



Korea:

A Third Year of War

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

"The front, or front lines, are rarely referred to as such. 'MLR' is used instead. It stands for 'main line of resistance.' In our case the MLR is a deep trench, from five to seven feet in depth, running along the ridgeline of the hill mass occupied by our platoon. Theoretically, the MLR is a continuous avenue from coast to coast, cutting the peninsula of Korea in half."

—Marine veteran Martin Russ writing in "The Last Parallel"

It was precisely that MLR, all 35 miles of it, six times the frontage normally assigned a division, that was the root of all the problems confronting Major General John T. Selden, the First Marine Division's commanding general. At the bottom of the dilemma was the simple fact that there was too much ground to defend and too few Marines to defend it. Every other difficulty grew out of this.

There was, for instance, the difficulty in complying with the 10 June 1952 order of Lieutenant General James A. Van Fleet, USA, commander of the Eighth United States Army in Korea. The order

required each Eighth Army division to "prepare plans for launching swift, vigorous, and violent large-scale raids to capture prisoners, to gain intelligence, to destroy enemy positions and material and/or strong limited objective attacks to improve and strengthen Line Jamestown." "Large scale" was defined as "attacking forces limited to battalion or regimental [brigade] size with appropriate armor and artillery support."

In theory it was all very sound. In reality it collided headlong with the fact that MajGen Selden didn't have the forces to do it. Practically every available Marine was needed to properly man the MLR.



Battalions manning the MLR were forced to deploy all three rifle companies on line, with nothing in reserve. The 1stMarDiv was spread thin, almost dangerously thin, considering that across the way there were two Chinese communist armies numbering nearly 80,000 men.

Making the situation even more taxing was the matter of close air support or rather the lack of close air support. Close coordination between air and ground forces had been the hallmark of Marine Corps combat operations from their earliest days in Nicaragua through the Pacific war against Japan. In the early days of the Korean War the Marine air-ground team, the only integrated force of combined arms in the world, was the envy of Army commanders operating adjacent to Marine units.

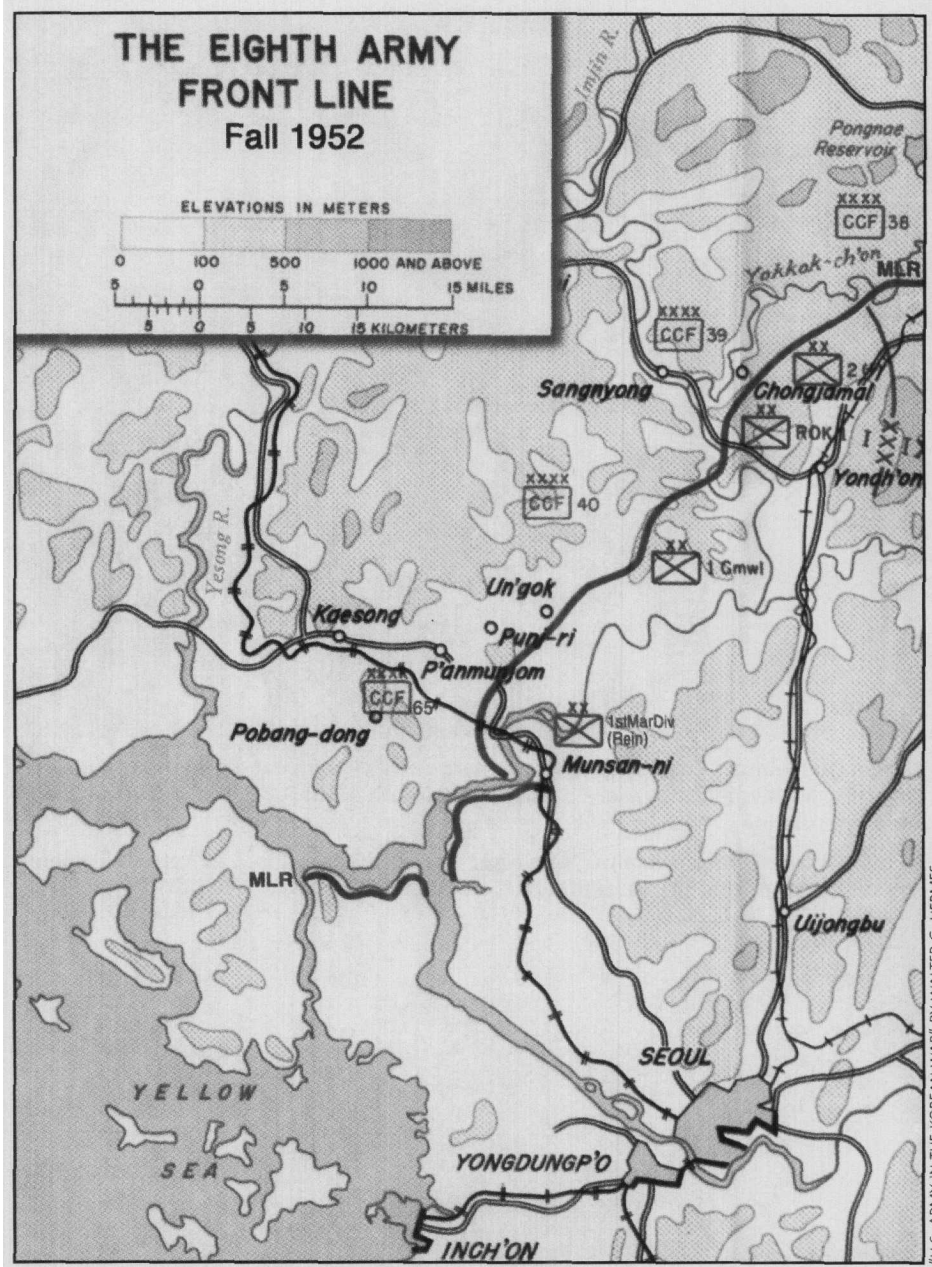
U.S. Army Colonel Paul L. Freeman had spoken admiringly of Marine close air support during the fighting in the Naktong Bulge in the summer of 1950. "The Marines on our left were a sight to behold," COL Freeman related after watching the constantly circling Corsairs above Marines on the ground. "They had squadrons of air in direct support. ... They used it like artillery. ... They had it *day and night*."

During the Chosin Reservoir Campaign the commander of the 7th Infantry Division's artillery, Brigadier General Homer Kiefer, wrote of his appreciation for the support the division received from Marine aviators and tactical air control parties: "Again, allow me to reemphasize my appreciation for the outstanding air support received by this division. The Marine system of [air] control, in my estimation, approaches the ideal, and I firmly believe that a similar system should be adopted as standard for Army divisions."

Nevertheless, for more than a year all air assets in Korea had fallen under the control of the 5th Air Force, and the emphasis had been placed on deep interdiction missions aimed at disrupting enemy logistics and lines of communication. Close air support was very low on the list of priorities. Marine pilots such as Captain Theodore "Ted" Williams, long a standout with the Boston Red Sox and still years away from his induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame; Jerry Coleman, a perennial All-Star second baseman with the New York Yankees; and future astronaut and United States Senator John Glenn were winging deep into North Ko-

Opposite page: With the trusty and hard-hitting BAR, M1 rifle and grenades, these 1stMarDiv leathernecks prepared to respond to any and all enemy attacks along the MLR. (Leatherneck file photo by TSgt Jack A. Slockbower)

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rea to shoot up railroad yards and supply depots. Williams returned from one such raid with a burning F9F Panther jet shot full of holes and on fire, to land wheels up, vault from the smoking plane and run like hell.

The exploits of Williams, Coleman, Glenn and other Marines like them aside, what it all meant for MajGen Selden was that an element of combat power vital to the defense of that long MLR was going to be available on only a catch-as-catch-can basis. The close air support that could have made the job easier was not going to be a sure thing.

If all this wasn't enough, there was the matter of outposts. From the time the 1stMarDiv had moved into its positions on the Jamestown Line, there had been outposts, combat elements located forward of the MLR to keep the Chinese at a respectful distance. No commander likes to have the enemy camped comfortably

on his doorstep. It is the job of outposts to prevent this.

At first these outposts had taken the form of an outpost line of resistance (OPLR). Quickly found wanting by reason of being sited too far forward, the OPLR soon was abandoned in favor of a string of outposts sited closer in. Usually placed on hilltop terrain commanding avenues of approach to the MLR, outposts varied in size, manned by a squad, a platoon or even a company, depending on their importance.

No matter the size or mission of an outpost, all outposts had one thing in common. Each and every outpost required Marines to man it, posing once again the quandary of too much mission and too few assets. It was a constant juggling act. A machine-gun squad on outpost duty is a machine-gun squad not available to cover a sector of fire on the MLR. A machine-gun squad covering a



LEATHERNECK FILE PHOTO BY MSGT FRED G. BRAITSCH JR.

sector of fire on the MLR is a machine-gun squad not available for outpost duty.

It wasn't long at all before the outposts took on a life of their own, Marines and Chinese locked in combat for bits of Korean landscape that one side or another judged to be inconveniently located. Within weeks of the 1stMarDiv's arrival on the Western Front, outposts had become something of a mini-MLR, adding depth and flexibility to the overall defense, but always taxing the division's finite manpower assets.

Completely unremarkable bumps in the ground that wouldn't otherwise merit a second look soon took on great importance. One of these bumps was a hill scarcely more than 100 meters in height that sat about 1,500 yards north of the MLR. Dubbed Outpost Yoke, the hill was directly in front of the sector that in mid-June was held by Lieutenant Colonel Thomas J. Cross' 2d Bn, Fifth Marine Regiment.

(Outpost Yoke should not be confused with Yoke Ridge, where Marines had fought on the Eastern Front in the spring of 1951. Neither should Outpost Yoke be confused with a heavily fortified Chinese hilltop position several miles to the

Above: Gull-winged Corsairs provided superb close air support along the Marine sector of the MLR when they were not engaged in other 5th Air Force missions such as deep interdiction.

Below: Accurate Marine sniper fire often reduced the odds and kept the enemy down in their positions. (Leatherneck file photo by Cpl Leslie S. Smith)



west that was also known as Yoke.)

Later in 1952 Outpost Yoke would be redesignated as Outpost Reno, which along with two other outposts called Carson and Vegas came to be known as the Nevada Outposts. In the spring of 1953 Reno would be the scene of some of the most fiercely contested fighting the Western Front would produce at any time during the Korean War.

Compared with the mountains of North Korea where the division had fought during the Chosin Reservoir Campaign or the rugged terrain of the Eastern Front, both places where peaks were measured in thousands (not hundreds) of feet, Yoke was little more than a pimple. However, to the infantryman faced with fighting his way up it against a determined enemy, a Yoke can seem like the Matterhorn.

In midafternoon, 24 June, the Marines of Capt Harold C. Fuson's "Fox"/2/5 began to get a good look at Yoke. About 1530, incoming mortar and artillery rounds began falling on Fox Co's MLR positions and on the area occupied by 2/5's 81 mm mortars. As it was recorded by the battalion's command diary, it was all pretty routine. "At 1530 'F' Company reported one WIA from fourteen rounds of 76 mm artillery."

For the defenders of Yoke, the 34 Marines of Second Lieutenant Charles G. Little's understrength platoon, the fire falling on the MLR was quite a show. It also was cause for more than mild feelings of apprehension. Were the Chinese merely "walking the trenches" with their artillery, as they did from time to time? Or was all this a prelude to something more interesting? If the Chinese artillery activity was to be followed by a ground attack—a possibility that was beginning to seem more and more likely—the Marines on Yoke would be the first to know. Then their stay on Yoke wouldn't end with a planned return to the MLR at day's end, and some of them would never leave the hill, at least not under their own power.

Chinese artillery and mortars continued to pepper Fox Co's MLR throughout the afternoon and evening, even as the defenders of Yoke observed large numbers of Chinese infantry, a battalion at least, deploying forward. All doubts of what the Chinese intentions might be vanished at 2130, when a rain of shells fell on Yoke itself, enveloping the outpost and the Marines holding it in a volcano of explosions. There were casualties immediately. There was no question about it, the Chinese were mounting a ground assault, and its focal point was Yoke.

Hard on the heels of the covering fire came the infantry, packed ranks of Chi-

nese following the barrage up the north slope of Yoke. They were met by a withering fire from the outpost's defenders, but 2dLt Little's Marines may as well have been firing at a tidal wave. For each enemy soldier who fell, there were three others to take his place.

The initial assault quickly overlapped the forward slope of Yoke, forcing the Marines to confront attackers on both flanks as well as to the front. Chinese machine guns that were sited on those flanks poured deadly accurate fire directly into the Marine trenches on the north face of the outpost. Enemy mortar and artillery fire was falling to the rear of the beleaguered band of Marines, cutting off any possible attempt at withdrawal, blocking any hope of reinforcement. The pale white light of friendly illumination rounds showed Yoke to be literally crawling with attackers. An ocean of Chinese, shouting, firing wildly, flinging grenades, washed up and over Yoke, inundating the small band of Marines by their sheer weight of numbers.

The Marines on Yoke may have been submerged by a human sea, but they were far from finished with fighting. Carrying their wounded with them, they retreated into bunkers and barricaded themselves in. From there they continued to fight, cutting down the Chinese attempting to overcome them. If it was a fight the Chinese had come for, it was a fight they were going to get.

One solid indication the Chinese received came in the form of a murderous hail of VT (variable time) 105 mm howitzer shells brought down directly atop Yoke by Charles Little. Calling for pre-planned fire missions from his command bunker, Little directed a thunderous, cracking roar of air bursts above the heads of the attackers swarming over the outpost. Thousands of white-hot shards of steel showered down on the unprotected Chinese, while Marines in bunkers blazed away through firing ports, adding to the destructive effect.

Still, the Chinese, disregarding their own casualties, sought to pry the Marines from their underground strongholds. At the command bunker, where many of the platoon's more seriously wounded had been brought for shelter, the Chinese intensified their efforts to claw away at the bunker's entrance. Second Lt Little shot them down as quickly as they appeared, firing into them at scarcely more than arm's length, piling their dead bodies atop one another. Radio handset in one hand, pistol in the other, Little single-handedly thwarted every attempt by the Chinese to force their way into the bunker.

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Marine riflemen scanned the area while members of their patrol passed through a wire obstacle.

The same battle was being fought in every bunker on Yoke, Marines and Chinese locked in hand-to-hand combat, every Chinese attempt to breach the Marine bastions beaten back. It was not being done without cost. Casualties in the platoon had passed the 50 percent mark, yet every wounded Marine who was able continued to fight. It was a fight that raged for hours, never diminishing in intensity, while Marine artillery lit up the night sky like a giant fireworks display.

In the midst of the violent struggle the clock passed midnight. It was a new day, 25 June, two years to the day that North Korea's communist dictator Kim Il Sung had sent his army smashing across the border of South Korea. The Korean War

had entered its third year. It isn't likely that any of the Marines on Yoke gave the fact much of a thought.

After battering fruitlessly against the Marine bunkers for hours, the Chinese began to draw off at 0300. They weren't giving up, just regrouping their thinned ranks. As the Chinese grudgingly withdrew from the crest of Yoke, Marines, more than a few of them hobbled by wounds, emerged from their barricaded sanctuaries to hasten them on their way.

At their head was Charles Little doing what is expected of a leader—leading. Firing into the Chinese ranks with controlled fury, Little led the remnants of his platoon back to the forward trenches,

ready to meet the next onslaught. Organizing the defense, encouraging his men, Little called once again for preplanned artillery fires, this time to box in the outpost, further punishing the Chinese as they sought to re-form for another attack.

That attack was soon in coming. As it had been with the first attack, so, too, was the second attack a mismatch. Fearfully reduced in numbers, the Marines of Yoke were again swamped by a human avalanche. The Marines fell back to their bunkers, and once again the battle became a hand-to-hand struggle.

As he had done during the initial attack, 2dLt Little performed like a stalwart, directing more deadly VT fires upon his own position, personally killing every Chinese who sought to force his way into the command bunker. Wounded himself, but refusing to give in to his injuries, Little continued to hold the line. How could he do otherwise when so many of his Marines were ignoring their own wounds to fight on?

Finally, as dawn began to break the eastern horizon, the Chinese gave up. They had thrown everything they had at the defenders of Yoke, twice submerging them in a flood of bodies. In a contest of wills the Chinese had come up against a will that refused to break. Bloodied but unbeaten, the defenders of Yoke had held against seemingly impossible odds: an understrength platoon of Marines pitted against a Chinese battalion.

The courage and determination of the Fox Co Marines on Yoke had not been without its price. Of the 34 defenders of the outpost, only two came through the night of 24-25 June unscathed. Nine of the other 32 had been killed. All of the remaining members of the platoon, 23 in all, had been wounded at least once. Outpost Yoke had been christened in the blood of the Marines defending it.

For his indomitable courage and inspirational leadership on Outpost Yoke during the night of 24-25 June 1952, 2dLt Charles G. Little, USMC, Fox Co, 2d Bn, 5th Marines, would receive the Naval Service's second highest award for military valor, the Navy Cross. It could be said that he represented every member of his platoon.

Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua, a former enlisted Marine and later an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, served in the Korean and Vietnam wars. He is a frequent contributor to Leatherneck and has been writing a continuing series of Korean War articles to commemorate the 50th anniversary of that war.

