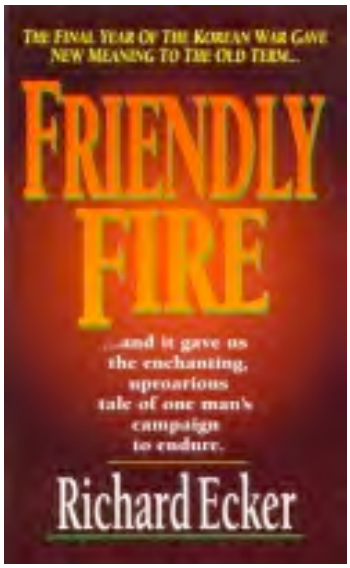
THE FINAL YEAR OF THE KOREAN WAR GAVE NEW MEANING TO THE OLD TERM...

FRIENDLY FIRE

...and it gave us the enchanting, uproarious tale of one man's campaign to endure.

Richard Ecker



In the third year of the Korean War, a young Army officer arrived in Korea for combat duty. He was assigned to the U.S. 31st Infantry Regiment, code name Bearcat. For almost two years he had been preparing to lead infantry soldiers in combat. Little of that training, however, had equipped him for what now awaited him as the new commander of Bearcat I&R (the regimental Intelligence and Reconnaissance platoon)--a unit best described in retrospect as a cross between "F-Troop" and "The Dirty Dozen.".

Friendly Fire

by

Richard Ecker

♦♦♦

**"…THE MOST REVEALING HISTORIES
OF WARTIME ARE NOT NARRATIVES ABOUT
BLOOD AND GLORY
ON THE BATTLEFIELDS.
MUCH MORE REVEALING ARE THE
PERSONAL STORIES OF MEN ENGAGED
IN THE DAY-TO-DAY BUSINESS
OF SURVIVAL.
WITH HUMOR AND INSIGHT,
FRIENDLY FIRE TELLS HOW THAT
BUSINESS PLAYED OUT FOR MEN FIGHTING THE
WAR IN KOREA..."**

♦♦♦

**"…*FRIENDLY FIRE* IS THE DELIGHTFUL TALE
OF AN UNCONVENTIONAL HERO
COMING OF AGE IN
AN UNCONVENTIONAL WAR…"**

♦♦♦

**"... ALWAYS IRREVERENT, AND
OFTEN HILARIOUS, *FRIENDLY FIRE* OFFERS
AN INSIDER'S VIEW OF HOW MILITARY
COMMAND, 'THE BRASS' TO USE THE AUTHOR'S
WORDS, CARRIED ON A WAR THAT
COULDN'T BE WON..."**

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Dedicated to the memory of my father
Robert Ecker (1902-1993),
who taught me to be a storyteller,
who inspired me to tell this one
and who remained
an enthusiastic supporter
until his dying day.

1

PFC Adams pulled the jeep off the road and stopped. "You want to get out and stretch, lieutenant?" he asked. "We've gone as far as we can go with the windshield up. Around the next curve we'll come out from behind these hills and be in full enemy view for the next several miles. If we take any enemy fire, we don't need a lot of flying glass to add to our problems."

The driver took off the cloth fatigue cap he'd been wearing and retrieved his steel helmet from the floor behind his seat. Then he hopped out of the jeep and busied himself with the fasteners that held the windshield in its upright position. I got out and stretched for a moment, then unhooked my own helmet from the top of my pack and put it on.

The windshield was attached to the vehicle by hinges that allowed it to be rotated forward and clamped flat on the hood of the jeep. The whole maneuver took less than a minute; then Adams climbed back into his seat and started the engine. A pair of goggles was attached to his helmet with an elastic band. He pulled these goggles down until they hung around his neck and then reached under his seat, grabbed another pair and tossed them in my lap.

"Here, lieutenant," he said with an impish grin, adjusting his own goggles. "These will help keep the bugs out of your eyes. When we get out there where Joe is watching us, we're going to be moving fast."

Joe, I had learned, was the term the GIs used to describe the Chinese army facing us. I adjusted my goggles and pulled the front rim of my steel helmet as far over them as possible. Adams turned the jeep out onto the road and began to pick up speed.

For the past several miles we had been driving generally northeast, along the west rim of the Kumhwa Valley. A range of steep hills on our left had blocked our view of the enemy—and vice versa. Now, the road made a sharp left turn and took us into the open, heading straight to the north.

Ahead of us, perhaps a mile or two, the broad valley came to an abrupt end. There the hills on our left were joined by an even taller hill on our right, leaving only a narrow northward passage out of the valley. The hills closing around us were steep and tall, rising a thousand feet or more above the valley floor. But they were all dwarfed by the mountain that appeared directly in front of us, perhaps five or six miles to the north.

"What in the world is that?" I shouted to the driver, pointing to the giant elevation.

"That's Papa-san."

"What?"

"Papa-san. Hill 1062. It's the tallest hill around. It belongs to Joe. As you can see, it gives him a pretty good view of things on our side."

Shuddering a bit as I thought about how many pairs of Chinese binoculars had me in focus right then, I felt myself almost involuntarily settling lower in my seat.

I did some quick calculating to estimate the height of that giant hill. The number of the hill—1062—referred to its elevation in meters. That meant that the peak towered more than three thousand feet above us.

"Do you get much enemy fire when you make this trip?" I asked a bit anxiously.

"Nope," the driver responded. "They usually won't waste ammunition on a jeep with

only one or two people in it. That's the reason we're not allowed to drive the valley during daylight with more than one passenger. They get frisky every once in a while and try to use us for target practice, but so far they haven't even come close."

I found little comfort in his assurances, particularly as the road continued to take us straight to the north—directly toward that huge enemy mountain. I checked my map to make sure that I knew where we were and that the driver knew where he was going.

The map indicated that the city of Kumwha occupied a major part of this end of the valley. Yet all I could see around us was tall, dry grass and a few scrubby trees.

"Where's Kumhwa?" I shouted to the driver. "According to the map it should be around here somewhere."

"Right over there." He nodded to his left, not taking his eyes from the road.

Carefully, and a bit apprehensively, I searched the landscape to the west. At first I saw nothing. Then I began to detect some scattered evidence to indicate that this once had been a prominent North Korean city. All that remained now, however, were some foundations, mostly hidden by the underbrush, and the remnants of a few walls, none more than a foot or two high. Kumhwa had been leveled—literally.

We continued north, the valley closing rapidly around us. As we passed Kumhwa, the road we were on was joined by an abandoned railroad track. If we had followed that railroad out of the valley to the north, we would have made a wide turn to the west into another valley—a long, flat no-man's-land extending generally east and west between the opposing forces on each side. Elements of my new regiment, the U.S. 31st Infantry, held front-line positions along the railroad on the south rim of that valley. The enemy held the high ground across the valley to the north—including, of course, Papa-san, "the father of mountains."

Easy Company, our destination, occupied positions in the hills to the east of us. So about a mile north of Kumhwa—when it seemed to me that we were in the very shadow of that giant enemy hill—Adams, with little decrease in speed, made a sharp right turn off the main road and headed into the eastern hills. In less than a minute, we were out of enemy observation. The jeep slowed to a more reasonable pace, and I began to relax. I knew I was getting closer to the enemy with every passing minute, but there still was comfort in knowing that he couldn't see me anymore.

We passed a battalion aid station nestled close behind one of the front-line hills to our left. The aid station was the combat-zone equivalent of a neighborhood emergency medical clinic. There the wounded had their first chance to be seen by a physician—the battalion surgeon. His job was to treat the less seriously injured for return to duty and to stabilize those with more serious wounds for evacuation to a M.A.S.H. unit in the rear area.

The road narrowed, beginning to rise steeply, and Adams had to shift the jeep into a lower gear. The vehicle responded with a jerk and growled up a draw toward what, from a distance, looked almost like an Indian pueblo built into the sides of the hills. As we neared our destination, however, I was able to identify the pueblolike structures as log and sandbag bunkers, some of them resting on the slopes behind the hills and some built directly into the crests of the hills or into the saddles and ridges dividing the crests.

The road ended in a small parking area that had been cut into the hillside. Adams parked the jeep there and announced, "Here we are, sir. This is Easy Company. Our platoon's sector is over on the left."

"Where's the company command post?" I asked.

"That's it straight ahead," he answered, pointing to a large bunker on the slope above us.

"Why don't you take my gear over to our area? I'll report in to the company commander. He'll probably want to take me around the company position. I'm sure he'll show me where our platoon is situated. I'll come over later and get settled in."

"Yes, sir," he replied, and grabbing my pack and his rifle, he disappeared behind a hill to my left. I retrieved my carbine from the jeep and started up the slope toward the company command post.

As I climbed, I noticed that someone was now standing outside the CP bunker waiting for me. The path leveled off a bit before I reached my destination, giving me a little time to catch my

breath. Now I could see the silver bar of a first lieutenant painted on the front of the waiting man's helmet and the name CARPENTER stenciled over his left shirt pocket.

Still a little breathless from the climb, I walked up to my new boss, saluted, introduced myself and handed him a copy of my orders. Expecting the formalities to be quickly cast aside in this combat situation, I was prepared to receive a friendly reply and a welcoming handshake. But I froze in my tracks as he ignored my salute, glowered at me fiercely and shouted, "Lieutenant! Do you know where your men are?"

"S-s-s-sir," I stammered, groping for a response, "I was hoping you could tell me."

The company commander ignored my feeble reply and continued without changing either his tone or his volume.

"I'll tell you where they are," he shouted. "They're in the rear area taking showers—the whole damned bunch of them. Except for three Koreans, your platoon position is totally deserted. Joe could come waltzing through there and be in our chow line before we knew what hit us."

I started to explain that I didn't have anything to do with their disappearance, but he surged ahead before I had a chance to get a word out.

"I called your platoon CP a while ago to talk to Sgt. Foxworth. After a lengthy discussion with one of your Korean soldiers, I finally figured out that the sergeant had gone for a shower. I went over there to find out what the hell was going on and discovered that the whole damned platoon was off bathing. Do you know how long it's been since any of the men in my company have been back for a shower?"

I shrugged and shook my head simultaneously, having no idea what else to do under the circumstances.

"Almost a month. *Almost a month*," he repeated for emphasis. "Your bunch has been here less than a week."

I wanted to protest that they weren't really "my bunch"—that I hadn't even seen most of them—but I was pretty certain that this was a good time to keep my mouth shut.

"That pack of goldbricks has been nothing but trouble since the day they came up here. My company was really shot up and I couldn't get any replacements. The colonel said he'd loan me his I&R platoon for a while until I could get back up to strength. But if I'd known then the kind of misfits he was going to send me, I'd have told him, 'Thanks just the same. We've got enough trouble with the damned Chinese.'"

Then, possibly moved by the sight of me shrinking before him like a whipped pup, Lt. Carpenter's tone began to change. The anger of his initial outburst gave way to quiet frustration.

"Lieutenant," he concluded almost plaintively, "I know you're not responsible for what's been going on, but I've got to have some cooperation out of the men in your platoon. I'll be expecting you to see to it that they don't give me any more grief."

"Yes, sir," I responded, showing as much determination as I could muster. "You can depend on it."

"Good," he muttered and then repeated absently, "Good," as he turned and led me toward the entrance to the CP bunker.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get a cup of coffee. I'll tell you a little about what's been going on around here. Then I'll show you around the company position.

"Welcome to the war," he added over his shoulder as he disappeared ahead of me into the bunker.

8

I was fifteen years old when the Second World War ended. The years of that war—three and a half of the most impressionable years of my life—had been dominated by propaganda glorifying the military and suggesting that the most reliable indicator of true patriotism was the desire for participation in combat. That propaganda had an enduring influence on me. Five years later, when the Korean War started, I volunteered for military service and requested assignment to the infantry.

Once I hit the front lines in Korea, it didn't take me long to discover that the movies, comic books and radio programs that had so stirred the patriotic juices of my adolescence had left out some important details about what it was like to be in a war. In fairness, I would have to admit that there is probably nothing that can prepare a potential combatant for the experience, but my first twenty-four hours "on the hill" certainly exploded—*literally* exploded—the myths of wartime glory that I had cherished in my teenage years.

I had already seen my platoon sergeant cut down by an enemy mortar round only minutes after we met. The following morning, when we came under another kind of enemy fire, my fantasies of combat as fun and games were put to rest forever.

That cave-pocked cliff across the valley, the one that had appeared so deserted when I scrutinized it through O'Brien's BC scope the previous afternoon, had come to life. The Chinese had rolled a 76-mm howitzer to the mouth of one of the caves and were zeroing in on our position. Unlike the mortars they had used on us the day before, these guns had a very flat trajectory. So my CP bunker, nestled on the steep reverse slope of the hill, was not in their line of fire. But the men in my platoon were getting plenty of fireworks.

When the first round hit above us, I tensed immediately. Sgt. Barton hardly stirred.

"76s," he noted. Then, seeing me reach for my helmet and my carbine, he added. "Don't worry, lieutenant. The guys can take care of themselves. This happens all the time. You won't be able to do anything more up there than you can sitting right here."

He went on to explain that the men in the platoon had made a kind of game out of the frequent attacks from the guns in those caves. It was about a mile and a half from the cliff to our position, so the men could actually watch the enemy gun crews at work. The crews didn't particularly care if they were being observed, because they would only be out long enough to fire off a few rounds. Then they would disappear back into the caves. Even if they did stay at their guns long enough to allow us to return the fire, the caves were almost impossible targets to hit.

When a howitzer is fired directly at you, it's very easy to see the flash and the smoke from the muzzle blast. The travel time for the projectile over that distance was perhaps four to five seconds. Sgt. Barton explained to me that the men delighted in standing at the apertures of their fighting bunkers, watching for the muzzle blast and waiting until just before the round was due to reach its target before ducking to escape the impact.

"What you're telling me is that these guys are up there right now playing 'chicken' with live artillery."

"I suppose you could call it that. It gets pretty boring standing guard duty up in those bunkers every day. The Chinese offer a little diversion with their 76 attacks. The guys actually feel a little disappointed if Joe takes a day off and doesn't shoot at us."

From everything I had learned during my first day as platoon leader, it was becoming painfully evident that these guys had a very low tolerance for boredom. Certainly, as a new combat commander, I had been heartened to discover that the platoon I had inherited liked nothing better than a good fight. Yet I could not shake the growing feeling that their impatience for action was going to bring me to grief before our tour together was over. Little did I realize how short a time I was going to have to wait for that premonition to become a reality.

I put on my helmet and stood in the bunker entrance, looking up the slope. Most of the enemy fire was concentrated on the right flank of my platoon position, up the hill toward Lt. O'Brien's observation post. Once in a while a round would hit close enough to the crest of the hill that I could see the smoke and the dust from the impact.

Then, a few seconds after one of those explosions, a loud whistle came through the receiver of the sound-powered telephone hanging on the bunker wall behind me. Even before Sgt. Barton could reach for the receiver, I could hear the voice on the phone screaming, "Medic! Medic!"

Sgt. Barton listened briefly and then reported anxiously, "Novak has had part of his hand blown off."

"Find Doc," I ordered, "and get him over there on the double. Then call the company CP, tell them what happened and request a litter jeep for evacuation. Tell everybody else to keep their heads down and sit tight. I'm going up there."

I had been watching when the round hit Novak's position, so I knew right where to go. The closest—and safest—route was straight up the side of the hill. The 76s were still coming in, but I was out of the line of fire as long as I stayed on the back slope of the hill. Getting over the crest and into the trench was going to be a different matter, but I wasn't going to worry about that till I got there.

"Novak?" I asked myself as I scrambled up the hill. "Who the hell is Novak? I haven't even met him yet."

Well, I was about to meet him now, but it would be a short acquaintance. His days in combat were over.

I was puffing hard when I reached the area behind the bunker that had taken the hit. Incoming 76s were still landing at regular intervals on the front slope of the hill. Now I could really feel the earth shake under me when they exploded and smell the pungent aroma of spent gunpowder. I bellied up to the crest of the hill and identified myself loudly to the men in the bunker. Now it was my turn to play "chicken" with those Chinese gunners.

From the spacing of the impacts, I guessed that they had only one gun in action. If they maintained that interval, I could get over the top of the hill and into the trench while they were reloading after the next round was fired. I waited just out of the line of fire.

"Here comes another one," I heard someone yell from a bunker down the hill.

I hugged the ground as the round exploded and dumped dirt and rocks all around me.

"Here I come," I warned as I scrambled over the crest of the hill and tumbled into the trench just a few feet from where the medic was already at work on the wounded man.

"Doc" had been in a nearby bunker when the first call for help came over the platoon telephone network. By the time I arrived, he had already stopped the bleeding with a tourniquet, but the hand was still a bloody mess. At least two fingers were missing. It was impossible to tell about the fate of the others.

Cpl. Conklin, Novak's bunker-mate, was holding the wounded hand in the air while the medic busied himself treating the patient for pain and shock. The ashen-faced Conklin was clearly relieved when I took his place and let him retire to his sleeping bunker.

I studied the aid man as he tended the patient and calmly gave me orders for assistance. We both understood without it being said that in this situation he was in total command.

Doc was not a member of my platoon. He was attached to my unit from the battalion aid station. As long as I was under orders to be a part of Easy Company, Doc would be a part of my platoon. He had a name and a rank like everyone else in the army, but because he was an aid man, those identifications were unimportant. Like all army aid men, he was known simply as "Doc."

He couldn't have been older than nineteen and was probably younger. His face showed several days' growth of beard, but it was little more than fuzz—pure white fuzz. I was sure that there was a matching mop of snow-blond hair under his helmet. A strong Texas drawl advertised his place of origin.

As he worked, completely indifferent to the continuing explosions of incoming 76s nearby, a different kind of explosion came from the saddle below us. I recognized the sound. It was one of our 57-mm recoilless rifles—a weapon a lot like the bazooka, but with greater range and accuracy. As a weapons instructor in the States, I had a lot of experience with the recoilless rifle. It was not accurate enough to hit the mouth of one of those caves from a mile away—except by pure luck—but it could convince the 76 crew to call it a day on the outside chance that we might get lucky.

Either it convinced them or they were ready to quit anyway. After the first round from the recoilless rifle, the bombardment stopped. I stood up and looked through what was left of the aperture of Novak and Conklin's bunker. The cliff already looked totally deserted, just as it had when I first viewed it the day before.

Doc finished his work and declared Novak ready to evacuate. It was going to be slow and clumsy work moving him down this narrow trench to where we could get him on a litter. He was still conscious, but the morphine had begun to take effect. It would have been a bigger problem getting him to maneuver on his own than to carry him. At least now we could do it without having to dodge incoming artillery.

But what about those mortars over behind Jane Russell? If Joe could tell that we were having a problem, he could make our problem a lot worse with those mortars. I picked up the receiver of the sound-powered telephone, which was lying where Cpl. Conklin had dropped it after his original SOS.

I whistled into it and hollered, "Sgt. Barton!"

"Yes, sir," came the response after a few seconds.

"Novak is ready to evacuate. Get hold of Lt. O'Brien and ask him if he can drop some protective fire over behind Jane Russell. I don't need any more grief from the Chinese while we're trying to get this job done . . . And make sure that there's a litter waiting for us at the machine-gun bunker when we get him down there."

I waited for him to confirm my order and then stuck my head into the sleeping bunker. "Cpl. Conklin, do you have a shelter-half we can use for carrying Novak down the trench?"

"Yes, sir," he replied, and a few seconds later he came out of the sleeping quarters holding a crumpled piece of light canvas. Every GI in the field was issued one of these things. It was originally designed to be one side of a two-man pup tent. In the hands of enterprising front-line soldiers, its actual uses were legion.

Just as we were moving the wounded soldier onto the shelter-half, we heard the welcome overhead sound of outgoing artillery. O'Brien was on the job. We could now move Novak with a little less fear of interruption. Fortunately for him, the morphine was doing its job. He had a pretty rough ride through that steep, narrow trench and down the hill to the road.

After the litter jeep disappeared down the winding road toward the battalion aid station, I started back up the hill toward my CP with an overwhelming and foreboding sense of déjà vu. How many more times, I wondered, was I going to be escorting a litter down the hill for evacuation? Maybe after one of those trips, I'd be the one with his feet sticking out of the back of the jeep.

Back at my CP bunker, I dismissed everyone else and asked Cpl. Conklin to come in so we could talk about what had happened. Sgt. Barton had some coffee heated in a blackened container, much like the one I'd seen in the company CP the day before. He poured generous portions into our canteen cups, and I invited the corporal to sit down and relax. He was still visibly shaken by the ordeal—and obviously grateful not to be on the way to the aid station himself.

I had met Conklin only briefly the day before, on my way down the trench from the artillery OP. He had seemed very young then, but he seemed even younger now as he sat staring absently into his canteen cup. I gave him a little more time to unwind while Sgt. Barton briefed

me on some messages that had come to the CP while I was away.

That the company commander wanted to see me at my earliest convenience was not totally surprising. I had already lost two men out of my meager roster, and I had been on the job for less than a day. I wondered if he wanted to inform me that I had just set some sort of new record. For sure, he was going to want to know what happened, so I needed to get the facts.

Cpl. Conklin leaned back against the bunker wall, sipped the hot coffee and related what he knew. Novak had been on duty in the fighting bunker during the shelling. Conklin himself was in the sleeping bunker. Although he couldn't see everything that happened through the opening to the trench, he could see that Novak was peeking through the aperture between impacts and then ducking when he saw the Chinese fire another round.

When he ducked to avoid the impact of the round that got him, he had absentmindedly held onto the aperture ledge with his left hand. The impact was almost a direct hit on the front of the bunker, and his hand was right in the way of the blast.

When the corporal finished his story, I excused him with a request to give Sgt. Barton an estimate of the damage to his bunker and what it would take to fix it. Then I put on my helmet, grabbed my carbine and headed for the company CP.

I wasn't looking forward to this interview. If first impressions really are lasting, then I was already just about dead meat with this company commander.

"One thing's for sure," I muttered to myself as I followed the path around the hill, "I'm sure as hell not going to tell him that Novak was wounded because he was playing chicken with those Chinese gunners."

15

All too soon after the assaults on Triangle Hill and Jane Russell, the 31st Infantry was moved back on the MLR to relieve the regiment currently occupying the western sector of the division front. Short-handed due to the high casualty count in the operation, and with little time to find replacements, Bearcat had to draw upon every available man to fill those front-line positions.

Predictably, my platoon was considered eminently available and, at least as far as many of the regimental staff were concerned, also eminently expendable. So not too long after the big show, Bearcat I&R again found itself occupying a stretch of front-line bunkers—this time just to the north of what was once the North Korean city of Chorwon.

These, however, were no ordinary bunkers. They were, if such a rating can be given to structures like these, absolute works of art. We were told that they had been built by an Ethiopian contingent that had occupied this sector at an earlier time. I never met any of those Ethiopian soldiers, but to this day, my hat is off to them. They really knew how to build bunkers. Before our tour in this position was over, we all were going to have plenty of reason to applaud them for it.

The CP bunker I had occupied over at Easy Company had been built somewhat into the side of the hill, but it was mostly an above-ground structure. It was fairly sturdy, with its log and sandbag walls and roof, but it would never have endured a direct hit from an enemy 120-mm mortar or 122-mm howitzer.

My new CP bunker, on the other hand, was almost more like a cave than a bunker. It was built totally below ground level. The roof was a layer of steel pickets (fenceposts) over which had been packed more than two feet of logs, rocks and dirt. The entrance was a narrow tunnel with a right-angle turn into the bunker, so that the interior was protected from rounds exploding outside the entrance. Its disadvantages were that it was very small and constantly dark without some kind of artificial light. However, those disadvantages were trivial, given the location of our position and the tactical situation in which we had been placed.

That situation involved another outpost, only this time we were not on the outpost itself. We were just the closest front-line position to it. And unlike our earlier experience, this outpost was not in an isolated location. In fact, it was almost more a part of the enemy position than it was a part of ours. Where Baker Company Outpost had been treated by the Chinese more as a matter of curiosity than as a position of tactical importance, King Company Outpost, a few hundred yards across a narrow valley from our front-line position, was looked upon by the enemy as a clear and present danger.

The enemy's main fortification in the area was an elevation we called Star Hill. Like the popular name for hill 598—Triangle Hill—Star was given its name from the shape of the contour lines that represented the hill on our tactical maps. The contours near the peak of hill 598 were in the shape of triangles—thus the name Triangle Hill. Star was made up of a series of ridges that met at its crest. On the map this configuration was rendered in contour lines that looked like concentric six-pointed stars.

One of those ridges extended to the south, through a shallow saddle, to another elevation. That elevation was King Company Outpost. It was only about four hundred yards from the peak

of Star Hill to the forward positions on the outpost—an easy romp across the saddle in either direction for one side to go pick a fight with the other.

Whenever that happened, which was regularly in the early days of our occupation of that location, my position was always the one that took most of the artillery and mortar fire from the enemy. The reason was pretty simple. The fighting on the outpost was often at too close quarters for either side to support the battle directly with artillery or mortars. My platoon, on the other hand, was situated where we could provide close fire support for our troops out there. So to make sure that we didn't have any opportunity to offer that kind of support, the enemy concentrated their heavy stuff on us.

The obvious objective of these barrages was to keep us out of the fight—and they certainly succeeded. We stayed in our bunkers. To do otherwise was to invite instant disintegration. One night, in about a one-hour period, we estimated that they dropped some five hundred artillery and mortar rounds just on our platoon position, in addition to intense concentrations of machine-gun fire. After a while, these frequent bombardments became such a routine part of our lives that men who were not on guard duty would sleep through the attacks without ever being aware that they were happening. In all of those barrages, not one bunker was even slightly damaged, and not one of my men sustained an injury.

One time, when we were under a daylight bombardment, we took a direct hit on the top of the CP bunker by a round from a 122-mm (about five-inch diameter) howitzer. Sitting inside when it hit, we could feel the ground shake and were given a pretty good dust shower, but the structure was not damaged in the slightest. On the outside, the only effect was a hole that needed to be filled with dirt. However, Sgt. Barton's "fart sack" did not fare as well. He had picked that day to air out his sleeping bag on the top of the bunker. Now the only evidence that it had ever existed was a hillside covered with feathers. All around our bunker, it looked like Christmas in October. The scene attracted quite a few curious onlookers and a generous assortment of witty comments, but the sergeant himself was not amused.

During the month we occupied this position, the outpost was not continually a battlefield. When it wasn't, life on the hill became pretty routine. Although we appreciated a respite from the artillery and mortar attacks, the boredom was sometimes almost worse. So when the routine became too boring, we would generate some activity on our own.

One morning when business was particularly slow, the company weapons platoon leader and I decided to drop a few 60-mm mortar rounds on the Chinese soldiers we knew were somewhere over on the other side of Star Hill. We didn't know exactly where they were, but we figured out a strategy to aggravate as many of them as possible. In the process, we would be giving the men in the mortar section some needed practice.

Our strategy was to fire a salvo—one round from each of the four tubes in the section—at a point about two hundred yards behind the crest of Star Hill. Then we would adjust the fire and put another four rounds fifty yards closer to the crest. With each successive salvo, we would drop another fifty yards from the distance until we could see the rounds exploding on the top of the hill. Then we would add two hundred yards to the distance and repeat the process, "walking" the fire back up the reverse side of that hill in fifty-yard increments. After several repeats of the strategy, we ceased fire and went back to other business.

For me that morning, other business involved a rather urgent trip to the latrine. Our diet still included one meal a day of C- rations—and the remainder of the diet contributed little additional assistance to bowel regularity—so trips to the latrine remained infrequent. However, when nature called in those circumstances, the answer needed to come soon. It was calling me urgently that morning, and I sought out the company latrine with some haste. Fortunately, it was close by. Unfortunately, a handy latrine was also a lot closer to the action.

Unlike the facility at Easy Company, this outhouse was not located in a sheltered area behind the company position. Because of the nature of the terrain, our six-holer had to be placed pretty much in the middle of the company area—specifically, just a short distance from the 60-mm mortar emplacement.

However, location was not the only disadvantage of this particular latrine. There was also the matter of how it was constructed. It very obviously had not been built by the Ethiopians. The

enterprising GIs who constructed this thing had decided to make the walls from cylindrical fiber tubes that were originally shipping containers for certain kinds of ammunition. These tubes had been filled with dirt and then stacked between a double row of fence pickets which had been driven into the ground around the perimeter of the throne room.

As they were originally constructed, I'm sure that these walls provided reasonably effective protection against shrapnel from any enemy fire that exploded in the vicinity. The only problem was that the intense bombardments that our company position had sustained over the previous couple of weeks had riddled those fiber tubes with so many holes that all the dirt had leaked out of them. Now, when you sat on the throne, the only thing between you and the outside world was a bunch of empty fiber tubes.

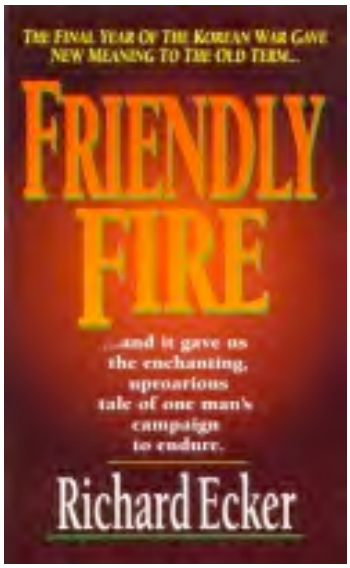
Needless to say, none of us visited the facility any more often than was absolutely necessary. Today, the visit for me was absolutely necessary—and I'm sure that it was partly the extreme urgency of my situation that caused me to overlook one very real possibility. In my haste, I had forgotten to consider that the Chinese might be upset by our little game with the 60-mm mortars and send us some return fire to demonstrate their displeasure. It was a very unfortunate lapse on my part.

I had just dropped my pants, settled my bare backside on the cold boards and gotten down to business when the first volley hit. Mortars never give you any warning. They just explode, and then, afterward, you have a faint memory that the explosion was preceded by a subtle hissing sound. Of course the enemy was shooting at our mortar emplacement. But they were just guessing where it was, and I wasn't about to assume that they might not drop something in the near vicinity of the paper fortress I was sitting in.

At times like these, all other considerations take a back seat to the drive for survival. Without the slightest hesitation—and with little concern for where I was in the process to which I had been attending—I sprang from my perch and hopped for the entrance of the latrine. Grabbing for my pants, with only partial success, I headed across the compound—partly hopping, partly running as I went.

Shouting a quick warning cry to whoever was there, I dived into the nearest sleeping bunker and sprawled headfirst at the feet of its lone occupant. At some other time, under more normal circumstances, I might have felt embarrassed to find myself lying face-down in the dirt in front of an enlisted man, with my trousers still at half-mast. But these were not ordinary circumstances and my only feeling at the time was extreme relief to be out of the line of fire.

Although I never asked, I suspect that I was not the first unannounced visitor to this bunker during a mortar attack. The soldier didn't appear particularly surprised to see me and showed little reaction as I struggled to get myself back into my pants. In fact, with the bunker lighted only by a single dim candle, he may not have had any idea who I was. I know I didn't ever get a good look at him. Within a few minutes the attack was over, and I was on my way back to finish what I had started.



In the third year of the Korean War, a young Army officer arrived in Korea for combat duty. He was assigned to the U.S. 31st Infantry Regiment, code name Bearcat. For almost two years he had been preparing to lead infantry soldiers in combat. Little of that training, however, had equipped him for what now awaited him as the new commander of Bearcat I&R (the regimental Intelligence and Reconnaissance platoon)--a unit best described in retrospect as a cross between "F-Troop" and "The Dirty Dozen.".

Friendly Fire

by

Richard Ecker