

MEMORIES OF THE KOREAN WAR*

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I am honoured to be invited to talk to you about the Korean War and what it was like. I will tell you of my own experiences. I was there in the infantry for just under a year, 1951/2, following on after Colonel Hickey.

Sir Max Hastings, the well-known historian and journalist, described the war as a ‘platoon commander’s war’. That is what I was, a platoon commander. A platoon comprised 30–35 men. Sir Max Hastings was correct: there were few major tactical movements such as the Inch’ön landing. Most of the fighting was between relatively small groups of men who fought for isolated hills, or parts of hills or, as in my case, No Man’s Land. Groups of ten to two hundred or so. There were two large armies growling at each other, but the great onslaughts and offensives with thousands of men had, as it turned out, finished although we always remained alert and expected them.

My battalion – the 1st Battalion of the Welch Regiment, a 300-year-old infantry regiment – travelled to Korea on a fine troopship, the same ship that Colonel Hickey had travelled on 12 months earlier. On one occasion, whilst we were resting from training on board, my men, who were 80 per cent National Servicemen (that means conscripted, not volunteers) said ‘Why are we going to war, why are we fighting on the other side of the world, Mr Bowler, sir?’ I remember saying there were a number of reasons:

- to stop the spread of Communism;
- to help a small independent nation cruelly invaded by a big force backed by a bullying nation, i.e. Russia;
- for the honour of the Regiment and the embodiment of that in its mascot, a goat;
- because if you don’t, Sergeant White (our Platoon Sergeant, a fine, feared soldier) will sort you out – a serious threat;
- and finally, if you don’t fight, the Chinese will kill you.

Most of the men were aged 18–20 with older NCOs. I was 19. We were posted to

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Korea for one year and arrived in what was then the dilapidated shanty-town harbour of Pusan (look at it today!) on 16 November 1951, to be greeted by two large Negro military marching bands. Fortunately, as the weather was turning cold, we were then kitted out with very fine British Arctic war clothing, seven layers of it. Two days later we moved up by train to Ŭijongbu through the damaged landscape and I well remember seeing the elderly patriarchs in their tall black hats with their long beards and the ancient graves on the hillsides.

We relieved what was left of the Gloucester Battalion that had been in the great Imjin battle, and then moved into the area known as the 'Hook', which overlooks the Samichon Valley some 110 kms north of Seoul and is the invasion route to Seoul. As we moved into the trenches it began snowing.

The trenches had been occupied by South Korean troops and were very clean and in excellent condition. Each platoon had its own hill. We had to cook our own food which was delivered by truck two or three times a week so we had to build ovens and a kitchen; we inspected the barbed wire (which was very good), the minefields in front of us (which were questionable); worked out our own routine for reveille, inspection, weapon cleaning, sleeping, sentries, cooking etc.

The company commander called the platoon commanders together daily for briefing. He was on a smaller hill 600 yards away. The line was now static. The dramatic mobility of the first 18 months had ceased, and it was very reminiscent of the First World War in Europe, with two large armies snarling at each other across the main battlefield which became No Man's Land. The commanding officer of the Welch decided we would be so active in No Man's Land that the Chinese would not be able to build up their forces in the open area in front of us and attack us. This policy appeared to work.

A word about the weather. It was a continual battle that had to be won. We had to beat the weather first. Those three years were the coldest three years in the last century. It was worst in January and February. Battalion HQ in the valley recorded -22° and -25°C . It was worse on the hilltop with the north wind from Siberia, probably -25° to -30° . Often bright, clear nights with a strong moon and bitter north wind. Spring and autumn were pleasant and summer hot and wet. I remember it raining for seven days and seven nights, stopping only for four hours. It was the only thing other than heavy snowfalls that stopped both sides fighting.

So we set about patrolling. My platoon did some 15 patrols of all kinds, reconnaissance, fighting, ambush, etc. We met the Chinese on eight of these. As well as heavy patrolling the battalion put out five listening posts every night in front of our lines with six or seven men.

A word about the countryside. It was very different to the UK. Everywhere there were hills, gullies, ridges, knolls, entrances, hiding places, blasted trees from previous

battles, abandoned paddy fields. There were no civilians, no birds. It was beautiful but barren in the cold.

The extreme cold brought problems. We needed to be permanently on our guard against surprise attacks, so at night half the front line troops were on guard at any time. Two hours on, two hours off was the system. We slept with boots on, never off. We never got into our sleeping bags, always slept on top with our rifles close by or with us to stop them freezing. Those sleeping had to be able to be in action in 90 seconds.

Our excellent parkas (large overcoats) had large wired hoods as protection against the wind but we never put them up as it would interfere with our hearing. We always shaved in the morning. I inspected the men and the weapons, and we fired all the machine guns to make sure they were working perfectly. I went seven weeks without a bath. We used the now banned DDT powder to keep the lice and fleas at bay, which it did. We put it inside our shirts and jumped about. In January we were told we would have no supplies for six weeks. We would be cut off as the poor roads were becoming impassable. Nobody would visit us unless we were in serious trouble. We had an extra-large delivery of ammunition, extra petrol for cooking and bunker heating, extra water and six weeks of packaged American C rations – which introduced us to Lima Beans, clam chowder self-heating soup, American cigarettes and other delights.

Now to the fighting. Let me tell you about the Chinese. They were excellent at camouflage and tunnelling. Their lines were roughly one and a half miles away. Suddenly one day we found they had tunnelled right through the hill facing us and they produced a large artillery gun which began shelling our lines. It was probably on railway lines as it disappeared as soon as our guns replied. The Chinese were experienced, quick thinking, silent movers when they wanted to be but were often noisy, talkative, lacking discipline, cruel, brave, willing to die, and able to handle hardship. We had the weaponry and planes and were very determined: they had the numbers.

Our platoon's first patrol was on 24th November, just over a week after landing, and fortunately we made no contact. Three days later it was more interesting. It was a daylight patrol, on a delightful autumn day, consisting of one officer and nine soldiers. We went to a small hill in No Man's Land one mile or so away. It was at the end of a long ridge that started in the valley. When we got to the hill I left the patrol on the ridge and went to the top with my wireless operator to check it out. The sun was shining. Had there been birds they would have been singing. No sign of any enemy! There was a bunker at the top. It contained a Chinaman. He was looking north towards his lines a mile away. He had his quilted ear flaps down. We pulled back. The hill came alive. The patrol was being attacked; we were too. The Chinese had let us walk through the centre of them! They had been hidden in shell holes, scrapes, remains of old trenches and were astonishingly well camouflaged. I and

my wireless operator ran north towards the Chinese lines, down the hill and called down an artillery barrage. We escaped, rejoined the patrol and retired. We had one wounded.

Three days later on 30th November, with 11 men, we were sent to Hill 169 (the number is the height in metres, a good naming system) to spend the night there and see if the Chinese came. They did, there was a fire fight and they went away. We had two slightly wounded. In the morning, on looking around I found six frozen dead Chinese on the Chinese side of the hill, all about 6 ft. I don't think we had killed them. We took their papers. I was told they were Mongolians.

Ten days after that we went back to Hill 169 shortly after dusk. This time not one plus eleven but the whole company, four officers and some 90 men. The Chinese came, at first a few and then in numbers, and a battle ensued. We withdrew at 3 a.m. with eight wounded, two badly. The hill was surrounded and we had to fight our way out. This intensity of patrol activity refers only to one platoon. There were 12 platoons in the battalion doing the same thing.

Probably the most interesting patrol was a night fighting patrol in May involving the whole platoon. It was a warm night with a strong moon. The platoon crossed No Man's Land – about two miles wide – and then penetrated the Chinese lines for half a mile or so, bypassing many enemy positions on parallel ridges. We then raided a strongly fortified location to prove the Chinese were nowhere safe from the Welch. My orders were simple, "Wake them up, give them a bloody nose". After the raid we withdrew rapidly, under attack from behind and from the ridges on both sides of us. Suddenly some five miles of the Chinese front line in front of us came alive, shooting at shadows, firing light flares for illumination. I was surprised for they were jittery and scared. The next night the place we had raided opened fire on one of their own returning patrols, killing some sixteen. The following day a Chinese officer appeared on our wire and asked to surrender. He was a captain and had been in charge of the place we had raided. He was a substantial prize. We had three wounded.

In my platoon 10 per cent of my men were killed, some 35 per cent wounded, many twice. They were often patched up at the fine hospital in Kure and then sent back to the front line. We killed many Chinese and never lost any ground.