

Korea, 1951

Operation Killer



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

As January gave way to February in 1951, the war in Korea had come to resemble a large-scale shoving match. Under slate-gray skies that leaked a constant drizzle of sleet, snow and freezing rain, two armies pushed each other back and forth through a miserable goulash of snow, slush and half-frozen mud. It was one hell of a place to fight a war. Too bad; it was where the war was, and the men who fight wars

seldom have any say in where they are fought.

The entry of the Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) into the Korean War in late 1950 had at once saved the thoroughly battered North Korean People's Army (NKPA) from total destruction and rolled the American and allied forces back from the northern reaches of the Korean peninsula, driving them below the 38th parallel that separates the two

Koreas. There, just below the line of demarcation, friendly forces hunkered down, caught their breath and prepared to meet the next Chinese thrust.

That thrust wasn't long in coming. Beginning in late December 1950, while the First Marine Division was refitting at its camp at Masan on South Korea's south coast, nightly CCF patrols poked and probed at the thinly held friendly line that stretched for 135 miles across

A leatherneck of 5th Marines checked out an enemy emplacement during operations to push the CCF back along the central Korean front. (USMC photo)



“I hate this damn place!”

—Anonymous voice from a fighting hole half-filled with icy water, near Wonju, Korea, 21 Feb. 1951

ber, fell to the invaders again, as thousands of refugees streamed across the Han River seeking safety. Mixed in with them and struggling to stem the tide were the soldiers of more than a half-dozen countries: Americans, British, Canadians, South Koreans, French, Greeks and Turks. Under tremendous pressure, they were backpedaling fast, but in the words of their commander, Lieutenant General Matthew B. Ridgway, USA, they were coming back “as a fighting army, not as a running mob. We brought our dead and our wounded with us, and our guns, and our will to fight.”

It may be that they got that last part from their commander. Matt Ridgway was a Soldier with a capital “S.” A distinguished airborne commander who had jumped into Normandy on D-Day, 6 June 1944, Ridgway had assumed command of the 8th Army in Korea when LtGen Walton Walker had been killed in a highway accident two days prior to Christmas. Despite the gloomy situation that greeted him, Ridgway’s first directive to his staff was to begin formulating plans for an attack. Terrain, as Ridgway saw it, was only incidental. The objective was the destruction of enemy forces. Even as his army was being pushed backward, Ridgway was determined to do some pushing of his own. With a line at last stabilized from Pyongtaek on the West Coast to Samchok on the East, Ridgway began making preparations for that push.

A key player in Ridgway’s plan would be the 1stMarDiv. Fresh from the destruction of the NKPA 10th Division in the Pohang-Andong area, the division would take on the task of clearing enemy forces from the vital Wonju-Hoengsong axis, for in Ridgway’s words, “The force which holds Wonju has the situation in hand.” To ensure that outcome, Ridgway was playing his high card—the division he termed, “The most powerful division in Korea.”

Before the division could fight at

Wonju, it first had to get there. That quickly turned into a major undertaking all its own. The road chosen for the main supply route (MSR) was, like nearly all roads in Korea, a dirt road that may have sufficed for horse-drawn carts on sunny summer days. Under heavy military traffic in thoroughly hideous weather it rapidly dissolved into a ribbon of mud in which men and vehicles floundered their way up and down the never ending hills that fill Korea from one end to the other. It was a struggle out of a logistics officer’s worst nightmare.

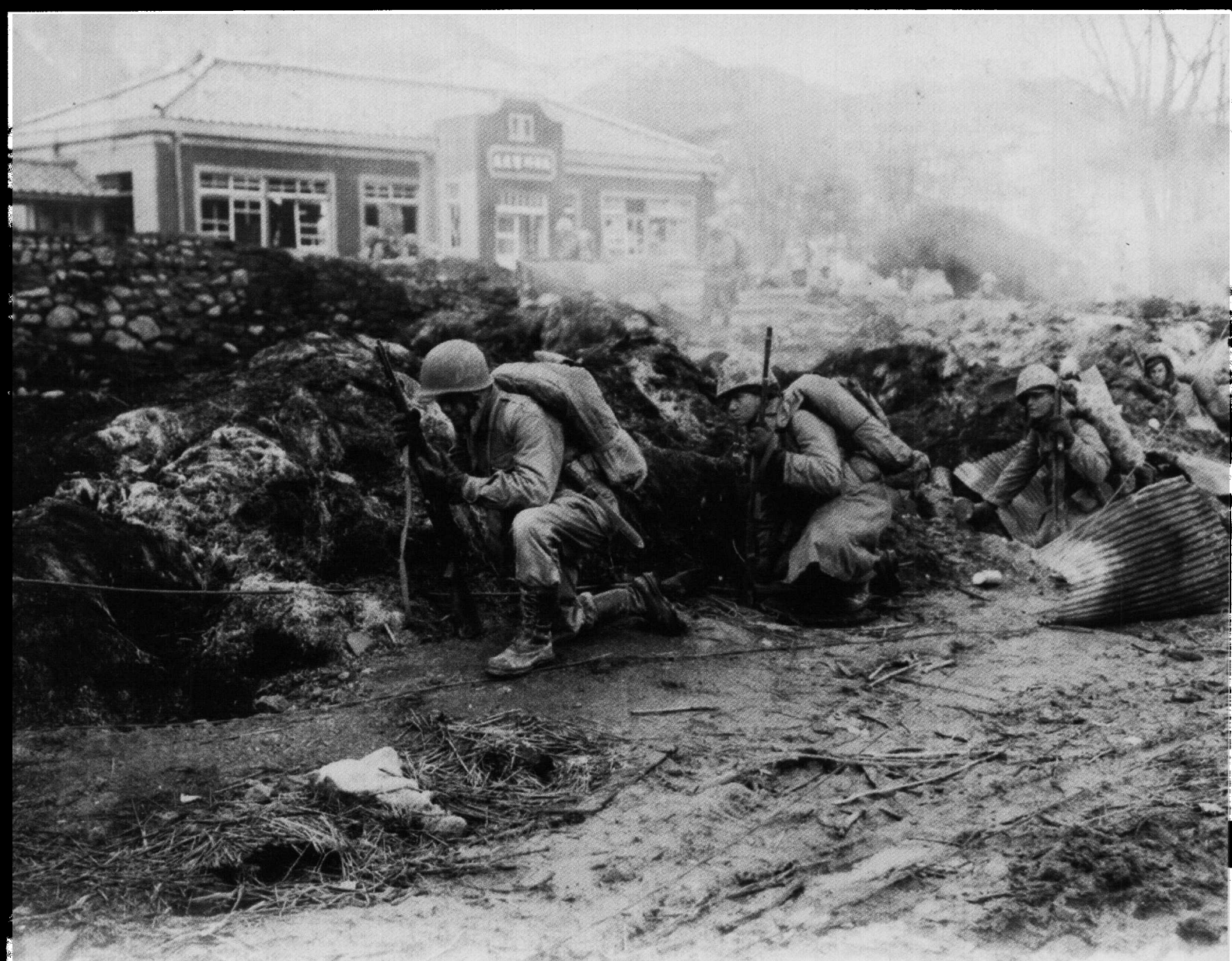
Even before the scheduled beginning of the attack at 1000 on 21 Feb., the MSR had collapsed. The Fifth Marine Regiment, slated to join the 7th Marines as the assault force, was hopelessly delayed by the disintegrated roadway and the jumble of vehicles that clogged it. Only at the very last minute did Lieutenant Colonel John W. Hopkins’ 1st Battalion, 5th Marines arrive on the scene to join the attack. Piling hurriedly from the trucks that delivered them, they advanced directly into the assault at the double—slipping, sliding and stumbling through the clinging muck underfoot.

In the midst of it all, a Marine radio-man struggled along under a load that would have foundered a mule—his trials made worse by a boot lace that had come untied and over which he kept stumbling. Suddenly a figure was at his feet, kneeling to tie the dragging boot lace. That done, LtGen Ridgway rose to his feet, patted the Marine on the shoulder and stooped to scrape some of the mud from his own clothing.

As the assault battalions jumped off, the Chinese were uncharacteristically passive. Maybe it was the weather. Physical misery is an equal opportunity employer on the battlefield, making life ugly for friend and foe alike. Maybe it was the thought that these American Marines advancing toward them might be in an utterly vile frame of mind because of the weather. Maybe they were

the entire width of Korea. Then, in the early hours of a frigid New Year’s Day, seven CCF armies, the 37th, 38th, 39th, 40th, 42d, 50th and 66th, slammed into the main line of resistance (MLR) along its whole length. It was a mismatch. There were too many attackers and too few defenders. All along the line friendly troops were forced back.

The South Korean capital of Seoul, liberated from the communists in Septem-



just having a bad day. Whatever the reason, the Chinese put up very little resistance, confining themselves to scattered light small-arms fire at long range. Only late in the day did any significant fighting break out, as 1/5 had a pair of short firefights with Chinese outposts.

All in all the first day of Operation Killer was marked by more opposition from the weather and the terrain than from the Chinese. LtCol Joseph L. "Moose" Stewart, commanding the 3d Bn, 5th Marines, summed it up pretty well when he described conditions as "a mixture of thawing snow, rain, mud and slush." The battalion settled down for the night in fighting holes that filled with water as fast as they were dug, each man, in Stewart's words, "wet to the bone, including his clothes, parka, weapons and ammunition." It was only the beginning. The gods of Korea, it seemed, had decreed that everyone taking part in Operation Killer was going to have some lasting memories of mud.

The second day of Operation Killer was, if anything, worse than the first. As the division continued its struggle toward Hoengsong through a sodden landscape, some wag whose name has been lost to posterity opined that the word Hoengsong was from the ancient Greek "Hoeng," meaning mud, and "Song," meaning more mud.

In the ranks of Major Webb D. Sawyer's 1st Bn, 7th Marines, newly arrived Private First Class Garland Hathaway, not long removed from his father's tobacco farm in Halifax County, N.C., saw a different geographic perspective. To Hathaway, his mud-smearred, soaking wet squadmates resembled so many Norse trolls venturing from their caves to glare balefully through the curtain of icy rain and sleet.

"About all we did was walk—walk—walk," recalled Captain Franklin B. Mayer, who commanded "Easy" Company, 2/5.

Was it walking or slogging? Most Marines would have settled on the latter. By

night the rutted, saturated ground froze to the consistency of concrete, sending heavily loaded infantrymen slipping, sliding and stumbling, falling into ditches and careening down hillsides. As the temperature rose during the day to thaw the gluey mixture underfoot, it became a matter of wearily extricating first one foot and then the other from the ankle-deep embrace of the clinging muck in order to lurch a few feet forward. Then doing it again ... and again ... and again. Men negotiated the mire with the exaggerated high-kneed gait of a drunk staggering his way through a pasture, all the while trying to keep from stepping into anything.

It wasn't all walking, though. Even though it was becoming more and more apparent that the Chinese were conducting an orderly withdrawal, beginning on 23 Feb. there were more frequent contacts. Despite these collisions, by the following day, the 1st and 3d Bns of the 5th Marines had secured the twin hills south of Hoengsong that had been designated

1stMarDiv Zone of Action Operation Killer

February 1951

Opposite page: North of Wonju, riflemen of 5th Marines paused to let enemy firing slacken prior to moving out as a key element in the UN counteroffensive. (Photo by Sgt John Babyak Jr.)

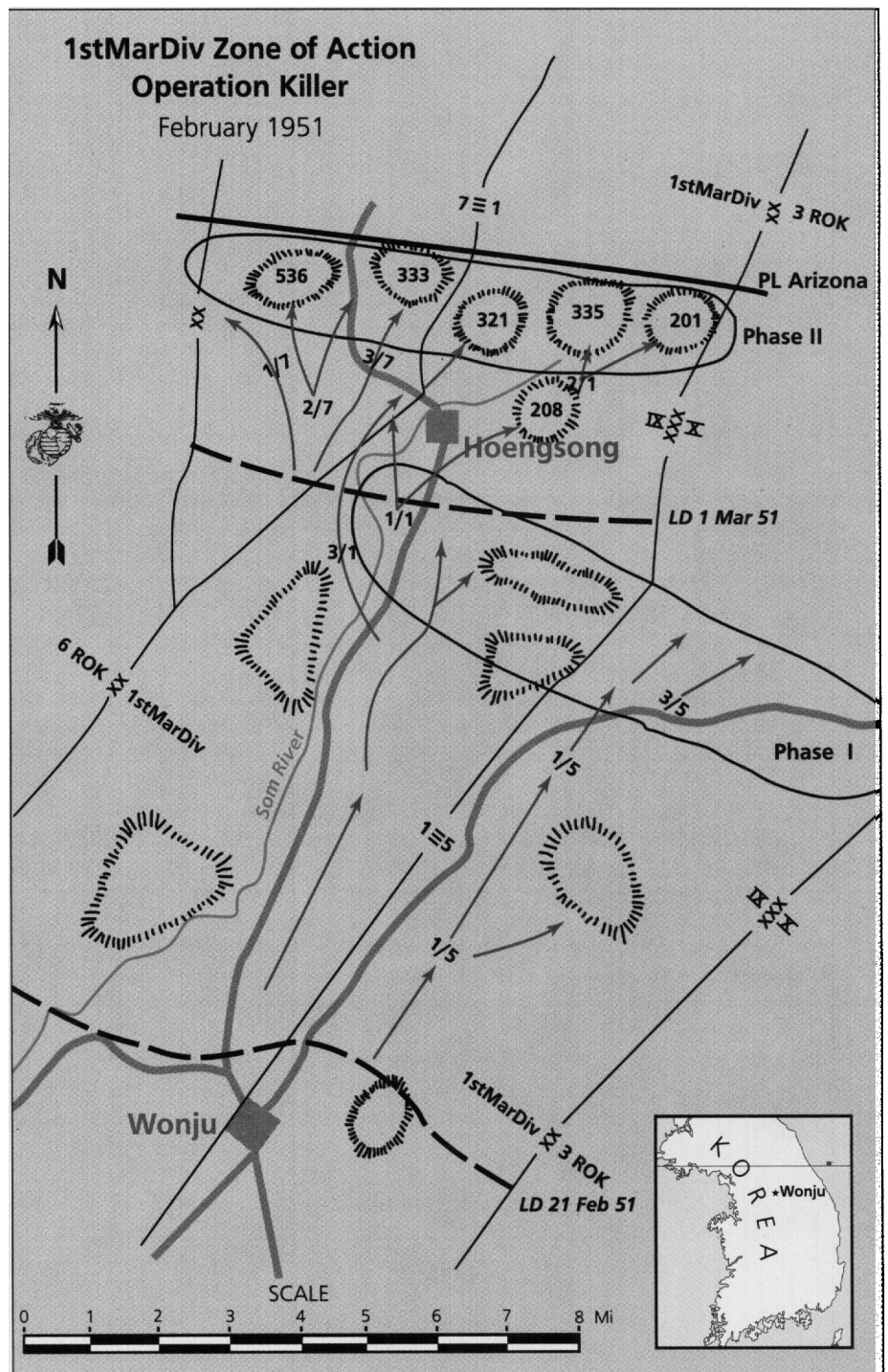
as the initial objectives. On the left, Capt Robert P. "Bob" Wray's Charlie Co, 1/1, in company with a platoon of tanks, had probed the outskirts of the town.

The operation was turning into a series of nasty little platoon and company affairs for the ownership of one piece of ground or another that the Chinese wanted to retain a bit longer. One by one they had to be pried loose from them. None of these encounters would merit so much as a footnote in the history books, but a man could be killed just as dead in one of them as ever a man was on Tarawa, Peleliu or Iwo Jima.

It was in one of these small but deadly encounters on 26 Feb. that PFC George W. Elmore, a Browning Automatic Rifleman in First Lieutenant Charles D. "Charlie" Mize's George Co, 3/5, placed his name on the Marine Corps' roll of valor. When intense enemy fire began bringing down members of his squad, Elmore left the cover of his position and moved forward into the open to where he could more effectively take the figures in the mustard-colored quilted uniforms under fire, knocking them down like tenpins.

Freed from the curtain of fire that had pinned them, the remaining members of the squad were able to move forward, but Elmore's actions had not been without their cost. Unprotected and in the open, the determined Marine suffered wounds that would cost him his life. For his selfless action, George Elmore would posthumously receive his country's second highest award for bravery, the Navy Cross. Camp Elmore, the headquarters installation of Marine Corps Forces, Atlantic/Fleet Marine Force, Atlantic, would be dedicated at Norfolk, Va., in honor of the Marine who didn't hesitate to risk his life for his comrades.

The actions of PFC Elmore were mirrored by those of scores of other Marines, most of whom are unknown today. Like Elmore they were ordinary men who, under the pressures of extraordinary events, routinely performed incred-



ible acts of bravery, most of which they themselves saw as only that which was necessary to meet the needs of the moment. There are more of these men than most people—except the combat veterans who witness their deeds—realize.

Some of these ordinary men are rather inventive. They can be handy to have around, especially when a commander is faced with a major terrain obstacle that stands between him and his objective. That was the situation confronting LtCol Virgil W. Banning, commanding the 3d Bn, 1st Marines, as February drew to a close. From the high ground below Hoengsong, Banning could see the final objectives of Operation Killer: the line

of hills to the north of the thoroughly battered town.

Before Banning could contemplate moving against those objectives, there was the problem of getting to them. That problem existed in the shape of the Som River, an unremarkable stream in normal times, but now flooded to a width of 200 feet by the never ending rain. The crossing site that usually would present little more than knee-deep wading was now running chest high with freezing water. "It's your problem," Banning was told. There could be no help from LtCol John H. Partridge's 1st Engineer Bn. The entire battalion was laboring around the clock trying to keep the roads open.



That was when an inventive man, Technical Sergeant Carmello Randazzo, the veteran platoon sergeant of the anti-tank assault platoon in Maj Edwin H. "Ed" Simmons' Weapons Co, stepped into the picture. Randazzo, an old-timer on his third enlistment, was drawn from the school of thought which holds that Marines can do any damn thing. Using a field manual provided by Simmons and a driving energy worthy of a perpetual motion machine, Randazzo set about building a "Swiss Bent Bridge."

With tools begged and borrowed, and timber hacked from locally available trees, Randazzo's charges were soon fashioning the A-shaped bents, or trusses, that would support the bridge, haul-

ing them into the icy, surging water and locking them into position. The communication wire that Randazzo's impromptu engineers used to fashion the bents and secure the spars, stringers and decking to them would have earned frowns from any concerned communicator. It did the job, though. Neither Randazzo nor any of the members of the platoon had ever built a bridge, but by late afternoon on 28 Feb. the raging Som was bridged. Marines can indeed do any damn thing.

In the morning, when the battalion crossed to the opposite bank, Randazzo and his men set aside their alternate identity as bridge builders, took up the normal tools of their trade—3.5-inch rocket launchers, flame throwers and

demolition charges—and returned to the business of blasting Chinese out of their defensive positions. Attacking along with 3/7, 3/1 immediately ran into increasingly stubborn resistance. Over on the left, Maj James I. Glendinning's 2/7 also came up against stiffened opposition, the going made even tougher by difficult terrain. Neither artillery nor the strikes of the few friendly aircraft that managed to arrive on the scene did much to dislodge the defenders from the earth-covered log bunkers that sheltered them. By mid-afternoon the decision was made to suspend the attack until the following morning, 2 March.

Promptly at 0800 three battalions—2/7, 3/7 and 3/1—moved forward, sup-

Marines hastily set up an M1919A4 .30-caliber, air-cooled machine gun to support a patrol temporarily pinned down by Communist forces during an assault on the central Hoengsong (1951) (photo)



ported by air and artillery strikes. Oddly, while 2/7 encountered fierce opposition, the other two battalions initially met with only sporadic resistance. Apparently, the Chinese were determined to put up a hard fight in one sector in order to withdraw in another. It was the luck of 2/7 to run up against the most die-hard of the defenders. Throughout the day 2/7's assault companies could only inch their way slowly forward over jumbled, rocky terrain which the Chinese defended ridge by ridge despite the unrelenting attacks of 2/7 and the 1,600 rounds dropped on them by the guns of the 11th Marines.

By daybreak on 3 March the attack was within reach of the final objective, dubbed Phase Line Arizona. Along this

"I still hate this damn place!"

—Anonymous voice from a fighting hole half-filled with icy water, near Hoengsong, Korea, 4 March 1951

line from west to east ran a series of five hills—Hills 536 and 333 in the zone of Colonel Homer Litzenberg's 7th Marines and Hills 321, 335 and 201 in the zone of the 1st Marines now led by Col Francis M. McAlister in relief of the redoubtable Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller, recently promoted to brigadier general.

In a series of sharp, crackling fire-fights, Maj Clarence J. Mabry's 2/1 cleared Hills 335 and 201 of enemy resistance. The terrain gave 3/1 more problems than the enemy in the assault against Hill 321. Clawing their way up the rock-strewn slope, Virgil Banning's assault companies found themselves slipping backward almost as much as they scabbled upward. Fortunately, the Chinese defenders of 321 had already started to withdraw.

As it had been on the previous day it was the 7th Marines that ran up against the hottest resistance. The heaviest fighting of Operation Killer took place on the slopes of Hill 536, attacked by 2/7, and Hill 333, where 3/7 continued the battle begun the day before. Unfortunately for the 7th Marines, it was this pair of hills that constituted the heart of the Chinese defenses, the key positions that had to be held if the withdrawal were to avoid becoming a rout. The defense of both hills was bitter, and its toll on the attackers was the heaviest suffered by the 1stMarDiv during Operation Killer.

It was on the fire-swept slopes of Hill 333 that 1stLt Alfred I. "Al" Thomas' Item Co, 3/7 was particularly hard hit. And it was there that an ordinary man, PFC Kenneth Albano, a machine-gunner, decided to make a difference. Firing from an exposed position, Albano relentlessly poured devastating fire into the defending Chinese. Running out of ammunition twice, and with no one to assist him, Albano on both occasions dashed unhesitatingly across ground swept by automatic weapons fire and pummeled by mortars to secure the additional ammunition needed to keep his gun in ac-

tion. Despite the efforts of Albano and countless others like him, the Chinese maintained their grip on the crest of the hill as darkness fell.

With the arrival of yet another dreary gray dawn on 4 March, the 7th Marines prepared to resume the attack against the obstinate defenders of Hills 536 and 333. At least it wasn't raining. Now it was snowing. It was enough to set Garland Hathaway, so recently a tobacco farmer, to wondering what in the everlasting hell he had gotten himself into. What was it the comedian W. C. Fields said? "Life isn't one damn thing after another; it's the same damn thing over and over." Most of the Marines waiting to jump off would have said Fields was an optimist.

To the surprise of everyone, the leading platoons crested the hills and swept across their summits unopposed. The Chinese had pulled out during the night. There was nothing but light, scattered small-arms fire from the thin screen of outposts that then turned and melted into the falling snow. The final objective was secured. Operation Killer was over.

What was it all about anyway? Primarily, Operation Killer was a limited objective undertaking, designed to keep the CCF off balance while they were attempting to put together another massive offensive. Put in ring terms, Operation Killer was a boxer planting a stiff left hand in an opponent's face, setting him back on his heels and preventing him from mounting an attack himself. Of course, a good ring-wise fighter doesn't throw just that one left hand. He keeps popping it in there, snapping his opponent's head back, throwing off his timing. That was exactly what Matt Ridgway, a pretty ring-wise fighter himself, had in mind for his next move.

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

