

Chapter 12

BACK TO THE OFFENSIVE—1951

The UN Command's situation after the withdrawal from North Korea was desperate. The 2d, 7th, and 25th Infantry Divisions, 1st Cavalry Division, and 1st Marine Division had each lost roughly the equivalent of a regiment while fighting their way out of North Korea's frozen highlands. The newly-arrived Turkish Brigade suffered losses that would cripple most units but the Turks bravely stayed in the fight. Few infantry regiments that fought their way back across the 38th parallel could muster more than two thirds of their original strength. Trucks, half-tracks, howitzers, and discarded personal equipment littered the main withdrawal routes.

Adding more gloom to the situation, Lieutenant General Walton Walker, Commander of the Eighth Army, was killed in a jeep accident as 1950 came to a close. A characteristically bitter Korean winter froze the ground to the consistency of rock, making it almost impossible to dig in and establish a line behind which the UN command could regain its strength. Taking full advantage of the situation, Chinese forces swept through abandoned Pyongyang and continued to push southward. They soon swept across the Han and took Seoul on January 4, 1951. Regardless of their condition, there was no time for depleted units on either side to rest and refit.

The 31st Infantry Regiment moved north from Pusan by truck on the day Seoul fell to the Chinese, arriving just behind the center of the UN line near Chechon. Weary infantrymen and engineers established defensive positions in depth along the road and rail lines between Tanyang and Chechon to protect X Corps supply lines. On January 27, the 7th Division attempted a counterattack to help straighten the UN line, but heavy rains and muddy roads made progress nearly impossible. It was becoming apparent, though, that the Chinese were also nearing the end of their tether. UN aircraft hammered Chinese and North Korean supply routes daily and UN troops were proving much more resilient than anyone could have predicted.

BACK ON THE ATTACK

On January 29, the 31st Infantry moved onto a series of long ridges and hills defining the 7th Division's main line of resistance (MLR) astride the Tanyang Pass. They would not have to wait long for their return to action. The following night the Chinese attacked in a series of three waves, each spaced about 300 yards apart. As Chinese bugles blared to signal the attack, their mortars and heavier guns began to shell the ridgeline. American searchlights behind the line aimed their beams at low-hanging clouds to provide reflected illumination for the infantrymen up front. Illuminated by the sudden light, the first wave of Chinese, about ten rows deep, came under fire from every American weapon in range. Rifles and carbines, BARs, machineguns, recoilless rifles, mortars, and artillery created a deafening orchestra of noise and flying metal that turned the valley into a slaughterhouse. The first wave quickly turned into a pile of mangled

bodies whose few survivors shielded themselves with the bodies of dead comrades. The second wave stopped several hundred yards away, dropped to prone, sitting, and kneeling positions, and concentrated their fire against troops of the 2d Battalion holding the lowest part of the ridge. Stationary in the open, the Chinese had no chance against massed American firepower and they too added their bodies to the harvest of death. The third wave came through the barrage at a dead run, moving through the first and second waves as quickly as they could. Some got to within 20 yards of the American line to throw hand grenades, but were mown down. None penetrated the line.

It was over in just under an hour. Afterward the night was eerily quiet. If there were wounded Chinese in front of the American positions, they made no sound and either crawled back to their own line or died silently where they lay in the damp, cold night. The next morning, Koreans came out of nearby villages to carry the dead to burial grounds. G Company counted 330 bodies being carried away. A nearby company of the 17th Infantry Regiment counted 387 Chinese dead in front of their positions, and so it went all along the line. Someone dubbed the place "Massacre Valley".

In China, families would in time grieve for sons whose bodies now rested in Korean soil, learning of their fate only when they failed to return home at the war's end or when a crippled brother or friend came home early with the news. To governments on both sides, numbers of casualties were faceless abstractions, mere indicators of how well or how poorly their generals waged campaigns. There were many millions of similarly "faceless" young men in China to take their places, and so the fighting continued, no matter how many times there would be a "Massacre Valley".

On January 31, 1951, the 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team and the 6th ROK Division relieved the US 7th Division in the Tanyang area. Because hell was being unleashed against the ROK 8th Division around Wonju, the 187th was abruptly shifted westward to plug the gap, leaving the 6th ROK Division to hold the sector alone, a fact soon discovered by the Chinese. Because ROK troops were not as well armed and trained as those of other UN armies, the Chinese would regularly pile on wherever they found a ROK division occupying a critical point in the line. Because the Tanyang Pass was a natural corridor to the south, the Chinese wanted it badly. The 6th ROK Division was driven off the MLR in disarray, opening a wide gap in the line. The 31st Infantry went right back into action, encountering stubborn resistance from Chinese troops who were unwilling to yield ground that had cost them dearly a few days before. Good weather and clear skies enabled the Air Force to dominate the fight, clearing the path for GIs by strafing, bombing, and napalming Chinese troops who had neither air cover nor antiaircraft support.

In Mid-February, the 7th Division resumed the offensive, supporting the ROK 5th Division's attack to retake Hongchon as part of Operation Roundup. To accomplish its part of the mission, the 31st Infantry had to cross a wide valley in full view of the Chinese. Artillery, air strikes, heavy mortars, and a platoon of tanks focused their attention on a steep hill dominating the enemy line, but to no avail. The Chinese responded with machineguns, mortars, and artillery of their own, forcing GIs to take

cover among the rocks and whatever folds in the ground they could find. G Company was sent up the hill again as another round of artillery and napalm struck the Chinese dominating the upper slope. The attack went forward with fixed bayonets while artillery and mortars blasted the hill. As American infantrymen reached the enemy trenches, the fighting continued at close quarters, often with bayonets and rifle butts when weapons couldn't be reloaded fast enough to engage Chinese who would suddenly appear from behind wrecked bunkers and collapsed sections of trench. When platoon sergeants took the report from squad leaders to determine their losses, miraculously only one man had been killed and two wounded.

Thereafter the 7th Division took up positions supporting the ROK 3d and 5th Divisions in the Chechon and Tanyang areas and secured the pass between Chechon and Wonju to prepare for further offensive operations. When Operation Killer, a general UN counteroffensive, began on February 21, the 7th Division struck repeatedly along the Wonju-Kangnung Road, driving the Chinese all the way back to the Soyang River in central Korea by March 21. Patrols chased guerillas out of rear areas while engineers rebuilt bridges and roads that had been washed away by heavy spring rains. There was now a general counteroffensive underway and every private understood the tide of war had turned again. The 7th Division relieved the 1st Marine Division in the Hongchon-Inje area on April 4 and began its attack as part of Operation Rugged the next morning. Five days later, the division was across the 38th Parallel again, capturing the town of Yangge on April 16.

When a Chinese counterattack collapsed the ROK 5th Division, the 7th Division held off a series of Chinese counterattacks against its exposed flank in the Inje-Hamyangni area between April 23 and 27. On May 1, the 7th Infantry Division was transferred to IX Corps control, taking up positions along Line No-Name just south of the Hongchon River. The UN counteroffensive resumed on May 20, recapturing Chunchon and Hwachon by the end of the month. Several thousand demoralized, half-starved Chinese troops surrendered to the division. It was becoming evident that the Chinese had outrun their supply lines.

HELL HILL



On June 4, the 31st Infantry Regiment penetrated Chinese lines near the Hwachon Reservoir and took the heights overlooking the town of Kumhwa at the Iron Triangle's apex before its attack was halted. The regiment's attack started quietly enough, but soon ran into a buzz saw. I Company's action is illustrative. At 3 PM on June 5, I Company, initially in reserve near the village of Hwachon-Myon, was ordered to take the largest hill (later dubbed "Hell Hill") overlooking the reservoir. Artillery pounded the crest while riflemen trudged up the long, steep slope. Sergeant Charles Bielecki, a squad leader with the 2d Platoon, recalls that midway up the hill, someone gave the order to fix bayonets. Soon

afterward, artillery fire was lifted and his Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Richard Smock, shouted, “commence firing”. Until then, no one had fired on the company and there was no enemy visible to shoot at. Bielecki muttered to himself, “looks like this is going to be a cake walk”. It wasn’t.

As I Company approached the Chinese trenches, automatic weapons fire erupted all along the hill’s crest. Lieutenant Smock was one of the first men hit. He and his runner were both hit in the head and killed instantly. Lieutenant Blair J. Willard immediately took command and the attack continued. Knowing a retreat down the long open hillside would be suicidal, Willard summoned a reserve of strength, leading a charge that overran the enemy trench line with bayonets and rifle butts. As the company moved across open ground toward a second line of trenches, one of Sergeant Bielecki’s men warned him of a Chinese soldier on his left, previously hidden from view. He turned and fired, hitting the man several times at close range.

Moments later, the trench came alive. Grenades flew over the parapets by the dozens, followed closely by a blaze of automatic weapons fire. Fortunately, most of the



Don Monterosso's Platoon - 1951

grenades were duds, but automatic weapons fire took its toll. During the dash to the enemy’s trenches, the 2d Platoon’s 2d Squad somehow got out in front of the rest of the company. They soon found themselves surrounded by Chinese troops who hit them with everything they had at close range. Eight men went in and seven quickly went down. Among them was the squad leader, Corporal James C. Toth, a reservist from Atwood, Kansas. A bullet struck him in the forehead as he shouted to PFC Don Monterosso to pull back. Toth’s facial expression changed to surprise and he stopped shouting in mid-

sentence and crumpled to the ground. Moments later, Monterosso was tossed into the air like a limp rag doll when a grenade exploded at his feet. When he landed, his helmet and rifle were gone and he had no idea which direction to run, but luckily he made the right decision and his mangled legs somehow cooperated.

Seeing a ragged looking figure coming across the hill toward him, Bielecki raised his rifle to shoot. A terrified voice shouted, “Don’t shoot, it’s me, Monterosso, please don’t shoot.” Monterosso was a mess and it was a wonder he was even able to stand, much less run. Both legs were ripped open and bleeding profusely and his trousers were a shredded mass of rags. Medics helped him to safety and began patching him up. He spent the night at the battalion aid station. After a painful evacuation by ambulance over barely passable roads to the 8076th MASH (Swedish), Monterosso was moved by air to Osaka Army Hospital in Japan. After three operations and six weeks in the hospital, he was back on the line in Korea. He soldiered on with I Company until his tour in Korea ended in October 1951. When he departed, he was one of the few men remaining who had gone ashore at Inchon just over a year earlier.

Throughout his life, Don Monterosso’s legs still hurt when winter’s icy chill swept across the lakes of his native Michigan. When he died, he had been confined to a wheel chair for two years. Memories of Korea lingered like his wounds, inspiring him to write poetry that commemorated the lives of his fallen comrades. Don’s own words in a letter he wrote to me in 1997 sum it up best: *“I remember all that happened to me in my 14 months and 20 days in the Far East. I also remember faces, but few names. There were so many I never got to know, many of them younger than my 19 years. The faces whose names I will never forget are Corporal Toth, Lieutenant Wilson, Higa, Jaime, Peoples, Captain Joy, Merchant, Bielecki, Jamerino, and Jordan. I am 64 now and a semi-invalid, but in my mind I am forever that 19-year old infantryman, humping the hills and mountains of Korea with a pack on my back and a rifle in my hand. I came home 44 years ago, but a part of me will always be in Korea. Some nights I still fight the battles, climb the hills, hunch over the fires, wonder how I made it home, and shed tears for those who didn’t”*.



About an hour after the fighting began on “Hell Hill”, a company of ROK troops wearing yellow scarves arrived behind I Company to lend their support. Before they ever reached the first trench line, the Chinese sent up four red flares, their signal for a counterattack. As bugles began blowing in the distance, the ROKs ran right back down the hill without firing a shot.

The Chinese counterattack failed to reckon with the fury of I Company’s First Sergeant, Benjamin F. Wilson (left). Born at Vashon, Washington in 1922, he enlisted in the Army in the summer of 1940 and was stationed at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii when the Japanese

attacked Pearl Harbor. He went to OCS in 1942 and was commissioned in the Infantry, but when the war was over, he resigned his commission and went home. His departure was only temporary. The Army suited him infinitely better than Washington's lumber mills and he was back in uniform nine months later. Because the Army was thinning its officer ranks and had no room for an experienced lieutenant, he enlisted as a private. He rose quickly through the ranks to become I Company's First Sergeant by the summer of 1951. As a First Sergeant, he could stay well to the rear if he wished, tending to requisitions for rations and ammunition, submitting daily strength reports, and handling the plethora of administrative details that keep a rifle company functioning. He of course did all of that, but he was also a born fighter who couldn't stay out of the action when his troops were in the thick of it.

His Medal of Honor citation reads: *On June 5, 1951, Company I was committed to attack and secure commanding terrain stubbornly defended by a numerically superior hostile force emplaced in well-fortified positions. When the spearheading element was pinned down by withering hostile fire, Master Sergeant Wilson dashed forward and, firing his rifle and throwing grenades, neutralized the position and killed 4 enemy soldiers. After the assault platoon moved up, occupied the position, and established a base of fire, Wilson led a bayonet attack that reduced the objective and killed 27 more enemy soldiers. While friendly forces were consolidating the newly won gain, the enemy*



launched a counterattack and Wilson, realizing the imminent threat of being overrun, made a determined lone-man charge, killing 7 and wounding 2 of the enemy, and routing the remainder in disorder. After the position was organized, he led an assault, carrying to within approximately 15 yards of the final objective when enemy fire halted the advance. He ordered the platoon to withdraw and although painfully wounded in this action, remained to provide covering fire. During an ensuing counterattack, the commanding officer and 1st Platoon Leader became casualties. Unhesitatingly, Wilson charged the enemy ranks and fought valiantly, killing 3 enemy soldiers with his rifle before it was wrested from his hands. He then annihilated 4 others with his entrenching tool. His courageous action enabled his comrades to reorganize and effect an orderly withdrawal. While directing evacuation of the wounded, he suffered a second wound, but elected to

remain on the position until assured that all of his men had reached safety.

Sergeant Francis Monfette, a squad leader from Decatur, Georgia, was badly wounded during the final assault and was lying exposed in the open forward of the trench line when the Chinese counterattacked. A medic tried to dash to his aid and was cut down in the attempt. Another managed to crawl out to him and drag him to safety. He had been hit sixteen times but clung feebly to life until the next morning. For over an hour the fighting swirled around the barren hilltop with the combatants hopelessly

intermixed, often fighting at ranges of fifteen to twenty feet and sometimes fighting hand to hand with whatever they could swing or throw when they ran out of ammunition. Charles Bielecki recalls feeling someone push him abruptly from behind. When he turned to see who it was, he found a Chinese soldier's bloody arm and shoulder on the ground behind him, but there was no owner in sight. An artillery or mortar round must have torn the man's arm off and propelled it across the hilltop.

The fight took down a high percentage of leaders. Around the same time Lieutenant Smock was hit, Lieutenant Tally J. "Bugs" Sheppard, I Company's 1st Platoon Leader, was killed by automatic weapons fire. Sheppard was popular with his men and his loss was sorely felt. He was a small town boy from Lucas County, Ohio, near Toledo, who helped his family run a general merchandise store. He talked endlessly about going back there when his tour of duty ended. Like thirteen other members of the 3d Battalion, his future ended on a hot, barren hillside in central Korea that day. Platoon Sergeant Bill Rowland kept his 2d Platoon together, keeping his men from bunching up, shifting the fires of key weapons, directing the redistribution of ammunition, directing the evacuation of casualties, and the myriad of other things an experienced infantry NCO does instinctively in combat. He was a rock on whom all could rely.

The rock of rocks, First Sergeant Ben Wilson, was being carried down the hill on a stretcher as the battle neared its climax. When his stretcher-bearers set him down to rest, Wilson, in obvious pain, arose from the stretcher and trudged back up the hill without a word. No one could tell him he did not belong there. Everyone understood that he would rather stay with his company than suffer the indignity of being carried to an aid station.

With the Chinese appearing on the hill in staggering numbers, it became apparent to Lieutenant Willard that his unit might soon be cut off and destroyed if it continued to cling to "Hell Hill's" summit. He called in mortar and artillery fire and as it became effective, he gave the order to pull back, adding, "I don't want anybody turning and running." Some did turn and run, but most dutifully backed down the hill, firing up at the Chinese as they poured over I Company's former positions. Incoming artillery kept the Chinese down long enough for the company to escape and dig in on a nearby ridgeline as evening fell.

I Company again attacked "Hell Hill" on June 6. Just one day after the exploit that earned him the Medal of Honor, First Sergeant Ben Wilson killed 33 more Chinese soldiers with his rifle, bayonet, and hand grenades in a similar one-man assault. In the process, he reopened the wounds he suffered the day before and was finally evacuated to a hospital. He was again recommended for the Medal of Honor, but Army policy prohibited any man from being awarded more than one. Wilson received the Distinguished Service Cross instead and was commissioned when he returned to the States. He retired from the Army as a major in 1960 and died in Hawaii in 1988.

Two days after Ben Wilson's second one-man war, PFC Jack G. Hanson of F Company earned the Medal of Honor at nearby Pachi-dong. Jack was born on 18 September 1930 at Escatawpa, Mississippi and entered the Army at Galveston, Texas in the fall

of 1950 as the Korean War was in its opening months. He was assigned to F Company, 2d Battalion 31st Infantry, 7th Infantry Division on his arrival in Korea in the spring of 1951. His Medal of Honor citation reads: *PFC Hanson, a machine gunner with the 1st Platoon, Company F, distinguished himself by conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty. F Company, in defensive positions on two strategic hills separated by a wide saddle, was relentlessly attacked at approximately 0300 hours, the brunt of the attack striking the divide within range of PFC Hanson's machinegun. In the initial phase of the action, 4 riflemen were wounded and evacuated and the numerically superior enemy, advancing under cover of darkness, infiltrated and posed an imminent threat to the company command post and 1st platoon. When his platoon received orders to move to a more secure position, PFC Hanson voluntarily remained behind to provide protective fire for the withdrawal. During the withdrawal, PFC Hanson's assistant gunner and 3 riflemen were wounded and crawled to safety, leaving Hanson manning a lone-man defense. After the 1st Platoon reorganized, it counterattacked and restored control of its original positions at 0530 hours. PFC Hanson's body was found lying in front of his emplacement, his machinegun ammunition expended, his pistol lying empty in his right hand, a machete with blood on the blade in his left hand, and 22 enemy dead around his position. PFC Hanson's consummate valor, inspirational conduct, and willing self-sacrifice enable his company to contain the enemy and regain the commanding ground, reflecting lasting glory on himself and the noble traditions of the military service.* Many members of F Company owe Jack Hanson their lives – although dead for 48 years, he lives on in their memory and in the memory of his grateful and proud regiment.

American artillery's preponderance and continuing, determined infantry attacks convinced the badly depleted Chinese that they could no longer hold the Hwachon corridor. As a chilly summer rain reduced visibility and turned the heights overlooking the reservoir into a muddy, blood-soaked version of hell, the Chinese fought a weak rear guard action and quietly slipped away during the morning of June 10. In six days of intense close quarters fighting, 47 Polar Bear soldiers had paid for that desolate string of hills with their lives. As he dug in on "Hell Hill", Sergeant Charles Bielecki suddenly realized that of the 12 men who had been in his squad when they went up to the Chosin Reservoir seven months earlier, he was the only one left. In fact, he was one of fewer than 20 men left in the whole company who had been at Chosin. But where Chosin had been an excruciating debacle that hastened the UN's departure from North Korea, Hwachon was an undeniable victory. American and allied units that had been on the ropes just a few months before had pushed the Chinese back out of South Korea and posed a renewed threat to North Korea. No unit could have been prouder of its role in the reversal of that tide than the men of the Polar Bear Regiment.

On June 23, the 7th Division was pulled off line to serve as IX Corps' reserve. In that role, it occupied and upgraded Line Kansas, a fallback position for the corps. Because its regiments had little time since returning from North Korea to mold its old-timers and replacements into real teams, the division wisely used its time in reserve to conduct unit and individual proficiency training.

PEACE TALKS BUT NO PEACE

The UN summer counteroffensive of 1951 seemed to have had a profound effect on China's assessment of its armies' prospects. Its most experienced units, veterans of the decades-long Chinese Civil War, had nearly evaporated in seven months of constant hard fighting. The winter of 1950-51 sent several division equivalents of China's ill-clad peasant soldiers to the grave from frostbite and hypothermia. Somehow the Chinese managed to continue replacing their losses, but they could not adequately feed or supply them. The sustained onslaught of UN forces all across the peninsula created the real possibility that the Chinese Army could soon be crushed in Central Korea, no matter how many men China rushed across the Yalu. UN forces were simply moving too fast for the Chinese to establish tenable new positions. Worse, the UN had complete control of the air, seriously hindering movement of supplies and replacements on North Korea's ruined roads and rails. Consultations with Stalin made it clear that China could expect little help from the Soviet Union if its defense of North Korea collapsed. It was time to start talking peace while China still held half of the peninsula.

After armistice talks began on July 10, 1951, the battle line in central Korea changed only a few miles in either direction throughout the war's remainder. Each side tried to improve its positions by capturing or vigorously defending key terrain but the days of deep offensives to the north or south were over. No one predicted at the time that the war would drag on for another two years. The talks were made possible by two factors: the UN decided it was no longer worth the human cost of going north again and China had badly overextended its Army and needed time to refit and dig in.

The UN Command, rather than collapsing after its rout from North Korea, had become stronger. More nations were sending troops to Korea while American and ROK divisions that had nearly been destroyed in late 1950, were hitting back surprisingly hard. Taking full advantage of their superior firepower and mobile logistics, UN forces were driving the Chinese and their North Korean partners steadily back up the peninsula and could easily have made another run for Pyongyang and Wonsan if things continued the way they were going in 1951's first six months. If those two cities had been recaptured, North Korea could not have remained a viable nation. It would have been cramped in the mountains north of the Chong'chon River with insufficient agriculture to feed itself, no east-west transportation routes to tie it together, and little more than the demolished cities of Hungnam and Hamhung to support heavy industry. China's leaders had made it evident that they were willing to pay practically any price to keep democracy away from their doorstep. Neither the UN nor the Truman Administration was willing to pay the blood tax for capturing and holding an additional third of that miserable peninsula or pushing all the way to the Yalu again. Thus, young men on both sides bled and died while old men argued over arcane details on flat maps.

After nearly two months in reserve, the 7th Division returned to the front line on August 7, 1951. It took two days to relieve the 24th Infantry Division due to conditions that could charitably be called daunting. Fall rains had again turned central Korea's highlands to mud. Streams winding their way swiftly down mountain valleys brought flooding everywhere. Bridges were washed out and the constant rain, mixed with morning mists made it difficult to operate. On August 26, the division conducted a series

of limited objective attacks to establish patrol bases in front of Line Wyoming. The attacks were also intended to break up a Chinese buildup along the Pukhan River. To gain information, the division's probing attacks established new outposts from which constant patrols could gather new information on enemy dispositions. The Chinese did not sit back and take the attacks lightly. They responded with probing attacks of their own to try to regain hills they lost.

On September 21, Operation Cleaver, a fast-moving tank-infantry raid, was launched against the eastern end of the Iron Triangle. The offensive positioned the UN Command for another big push up the center if ordered to do so. On October 5, the 7th Division went back into reserve. On October 23, the division went back on line, rejoining X Corps to relieve the 2d Infantry Division northeast of the Hwachon Reservoir. Along Line Minnesota, the division concentrated on improving its positions, building bunkers and communications trenches to protect against a renewed Chinese offensive. The give and take along the line took its toll a few men at a time. Patrols went out, sometimes getting ambushed and sometimes ambushing Chinese patrols or raiding their bunkers. The Chinese did the same, probing constantly for weak spots and periodically sending out larger units in attempts to breach the UN line.