



New Year—Same War

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)



LEATHERNECK FILE PHOTO BY SGT LESLIE S. SMITH

The expertise of combat engineers gained more significance as bunkers and minefields played an even larger role in the war of attrition along the main line of resistance.

"Marine casualties for the month amounted to forty-two killed, six died of wounds, three hundred fourteen wounded (evacuated), two hundred nine wounded (not evacuated), and five missing. There were four deaths from other causes."

—First Marine Division Command Diary
for January 1953

In January 1953 you could spend all day and most of the night at the movies. You could enter the theater at noon and come out at midnight. For the price of a ticket, 35 cents in most theaters, you could watch two full-length feature films, a short subject, a cartoon,

a newsreel and previews of coming attractions. Then, if you wanted, you could watch them all over again. They were called continuous showings; the playbill cycled over and over to accommodate any patron who came in at any time. The expression "This is where I came in" originated from continuous showings.

In January 1953 the war on Korea's Western Front had come to resemble a continuous showing at the movies. The same battles were fought at the same places. Intense combat flared on shell-blasted hills that carried names like Ungok, Hedy, Dagmar, East Berlin and Warsaw. The fighting died away for a

while, then roared into life once more. Again and again the same parcels of ground were watered with the blood of Chinese soldiers and United States Marines. Only the names of the participants changed.

As the Korean landscape froze to the consistency of concrete, the war itself became set in concrete. There was nothing of strategy and little of tactics, no maneuver, no deception, just two adversaries locked into the same trench and bunker systems they had held for more than six months. Each side knew the dispositions of the other down to the last field head. Every bump and wrinkle in the ground was plotted and registered for the fires of the mortars and artillery of both sides. Machine-gunners knew the location of every trail, every footpath. The chances of a man moving about undetected in the open out between the lines during daylight were about the same as the chances of Canarsie Swamp Teachers College defeating Miami in the Orange Bowl.

It was also a war fought almost exclusively at night by men who spent their days underground in bunkers foul with the stench of unwashed bodies. Pack a dozen men who haven't been able to wash for two weeks into a poorly ventilated subterranean shelter. Tread the floor into a muddy, slushy gruel. Coat the walls liberally with frost and green mold. Add some icicles dripping water from the ceiling. For background music throw in the "Crump" of incoming fire as the Chinese "walked the trenches" with their mortars. Listen to the incredibly loud thumping of your own heart as you clench your teeth waiting for the next one.

Is that miserable enough? No? Then sprinkle liberally with rats, naked-tailed, flea-covered, bewhiskered rats that don't appear much smaller than a football, rats that would look at the fiercest cat ever born as a snack. Try not to think about what the rats have been feeding on in the disputed ground between the lines. Keep an entrenching tool handy while you scratch the little gray creatures that infest your clothing.

Years later, Staff Sergeant Willem Hendrik "Dutch" Van der Veer remembered the rats he had seen as a private first class in the ranks of the Fifth Marine Regiment on Korea's Western Front. "Jeez, I never knew rats got that big!"

That was what life on the Western Front was like as 1953 dawned—that and the never-ending firefights on the same hills. January was barely a week old when one of those hills flared into life again.

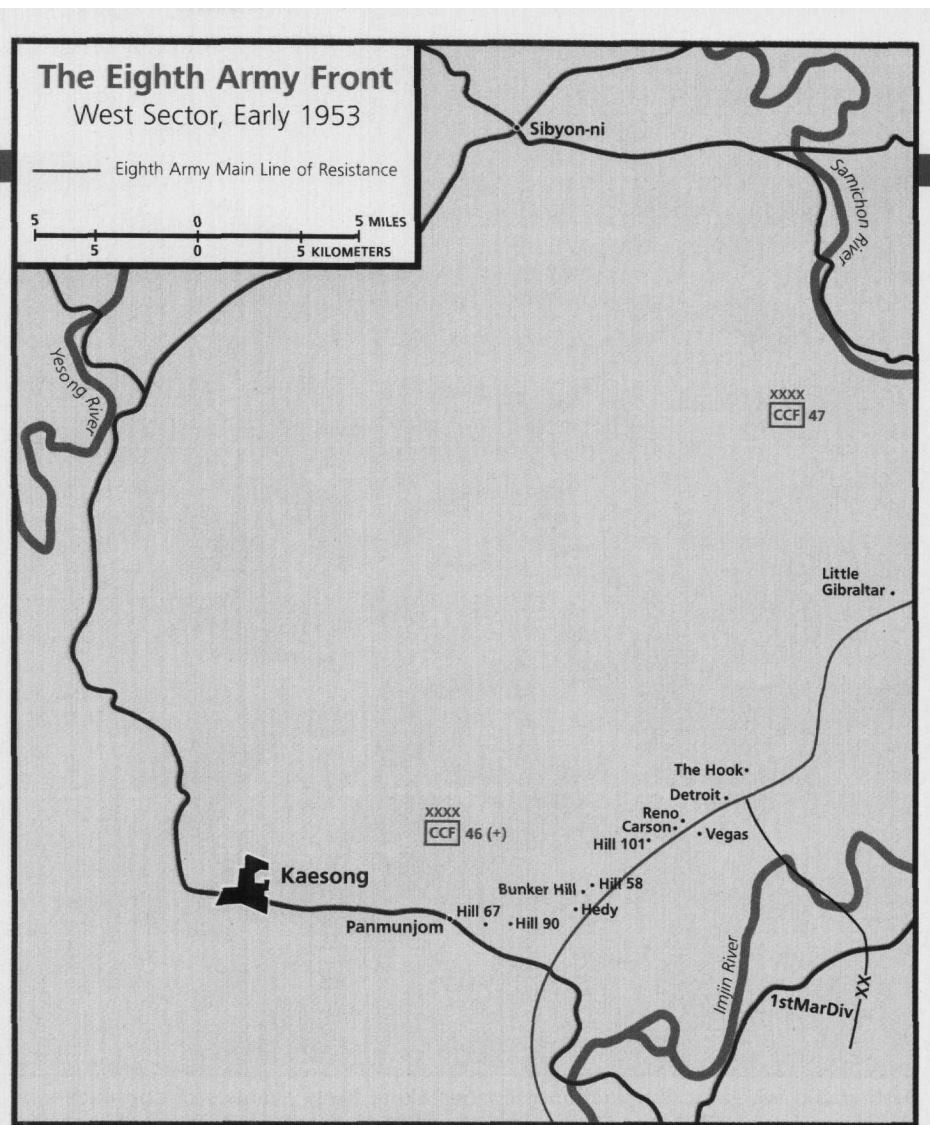
A hill numbered 134 was well forward of that sector of the main line of resistance (MLR) held by Lieutenant Colonel Charles D. Barrett's 3d Battalion, Seventh Marine Regiment, and not quite 1,000 yards northeast of Marine-held Combat Outpost 2. Hill 134 was home to an estimated reinforced Chinese company. The Marines had no desire to take and hold the hill. They wanted only to bloody the Chinese and keep them from getting too comfortable there. The attack on Hill 134 was to be a raid; its stated purpose was "to kill or capture enemy encountered and to destroy fortifications."

In a most unusual departure from normal practice, the raid was to be carried out in broad daylight, relying on surprise, speed of execution and superior supporting arms to get in, do the job and get back out before the Chinese could react. The raid force, Second Lieutenant Donald F. Lambert's platoon from "Item" Company, would be organized in three elements: shock group, main assault group and cleanup detail. The raid would be well supported by tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery, mortars and air strikes. Planning for the raid was detailed and meticulous, utilizing every bit of available intelligence and reconnaissance.

Advance preparations for the raid began during the night of 7-8 Jan., when mine-clearing details from LtCol Francis W. Augustine's 1st Engineer Bn swept the approach routes to Hill 134 clear of mines. Likewise cleared were firing positions for the 10 tanks of Charlie Co, 1st Tank Bn and the four tanks from the Tank Platoon of the 7th Marines' Antitank Co.

At 0630 on a clear, cold 8 Jan., all 14 tanks departed their assembly area immediately behind the MLR and rolled toward their assigned firing positions. The Chinese reacted immediately with long-range rocket fire. It was ineffective. Far more effective was the return fire from the 90 mm main guns of the Marine tanks. The rocket fire ceased and was not resumed.

Upon arriving in position, the tankers wasted no time in laying in adjustment rounds on preplotted targets. That done, and the elevation and deflection to each



target carefully recorded for later reference, targets of opportunity were taken under fire.

At 0800, adding to the high-explosive 90 mm rounds that were pinging Hill 134, Grumman F9F Panther jets and propeller-driven Douglas AD-1 Skyraiders from Marine Aircraft Group 12 came whistling in to batter the hill with 500-pound bombs and spray it with 20 mm gunfire. No sooner had the last plane soared off and wagged its wings in a parting salute than the 105 mm howitzers of the 11th Marines added their voices to the chorus of destruction being rained on Hill 134. Lastly, as a final prelude to the infantry assault, the 7th Marines' 4.2-inch mortars saturated the hill with smoke to blind the defenders.

Five minutes later, at 0815, the first element of the raid, the shock group, advanced on the hillside.

Supported by flame-thrower teams and demolitions men from Weapons Co, 3/7, the shock group quickly reached the hilltop before the Chinese could recover from the preparatory fires of the tanks, artillery and close air support. The mis-

sion of the shock group was not to stay and fight. The job of the shock group was to shock and stun the Chinese, to spread fear and confusion, paving the way for the main assault group coming on hard behind. With TNT, jellied gasoline and automatic-weapons fire, the shock group set aggressively about doing that. Then, according to plan, they withdrew, their part in the raid concluded.

Close on the heels of the shock group, 2dLt Lambert led the main assault group up the slope of Hill 134, at the head of the left element himself, while Sergeant Thomas P. McGuire led the right element. Accompanying the main assault group were a pair of M4 flame tanks led by First Lieutenant Michael McAdams.

Despite the pounding they had taken, some Chinese still were prepared to fight. Emerging from deep bunkers, an estimated 80 Chinese infantrymen fought back furiously with a hail of potato-masher grenades and automatic-weapons fire. Caught in the open, the left element was forced to take cover in an abandoned Chinese trench.

For a few minutes there was a stale-



LEATHERNECK FILE PHOTO BY SGT LESLIE S. SMITH

Setting trip wires for illumination grenades along likely avenues of approach was routine and paid off, as the Marines sought any advantage against surprise attacks.

mate on the crest of Hill 134. Marines and Chinese were hunkered down only a few yards from each other, pitching grenades back and forth. That was when 1stLt McAdams weighed in. Shrugging off mortar rounds, grenades and machine-gun bullets like so many pingpong balls, the pair of flame tanks rolled through the stalled left element, lighting up the summit of the hill and certain numbers of Chinese with billowing red-black clouds of searing jellied gasoline.

Despite intense Chinese small-arms and automatic-weapons fire, Lambert continued to lead the left element against enemy units still fiercely resisting. If the raid was to be a success, these holdouts had to be overcome. Attempting to gain a vantage point to better direct the attack, Lambert sprinted through a hail of fire to gain the very top of the hill. In the open, showing the way and completely exposed, Donald Lambert was cut down, gravely wounded by a burst of machine-gun fire from one of the last of the Chinese still hanging on in that sector.

Over on the other flank, Sgt McGuire's right element also had gained the Chi-

nese trenches. They found themselves in a close-quarters fight with defenders clinging desperately to a portion of the trench line, while grenades rolled down the hill from other Chinese on the very summit. At one point McGuire threw white-phosphorus grenades into a bunker, then felled an emerging Chinese with a burst of heavy .45-caliber slugs from his Thompson submachine gun.

Even as McGuire's men battled to clear the trench line, a Chinese machine gun firing from a saddle above raked them, knocking down Marines from its protected position. One of the Marines to fall wounded was the attached demolitions man. From a low, diving crouch, McGuire snatched up the fallen man's satchel charge and zigzagged toward the stuttering machine gun until he reached a point directly below the trench it was firing from. Setting the delay timer, he heaved the charge of TNT into the trench and hit the deck. The Chinese machine-gun squad and much of the trench erupted in a thunderous orange-black flash.

With the last of the Chinese resistance in his sector eliminated, McGuire led his

remaining unwounded men in cleaning out the rest of his sector. Learning of Lambert's serious wound, McGuire then led his men around to the sector of the left element and took command of the entire main assault group. Hill 134 was firmly in Marine hands, but the mission had not been to take and hold it.

At 0850, with the assigned mission to "kill or capture enemy encountered and to destroy fortifications" accomplished, McGuire on orders from the Item Co commanding officer organized the withdrawal of the main assault group. As the cleanup detail tended to the evacuation of the wounded and the collection of any items of intelligence value, McGuire led his men back to the MLR, arriving at 0925.

The raid on Hill 134 had gone exactly as planned, evidence in itself of the need for careful, detailed planning in the conduct of the raids that were daily events on the Western Front. The price had been one Marine killed, 24 wounded and two missing in action. Chinese losses were estimated at 25 killed, and Hill 134 had been reduced to shambles.

For their roles in the raid on Hill 134 both 2dLt Donald F. Lambert and Sgt Thomas P. McGuire would receive the Navy Cross. The only Marine to die that day, Donald Lambert, would be given the award posthumously.

The fight on Hill 134 served as an indication that the war on the Western Front had not changed and was a preview of more of the same to come; 1953 was to be a constant battle of outposts. A pair of George Co, 3d Bn, 1st Marines noncommissioned officers each earned the Navy Cross during a raid on an outpost called Hilda.

In the pre-dawn hours of 13 Jan., the reinforced platoon raiding party ran into a buzz saw of murderous Chinese fire on the slopes of the former Marine outpost. Casualties were immediate. Among the first to fall wounded was platoon leader 2dLt Ray Wilson, shot down by a Chinese machine gun.

Gunnery Sergeant Walter C. Borawski stepped in and assumed command, only to suffer the full blast of a grenade that detonated directly in front of him as he led the attack against the key enemy strong point. Gravely wounded and in great pain, GySgt Borawski continued to direct the action until he was no longer able.

Veteran squad leader Sgt Howard C. Hensley Jr. took over the reins. Although

painfully wounded, he carried the attack forward, directing flame-thrower teams that seared the main Chinese trench, setting off a stupendous explosion from an ammunition bunker. That broke the back of the defenders. With the objective accomplished, Hensley then took charge of collecting the wounded and organizing the withdrawal.

Aiding Hensley in this was fire-team leader Corporal Jess Meado, who set out in search of 2dLt Wilson, GySgt Borawski and the platoon corpsman, who also had been downed by wounds. Borawski told Meado to leave him and go in search of the lieutenant and the corpsman. Only after they had been found and evacuated would Borawski consent to being carried down the hill himself.

GySgt Borawski, selfless and courageous to the last, died of his wounds. His last words were to his close friend, 2dLt Richard Guidera, "I'm getting awfully cold." GySgt Walter Borawski would receive the Navy Cross posthumously. Sgt Hensley's wounds, while painful, were not life-threatening. He, too, would receive the Navy Cross.

The continuous showing went on throughout January, culminating on the last day of the month in a blazing encounter that was a preliminary to a major raid planned for three days later on the Chinese stronghold of Ungok (Hill 31/31A/31B/31C). By this time Colonel Lewis W. "Lew" Walt's 5th Marines had

relieved Col Hewitt D. Adams' 1st Marines in the 1stMarDiv's right sector. The raid was carried out by a reinforced platoon from Dog Co, 2d Bn, 5th Marines.

As usual, the raid was conducted at night. As usual the Chinese reacted violently, but could not prevent the raid from being successful. They did, however, add to the 4,262 Marines who died in Korea, mortally wounding Sgt Fred D. Chadwick and PFC George F. Fitzpatrick. Displaying incredible courage before falling, both men would receive posthumous awards of the Navy Cross.

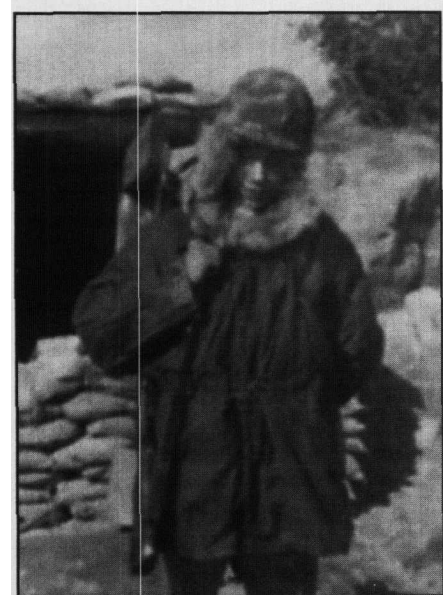
So it went as January ushered in 1953, nasty little platoon affairs on hillside outposts that otherwise would merit no particular mention. The war on the Western Front had become the very essence of static, positional warfare. The constraint of orders from the very highest level terminated all large-scale offensive action to gain ground in favor of a strategic objective of ensuring the continued integrity of the Republic of Korea. On the enemy side there was the inability to gain a decisive advantage in the face of massed firepower.

The Chinese, drawn reluctantly into the Korean War, regarded it as a sideshow that detracted from their goal of seizing Taiwan. With this goal slipping further and further away, they were looking for a way out. These factors left the war a slug-ging match, one side unwilling to advance, the other side unable to advance, and neither side willing to take a step back.

In his excellent account, "The Final Crucible: U.S. Marines in Korea, Volume II, 1953," Marine veteran Lee Ballenger describes beautifully the war on the Western Front: "Like prizefighters with their shoes nailed to the floor, each side prepared to fight until one or the other became too exhausted to continue." It was that kind of war, a continuous showing at the movies, one that would become familiar to Marines in the jungles and rice paddies of Vietnam.

Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua, a former enlisted Marine who served in both the Korean and Vietnam wars, has been a contributor to Leatherneck's Korean War commemorative series since July 2000.

Lee Ballenger's books on the Korean War are available through the Marine Corps Association bookstores.



LEATHERNECK FILE PHOTO

PFC Wilfred E. Martin modeled the front-line fashions common among those who manned the bunkers in the frozen areas along the MLR.

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