

# KOREA IN THE 1950s: WAR AND PEACE

## (A) WAR

### MEMORIES OF THE KOREAN WAR\*

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After I have spoken you will get an exceptionally realistic account, from John Bowler, of what the Korean War was like at the sharp end. As an infantryman he saw at very close range the violence that only the infantry know, for it falls to them to take part in close combat.

I was not an infantryman; I had been commissioned in December 1949 from Sandhurst into the Royal Army Service Corps, the forbear of today's Royal Logistic Corps. The RASC was responsible for a wide range of tasks; the constant supply of rations, fuel, ammunition and much else to the entire army. It also provided crews for landing craft, the load despatchers for supply-dropping aircraft of the RAF, and ambulance units; and when I underwent my commissioning course at the RASC depot in the summer of 1950 it still ran horse and mule transport units. At the end of that most enjoyable experience I was familiar with the rudiments of equitation. I have never sat in a saddle since – horses and I didn't empathise. But I could get a harbour launch up and down the south coast, drive quite competently almost every vehicle operated by the army, carry out simple maintenance and repairs to a lot of these, including a spot of welding; and I could slaughter and butcher an ox (just in case I went off on one of the British army's traditional expeditions to deepest Africa).

At the end of that course we were vaguely aware that something was happening at the limits of the Far East. A country called Korea had been invaded by Communists; some of us reached for our atlases to find out where on earth Korea was. To those who hoped for distant postings the Emergency in Malaya seemed far more relevant and I for one was dismayed when sent to a unit mobilising on Salisbury Plain that had been earmarked for the Korean war theatre; it was not even a glamorous unit – I found that I was in command of a platoon of ambulances. My dreams of martial glory evaporated,

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for I knew that some of my friends from Sandhurst were headed for Korea in the infantry. My soldiers arrived within days, mostly cursing their fortune – and even more Clement Attlee’s Labour government: nearly all of them were reservists who deeply resented being dragged back in uniform after years of war service. On average they were ten years older than me and clearly regarded me with grave suspicion as a total beginner; how right they were. Some were clearly unfit for active service and we quickly sent them home; others had hair-raising welfare problems, for the likes of which my Sandhurst training had not prepared me. At this time the British Army was 400,000 strong but 18-year old conscripts could not be sent for combat in the Far East. In 1950 they served for only 18 months; but in 1951 this was raised to two years and this gave time for them to reach their 19th birthday once they had undergone basic training and then been sent off on the four-to-five week sea voyage to Korea.

I do not know why our unit had been equipped with elderly Austin ambulances, incapable of use away from metalled roads and lacking 4-wheel drive; they were collected by me and my men from a huge ordnance depot near Nottingham and it took two days to get them back to Bulford on Salisbury Plain where the unit was kitting itself up for war. Our clothing was a collection of remnants from earlier campaigns; I received a splendid sealskin hat bearing the date 1918 – it had been destined to go to North Russia in the ill-fated campaign against the emerging Red Army. We had boots hurriedly made in 1939 for another aborted expedition to help the Finns against the Russians; these boots were disgracefully ill-suited for Korea and were quickly abandoned as we obtained by unofficial means any American cold weather clothing, sleeping bags, footwear and tents that we could beg, borrow or steal. Our possession of copious amounts of NAAFI alcohol enabled us to use whisky and beer as currency in dealing with the Americans, who had been forbidden by Bible-belt American women’s temperance organisations from taking liquor off to the wars.

We sailed from Southampton on 15 October 1950 on the troopship ‘Empire Fowey’, formerly the Nazi ‘Strength through Joy’ cruise liner ‘Potsdam’, now run by the P & O line. It was the first time I had ever been abroad and the novelty was great. Now free of food-rationed Britain we were fed like kings. The troops down below on their accommodation decks were lavishly fed in a huge cafeteria and had bunks to sleep in, unlike the older troopships in which the other ranks’ accommodation was a disgrace. During the long voyage we tried to keep fit with physical training, running round the upper decks; there were many lectures and talks as we tried to teach the men something about the country towards which we were sailing. As I knew nothing about Korea I was reduced to playing them classical gramophone records and teaching the elements of music; this they rather seemed to like. We shared the ship with the 8th King’s Royal Irish Hussars in which several of my Sandhurst friends were serving; most of them were lost in the near-disastrous battle north of Seoul on New Year’s day

1951 when the Royal Ulster Rifles were almost overrun and the reconnaissance troop of the Hussars lost.

Our first sight of Korea, on a freezing morning in November, was not encouraging. Pusan was a desperately neglected city; filthy, crowded with unhappy refugees and evil smelling – totally unrecognisable as the dynamic seaport and industrial city that it now is. We sorted ourselves out on the dockside. It was clear our ambulances would have to be sent across to Japan whilst 4-wheel drive trucks were obtained from some ordnance depot. To my fury I was appointed in command of the detachment to be sent immediately to Japan whilst the rest of the unit piled into a run-down train heading north. At this point the United Nations forces, following MacArthur's bold amphibious landings at Inch'ŏn in September, had driven so far north that they were approaching the Chinese and Russian frontiers and it looked as if the whole war was running out of control. Little did we know that the Chinese had already decided to intervene. As the campaign in Korea went into crisis mode I was having a wonderful time in Kure, the Commonwealth base across the water where the Australian Army Service Corps had made me and my men most welcome; some were soon playing rugby league for the local team and others learned the mysteries of Aussie Rules, a game better described as Foot and Mouth. I played hockey for the Australian team and so, as sportsmen, we ticked all the right boxes with our hosts.

My Japanese tour came to an end when one of my colleagues in Korea fell sick and I was flown over to take over his platoon, now equipped with elderly Bedford 3-tonners, and attached to the 27th Commonwealth Brigade. I was dropped off an Australian Dakota at Taegu airfield, a bleak and unfriendly place; I noted a DC6 transport plane overturned off the runway; a jeep picked me up for the 50-mile journey to our company HQ at Wŏnju. On the way we passed the litter of the earlier fighting – T-34 tanks, Russian lorries, broken bridges, ruined villages in which a few unhappy people were trying to exist. It occurred to me that this was a land that had been harshly repressed for 40 years and whose economy had been stolen by the Japanese. Apart from the roads between Inch'ŏn and Seoul and down to Suwŏn, and upwards from Pusan to Taegu, none was surfaced; consequently much of the British army's transport was useless on the dirt roads. Within days of arrival in Korea I had to take my unit of strangers into a battle as the Commonwealth brigade advanced north towards the Han River. At this time, around the battered town of Chip'yŏng, a combined French and American garrison was holding out against large numbers of enemy. The defenders' resolution inflicted one of the first reverses on the hitherto unstoppable Chinese. Our brigade was very much an ad-hoc affair; two battalions of British infantry – the Middlesex and Argylls – an Australian battalion, a regiment of New Zealand field artillery, a superb Indian army Field Ambulance – all parachute-trained and proud of their red berets, then our British-New Zealand-Canadian transport and supply unit. Until now the brigade had relied on the Americans for its

logistic support and whilst the US Quartermaster Corps and Engineers excelled, their transport units frequently let the infantry down, especially in the recent 'bug-out' season. So our arrival, a versatile unit assuring the fighting units of reliable transport in the forward area and guaranteed supplies of rations, ammunition and fuel, and capable if necessary of fighting as infantry in dire emergency, was warmly welcomed in the brigade.

On the 19th of February I was able to describe my first week at the front in a letter home:

My new command consists of 30-odd lorries, a small armoured car and 57 men ... During this last week I have seen, and to a small extent taken part in, my first battle. On Tuesday and Wednesday I had half a platoon of trucks out north of Yōju, taking the three infantry battalions up to the Han Valley. Having lifted them into their defensive positions we left them digging in. I withdrew my vehicles back to wagon lines alongside Brigade HQ; from there we had a grandstand view of what happened as the Chinese attacked during the night. The Middlesex battalion, having dug in about two miles north, were attacked at dawn by waves of Manchurian infantry, who managed to get into one of the rifle company positions and overran two platoons. But the old 'Diehards' stuck to their guns and when the smoke of battle lifted, nearly 70 of their attackers lay dead. The New Zealand gunners were tremendous – only recently arrived (their troopship hit a reef and sank en route) – they are almost all inexperienced volunteers, equipped like us with worn-out World War 2 weaponry. Also the US Air Force performed a spectacular attack on the enemy as they massed after dawn for further attacks on Thursday afternoon, scattering them over and over again. I could see all this clearly in my binoculars as the enemy hopped around on the hillsides [under] a hail of rockets, cannon-fire and the dreadful napalm – a sort of petroleum jelly igniting on impact to form gigantic fireballs ... Our troops are in wonderful heart as they know we have air supremacy and that alone is a marvellous morale-raiser. The American troops of our Division look on with frank admiration and the personnel of the first rate American heavy mortar battery attached to our brigade make a point of stressing their pride in serving as part of the 'British Royal Commonwealth Brigade'. We all feed very well on American rations, which are mostly dropped from the air as the roads are execrably bad and some of the pontoon bridges have been washed away in the early spring floods ... At the moment I'm living in the outbuildings of a dilapidated farm. My most treasured piece of furniture is a tremendous neo-Edwardian barber's or dentist's chair, with elaborate upholstery – brass studs and all the trappings! ... It seems rather odd that people are sitting listening to concerts in the Albert Hall, as I have done so many times, and looking at the paintings in the same galleries that have given me so much pleasure ... I must turn in now as my batman is preparing our shared nightcap, a hot grog of army rum and hot tinned milk; the rum looted by him in the great bug-out before Christmas when I was still in the fleshpots of Kure.

For the next two months we slowly advanced back onto the general line of the 38th parallel. It was time for the Argylls and the Middlesex to leave and their relief

battalions, the King's Own Scottish Borderers and the King's Shropshire Light Infantry to join our brigade, which was placed in reserve near the town of Kapyŏng. In the midst of the handover, the Chinese launched their great spring offensive. Thirty miles westward our 29th brigade just managed to hold on north of Seoul despite the loss of most of the Glosters. Our own brigade held out through the resolution of the Canadian and Australian battalions and the matchless support of the New Zealand gunners. How we managed to cope as a transport and supplies unit is still almost beyond me – not only were we working frantically to get the outgoing battalions to Inch'ŏn but picking their reliefs off the dockside and carrying them up to where they might be needed to fight 'from cold' as it were on arrival at the front; at the same time the guns had an insatiable appetite for ammunition and this had to come from as far south as Suwŏn. We all took turns as drivers – my commanding officer who had never driven anything bigger than a Morris Minor was carrying 7 tons of ammunition on his 3-tonner and I went without sleep for 100 hours and was hallucinating at the wheel. The main problem in this phase of the war was that some of the newly raised ROK units had still to acquire the experience now evident in the ROK Marines and the Capital Division. The 6th Division was still untried and raw when the full weight of the Chinese thrust hit them, and the Commonwealth brigade, still in the middle of rotating two of its battalions, was nearly overwhelmed as well when the 6th ROK division retired through us in some disorder. More dangerously, its ranks had been penetrated by Chinese infantry and it was impossible to distinguish friend from foe in the dark. It was clear that unless we acted quickly our reserve stocks of fuel, ammunition and rations, stacked in the Kapyŏng valley near brigade HQ, were at risk and we diverted most of our trucks to rescue them. By grossly overloading our ancient Bedford lorries we succeeded, apart from an impressive stack of fresh bread from the admirable American field bakery. I had this soaked in petrol and threw a match on the pile: immediately the valley was filled with the smell of burnt toast and this must have puzzled the Chinese when they arrived briefly on the scene before the Australians drove them back.

After the excitement of the Chinese offensive and its repulse the war became more static. We moved west to join the newly formed 1st Commonwealth Division on the line of the Imjin. The vicious cold of the winter gave way to the spring – in Korea such a time of beauty, then to the hot and humid summer, which led to outbreaks of hitherto unknown diseases. Our reservists went back home, glad to be released; but they had been marvellous soldiers from whom I learned so much. Their successors were mainly young conscripts, now obliged to serve two years, but they were keen to learn and by now I felt I had taken on some of the skills of my reservists.

As the summer wore on the Chinese withdrew to the north to gather strength for their next campaign and the Commonwealth Division sent out patrols across the Imjin to search for them. On one such occasion we had carried a platoon of the Shropshires

about four miles north of the river where they got down and continued on foot. Still athirst for martial glory I decided to join them, leaving my trucks under a reliable sergeant. I borrowed one of my soldiers' rifles and 100 rounds of ammunition. A sensible choice, for the platoon was spotted and ambushed when five miles further across the river; an exciting afternoon followed in which I was glad that I had been well trained as a marksman in my recruit days. By the time I regained safety I had expended all my 100 rounds and had satisfied several queries of the sort that haunt young men: how would I behave under fire? And how would I feel when pulling the trigger on a human target?

In the autumn our unit, having completed a full winter at the front, was moved down to Pusan in support of the huge logistic base now flourishing there. Already the town and dock area had changed radically from the ghastly shambles of the previous year. The energy of the Korean people as they set about the great task of rebuilding their nation was evident. I was able to see a great deal of the base areas and was amazed at the American effort; a large hospital was catering for the dreadful casualties caused by napalm, and here Chinese and North Korean prisoners were treated by some of the world's leading plastic surgeons; I spent a fascinating if horrifying day as their guest as they showed me the new techniques they were using – including the reconstruction of complete faces which had been burnt away. I was also able to go to the prison island of Koje off the south coast where over 100,000 North Korean and Chinese prisoners were held under what I thought was a dangerously slack discipline. Sure enough, only weeks later there was a huge mutiny, the prison commandant was captured and held hostage by the prisoners and British Commonwealth troops were called in to help restore order. This they did without bloodshed, and within days, unarmed British soldiers were playing football and organising sports with the former enemy. But by this time I was enjoying a spell of leave in Japan and soon after that I was on a troop ship bound for home.