

A New Year on the Eastern Front

Story by Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)
Photos courtesy of the Marine Corps Historical Center

"For history was staging one of its repetitions; and allowing for improvements in weapons, the trenches of Korea in 1951-1952 differed but slightly from the trenches of the Western Front in 1917-1918."

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It was minutes past midnight. Monday had become Tuesday, and 1951 had given way to 1952. Far off in Tokyo, revelers already were greeting the arrival of the New Year, setting the tone for countless such celebrations as the Earth's rotation brought the stroke of midnight to waiting crowds in distant continents and cities in turn. Not that the fact meant much of anything to the small ambush patrol out of Captain Charles McDonald's Company B, 1st Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment. A rifle squad, a light machine-gun squad, an interpreter and a corpsman, their white camouflage clothing blending with the snow-covered ground, lay quietly in wait for any night-prowling North Koreans.

The North Koreans, loathe to move about in the daytime lest they draw down a firestorm on themselves, were much more active at night. That the Marine patrol might be ambushed itself was not out of the question. It had happened before to other patrols. In the rugged, mountainous terrain forward of what was called the Minnesota Line nothing was taken for granted. The "Baker" Co Marines, veterans at the game, were fully aware that they could easily become the hunted rather than the hunters. They had moved into position quietly and carefully and sited their ambush skillfully. Now they waited patiently.

The old adage stated that virtue is its own reward. Patience also can be rewarding. Shortly after 0200, 1 Jan. 1952, muffled footsteps told of the approach of a small body of men. Soon the darkness revealed the shapes of a six-man North Korean patrol. The Marines held their fire until the patrol had approached to

point-blank range. Now! The silence was shattered by the sharp cracking of M1 rifle fire, the barking of Browning Automatic Rifles and the stuttering of the Browning M1919A4 light machine gun.

It was over in less than a minute. The North Koreans never had a chance to fire a shot in return. The survivors turned and fled, dragging several wounded comrades with them, leaving the dead where they fell.

The job finished, the Marines wasted no time in packing up and leaving. It wasn't wise to lollygag about an ambush site out between the lines once the ambush had been sprung. North Korean mortar gunners had every bump in the ground plotted and registered. To remain in their position would be a sure invitation to a flight of 82 mm or 120 mm mortar rounds. The Baker Co patrol passed through friendly lines without casualties at 0400. Another day and another year had begun in Korea.

The Baker Co New Year's Day patrol, a minor action worth little more than a footnote in the First Marine Division's command diary, was representative of the fighting on Korea's Eastern Front in the second winter of the war. During the previous summer and early autumn, this zone of action had been the scene of some of the most intense large-scale fighting the Korean War would produce. Now, with the thermometer hunkered down in the negative regions below zero and the steep-sided mountains deep in snow, it was a different story. With all friendly offensive initiatives halted by orders from on high, small-unit operations were the order of the day or night.

Typical of the changed nature of the war was the company-strength raid conducted by two reinforced platoons of Capt James B. Ord's H/3/1 during the night of 1-2 Jan. The objective area was the crossing point on the Soyang gang (river) between Hill 812 and a commanding height to the north numbered 951.

The North Koreans were very touchy and sensitive to friendly activity in the

no man's land north of the Soyang gang, especially in the vicinity of Hill 951. A critical installation in their overall defense system, the hill was regarded by the North Koreans as their territory. They reacted violently to any incursions. Knowing this from experience, Capt Ord planned his raid and its supporting-arms coordination meticulously.

Using surreptitious ground reconnaissance and aerial photography, Capt Ord and his command group carefully laid out approach and retirement routes, checkpoints, rallying points and objective areas. Platoon leaders, platoon sergeants and squad leaders were briefed in detail, as were the attached artillery and 81 mm and 4.2-inch mortar forward observers. No detail was overlooked.





It was the Eastern Front, and Marines newly arrived in Korea learned on the line. This photo was taken in February 1952 as a Marine rifle squad leader learned to coordinate fire support with tank commanders. (USMC photo)

What was the result of all this planning? Two North Korean soldiers were taken prisoner. One Marine was wounded when he stepped on an antipersonnel mine. While this might seem a small return on a large investment, it was the price of doing business on the Eastern Front. Careful reconnaissance, detailed planning, thorough rehearsal and minimal risk were the essentials of this new small-unit warfare that had become the norm. It stands as testimony to the adaptability of the Marines of the 1stMarDiv that they quickly mastered this craft that was contrary to all their offensive doctrine and training.

Night after night, all across the 1stMarDiv's front, they went out. Combat and reconnaissance patrols, raids and ambushes were business as usual for the division's forward regiments. If it was warfare on a small scale, it was nonetheless highly active warfare, carried out constantly and primarily at night in weather conditions that ranged from marginal to atrocious. That it was effective may be seen in the division's monthly report for January, which recorded that the enemy "showed greater caution than he had in previous months, and friendly outposts and ambuscades noted fewer contacts." If the North Koreans

were becoming aware that Marines were no longer conducting large offensive actions, they also were learning that the 1stMarDiv was handing out no free passes. Don't get too frisky was the message.

In the realm of messages, Marines were starting to see evidence that persons on high were getting the message, at least in the area of personal equipment. Along with the new year, two articles of equipment—the thermal boot and the armored vest—were starting to arrive. Both were gladly accepted by Marines. Both were destined to be highly successful.

Winter in the mountains of Korea is a cruel affair, with temperatures below zero

an almost daily event. During the winter of 1950-51, thanks to an abominable bit of footwear known as the shoe-pac, frost-bitten feet rivaled combat wounds as the most common disabling medical condition. First used and found wanting in the European Theater in World War II, the shoe-pac, with its leather uppers and rubber lowers, was a guarantee of foot problems. Encased in the nonporous rubber of the lower portion of the shoe-pac, feet perspired heavily. In sub-zero cold this perspiration promptly froze, leaving the wearer's feet covered by a sheathing of ice.

The new thermal boot was a godsend. The feature that made the boot so effective was its two layers of wool insulation, sealed off from each other by latex, with an air space in between. While the boot held the heat from the wearer's feet in, it did not permit the entry of cold air from the outside. At last, a boot kept heat in and cold out. Tested extensively by the Marine Corps at such widely diverse places as Quantico, Va.; Port Churchill,

January 1952. Designed by the Naval Field Medical Research Laboratory at Camp Lejeune, N.C., the vest was a product of an around-the-clock effort by Lieutenant Commander Frederick J. Lewis, (MC) USN, and his associates.

Thanks to LCDR Lewis and his staff, the nylon vest with its Doron plates was produced on time and within specifications. While it did not stop high-velocity bullets, it afforded almost complete protection against shell and mortar fragments and the low-muzzle velocity projectiles of the North Korean "burp gun" (the Soviet-made 7.62 mm M1943 PPSH submachine gun). It quickly proved its worth in Korea, where Marines who sustained what otherwise would have been disabling or life-threatening wounds escaped unscathed except for minor bruises.

The effectiveness of the armored vest was illustrated by the report of Capt David R. McGrew, USMC, the project officer who accompanied the initial shipment of vests to Korea and wrote:

vest had been struck by 45 fragments without any penetration. Fifteen of those fragments had been large enough to inflict fatal chest or abdominal wounds.

With findings confirmed by medical officers, Capt McGrew was able to report some very interesting conclusions:

- Men who would have been killed or wounded if they had lacked armor protection—23
- Men who had potentially severe wounds reduced to superficial wounds—29
- Men who had superficial wounds prevented altogether—31

The armored vest was not only reducing casualties among Marines, it was reducing the effectiveness of enemy weapons as well. Marines who otherwise would have been taken out of the fight remained in action. With the vest reducing Marine casualties by 30 percent (an estimate that was later seen as conservative), it was as though three out of every 10 North Korean grenades and mortar and artillery rounds were duds. Conceived as a medical measure, the armored vest was proving to have a tactical value as well.

If the thermal boot and the armored vest were new Marine tactical innovations, the third such, helicopter operations, was by now almost routine. From its small experimental beginnings at Quantico, the helicopter had become an everyday sight in the zone of the 1stMarDiv. Battalion troop lifts, once a novelty, now were standard, as were the regular helicopter resupply operations in support of front-line troops. During the first week of 1952, Lieutenant Colonel Keith B. McCutcheon's Marine Transport Helicopter Squadron (HMR) 161 took on the task of supplying LtCol John E. Gorman's 1/1 on Hill 884.

Using only one-third of its available aircraft, HMR-161 kept so far ahead of schedule that on several occasions more cargo was delivered than could be unloaded at the delivery site. It was the first such operation in the history of warfare, an undertaking that could not have been envisioned one short year earlier. Much of the credit had to go to an inventive Marine, Major Charles E. Cornwell, who developed the mechanisms of under-slung cargo netting controlled from the cabin. Using Maj Cornwell's innovation, a helicopter could deliver cargo much faster than was possible with pallets.

In addition to the workhorse efforts of HMR-161, fixed-wing elements of Major General Christian F. Schilt's First Marine Aircraft Wing were also in the skies over the Eastern Front. The circling Panthers and Corsairs were a common presence over the North Korean posi-



Flak vests were issued to Marines in the Far East beginning in January 1952 and proved to be effective in saving lives. By the time Private First Class Ralph W. Barlow, 1stMarDiv, took a piece of shrapnel in his vest rather than in his body, flak vests had saved the lives of at least 18 Marines.

Manitoba, Canada; Big Delta, Alaska; and the High Sierras of California, the "Mickey Mouse" boot was a tribute to its designers and manufacturers. In the hands of Marines in Korea well before the onset of winter, the new boot lost no time in demonstrating its value.

Another new arrival, the M1951 armored vest, began arriving in Korea in

"Up to tonight we have had nine men hit while wearing the vest. One was killed outright when a 120 mm mortar round landed right in his lap. However, the other eight showed excellent results." Capt McGrew went on to cite the case of a 2/7 rifleman wounded by the explosion of an 82 mm mortar round only 15 feet in front of him. The Marine's armored



The tank could be an effective weapon on the Eastern Front. It proved to be a great bunker buster, as it could accurately place high explosive shells into a bunker gun port. (Photo by SSgt Robert H. Mosier)

tions on the commanding heights of Hill 1052, Hill 980 and the ever-troublesome territory beyond the Soyang gang. Offensive operations to take new ground may have been halted by orders from Washington. That did not spare the North Koreans from frequent plasterings from the air.

On the ground the constant patrols, raids and ambushes continued to wear away at the North Koreans, keeping them on the defensive and pinning them in place. None of these small-unit actions were noteworthy. Probably none of them are remembered today except by those for whom they were intensely personal experiences. Certainly, former Second Lieutenant William Omdahl has cause to recall the night on the forward slope of Hill 812 when a mortar fragment tore a large gash in the back of his leg. With the subfemoral artery severed he lay within minutes of bleeding to death but for the prompt actions of Corporal Robert W. Thompson, who fashioned a tourniquet with his own web belt. A man tends to remember a thing like that.

What most Marines in the forward

positions remembered, beyond those jaw-tightening moments crouching beneath incoming mortar rounds or out in that contested ground between the lines, was the sheer monotony of it—the monotony of the molelike underground existence, the monotony of the miserable weather, the monotony of the never-ending diet of C-rations. Former Sergeant H. B. “Harry the Hawk” Ellett remembered the C-ration gourmet, the Marine who would rummage through a case of C-rations looking for his favorite. “Hell, man,” the Hawk would growl, “just take one. After the third meal they all taste the same anyway. What’s the damn difference?”

For the Marines of whatever regiment that happened to be in division reserve, there were more than likely memories of Camp Tripoli. Located well behind the lines near division headquarters, Camp Tripoli offered the opportunity for a man to rid himself of the goatlike aroma that clung to him like an antideodorant after weeks of dirt and grime as constant companions. It was a chance to get reacquainted with the face beneath the accumulation of soot and dirt and stubble and to rediscover the luxury of hot water. Who

can appreciate the sheer sybaritic delights of something as simple as brushing his teeth? The man who hasn’t been able to brush his teeth for three weeks can.

Camp Tripoli was a place to relax, sip a few cool ones, read several weeks of back mail from home, play pickup baseball and football. It was an unsurpassed place to spend a few days being just plain lazy and enjoying regular meals of real mess-hall chow. It was also a place to train, for after units had had time to take off their packs and let everything hang out, there was a daily training regimen to practice and critique the things they would be going back to. The Marines of the Eastern Front remembered such things.

No one but the North Koreans themselves remembers what memories they collected of that winter on the Eastern Front. A pretty good guess might be that they remembered that those American Marines just wouldn’t let them alone. Their patrols were all over the place, looking for a fight. Their airplanes had the habit of showing up to drop bombs and napalm at the most inopportune times. Their artillery and mortar observers

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made movement hazardous at any time. Even attending to the calls of nature could be a hair-raising experience. The American Marines even had taken to sniping with .50-caliber machine guns. Fifty-caliber machine guns, for the love of Lenin! Was there nothing those American Marines were not capable of?

The identity of the Marine who first conceived of the .50-cal. machine gun as a sniper's weapon has long been lost. But the hefty .50-cal., fitted with telescopic sights, rock-solid on its heavy tripod, soon proved itself without equal in picking off distant targets. Deadly accurate at ranges more than 1,000 yards, the "Big Fifty" wrote finish to more than one North Korean who thought himself safely out of harm's way. Sometimes life just wasn't fair.

The end result of all this was that by mid-February the North Koreans were getting decidedly skittish. They were staying home and attempting to avoid contact. More and more of their defensive positions were moving to the reverse slopes of hills, seeking to escape the never-ending working over by Marine supporting arms. It was this inactivity that gave birth to Operation Clam Up.

If the North Koreans didn't want to fight, maybe they could be lured into it was the thought behind Operation Clam Up. It was all an elaborate deception aimed at enticing the North Koreans into taking the bait of a series of ostentatiously staged false withdrawals. During daylight hours the reserve battalions of the division's forward regiments, the 1st and 7th Marines and the Korean Marine Corps Regiment, would carry out highly visible rearward marches, returning quietly by truck after dark. The 5th Marines, in division reserve at Camp Tripoli, also would move up under cover of darkness and retire in full view of the enemy after daylight. The objective was to make the North Koreans think the 1stMarDiv was abandoning its positions and falling back.

To further the impression that a large-scale withdrawal was underway, the 11th Marines fired 471 harassing and interdicting fire missions on the night of 9-10 Feb., the night before the beginning of Clam Up. In all, 12,000 rounds of 105 mm and 155 mm were unloaded on the North Koreans as an enticement to make them think it was all being done to cover a withdrawal of front-line units. As the last echoes of these volleys faded away, an eerie silence descended over the 1stMarDiv's lines. Along the front lines strict discipline prevailed. Marines were instructed to hold their fire unless absolutely necessary in self-defense.

It didn't take long for the North Ko-

reans to get curious. For the next three nights North Korean patrols poked and probed at the Marine lines, hoping to draw a response. On the 13th the North Koreans subjected the Marine lines to the heaviest concentration of artillery and mortar fire (nearly 1,800 rounds) of the entire month of February. Beyond that, though, the North Koreans didn't rise to the bait, except for selected probing actions against division positions on Hills 812 and 854. In both cases the North Korean assaults were repulsed with heavy casualties.

The guns of the 11th Marines did even more damage. During February the regiment fired 679 observed missions against such targets as troops, bunker complexes, observation posts and supply points. These fires succeeded in their objective of hastening the North Koreans to further abandon their front-line defenses in favor of defilade positions on the reverse slopes of hills.

Not even this tactic spared the North Koreans from punishment. During the month of February the battleship USS *Wisconsin* (BB-64) and the heavy cruiser USS *St. Paul* (CA-73), firing at maximum range from stations off Korea's East Coast, scored devastating hits on North Korean rear slope installations. A salvo of 16-inch shells from a battleship can totally ruin a man's health record.

This then was daily life on the Eastern Front as January gave way to February, and February in turn slid into March. Another facet of daily life was the continuing spate of scuttlebutt and rumors, both of which have accompanied Marines wherever they've gone ever since the first Marines were mustered in at Philadelphia's Tun Tavern in 1775.

An overheard conversation in a forward bunker of 3d Bn, 7th Marines in early March:

"Hey, Mac, didja hear the latest word? We're movin'. The whole division is movin'."

"Where didja get that, the third hole from the left?"

"Naw, it's straight scoop. I got it from a guy back at battalion. The whole division is movin'."

"Yeah, an' I'm gonna marry Marilyn Monroe. Shut up an' lemme get some sleep, will ya?"

There is scuttlebutt, and there is scuttlebutt, and some scuttlebutt is better than other scuttlebutt.

Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua, a frequent contributor to Leatherneck, is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars.

