said, “to a bad case of trench foot. All the hide is cut up and torn. Your feet look like they’ve been through a grinder. It’s like damp rot is setting in.”

“Hell, Doc,” I said, “probably most of my outfit have feet that look like this. A lot of guys are limping around with wet feet and frostbite.”

“I know,” he said, “and as I get them, I tag them and ship them out to get dry and heal, which is what I am going to do with you.”

“Well, captain,” I said. “You’d better let my outfit know. I think they are expecting me back today or tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry about that. It will all be in the reports.”

“Thanks, Doc.”

“Good luck to you, young man.”

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They gave me a stretcher to sleep on that night, and in the morning after chow, a group of us so-called walking wounded and sick were hustled out to the runway and a waiting C-54, and we were off to Pusan. From there, we went by truck from the airfield to the U.S.S. Haven, a Navy hospital ship that was docked in Pusan harbor.

Once on the ship and checked in, I got a quick exam and a shower. They kept my clothes and I got them back the next day, steam cleaned. They were beautiful, even the greasy cap I had been wearing. It was great to get the crud washed off. I was even able to shave and put on clean pajamas.

Another doctor checked over the injuries on my back and leg. They took another x-ray, and he said everything was okay and looked good. He said he wasn't going to replace any dressings as the wounds were healing well. He ordered me some more shots and meds, which I took three times a day.

I got a bunk in a ward. They kept me down for three days, except for the use of the head. My feet were uncovered and kept coated with medicine. Other than bothering me with some pills or a shot now and then, they left me alone. I didn't bother them and they didn't bother me. I spent most of my time sleeping or talking to a wounded doggie in the next bunk. He was hurt pretty bad and was going to be sent to Japan for medical work. I gave him some money that I had. We both thought it would be a while before his records caught up with him, and figured he could probably use a few bucks, and I knew I wouldn't be needing any cash. What for? He took my home address so he could send the money to my folks when he got organized. I never figured I would ever hear from him, and just wrote the whole deal off. Some time later, my mother wrote to tell me that he had sent a money order. He and I stayed in touch for several years after that.

Finally, the medics got me up and moving around the deck. My feet were healing and looking much better. I asked for an appointment with the dentist. I had a filling that needed repair. After the dentist was finished with his job, he sent in a smart-ass to clean my teeth. We had words and got into it. Words led to punches, and I knocked the ape into a large medical cabinet causing a lot of noise. There was a lot of broken glass and

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dental instruments all over the floor. The deck ape got up and left, and I was taken before a Navy lieutenant to explain the situation.

“Well,” the lieutenant said, “I’ve been looking for a reason to transfer him and this looks like as good a reason as any. Thanks, Marine. I’ll get in touch with you if I need you.”

“Well sir,” I said, “This guy probably has friends on this ship, and the best thing I can do is get the hell out of here myself.”

“I’ll see what I can do. I’ll check with your doctor.”

The next day, I was told that a Marine truck was to take several of us from the hospital ship to division rear headquarters at Masan. I was to report to the medical officer there.

When we got to the compound at Masan, I turned in at the medic’s. The doctor there looked at my charts and records.

“Take off your boots.” He looked at my feet and said, “What the hell are you doing out of the hospital?” I told him what had happened on the ship. He wrote something in my file and closed the folder.

“Go over to supply and get a new pair of boondockers—make sure they are the right size—and a half dozen pairs of socks, some extra underwear and a new warm jacket.” He wrote a note for the supply officer. “I’ll get you a bunk over at the transit barracks. I’m your C.O. now, if anyone asks, and you report to me.”

The doctor had a clerk make out a liberty card so I could leave the base if I wanted to, a chow hall card so I could eat every day, and a card with the doctor’s name and phone extension. He signed all the cards to make them official and handed them to me.

“If you have any problems or need anything, let me know. If your feet start bothering you, come and see me. Let’s give them a rest. Stay off them for a while, at least as much as you can for a few days. Stay out of those shoepacks and use your new leather boondockers. Keep them a little loose for a while. I think that’s all you will need. Come back and see me in a week and we’ll see how you’re doing.”

“Yes sir, this is the best duty I’ve ever pulled, probably the only good duty I’ll ever pull.”

“Well, you sure don’t belong back up on the line and you had to get off the hospital ship, so this will have to be your home for now.”

“Yes sir, I’ll try to stay out of everyone’s way.”

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The doc laughed and patted me on the back.

"I'll see you around the compound. Don't forget, if your injuries give you any problems, look me up."

"I will, sir. Thanks again, doc."

A couple of days later, I was walking across the main parade ground at the Masan headquarters when a loud voice got my attention.

"Hey Jack, is that you?"

I turned around and was met with, "Damn, Jack, it *is* you! What the hell are you doing here in the rear with the gear?"

There he was, not twenty yards away--Dick, an old friend from high school who I had lost track of. We shook hands and slapped each other on the back, and tried to get caught up on the news while standing there.

"I'm back here in sick bay on the mend," I said. "My feet are all tore up and I had a bad case of frostbite awhile back, but I had to get off that hospital ship. I had some trouble there and Doc here says I need more time off, so I'll be around here for at least a week. How about you? What are you doing here?"

"This is my headquarters," said Dick. "I'm with a communication outfit and we work out of here. I spend a week or two on the line up north and a week or two back here."

"Sounds like a good deal," I said. "I didn't know you were a specialist."

"I'm not a specialist. They put me in this outfit because I'm so big and can carry large loads. You should see the damn radio I have to haul around up there. It isn't a laughing matter."

"Why hell, Dick," I said. "They could have got some of those Chinese pack horses. They can pack a hell of a load and they are very gentle. They could have made you a drover."

We both had a good laugh.

"Come on over to my outfit's tent," said Dick. "I'll put some fresh coffee on. I'm sure you can use a cup, and there's lots of room over there."

"I can always use a cup of joe. Lead the way, my friend. I have nothing to do for the next week."

And so it was. For the next week, Dick and I and a few of his other off-duty friends drank coffee, ate and had a few nightcaps. We reminisced, rested and slept. It was a good time, a good break, and the week went by

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fast. Then, Dick's outfit got orders to ship out for the front and they were gone the next day. A week was gone, so I thought it best that I check in with the doctor.

"Is it a week already?"

"Yes sir."

"Let's see you're dogs," he said. "Looks like they're coming along. Be patient."

"When do you want to see me again?"

"Four or five days," he said. "Be patient."

"Okay, Doc."

"Do you need anything?"

"No sir, I have everything I need."

Five days later, I was on a truck heading for the Pusan railhead with five other Marines. Several of them had been down with pneumonia. It was good to be back on the move again. We got some directions and found the right place, then jumped a northbound almost-empty troop and hospital train. Somewhere up north in South Korea, the train stopped and we were herded to a place where we were split up and sent to trucks that were going to our respective regiments. From regiment, I got a lift over to battalion. I was checked by the doctor the next day and was declared fit for duty. The next day, when the supplies went up to the company, I went with them.

It was like old home week when I reported back. I got caught up on the company news and found out that we lost several men killed in action, and a number wounded and evacuated. There were several men out with pneumonia and a couple gone with bad feet.

Such is life in a rifle company, and all this for little because, as the big brass saw it, Operation Killer did not live up to its name.

Chapter Three

LET THE BASTARDS BURN

The lieutenant got us together after his meeting with the skipper and told us of the plan of attack. Our company, along with one of our brother companies from the battalion, was to attack right up the middle of a small, flat valley. My fire team and squad had the point for this job. The rest of the regiment was to move at the same time with the other battalions on our right and left. They were to clear the hills on our flanks.

When we moved out, the rest of the company was to let the lead squads out about a hundred yards before proceeding forward. My point fire team was to be another forty or fifty yards ahead of the whole outfit.

Before daylight the next day, we were in position at the foot of the hill we had just left. Extra ammunition and grenades had been issued, so we were ready to go.

The skipper was in our ranks to wish us God's speed and to pin air panels (very bright, red squares of fabric, about 2 x 2 feet) to the backs of the two of us who were to be on the point. These panels would be visible to anyone above or behind them and would indicate the most forward elements of a unit to any aircraft or observer, but were not visible to anyone in the direction the wearer was heading.

I looked over my fire team.

"Ready."

"Let's go."

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Mike and I, about ten yards apart, stepped out front. Red, with the BAR (Browning automatic rifle), was to our right and about 25 yards behind us, and Les was about twenty yards behind Red so he could cover him.

It was still dark but we could see well enough. I glanced back and could just make out the other two fire teams of our squad, spread out and back of us by about seventy-five yards. There were four or five buildings about 600 yards in front of us. They were all damaged, at least to some extent, from previous fighting in the area. I couldn't see them in the dark but I knew right where they were. We'd had a scope on them the day before; there had been no activity.

About daybreak, when it was clear enough to see and we were about 150 yards from the buildings, the North Koreans cut loose on us with machine gun fire. They were firing from the area around or in those buildings. I knew we would receive fire somewhere along this valley, but I didn't think it would come from the area around those buildings, the only ones in the valley. The rest of the area was covered with rice paddies and open fields.

Red cut loose with the BAR, as did the rest of us with our M-1s, but I still wasn't sure the enemy fire was coming from the broken buildings.

It was a very cold day in late winter and I figured we could use a little heat. I always carried a clip or two of blue-tipped incendiary rounds in my jacket pocket. This was good ammo and would light a fire a lot better than a tracer. I loaded a clip of this hot stuff into my M-1 and fired some low shots into the area around the floorboards of the buildings. It wasn't long before we got some smoke as the places started to light up.

There was a dry wash behind the buildings that ran along one of the fields to the east for about fifty yards; then it turned and meandered north toward the hills at the end of the valley, which was our objective. This wash or drainage ditch was about four or five feet deep. I spotted someone moving along the ditch near the turn, headed north. I fired several shots into that area but only managed to make a lot of dust along the edge of the ditch.

The North Koreans who had been in or around the now-burning buildings were on the move. Another fire team now caught up with us. I asked the team leader to cover us. We were going after them. When we started to move, we would go as quickly as we could. I knew the

lieutenant would see what was going on and he would shake the whole platoon quickly forward to back us up.

About then, the North Koreans in the hills out in front of us cut loose on our end of the valley with mortar and machine gun fire. Most of the rounds were dropping around the main part of the company well behind us. Somewhere back there, I heard the call for a corpsman. Someone had been hit.

The fire team that had just caught up with us now opened fire on the edge of the ditch as the four of us, my fire team and myself, moved to the right and then fast-forward to the ditch. As we approached the ditch, two North Koreans popped up and shot at us with burp guns (Chinese submachine guns). We all dove for the ground.

“Great,” I muttered.

Les tossed a grenade into the ditch. As fast as it disappeared, two other grenades of a different type came out of the ditch and went off near us. These were known as Chinese “potato masher” grenades, and were usually not too much to worry about, but a chunk of one of them caught Mike on the side of his neck.

Red spotted one North Korean heading north up the ditch and cut him down with a short burst from the BAR. That left one still in the ditch where Les had thrown his grenade.

I shoved a fresh clip of ammo into my M-1 and opened fire over the edge of the ditch where I thought the remaining soldier was. I continued firing as I jumped into the ditch. He was down where I expected him to be, probably already dead from Les’s grenade, but I put my last two shots into him to make sure he stayed that way.

The rest of the team followed me into the ditch as more mortar rounds found their way into the ranks of the company coming up behind us. Les and I looked over Mike’s wound. It was bleeding but not very serious.

“I’m okay,” said Mike. “It’s an easy Purple Heart.”

As we started up the ditch, our artillery started in on the north end of the valley and the flat ground and low hills in front of us. Our artillery officer had put in a call for some big rounds. He needed to wait for enough light to see exactly where the rounds were dropping, so he could make the proper adjustments on his guns. The lieutenant sent us a runner to say that there was an air strike on the way. He wanted to make sure we had our air

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panels exposed so the planes could spot us. We hunkered down in the ditch and let the artillery have its way. It dropped on the hills to our right and left as other elements of the regiment ran into opposition on the way to their objective.

We had one dead North Korean in the ditch and one that I had shot at while he was running in the ditch, but I probably missed him. Then there was another one that Red had dropped. He was somewhere in the ditch, but we couldn't see him. We had not found the machine gun that had shot at us earlier. Someone had escaped with it.

There was a bit of a turn in the ditch just ahead. Red had it covered with his BAR but we all wondered what was north of that slight turn. Mike and Les covered us while Red and I went forward to the turn. We tossed a couple of grenades in and then, with Red in front, we swung around the turn and opened fire.

There was no one alive in there, but about twenty yards from us was the dead North Korean that Red had hit earlier. He had gone about forty yards with Red's .30 caliber bullet in him, but in the end he died over his weapon, the light machine gun that we'd been looking for. We pulled it out from under him and went back to Mike and Les.

Now, we figured, everyone was accounted for. These guys were probably a listening post and the man on watch at the time of our arrival must have been asleep. Our early morning wake-up call had caught them napping. Now they were really asleep. Amen.

All the while, the artillery bombardment was continuing—both ways. I could see rounds hitting among the ranks of the company. Fortunately, the boys were spread out.

At last, the air strike arrived. What a blessing those Marine Corsairs were. As soon as our air power showed up, the North Koreans stopped firing their mortars and artillery. Our planes tore into the enemy positions with a vengeance.

Napalm was our greatest friend. All Marine infantrymen loved to see this stuff in use, but bombs and those large five-inch rockets, followed up by bursts from the big .50 caliber machine guns that were mounted in the planes were an equally welcome added attraction. The commies switched their attention to the aircraft and away from us.

Tripwire to Hell

The lieutenant came forward and jumped into the ditch with us, followed by the skipper and his radioman. They reorganized the attack and the whole company came forward quickly, putting more air panels out to our left and right.

We were relieved from point duty. The job was reassigned to another squad, which was a break for us. The knot in my gut relaxed a little and I got Mike to a corpsman, who checked the slit on his neck. It wasn't bleeding much so the doc put on a fresh, clean dressing, wrote out an evacuation tag and told him to head south to battalion aid.

Mike started to say he didn't want to go but the doc said he would need some cleaning up, a few stitches and a lot of penicillin. There was a lot of dirt in that wound and this was nothing to fool with. Reluctantly, Mike started to the rear.

"Get yourself cleaned up," I called after him. "Get some rest and some hot chow. The goddamn war will still be here when you get back. And don't come back too soon."

"I'll see you when I see you," said Mike as he trudged off to the south.

Meanwhile, the air strike was in full swing. The noise in the hills out front was tremendous. A second strike had arrived and the whole area across the regimental front was on fire. The Corsairs splattered everything in sight with all their goodies.

All of us in the valley were spread out and in some cover. Some of this was improved with a little fast shovel work. None of us could see what the planes were hitting, but our air officer (forward observer) was talking to the pilots by radio, so those of us who were situated near our company command post were getting a blow-by-blow description of what was going on in front of us.

The pilots spotted a long, camouflaged trench near the foot of the hill directly in front of us. We were all advised that the Corsairs would make one run with napalm and machine guns from east to west, laying their hellfire into the trench.

Some of us went forward another forty or fifty yards. The skipper passed the word that as soon as the air strike was finished, we were going to push forward on the double. Some squad leaders were telling their men to fix bayonets.

KOREA AND THE MAGIC LINE

Might as well, I thought to myself. I just may need to stick some son-of-a-bitch. It'll be payback for Mike's wound.

Then, out of the east across our front, about a hundred yards forward of our line of departure, came the Corsairs, three or four of them in line and several hundred yards apart. When the first guy got lined up on the trench that we still could not see, he cut loose with the Brownings, and when he was dead on, I saw the napalm drop away from the plane. It made a couple of uncoordinated, twisting turns as it plummeted toward the North Korean trench. When it went off, it was like the gates of hell had been opened at the north end of that valley. You could feel the lack of oxygen in the air as the flames sucked it up. The heat was unbelievable, even at a distance of over a hundred yards.

Red looked at me with a smile on his dirty face.

"Boy," he said. "That one curled my damn eyebrows." He laughed a little.

"Yeah," I said. "It got a little hard to breathe."

The other planes finished up with equal results, and our air officer told them to lay off, that the company was going in. Our light mortars opened up just to hold down any survivors of the air attack.

It looked like a WWI battle scene—men moving forward with fixed bayonets across a broken and shell-pocked landscape, fires burning, acrid smoke, burnt ground, brush and trees, and that awful odor of burnt napalm and burnt flesh.

It didn't take us long to get to the trench. As we approached, shooting broke out all along our line to clear the area of survivors and a few hard-nosed holdouts. Several burning commies jumped out of the trench and headed north up the hill through what was left of the woods and brush.

"Cease fire," someone shouted. "Don't shoot them. Let the bastards burn."

It was strange. The whole line stopped firing and let those guys run. They weren't going to get far anyway, not with burning napalm all over them.

There were several bunkers dug into the trench line, and a few North Koreans were holding out. Everyone was throwing grenades into the trench. Someone set off a satchel charge in a bunker about fifty yards from where Red and I were, and blew ashes and hot dust all over everyone.

Tripwire to Hell

The company continued to advance up the hill. Once we crossed the trench, we had a relatively easy time. The air strikes had pushed most of the North Koreans off the hill and killed a large number of them. The attack left us with a lot of communist weapons, ammo and equipment.

The company pushed on over the hill, down the other side, through the draw behind our objective, and up the next hill. We had really made a good run at it. It was time to stop and dig in, maybe even get a little rest and some chow. We had taken the day's objective, plus the objective for the next day. The rest of the regiment had equally good results. We probably could have gone for one more hill, but the whole outfit was exhausted.

We took care of our wounded and got them to the rear area for transport. We picked up our dead, said our good-byes, replenished our supplies, cleaned our weapons, dug a hole for the night, and prepared to defend what we had won that day.

We had captured two 120mm and several smaller 82mm mortars, two heavy Maxim machine guns and a number of light machine guns as well as dozens of rifles and burp guns and a fantastic amount of ammunition. This was just from our company area.

We all felt good about the job we had done but our hearts were heavy because of our losses. I saw the skipper as he was checking our new positions. I could see that there had been tears in his eyes. It had been a rough day.

About a week after the battle, we got a letter from Mike. He was doing well and in love with every "skirt" on the hospital ship. He had also decided he wanted to spend the rest of the war right where he was—"in heaven" as he called it.

We knew he would be back. Guys like us can stay clean and warm only so long.

A Marine remembers a year of deadly combat in Korea.

Korea And The Magic Line: Tripwire to Hell

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