

Chapter 13

CENTRAL KOREA 1952

ON THE LINE

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On February 1, 1952, an F Company attack on an enemy bunker complex was repulsed, leaving three wounded men stranded under heavy enemy fire. First Lieutenant Isidro G. Urbano of Lane, California, G Company's Executive Officer, organized a litter team to rescue the wounded soldiers. Despite enemy mortar fire, he led his team to the bunker's vicinity to rescue the wounded. As the team was treating the first casualty, they heard a faint call for help from another. Under protective fire from his team, Lieutenant Urbano rushed to the wounded man, administered first aid, and carried him to protective cover. Disregarding enemy fire, he rushed back to the bunker to retrieve the third man, a rifleman who had been killed but no one could be sure at the time. For his heroism, Lieutenant Urbano was awarded the Bronze Star for Valor. The award in no way matched the esteem in which he was held by his troops who revere him still. He was killed in action on September 18, 1952 while commanding G Company.

In trenches and bunkers all along the mountainous ridges and peaks of Central Korea, soldiers on both sides stood watch in the bitter cold. The Chinese wore rubber-soled canvas sneakers wrapped in rags to insulate them against the frozen ground. Americans generally wore several pairs of wool socks under leather combat boots, often stuffed inside rubber galoshes or "shoepacs" that caused men's feet to sweat. Chinese soldiers wore lightweight quilted cotton jackets and trousers with wrapped leggings to keep body heat from escaping. Americans wore heavy wool shirts and trousers over cotton underwear or long-johns, often wearing a cotton field jacket and parka and white camouflage cover over the whole mess. Both sides wore pile caps with turned-up bills and long ear flaps that tied under the chin. Over that, an American soldier was supposed to wear a steel helmet and helmet liner. It would be hard to say that either side stayed warm, but it was certain that American uniforms were not as well designed to give a soldier freedom of motion.

Patrols were sent by both sides into the intervening valleys to each other's discover weaknesses, learn what the other side was up to, and sometimes to ambush opposing patrols. To many Americans on the line, there was little sense to what they were told to do. The front remained generally static, so why risk his life going out on a patrol to capture a Chinese soldier who had no more clue as to what was going on than he did? Why expend lives trying to take hills that were in the shadow of higher hills still

held by the Chinese? Why cling to bald, isolated fingers of ridges that had no economic or military value? Why not just booby trap and mine the more isolated outposts and call in artillery when someone intrudes and sets off a trip flare, mine, or booby trap? The Chinese seemed adept at tunneling into rock, weathering the artillery and air strikes, and coming back to well-camouflaged bunkers when American infantry got too close. But sometimes their tunnels caved in from the concussion, trapping hundreds in the earth's dark womb. In contrast, Americans tended to build on the surface and only tunnel occasionally on the backside of hills. Atop the ridges were sandbag bunkers built with heavy timbers. Visible to the naked eye, they were artillery magnets in a tree-barren landscape. Bunkers were connected by World War I-like communications trenches, complete with parapets, duckboard flooring, and timber reinforced-sides. When enemy artillery came in, sandbag bunkers often collapsed, crushing or suffocating people inside. The walls of trenches collapsed and duckboard flooring added more splinters to the flying debris. There were no safe havens on the line for either side.

On the bunker line it was clear to every man in the grade of captain and below that higher headquarters had too little to do in this static "no win" war. They appeared to plan for the sake of planning and most of their plans and directives seemed to cost lives and limbs without yielding any real advantage. When the "brass" came to "visit" with their inevitable bevy of well-dressed, clean-looking straphangers, many seemed to pay more attention to how tidy soldiers, trenches, and bunkers looked than how well cared for the troops were, how tactically effective their dispositions and defense plans were, or what could be done to improve the tactical situation. There was seemingly a stateside-like preoccupation with administration, positive statistics, professional briefings, nice-looking vehicles, and showy command posts. If that was the sense of priority conveyed by furrowed brows or offhand comments during the rare visits of army, corps, or division commanders, it quickly flowed down the command chain and nearly everyone eventually complied, even if hated it and they had other ideas about what was important.

Not all visitors to the line were senior officers. In early February, Bill Mauldin, the cartoonist who sketched "Willie and Joe" cartoons during World War II, visited I Company. He was doing a series of articles and sketches for *Collier's* magazine and needed the down-to-earth feeling of an infantryman. The men rigged up an extra bunk for him in a squad bunker and he ate Army chow out of the same mess kits as the troops he lived with. He spent his first day with I Company watching artillery, mortars, and recoilless rifles pound suspected enemy positions on the opposite side of the valley. His experiences appeared in the 26 April 1952 edition of *Collier's*. While Mauldin's letter to "Willie" is humorous fiction, the events he described are real and so are the characters. They included Lieutenant Murry Kleinfeld (a new officer in I Company), Sergeant Steve Heardman (squad leader), Corporal Rex Munson (radio operator), PFC Donald Queen (rifleman), and PFC Frank Silva (BAR man).

Captain George Casey commanded I Company at the time of Mauldin's visit. Casey later rose to the grade of Major General and was killed in Vietnam while commanding the 1st Cavalry Division. Lieutenant Lee H. Miller, I Company's 2d Platoon Leader, was responsible for hosting Mauldin's visit. Miller left the Army after the war

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The regiment returned to 7th Division control on April 23, just in time to relieve the 2d Infantry Division in the Kumhwa area. As the Chinese became more aggressive with mortar and artillery attacks, bunker lines were reinforced and camouflaged. Patrols became steadily more dangerous as both sides attempted to lure each other into traps.

On July 2, 1952, a C Company patrol was ambushed as it was returning to friendly lines. In the initial outburst of fire, the patrol leader and seven others were wounded and PFC Robert D. Hanna was killed. Lieutenant Anthony F. Silveira volunteered to lead a relief force to rescue the patrol. Acting as point man, he led his men to the scene of the ambush and in the face of continuing fire, began locating and recovering the wounded. After ensuring that all had been recovered and their wounds were treated, he led a rear guard action while the wounded were helped to safety. For his actions, he received the Bronze Star for Valor.

The 31st Infantry remained on line until September 24, when the 32d Infantry relieved it. In October, action picked up all along the line as the Chinese established strong outposts to protect their main line and the UN Command conducted a series of probing actions to seek weak spots in the thickened Chinese line. If it made no sense to make another try to go north in October 1951, it made even less sense to try it a year later after the Chinese had been given the gift of time to reinforce, resupply and dig in deep.

TRIANGLE HILL

The 31st Infantry launched Operation Showdown on October 14, 1952 to seize Triangle (Hill 598) and a set of twin peaks nicknamed Jane Russell Hill near Kumhwa. In preparation for the attack, Lieutenant Urbano of G Company was killed while leading a patrol up the "bowling alley" toward Triangle Hill. Lieutenant Charles Shields, who commanded a smoke generator detachment supporting the 2d Battalion at the time, remembers Urbano as a great guy loved by the men he led. Urbano's patrol set the stage for the most violent and costly fight since the regiment returned from North Korea nearly two years earlier.

First Lieutenant Edward R. Schowalter of Company A earned the Medal of Honor during fierce fighting at Triangle Hill on October 14. Ed is a native of New Orleans, graduated from Virginia Military Institute, and joined the 31st Infantry in Korea in 1952. His Medal of Honor citation says best what happened: *First Lieutenant Schowalter, commanding Company A, distinguished himself by conspicuous gallantry and indomitable courage above and beyond the call of duty in action against the enemy. Committed to attack and occupy a key approach to his battalion's objective, the 1st platoon of his company came under vicious small arms, grenade, and mortar fire within 50 yards of the enemy held strongpoint, halting the advance and inflicting several*

casualties. The 2d Platoon moved up in support, and although wounded, Lieutenant Schowalter spearheaded the assault. Nearing the objective he was severely wounded by a grenade but, refusing medical aid, he led his men into the trenches and began routing the enemy from their bunkers with grenades. Suddenly a burst of fire from a hidden cove off the trench wounded him again. Although suffering from his wounds, he refused to relinquish command and continued directing and encouraging his company until the objective was secured. Later, Ed served twice in Vietnam and eventually retired as a colonel.

A day after Ed Schowalter's heroic action, PFC Ralph E. Pomeroy of Company E also earned the Medal of Honor. Pomeroy was born on March 26, 1930 at Quinwood, WV where he entered the Army in the spring of 1951. He was assigned to the 31st Infantry on his arrival in Korea in the fall of 1951. His Medal of Honor citation reads: *PFC Pomeroy, a machine gunner with Company E, distinguished himself by conspicuous gallantry and indomitable courage above and beyond the call of duty in action against the enemy. While his comrades were consolidating on a key terrain feature, he manned a machinegun at the end of a communication trench on the forward slope to protect the platoon's flank and prevent a surprise attack. When the enemy attacked through a ravine leading directly to his firing position, he immediately opened fire on the advancing troops, inflicting a heavy toll and blunting the assault. At this juncture the enemy directed intense concentrations of mortar fire on his position in an attempt to neutralize his gun. Despite withering fire and bursting shells, he maintained his heroic stand and poured crippling fire into the ranks of the hostile force until a mortar burst severely wounded him and rendered his gun mount inoperable. Quickly removing the hot, heavy weapon, he cradled it in his arms and, moving forward with grim determination, raked the attacking forces with a hail of fire. Although wounded a second time, he pursued his relentless course until his ammunition was expended and then, using the machinegun as a club, he courageously closed with the enemy in hand-to-hand combat until he was mortally wounded.*

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ANOTHER YEAR OF WAR DAWNS

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