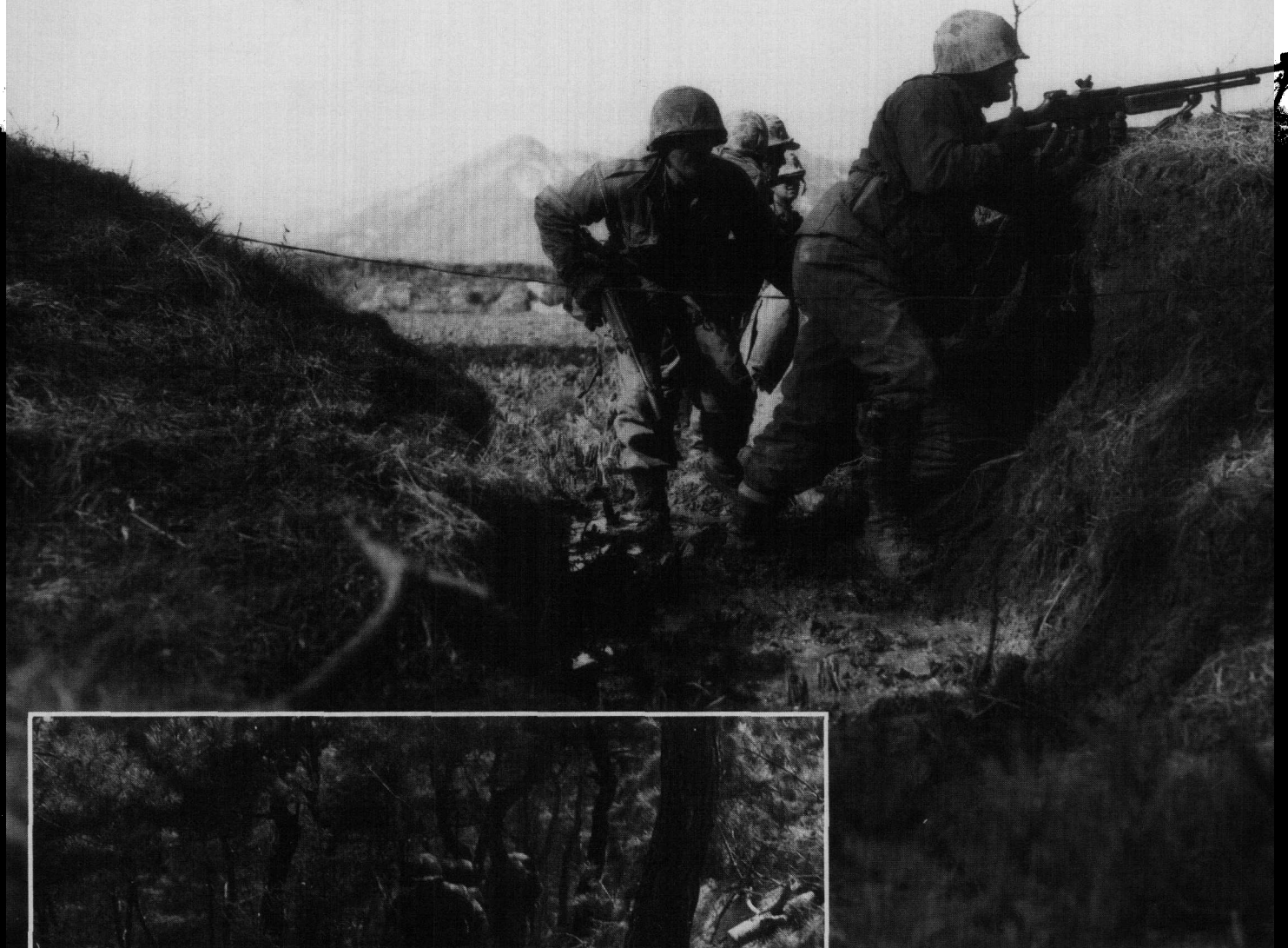




Korea, 1951

Operation Ripper



Leathernecks of 1stMarDiv moved up difficult terrain in order to position themselves for the jump off of Operation Ripper on the Central Front.

Story by Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua
USMC (Ret)

"We did cover a lot of ground, most of it overland, through terrain unsullied by roads or trails—some thirty-five miles as the crow flies—and ended up with a division front that stretched about twenty miles across."

—Major Gerald P. Averill
S-3 (Operations Officer)
2d Bn, 5th Marines

PFC C. T. WEHNER

Left: Ankle-deep mud didn't slow up elements of 1st Marines as they pushed to capture Oumsan.

Ridgway wanted blood, not land.

With the evidence that the Chinese were still attempting to conserve their forces and set themselves for another massive attack, Ridgway resolved to continue his own drive to the north, beating the enemy to the punch. Operation Killer had no sooner concluded than plans for Operation Ripper were set in motion.

Set to jump off on 7 March 1951, Operation Ripper had two primary objectives. The first was to inflict maximum casualties on CCF forces and by means of constant pressure all along the line keep them off balance and disrupt their offensive buildup. The second and lesser objective was to outflank Seoul, leaving the CCF with the choice of withdrawing or defending the city under unfavorable circumstances.

During Operation Ripper the First Marine Division would attack as part of the 8th Army's IX Corps, the 1st Cavalry Division on its left and the 2d Infantry Division on its right. The 2d Infantry Division was an old associate. It was as a part of that division, then designated the 2d Division United States Regular, that the famed Marine Brigade had fought in France in 1918. In Korea the First Provisional Marine Brigade had fought alongside the 2d Infantry Division in the defense of the Pusan Perimeter the previous summer.

Directly in the path of the IX Corps advance lay the towns of Hongchon and Chunchon. Both were important communications centers that would make the CCF's job of launching a new offensive much easier. Hongchon would be within the zone of action of the 1stMarDiv. Facing the division in its advance from Hoengsong would be the harsh terrain that so defines Korea: steep, rugged, wooded hills cut up by a tangle of rushing streams and minor rivers. The area was almost devoid of roads; the few that did exist were little more than oxcart trails. Dominating the whole, and just shy of the operation's initial objective dubbed Phase Line Albany, was the 2,900-foot mountain the Koreans called Oumsan. For the defender the area was a natural stronghold. For the attacker it was a truly nasty place.

If the difficulties posed by the terrain weren't bad enough, the weather, which had been so foul throughout Operation Killer, showed no signs of improving. Corporal Austin Stack, a machine-gunner in First Lieutenant James T. "Jim" Cronin's "Baker" Company, 1st Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment, remem-

bered the period as the time of his lowest morale in Korea. Being constantly cold and wet, pelted by rain, freezing rain, sleet and snow, and slogging wearily through a mixture of half-frozen, boot-top-deep snow, mud and slush can dim the spirits of the most cheerful optimist and give pause to even the most determined masochist. A mess kit infrequently full of hastily prepared SOS turned into cold soup by a driving, icy rain can leave the diner looking for somebody—anybody at all—to belt over the head with that mess kit, soup and all.

In spite of the daunting terrain and

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tomorrow, but an enemy sol-


dier killed today has no hope of

fighting tomorrow.

weather, Operation Ripper began well. On a cold, clear morning that quickly gave way to clouds and snow, the 1stMarDiv went into the attack with the 7th Marines on the left and the 1st Marines on the right. As in the early stages of Operation Killer, Chinese resistance was light, confining itself to scattered small-arms fire from the enemy's line of outposts. By nightfall the day's objectives had been secured at a total cost of seven Marines wounded.

The suspicions of the first day were confirmed on the second. The Chinese were continuing the withdrawal they had commenced the previous month, carefully picking their fights and giving battle only to cover the withdrawal of other units. They were falling back, but they were doing it very skillfully and under control. When it was required, they were ready to put up a blistering fight in one area in order to let units withdraw from an adjacent piece of ground.

First Lt Eugenous M. Hovatter's Able Co, 1st Bn, 7th Marines ran into one of those fights the next day during an attack on a rock-strewn hill just to the left of Oumsan. Well-aimed small-arms and mortar fire pinned the company to the ground 300 yards short of the final objective, knocking out Second Lieutenant Clayton Bush, who went down with a shredded right arm, and killing or



Lieutenant General Matthew B. Ridgway, commanding the Eighth United States Army in Korea (EUSAK), was dissatisfied. While the recently concluded Operation Killer had attained its terrain objectives and interrupted the Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) plans for an immediate major offensive, it had not caused anywhere near the amount of enemy casualties Ridgway had desired. Ground taken today can be lost tomorrow, but an enemy soldier killed today has no hope of fighting tomorrow. LtGen

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The one-two punch of the Marine air-ground team kept the Chinese off balance. (Leatherneck file photo)



**First Lt Horace L. Johnson's
Marines closed to hand-
grenade range and blasted the
defenders from their well-
camouflaged bunkers.**

wounding five other members of his 2d Platoon. The company remained stuck where it was until air attacks and the supporting 90 mm fires of a section of tanks allowed the infantry to gain the upper hand.

Chinese resistance continued to be light and sporadic on the following day, 9 March, but not so light that Captain Robert P. "Bob" Wray's Charlie Co, 1/1 didn't run into a lethal hornet's nest on

one of the mangled ridges before Oumsan. Sergeant John Chinner earned a Navy Cross, leading his machine-gun platoon through a storm of enemy fire coming from a carefully sited cluster of well dug-in bunkers.

Single-handedly and armed with only his .45-caliber M1911A1 pistol and a supply of captured hand grenades, Chinner stormed the ridge line through murderous fire, neutralizing five bunkers and either killing or forcing their occupants to flee. Darkness fell with Charlie Co in uncontested possession of the ridge. As they had done so often, the Chinese turned and pulled out.

Throughout the next two days Marine units devoted themselves to local patrolling, while friendly units on the right that had been outpaced by the Marine advance caught up. Then, early on 11 March, it was back to business, with the pattern of previous days repeating itself. In a brisk little engagement filled with the crackle and rip of rifle and machine-gun fire, a patrol from George Co, 3/1 attacked

the defenders of Hill 549, guarding the southeastern approaches to Oumsan. Then 1stLt Horace L. Johnson's Marines, aided by supporting fire from a pair of tanks, closed to hand-grenade range and blasted the defenders from their well-camouflaged bunkers.

Action flared in the zone of the 7th Marines as well. Battling forward against the prepared defenses of key ridges leading to Oumsan's southwestern slopes, Capt Jerome D. Gordon's Dog Co, 2/7 found itself staggered by the volume of fire directed at it from a maze of bunkers. At Yudam-ni in November, Dog Co, then commanded by Capt Milton A. "Milt" Hull, had been shot to shreds holding the vital height of Hill 1240. Thus most of the Marines going forward against the lower slopes of Oumsan were relative newcomers to Korea, but they lacked nothing of the fighting spirit of their predecessors.

Master Sergeant George H. Butler had enough fighting spirit for three men. With Dog Co's leading assault platoon

pinned down, MSgt Butler didn't hesitate. Leaving the relative safety of the company command post, he sprinted through a hail of fire to reach the beleaguered platoon whose platoon leader and platoon sergeant had fallen wounded. Charging forward up the narrow ridge line, he rallied the platoon by the time-honored expedient of getting out in front and leading, even though that meant leading through a hail of incoming fire.

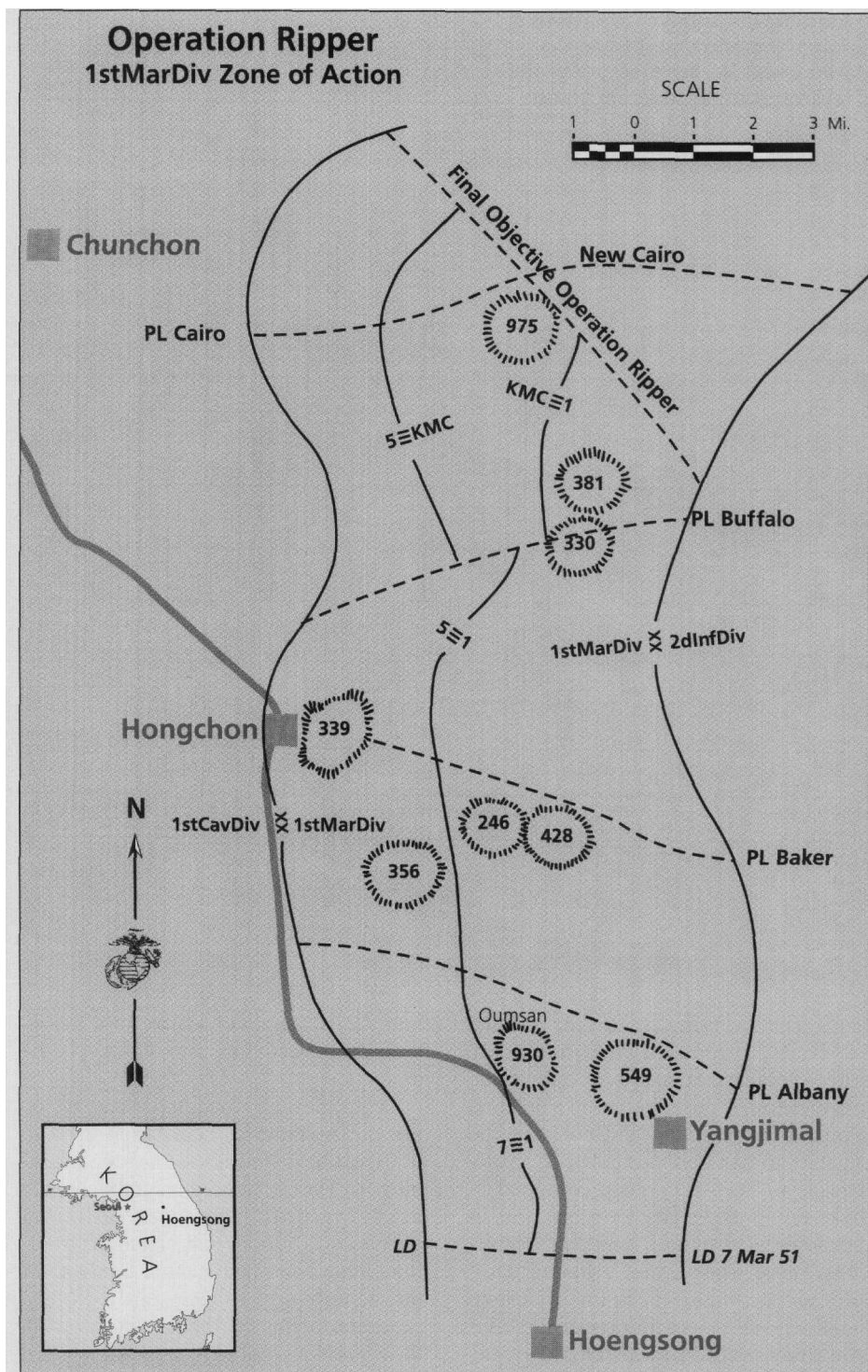
Wounded in the face and blinded in one eye by grenade fragments, Butler continued his assault on the dug-in Chinese, bringing the rest of the platoon with him through the sheer force of his personal character and his display of fearlessness. When his rifle was shot from his hands, he picked up another, personally killing 10 defenders. MSgt Butler's one-man war ended only when the defenders of the ridge turned tail and fled. Only then would he allow his wounds to be treated. There are times when wounds don't count. George Butler's actions would in time bring him America's second highest award for military valor, the Navy Cross.

MSgt Butler would not be the only Dog Co noncommissioned officer to distinguish himself in front of Oumsan. The Chinese weren't quite ready to give up the fight, and a counterattack wasn't long in coming. Much of the brunt of it fell on an exposed squad of Dog Co Marines led by Sgt Jack Larson.

Temporarily forced out of his primary position by overwhelming pressure, Larson withdrew his men to a planned alternate site, only to lead them back once darkness had fallen. The squad was able to complete its preparation of the primary position none too soon, for shortly before midnight the Chinese struck with the force of a pile driver.

Larson's squad suffered serious casualties. Firing his own weapon into the ranks of the attackers, flinging grenades into their midst, reorganizing his men to compensate for casualties, directing the defensive fires, he scrambled from man to man to lend encouragement. Painfully wounded and bleeding profusely, Larson held the situation together for two hours until relief arrived. After the last of his wounded men had been treated, Larson accepted medical aid himself. Like the indomitable George Butler, Jack Larson would receive the Navy Cross.

Faced with men like Chinner, Larson and Butler and hundreds of other Marines cut from the same cloth, the Chinese continued to give ground and fall back to the north. Pressing forward for the next three days, by 14 March the



1stMarDiv was well established on Operation Ripper's first major objective, Phase Line Albany. On the following day, friendly units to the west found the ravaged city of Seoul abandoned by the back-pedaling enemy.

Even so, no one, from Major General Oliver P. Smith, the division's commander, to the most junior enlisted Marine, expected the Chinese to abandon the fight, turn tail and run. By the best available estimates there were some 385,000 CCF troops in Korea, along with 120,000 North Korean soldiers, reorganizing after the beating they had absorbed the previous year and beginning to appear in

action once again. They were going to require some energetic rooting out. Scarcely pausing to catch its breath on Phase Line Albany, the 1stMarDiv jumped off toward Hongchon and Phase Line Buffalo early on 15 March.

It wasn't easy. Korea is a land of hills and mountains. Those hills and mountains grow increasingly higher from south to north. To scramble, scabble, claw and battle up a steep, wooded hill to reach the crest against a determined enemy is to be confronted by the same enemy on another higher hill. The process never ends.

Then there was the problem of the

Chinese forces followed a pattern of fighting and withdrawing, as the Marines kept up the pressure of the offensive. (Leatherneck file photo)



roads. The few primitive dirt roads in the 1stMarDiv's zone of action quickly proved totally inadequate to handle the logistics traffic needed to keep a division supplied. They simply did not have the capacity to handle the number of trucks it takes to keep a division equipped in those things necessary to wage war. In thoroughly atrocious weather conditions, those trucks were grinding painfully along, hub-deep in mud. Despite the around-the-clock efforts of the division's engineers to keep the few roads passable, the entire supply system was bogging down. Only the efforts of the Ko-

In a series of bloody hand-to-hand encounters, up close and personal, Marines had to shoot, blast and burn the defenders from their strongholds.

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rean Civil Transport Corps kept everything from becoming immobilized in the mud.

Thousands of Korean porters, utilizing the A-frame carrying rack used to transport heavy burdens since the beginnings of Korea, labored up and down the nearly vertical landscape, delivering ammunition, rations and fuel to the front-line units. Too much cannot be made of the contribution of the sturdy Korean peasants, some of them *papa-sans* in their 50s, who routinely muscled forward loads of 100 pounds and more to keep the advance moving. Cargadors they were called officially. Marines in the ranks, ever quick to borrow from the local language, dubbed them the *yo-bo* train, from the Korean word for the carrying device they mounted their loads on. By whatever name, they were invaluable.

By one means or another the advance kept moving. Evidence that it was disrupting Chinese plans for a fighting withdrawal came in the form of an intercepted radio communication early on 15 March. "We cannot fight any longer. We must move back today. We will move back at 1400. Enemy troops will enter our position at 1300 or 1400. Enemy troops

approaching fast." Late that afternoon the lead elements of Major Webb D. Sawyer's 1/7 entered Hongchon without a fight.

It was a different story north of Hongchon, where for the next three days the Chinese fought bitterly, battling for every lump and bump in the ground. The division plan called for 5th Marines to pass through and relieve the 7th Marines on the left. The 1st Marines on the right had their hands full with Chinese fighting from a succession of skillfully sited bunkers and trenches. In a series of bloody hand-to-hand encounters, up close and personal, Marines had to shoot, blast and burn the defenders from their strongholds. On the infrequent occasions when the weather lifted, the treetop-level strikes of Marine close air support provided the element that turned the tables.

The 1stMarDiv's running gun battles with the Chinese continued to follow the pattern of alternately fighting and withdrawing. Slowly but surely, however, the Chinese were being forced backward, until on 20 March the advance had reached Phase Line Buffalo. Before darkness fell the 5th Marines,

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Truman Fires MacArthur

On 11 April 1951, like a thunderclap, came the news that President Harry S. Truman had relieved General of the Army Douglas MacArthur as supreme commander of allied forces in Korea. MacArthur, who had reigned as America's proconsul in the Far East, had been too outspoken in his opposition to national policy. Now he would have to go. Lieutenant General Matthew B. Ridgway, commander of the Eighth United States Army in Korea (EUSAK), was named to succeed MacArthur and was relieved in turn by LtGen James A. Van Fleet, who assumed command of 8th Army on 14 April.

LtGen Van Fleet, a thorough professional with a reputation as a vigorous commander who preferred offensive combat, arrived on the scene as more and more evidence was mounting that the Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) were on the verge of launching the major countrywide offensive that had long been anticipated. Operations Killer and Ripper had set the Chinese back on their heels and taken a good bite out of their hide. While these twin operations had delayed the Chinese, they were unable to cripple them sufficiently to prevent them from going over to the attack.

On the night of that 22/23 April attack, termed the Fifth Phase Offensive by the Chinese, the assault force of four armies with a total strength of nearly 125,000 men slammed into the friendly lines. Supported by massed artillery fires, the brunt of the attack fell on the Republic of Korea (ROK) Army's 6th Division, in position on the left of the First Marine Division. The 6th Division was inundated, opening a huge rupture in the friendly lines through which the Chinese sent thousands of reinforcements. It was the beginning of fighting on a scale and intensity not seen by Marines since the Chosin Reservoir Campaign.

LtGen Van Fleet saw an opportunity in the situation. He would trade space for Chinese bodies. Bit by bit the 8th Army would fall back, always in good order and inflicting maximum casualties on the attackers. Like LtGen Ridgway before him, LtGen Van Fleet had no interest in real estate. He was going to make the Chinese pay, and pay dearly, for every

yard of ground gained. It was a combination of maneuver warfare and attrition warfare, with friendly forces stepping back little by little, all the while placing devastating fires of air, infantry and artillery on the wave upon wave of attackers thrown at them.

The Chinese were gaining some ground, but their forces were being chewed up in wholesale lots. Undeterred, the Chinese poured follow-on units into the battle. They may as well have been feeding men into a meat grinder. As the 1stMarDiv's G-3 (Operations Officer), Colonel Alpha L. Bowser reflected, the division executed its mission "so smoothly and efficiently that a complex and difficult operation was made to look easy."

By mid-May the Chinese attack had slowed to a crawl as the bodies of Chinese soldiers piled up in heaps and CCF supplies dwindled to a trickle. LtGen Van Fleet lost no time in going over to the offensive himself. In a series of slashing attacks throughout late May and early June, allied forces thoroughly pummeled the decimated Chinese forces who were now falling back in complete disorder, seeking only to escape the killing ground.

Advancing deeper into North Korea than it had been when the CCF offensive started, the 1stMarDiv gave the fleeing enemy no respite. It was a slaughter. When it was all over in late June, the CCF had been bled white. The vaunted 5th Phase Offensive had been a catastrophic failure that left the CCF high command stunned by its magnitude. Only the mountainous Korean terrain, which prevented LtGen Van Fleet from launching an armored breakthrough, saved the CCF from complete destruction.

As the first year of the Korean War ended, the Marines of the 1stMarDiv, who had fought continuously for 60 days, could take satisfaction from the knowledge that they had proven themselves worthy of standing beside the Marines of Belleau Wood, Iwo Jima and the Chosin Reservoir. Many of them would have settled for a hot shower.

—Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

with the 1st Marines on the right and aided by deadly accurate air strikes by Marine Fighter Squadrons 214 and 323 (VMF-214, VMF-323), overran the Chinese main line of resistance with no friendly casualties.

If anyone had the urge to celebrate, there was no time for it. The drive northward resumed almost without pause with the 1st Korean Marine Corps (KMC) Regiment once again attached to the 1stMarDiv. The fighting qualities of the regiment could be summed up in the words of one of its young officers, 1stLt Kim Sik Tong. In his diary he wrote: "The KMC ideal is to complete the mission, regardless of receiving strong enemy resistance, with endurance and strong united power, and always bearing in one's mind the distinction between honor and dishonor." Men like that are handy to have around in a regiment that

would have to fight its way through a virtual wilderness, devoid of the most rudimentary trails.

It was the KMC Regiment that ran up against the heaviest fighting in the advance to Operation Ripper's final objective, Phase Line Cairo. Sandwiched between the 5th and the 1st Marines, the Korean Marines worked their way through the tortuous jumble of ridges, gullies and ravines that fronted Hill 975, battling pocket after pocket of resistance in a continuing rattle and crash of point-blank fire punctuated by the detonation of grenades and mortar rounds. Supplied by airdrops and ably supported by Lieutenant Colonel William McReynolds' 3d Bn, 11th Marines firing in direct support, they slugged their way forward until the issue was decided on 24 March.

All the objectives of Operation Ripper were now controlled by the 8th Army,

which had been attacking continuously since 21 Feb. Still, with evidence mounting that the CCF had not abandoned plans for a major offensive, LtGen Ridgway wanted to keep the pressure on.

Moving forward relentlessly, on 4 April the 1stMarDiv was among the first 8th Army units to recross the 38th parallel and enter North Korea. It was also on that day that LtCol Joseph L. "Moose" Stewart, the executive officer of the 5th Marines, began his journey back to the United States. Of all the original members of the 1stProvMarBrig to land at Pusan on 2 Aug. 1950, he was the last to leave Korea.

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

