

# Korea 1952: The Hook

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

*“We had to cover two, maybe three times as much line as would normally be assigned to a defensive company. ... So, there you have two platoons covering a two company area with one platoon out in front.”*

Capt Fred McLaughlin  
Commanding Officer  
“Able” Co, 1st Bn, 7th Marines

As the summer of 1952 gave way to autumn, the war in Korea had been a war of position for one year. The war that had begun in 1950, a war of movement and maneuver that saw American forces fight their way along almost the entire length of the Korean Peninsula, was long over. Now, two contending armies occupied a continuous line of trenches, bunkers and strongpoints across Korea, from the Sea of Japan on the east to the Yellow Sea that lapped Korea’s western shore. It was war in the style of the Western Front in France, circa 1916.

For Major General Edwin A. Pollock’s 1st Marine Division this meant a frontage of 31 miles from the Kimpo Peninsula eastward to the Samichon River, an extraordinarily long piece of territory. Even with the addition of the Republic of Korea Marine Regiment, MajGen Pollock’s division was stretched thin, frighteningly thin. Thus far, though, the Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) that had assumed the main role in western Korea, had not tested the 1stMarDiv’s main defenses. The war in the western region had until now been characterized by fighting along the 1stMarDiv’s combat outpost line (COPL). The main line of resistance (MLR) had been relatively uninvolved.

That was about to change on a rather unremarkable hill along the Samichon River. In geological terms the hill wasn’t actually a hill but a relatively low, somewhat flat ridgeline protruding from the higher hill behind it. When seen on a map, the immediate



Marines on The Hook have a clear view of Chinese shells exploding in the valley below.



mental image that came to the viewer's mind was that of an upside down letter J, somewhat of a hook. If the hill had ever carried a name, that name was long forgotten as the autumn days of October 1952 began to have a bit of a chill to them. The Marines who fought on the hill then knew it by the name they gave it, a name that always will be a part of their memories. Marines dubbed the hill The Hook, and none of them cared overly much for it.

That lack of affection might have grown out of the hill's very nature. An integral part of the 1stMarDiv's MLR, The Hook bulged out into the contested ground directly in front of it to the north. Tactically that allowed the CCF, who eyed The Hook as a pathway to greater things, to fire into the Marines holding the hill from two sides, concentrating their fires on the defenders. Marines on the receiving end were left with the unenviable choice of having to distribute their defensive fires against attackers from two directions.

No less desirable was the fact that access to The Hook or out of it required going downhill or uphill from its larger neighbor behind it in full view of the Chinese out in front all the while. Access to The Hook or out of it was almost always done under fire.

The Hook may have been the least enviable piece of ground Marines ever have been ordered to hold; tactically it was a nightmare. Why, then, hold it? First, because The Hook was all that was available. Second, because it was an extremely valuable piece of ground. From where it stood, The Hook was the sole position that commanded the best CCF avenue of attack through the Samichon Valley. The Samichon Valley in turn lay like an arrow pointing to 1stMarDiv's rear area and the direct route to the South Korean capital of Seoul. The Hook was also the right limit of the 1stMarDiv's defense sector. To the right, across the Samichon River, the line was taken up by the 1stMarDiv's "brother" division, the British Commonwealth Division.

But why not run the MLR along the larger hill behind The Hook? What, in full view of the Chinese across the way? Fully exposed to the direct fires of Chinese self-propelled, flat-trajectory 76 mm artillery so thoughtfully provided by the Soviet Union? No, the Hook was what there was. Were it to be lost, as MajGen M.M. Austin-Roberts-West, whose Commonwealth Division held the east bank of the Samichon, summarized the situation by observing that "a withdrawal of 4,000 yards would have been necessary." Unlovely though it was, The Hook had to be held.

The CCF high command, on the other hand, felt no misgivings about The Hook. The CCF high command wanted The Hook. If The Hook could be taken, the CCF would be able to create a penetration between 1stMarDiv and the Commonwealth Division, the very type of a decisive engagement that could determine the outcome of the Korean War. The CCF high command very much wanted The Hook and wasn't the least bit hesitant to spend the lives of its soldiers in taking it.

In the late afternoon hours of Thursday, Oct. 2, the Chinese made their first move. A curtain of incoming fire, mixed 120 mm mortar and 122 mm artillery, began pounding the positions of the reinforced platoon from Lieutenant Colonel Gerald F. Russell's 3d Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment holding Combat Outpost Warsaw 600 hundred yards forward and slightly east of the MLR. Strongly reinforced, the CCF's 9th Company, 357th Regiment, 119th Division, advancing through its own supporting fires, taking casualties as it came on, was almost immediately into the defensive positions of Warsaw. Fighting was hand-to-hand and face-to-face, but there were too many Chinese and not enough Marines.

Warsaw could not be held, but the Chinese could be made to pay a stiff price for its capture. One Marine in particular, Private Jack W. Kelso, was adamantly determined to exact that price.

When both his platoon leader and platoon sergeant fell dead,



**Pvt Jack W. Kelso**



The President of the United States in the name of the  
The Congress takes pride in presenting the  
MEDAL OF HONOR posthumously to  
PRIVATE JACK W. KELSO  
UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS  
For service set forth in the following

**CITATION:**

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while serving as a rifleman of Company I, in action against enemy aggressor forces. When both the platoon commander and the platoon sergeant became casualties during the defense of a vital outpost against a numerically superior enemy force attacking at night under cover of intense small arms, grenade, and mortar fire, PFC Kelso bravely exposed himself to the hail of enemy fire in a determined effort to reorganize the unit and to repel the onrushing attackers. Forced to seek cover, along with four other Marines, in a nearby bunker which immediately came under attack, he unhesitatingly picked up an enemy grenade which landed in the shelter, rushed out into the open, and hurled it back at the enemy. Although painfully wounded when the grenade exploded as it left his hand, and again forced to seek the protection of the bunker when the hostile fire became more intensified, PFC Kelso refused to remain in his position of comparative safety and moved out into the fire-swept area to return the enemy fire, thereby permitting the pinned-down Marines in the bunker to escape. Mortally wounded while providing covering fire for his comrades, PFC Kelso, by his valiant fighting spirit, aggressive determination, and self-sacrificing efforts on behalf of others, served to inspire all who observed him. His heroic actions sustain and enhance the highest traditions of the U.S. Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life for his country.

Kelso and four other Marines found themselves trapped in a bunker, under fire by Chinese from apparently every direction. Everything the Chinese did to eliminate them, Jack Kelso threw back with a vengeance. Whether it was small arms fire or grenades, Jack Kelso had a reply. On one occasion he picked up a Chinese grenade and threw it back, only to have the grenade explode just as it left his hand.

The severe wounds Kelso suffered didn't deter him. Still able to use a rifle, he used it to deadly advantage, sending more attackers sprawling in the dirt. There were too many Chinese. Keeping up his fire, Kelso called his fellow Marines to get out and make a run for it while he covered for them. As the other



three Marines ducked and dodged their way down the trench line, Jack Kelso fell in a hail of Chinese fire. For his selfless actions and complete disregard for his own safety on Outpost Warsaw that night, Pvt Jack W. Kelso posthumously would be awarded America's highest commendation for military valor, the Medal of Honor. Perhaps his squad leader, Sergeant Keith Yarnell, had the best memorial for him. "Jack Kelso was the bravest man I ever met."

Even as Jack Kelso was locked in his doomed battle, Staff Sergeant William D. "Denny" Weisgerber was bringing his I/3/7 platoon forward from battalion reserve to retrieve the situation, not knowing that already, it was too late. Taking casualties even before it arrived on Warsaw, the platoon found the outpost blanketed by Chinese fire. Minutes after arriving, the platoon was ordered to withdraw.

It was then that one of Weisgerber's Marines fell wounded in an open area that would have meant certain death to enter. Denny Weisgerber didn't hesitate. Running to the downed man while Chinese artillery churned up every foot of Warsaw, Weisgerber hoisted the wounded Marine to his shoulders and started back out of the kill zone. He almost made it.

A stunning blow struck Weisgerber's right leg, knocking him to the ground. Never one to give up, Denny Weisgerber, crawling as best he could, dragged the wounded Marine like a sack of potatoes until other Marines from the MLR came forward to bring Denny and his charge to safety.

For his courage in the face of certain death, SSgt Denny Weisgerber would be awarded the Navy Cross. The medal came with a price tag—his right leg—but as Denny explained it: "That was one of my people out there. I couldn't just leave him."

The Chinese assault on Warsaw that had begun so suddenly ended in the same manner. What had been a flaming cauldron short minutes before was now a smoldering silence. The few Marines who managed to get out of Warsaw before being overrun were neither fired upon nor pursued as they made their way back to the MLR. A platoon from Captain John A. Thomas' I/3/7 quickly and easily recaptured Warsaw. Where only minutes before Warsaw had been covered by Chinese, there were now no living Chinese on the outpost.

The Chinese had achieved their objective. That objective was not to take and hold Warsaw; rather it was to determine what would be necessary to eliminate Warsaw before the main attack on The Hook could go forward. If doing that required expending Chinese soldiers, it was bad luck for the soldier in the ranks, many of whom were now putrefying corpses littered about Warsaw. No matter, there were more than enough others for the main attack to go in.

What followed was a period of several weeks of relatively minor actions as Marines and Chinese traded ambushes and



Marine bunkers were severely damaged by Chinese mortar and artillery fire throughout the battle for The Hook in October 1952.



Marines from Btry I, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines load their howitzer in preparation for a fire mission.

raids that had little effect on the overall situation. Unfortunately, this activity occurred at a time when American forces all across Korea were experiencing serious artillery and mortar ammunition shortages that limited their ability to undertake anything decisive. The Chinese, who had no such problem on their hands, were stockpiling massive amounts of such ordnance in preparation for the main attack on The Hook.

That attack, after a few days of preparation, would be directed at LtCol Leo J. Dulack's I/7 that assumed that sector of the MLR from 3/7. The least enviable task of all, defense of The Hook itself, fell initially to Capt Paul B. Byrum's C/1/7. The company had barely had the opportunity to become familiarized with the situation when the Chinese launched their all-out effort to take The Hook and open the pathway of the Samichon Valley.

When the Chinese launched their all-out attack on The Hook,



they launched it in what was by now becoming an all-too-predictable fashion. Beginning on Oct. 23, Chinese artillery began an accurate plastering of defensive positions on The Hook. The Chinese forward observers were doing a very professional and methodical job of directing fire against key points all along The Hook's forward trenches and command bunkers. They were doing a very effective job as well.

Entire sections of trench line were collapsed, bunkers caved in. As quickly as they were repaired, they were wrecked again. Trenches that had been 6 feet deep were now leveled. Timber reinforced bunkers ceased to exist. Any movement on The Hook brought an instant rain of Chinese fire. At the same time Chinese heavy artillery, 152 mm howitzers, were constantly active, seeking out priority targets in 1stMarDiv's rear areas.

It went on and on and on for three days. In the midst of it, LtCol Dulacky, anticipating what was coming, put in his last reserve. Capt Frederick C. McLaughlin's A/1/7, took over the defense on The Hook while C/1/7 sidestepped to the left to strengthen the left shoulder. Each company reached its new position just short minutes before the Chinese main attack came in as the Chinese artillery fire fell in ever increasing intensity. First Lieutenant Charles C. Mattingly remembered it years later as his worst experience in one year in Korea.

On Oct. 26, out in front of the MLR, it was even worse than that as the Chinese infantry, the 3d Battalion of the 357th Regiment, came on in an assault that was intended to break through the 1stMarDiv and open the road to the Samichon Valley. The Chinese had already determined what would be necessary to eliminate Outpost Warsaw.

Within minutes Warsaw and the squad-sized outpost dubbed Ronson fell beneath a human avalanche of Chinese. Outpost Ronson vanished without a trace. One final radio transmission from Warsaw told that the outpost was being overrun. Three Marines from Warsaw managed to avoid being killed or captured and made their way back to the MLR, where the situation and the MLR itself were fast deteriorating.

The forward defenses on The Hook were systematically being minced and churned into nothing resembling a defense system by a rain of incoming fire. Even as The Hook's forward positions were torn apart, Chinese infantry, the 1st and 2d Battalions of the 357th Regiment, had reached what had moments before been the forward positions of A/1/7. The Chinese were on The Hook.

Private First Class James Yarborough, a machine gunner, found himself with but one other member of his squad, all that remained of what had been a complete machine-gun squad short minutes before. Squeezing through the firing port of a half-wrecked bunker as the Chinese flung grenades at them and Chinese artillery continued to plaster the area, the pair crawled their way back to the second line of defenses.

A forward observer team from 2/11 wasn't that fortunate. Second Lieutenant Sherrod Skinner Jr., the forward observer, radio operator Corporal Franklin Roy and wireman PFC Vance Worster, all were soon trapped in a bunker within minutes, fired upon by Chinese from what seemed like all points of the compass. Undeterred, 2ndLt Skinner continued to call in fire missions until his radio went dead. He and his team then fought as infantry, fighting as demons until a Chinese grenade landed in their midst. With Cpl Roy and PFC Worster already wounded, Skinner threw himself atop the grenade, absorbing the full force of the explosion. Cpl Franklin Roy and PFC Vance Worster each would receive the Navy Cross for their actions. For Sherrod Skinner there would be a posthumous award of the Medal of Honor.

As daylight gave way to dusk, the situation on The Hook had become critical. Fully aware of the seriousness of the situation, MajGen Pollock released LtCol Sidney J. Altman's 3/1 from division reserve to operational control of 7th Marines. In addition,



**2ndLt Sherrod Skinner Jr.**



The President of the United States in the name of the  
The Congress takes pride in presenting the  
MEDAL OF HONOR posthumously to  
SECOND LIEUTENANT SHERROD SKINNER JR.  
UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS RESERVE  
For service set forth in the following

**CITATION:**

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty as an artillery forward observer of Battery F, in action against enemy aggressor forces on the night of Oct. 26, 1952. When his observation post in an extremely critical and vital sector of the main line of resistance was subjected to a sudden and fanatical attack by hostile forces, supported by a devastating barrage of artillery and mortar fire which completely severed communication lines connecting the outpost with friendly firing batteries, 2ndLt Skinner, in a determined effort to hold his position, immediately organized and directed the surviving personnel in the defense of the outpost, continuing to call down fire on the enemy by means of radio alone until his equipment became damaged beyond repair. Undaunted by the intense hostile barrage and the rapidly-closing attackers, he twice left the protection of his bunker in order to direct accurate machine-gun fire and to replenish the depleted supply of ammunition and grenades. Although painfully wounded on each occasion, he steadfastly refused medical aid until the rest of the men received treatment. As the ground attack reached its climax, he gallantly directed the final defense until the meager supply of ammunition was exhausted and the position overrun. During the three hours that the outpost was occupied by the enemy, several grenades were thrown into the bunker which served as protection for 2ndLt Skinner and his remaining comrades. Realizing that there was no chance for other than passive resistance, he directed his men to feign death even though the hostile troops entered the bunker and searched their persons. Later, when an enemy grenade was thrown between him and two other survivors, he immediately threw himself on the deadly missile in an effort to protect the others, absorbing the full force of the explosion and sacrificing his life for his comrades. By his indomitable fighting spirit, superb leadership, and great personal valor in the face of tremendous odds, 2ndLt Skinner served to inspire his fellow Marines in their heroic stand against the enemy and upheld the highest traditions of the U.S. Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life for his country.







**Marines hike up a trail to bring ammunition to machine gunners on The Hook.**



USMC

for the most part leaderless, the Chinese didn't know what to do with the victory that was almost within their grasp. They were, however, tenacious and had to be rooted out foot by foot yard by yard.

That rooting had to be done by Marines like PFC Enrique Romero-Nieves, who attacked a Chinese position in the midst of a blizzard of fire, flinging grenades as he came on. Hit and knocked to the ground, his left arm rendered useless, Romaro-Nieves continued his one-man attack. Able to use only his right arm, he used his belt buckle to pull the pins from the grenades he continued to fling at the Chinese, eventually killing every last one. For his actions in the melee on The Hook, PFC Enrique Romero-Nieves would receive the Navy Cross.

Slowly the noose was tightening on the Chinese on The Hook. Much of that tightening was done by H/3/7, released from regimental reserve to take over from A/1/7 and C/1/7, both now all but exhausted from hours of constant combat. In the forefront of the H/3/7 assault, 2ndLt George O'Brien was almost instantly wounded and knocked to the ground. Regaining his feet, O'Brien was confronted by five Chinese who had seemingly popped up out of nowhere. With five shots from his Colt Model 1911A1 service pistol he killed each of them. He would be wounded again, refuse evacuation and continue fighting. He later received the Medal of Honor.

As the fighting on The Hook flared and roared, Marines in the sky were no less busy than their brothers on the ground. Throughout the day of Oct. 27, Marine aviators punished the Chinese below with more than 90 tons of bombs and napalm.

It remained for I/3/1 and B/1/7 to complete the eviction of the Chinese from The Hook. Closing in on the Chinese from two directions, as the calendar clicked over from Oct. 20 to Oct. 28, both companies initially encountered stiff resistance. Ferocious Marine artillery strikes pounded the Chinese, allowing both companies to go forward. By 0600 The Hook was once again firmly in Marine hands. Patrols to Outposts Warsaw and Ronson found them unoccupied.



USMC

**Marines rest before jumping off into "no-man's-land" on The Hook.**

The Chinese had thrown everything they had into an offensive to seize the key terrain feature of the Western Front in the Korean War. Its goal was nothing less than total victory in Korea. It had failed, stopped dead in its tracks by Marines with names like Skinner and Weisgerber, McLaughlin, Byrum, Romero-Nieves, Kelso and O'Brien, Roy and Rauh and Worster and Yarborough, ordinary American names that may be found in any telephone directory. On The Hook in the autumn of 1952, they and others like them were United States Marines who refused to yield, and who turned defeat into victory.

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Robert Service

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