

"One Damn Hill After Another"

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"One



Marines moved up yet another hill along the central front in Korea, 1951. (Photo by PFC Carl T. Wehner)

Damn Hill After Another

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

"Sure, I was in Korea, but don't ask me to tell you a whole lot about it. Beyond what was happening in my squad I never knew much about what was going on. Oh, I remember the firefights. I remember how hot it was, how cold it was. I remember going for days with next to no sleep. I remember trying to trade C-ration meat and noodles for sausage patties or franks and beans. And the hills. Yeah, I remember the hills. One damn hill after another."

—Former Sgt John M. "Duke" Alston
"Easy" Co, 2d Bn, 5th Marines
50 years later

The individual Marine, the Marine like Duke Alston, who sees combat face to face, carries the memories of that close encounter with death for the rest of his life. Years after it is all over, those memories can jolt a man out of a sound sleep. They never go entirely away. Combat leaves an indelible mark on a man, a mark that accompanies him to his grave.

Oddly, though, while a man can come away from combat with the vivid images of it seared into his soul, his grasp of the whole picture is often no greater than his understanding of events on the far side of the Himalayas. For the Marine in combat, the world truly comes down to himself and his squad. Beyond that the picture becomes fuzzier and fuzzier until it fades away entirely.

Think of an ant crawling across a lawn. There may be enough grass there to keep a man busy with a lawn mower for an entire afternoon. How much of that lawn does the ant see? Other than those blades of grass that immediately concern him the ant sees precious little. The ant isn't all that interested in the whole, wide sweep of the lawn. It's a matter of immediacy. The situation at hand is the ant's most pressing concern. What may be happening on the far side of the lawn is of almost no concern. As it is with ants and lawns, so it is with Marines and combat. There is enough close at hand to occupy a man. The situation in the next battalion is someone else's concern.

It shouldn't come as any surprise then, to know that in the late summer of 1951 most Marines in the First Marine Division saw the overall situation in Korea only in the most general of terms. Of more immediate importance were things like mail call, the out-at-the-knees condition of a pair of dungaree trousers that hadn't been taken off in more than a

month, the need to be ever alert for that telltale *sssssh* that preceded the arrival of a flight of 82 mm mortar rounds, that certain necessity for which there never seemed to be enough paper. The overall situation? Who knew? Who cared?

Yet that overall situation was an interesting one. The picture the war presented was beginning to shift and change. The man with his nose to the wind could catch a whiff of something that hadn't been there a short while before. The Korean War of late summer 1951 was taking on some distinct differences from the war that had existed in late spring. For one thing, a different enemy was beginning to appear. The North Korean People's Army (NKPA), so badly mauled and battered during the previous summer and fall, was getting back into the fight on Korea's Eastern Front, in the zone of action of the 1stMarDiv.

There were several reasons for this. First and foremost, the Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) had been bled white in the ill-conceived Fifth Phase Offensive launched in late April. After some initial successes CCF units had been chewed up in wholesale lots, bodies piled atop bodies until even the Chinese, with their vast resources of manpower, could no longer stand the killing. By late May friendly forces had gone over to the attack, driving decimated Chinese communist remnants before them and advancing farther into North Korea than they had been when the Chinese offensive started.

A less obvious reason was that the Chinese, beyond being desperate to conserve their badly battered forces, were quietly shifting their attention westward to the traditional route followed by invaders seeking to drive into the southern reaches of the Korean peninsula. Left behind to cover the Chinese withdrawal, at



By the end of the summer of 1951, the order of the day always seemed to be to move up a hot, dusty road; get into position; and assault the next hill. (USMC photo)

whatever cost, was the refurbished NKPA. Stand and fight and die—buy time was the order given them.

Buying time was also the unstated but very real objective of the communist proposal for truce talks that was made by Soviet Foreign Minister Jacob Malik on 23 June. Two days later the Chinese communist government weighed in with a carefully worded but unofficial endorsement of Malik's proposal.

The communist willingness to enter into negotiations to end the war in Korea fooled very few on the scene. Lieutenant General James A. Van Fleet, USA, Eighth Army commander, correctly evaluated the communist proposal as a stalling tactic designed to buy time for the badly battered communist armies. Major General Edward "Ned" Almond, USA, X Corps commander, saw the proposal for truce talks as a ploy deriving solely from dire necessity.

"I felt at the time that the Chinese communists and North Korean armies were on the most wobbly legs that they had been on to that date. They were punch

drunk and ineffective, and I, personally, thought at that time that it was time to finish off the effort," MajGen Almond said.

The transparency of the communist ploy was apparent even to French newspaper correspondent Raymond Cartier. For Cartier's money it was "just a crafty trick devised by the communists to gain time and build up again the badly mauled Chinese armies." Transparent trick or not, there would be truce talks, which meant next to nothing to the Marines in the ranks of the 1stMarDiv. As far as they were concerned, the truce talks may as well have been a gussied-up minuet pranced out in some la-de-da high-society ballroom. For them the war would go on.

It would go on in terrain that was becoming wearily familiar, a near wilderness as rugged as any to be found in all of Korea. Through the snow, sleet and freezing rain of winter, through the thick, clinging mud of spring, and into the torrid heat and billowing clouds of summer dust, the 1stMarDiv had fought deeper and deeper into this inhospitable region.

Inhabited areas were rare. Trafficable roads were even rarer. An abundance of a jumble of steep-sided, rock-strewn peaks could tax the energies of a mountain goat.

The advance to the north was as much a battle against the terrain as it was against the CCF and NKPA defenders. By late summer, names like Chunchon, No Name Line, Yanggu, Hwachon Reservoir, Hill 610, the Punch Bowl, Yoke and Kansas Line had been woven into the division's collective memory. Along the way, the division had picked up a new commander when MajGen Gerald C. Thomas, who had seen his first combat as a sergeant at Belleau Wood in 1918, relieved the revered MajGen Oliver P. Smith, who headed for home and a promotion.

Another new officer on the scene was Lieutenant Colonel Houston Stiff, who took over the reins of 2d Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment in June. LtCol Stiff wasn't the only new face in the battalion. There were very few veterans of the previous year's fighting in the ranks. Casualties and rotation had cut into the numbers

of those who had battled through the winter and spring campaigns. The battalion that LtCol Stiff would take into combat would be to a large extent an entirely new battalion.

It would not be an unprepared battalion. A rigorous, intense and realistic training regimen, presided over by a solid nucleus of hardened combat veterans during the division's time in reserve, saw to that. It was a good thing, too. The battalion would be going up against as tough a nut as existed from one end of Korea to the other.

Like most objectives in Korea, it was a hill. Like most hills in Korea, it bore a number—812—rather than a name. Located north of the Punch Bowl and Yoke Ridge in an area as bleak and forbidding as what the last man will see on the last day, Hill 812 was actually the eastern tip of a long east-west ridge line that was crossed by another north-south ridge.

Taken together, the two formations presented a "T" with Hill 812 poised at the right edge of the crossbar. It was a terrain feature perfectly suited for defense. An attacker advancing along the upright of the "T" would be under a constant, accurate crossfire from well dug-in defenders on both arms of the crossbar. The North Korean bunkers were so solidly constructed of logs and earth that the infantry manning them did not hesitate calling mortar fire on their own positions when friendly elements got in close. A determined enemy in such a position can be uncommonly hard to dislodge.

Colonel Wilbert S. "Bigfoot" Brown's 1st Marines and Col Herman Nickerson Jr.'s 7th Marines found that out the hard way. Battling day and night from 13 to 16 Sept. to root out the defenders of a series of hills, Hills 673 and 749 in particular, the two regiments fought their way through a hornet's nest of skillfully sited defenses. The North Koreans countered with a ripping hailstorm of automatic-weapons fire, underscored by the deep bass notes of barrage after barrage of 76 mm, 105 mm and 122 mm artillery, liberally supported by the fires of massed batteries of 82 mm and 120 mm mortars.

Clearing the approaches to Hill 812 cost the assault companies of the two regiments more than 800 casualties. By early afternoon of 16 Sept., Bigfoot Brown's 1st Marines was more than willing to allow Col Richard G. Weede's 5th Marines to pass through and continue the attack.

It was slow going from the start. The forward companies of 2/5, Captain William L. Wallace's Easy and Capt William E. Melby's Fox, were going up against a

network of defensive installations the likes of which previously had not been encountered in the war. Fire and communication trenches, concealed weapons pits, and log and earth bunkers with interlocking fields of fire, all covered by preplanned and registered fires of mortars and artillery, lay in the path of every conceivable avenue of approach. To attack one position was to be taken under fire by two or more others. It was a defensive network fully as formidable as those thrown up by the Japanese on islands like Peleliu, Iwo Jima and Okinawa in another war.

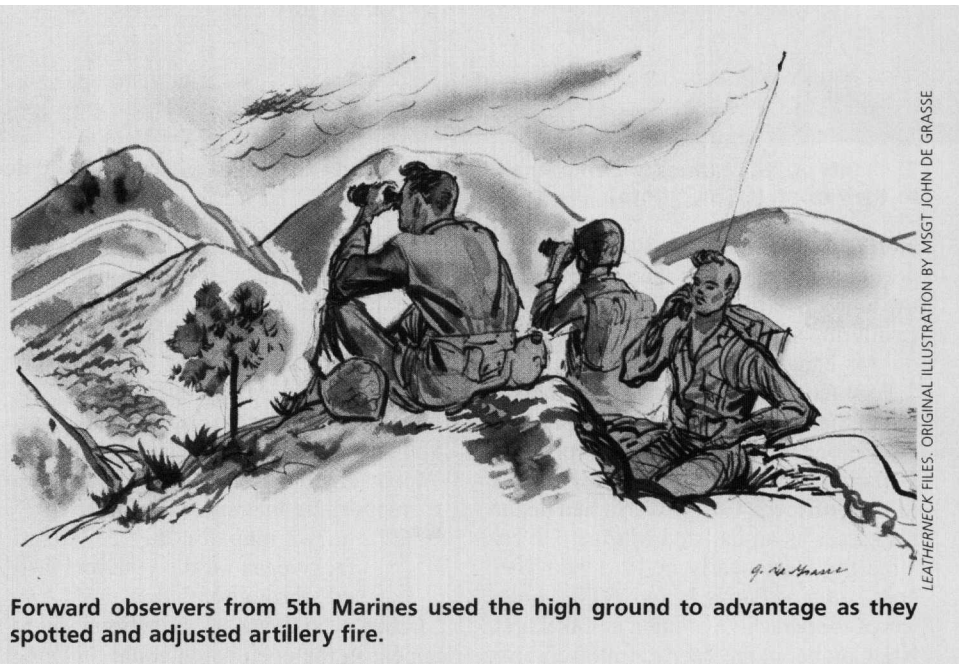
It was late afternoon before the attack got started, and when it did the point elements of Fox Co found themselves in it right up to the belt buckle. The ridge line leading to Hill 812 erupted in the dirty brown mushrooms of 82 mm and 120 mm mortar fires intermingled with the nasty red and black eruptions thrown up by 76 mm mountain guns. The air was filled with screaming, white-hot shards of steel. Crisscrossing strings of green tracers seemed to come from every direction.

There were casualties immediately, two

The next day, 17 Sept., brought more of the same. Fox Co battered its way ahead into the firestorm, eventually reaching a point just short of the east-west running ridge that culminated in Hill 812. There Easy Co passed through the thoroughly exhausted members of Fox and took up the attack. It was joined by the 2d Plt of Fox Co, which had lost contact with its parent unit. Slowly, rooting tenacious defenders from one strong point after another, Easy Co bludgeoned its way forward.

With one prong of the attack held up by a particularly stubborn North Korean bunker pinning Easy Company's 2d Plt to the ground, Platoon Sergeant Frank Bilski asked two Marines, Duke Alston and Ray Hernandez, what they could do about it. "We'll get the sonuvabitch," said Hernandez.

Beneath the covering fire of the rest of the squad and hugging the ground, Alston and Hernandez worked their way around to the blind side of the bunker. There Alston thrust the muzzle of his Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) into a firing port and emptied half a magazine into the interior of the bunker. Hernandez quickly followed with a grenade. The



Forward observers from 5th Marines used the high ground to advantage as they spotted and adjusted artillery fire.

platoon leaders down and a dozen Marines killed or wounded. Somehow the attack went painfully forward, raked by fire until it had advanced a scant 400 yards, paying a price in blood for every step. At 1700, with daylight fading, the attack was called off for the day, and the Marines of Fox Co dug in for the night in preparation for the expected counterattack. Thanks to a cloudless sky and a full moon that lit up the mangled ridge like midday, there was no counterattack, and Fox Co snatched what bits of sleep it could.

bunker fell silent. It was all in a day's work.

With actions like those, duplicated a score of times, Easy Co eventually clamped its grip on a portion of Hill 812. The North Koreans clung like leeches to the rest. In between them was a massive granite outcropping, the primary feature of the hill, looming 12 feet above the crest of the ground. It had no name. It was simply "The Rock."

Aided by massed supporting fires, the thinned ranks of Fox Co rolled forward on the left to lend a hand, driving off the



Elements of 7th Marines forded a small stream en route to assist a platoon pinned down by enemy machine-gun fire on the ridge to their front. (USMC photo)

North Koreans and securing the western portions of the hill. As the sun settled on the horizon, Hill 812 and The Rock were firmly in Marine hands. All they had to do was hang on to them.

Fortunately, there was just the man to see to that. That man was newly promoted Major Gerald P. "Gerry" Averill, 2d Battalion's executive officer. Like many Marine officers, Gerry Averill had begun his career as an enlisted Marine. He entered the Corps early in 1941 and after boot camp at Parris Island, S.C., volunteered for parachute training at Lakehurst, N.J. Combat in the Pacific followed, first as a member of LtCol Victor H. Krulak's 2d Parachute Bn, then as a company commander with the 26th Marines in the bloody struggle for Iwo Jima. He would be the man on the spot, placed in overall command of the two companies on the hill. It was a logical choice. Averill was the most experienced officer in the battalion, the one who had been with it longer than anyone else.

Experience wasn't a necessity in one area, though. Something that quickly became apparent even to the most recently arrived replacement was that daylight

movement anywhere on the hill or the ridge it ended in was dangerous. Show your head in the open, and you were a target. North Korean observers on a pair of higher hills to the west, 980 and 1052 (in Korea there was *always* a higher hill), had the entire Marine position under surveillance, eager to call in the ever-present 76's on anything that moved. Eager, too, to support the inevitable counterattack.

The warmup for that counterattack began on the 19th and lasted throughout the day. Any Marine who was so incautious as to appear in the open could count on being greeted by the crackling *zzzzing, bang* of the high-velocity 76's and sent scurrying for shelter or perhaps, if his luck was running a little bad, tumbled in a heap. The North Korean artillery observers on 980 and 1052 didn't miss a thing. All along the line Marines dug a little deeper and cut trees for overhead cover.

As midnight passed and the calendar turned over a page to 20 Sept., Duke Alston, feeling a long way from his birthplace in Virginia, passed a sleepless night. What sleep he got was taken in fitful bits and pieces. He spent his time on

watch searching out any sign of activity in the shallow draw he and several other members of the squad were covering with his BAR, his senses alert for movement or sounds. When the North Koreans came, some of them certainly would come that way. What sane man would disregard a covered approach that led right into Easy Co's line? A man can bet on some things.

"About 0200 the next morning [20 Sept.] the sky fell in," was the way Gerry Averill remembered it. A hailstorm of 120 mm mortar rounds fell roaring upon the entire defensive position, saturating it from one end to the other. The barrage poured in for 30 minutes, shaking the ground beneath the feet of the Marines on the hill, setting the air to cracking and whirring with explosions and the flight of thousands of deadly slivers of steel. Then the fires lifted, and the North Korean infantry launched the first of many attempts to pierce the Marine lines.

In his foxhole Duke Alston wasn't disappointed in his assessment of things. North Korean infantrymen were indeed attempting to use the shallow draw as a means to get in close. Firing in short

bursts, Alston added the distinctive stuttering blasts of his BAR to the first fires that were knocking the attackers over as they appeared around a slight bend. He wondered if he was going to have enough ammunition. To save on ammunition Alston flung grenades among the figures scuttling up the draw. Then he wondered if his supply of grenades would hold out.

About that time a crouching figure appeared at the rear of Alston's hole. "Could you use some grenades, son?" It was Gerry Averill, carrying a sandbag full of grenades and living his dictum: "Rank gets paid to be seen."

He was seen all along the line, lending encouragement, directing the action from the only place he knew how, a fighting man up front where the fighting was, with his men where he believed a commander should be. It was a leadership technique he had picked up in the Pacific from the ever-present Victor Krulak, who seemed to be everywhere at once, but mostly up front.

It was from up front, as the sun broke the eastern horizon, that Averill saw the most serious North Korean thrust, one aimed directly at The Rock and designed to cut the Marine line in half. Swarms of North Korean grenadiers were pushing forward there, just short of the Marine line that was blazing with fire. Many of the attackers were falling, but there were always more to take their places.

Corporal Peter "Rip" Meletis saw them much closer. Most of them seemed headed directly for his foxhole. Meletis emptied his M1 rifle into the packed ranks, then inserted another eight-round clip and emptied that. More North Koreans were behind the ones who fell, more than Meletis had clips for in his cartridge belt.

Eventually it came to be a hand-to-hand matter, with Meletis using the butt of his rifle like a baseball bat, smashing in the heads of three North Koreans before the remainder drew off. As the attack finally died, along with scores of the North Koreans who had launched it, Meletis, dribbling blood from a half-dozen grenade fragments, stormed along the ridge line in search of the company aid station to get patched up. Duke Alston saw him pass, spewing an eruption of invectives that would have dissolved an anvil.

Averill's ace in the hole turned the tide at The Rock. That was the orphan 2d Plt of Fox Co, led now by its platoon sergeant, Staff Sergeant Stanley "Stan" Wawrzyniak. Sent forward by Averill at just the right moment, 2d Plt smashed into the North Koreans, blunted them, turned them back and shattered them.



"Always Another Hill"

LEATHERNECK FILES. ORIGINAL ILLUSTRATION BY MSGT JOHN DE GRASSE

Not the least part of the shattering was done by Wawrzyniak. Charging forward at the head of his platoon, Wawrzyniak lit into the North Koreans with a vengeance, single-handedly killing an entire machine-gun squad. Out of ammunition and wounded by grenade fragments, but still full of fight, Wawrzyniak seized a BAR from a fallen Marine and continued to lead his men forward, driving the North Koreans back from the bitterly contested Rock and restoring the line. For his actions Stan Wawrzyniak would be awarded the Navy Cross.

That was it. The North Koreans had had enough. Hill 812 belonged to the USMC. It hadn't been easy. The bill had been steep. The price exacted on Easy and Fox companies in casualties had been high, but superb leadership and coordination between the two companies had tilted the scales. War is never easy.

For his inspirational leadership on Hill 812 Gerry Averill would receive the Silver Star. Is it overstating things to say that Averill's brand of leadership made the difference on that hill that was the war in Korea for one small band of Marines in the early autumn of 1951? Perhaps. Then again perhaps not. Forty years later Duke Alston would write to Gerry Averill:

"It is this sort of leadership that strengthens us for the rest of our lives. You were our officer, and because of your leadership by example I don't think we could have been beaten by any army that day. You were right there with us, and that made all the difference."

That's what it was like in Korea in 1951, one damn hill after another.

Afterword: LtCol Gerald P. Averill, USMC (Ret), a veteran of combat in World War II, Korea and Vietnam, a major contributor to military parachuting and one of the handful of Marines entitled to wear the Army's master parachutist badge, lost his last fight, a battle against cancer, in 1994. In testimony of the esteem, respect and admiration accorded him by his many friends in the Army's airborne community, he rests beside his beloved wife, Helen, in the post cemetery at Fort Bragg, N.C.

Stan Wawrzyniak would receive a second Navy Cross for heroism on another Korean hill in April 1952. Fierce and utterly fearless, a man seemingly destined for death on the battlefield, LtCol Stanley Wawrzyniak, USMC (Ret), a veteran of combat in three wars, passed away quietly in his sleep at his home in North Carolina in 1998.

Duke Alston lost both legs to a near-direct hit from an 82 mm mortar on yet another hillside in February 1952. He wasted no time whining and moaning, but launched into a career as an educator. An avid outdoorsman, he enjoys camping, hiking and trail riding, and is retired in Oregon.

After his Marine Corps service, Rip Meletis went on to a rewarding career as a business executive. Retired, he lives in North Carolina. He still keeps in touch with the old hands from Easy Co in those days a half-century ago.

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

