Operation Mixmaster

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

"I've never been so damn miserable in my entire life."

—Cpl Mike Alessandrini
Weapons Co, 2d Bn, 1st Marines

On 12 March 1952, the First Marine Division had a distinguished visitor. In midmorning Lieutenant General James A. Van Fleet, USA, commander of the Eighth United States Army in Korea, arrived at the division command post to confer with the division's commanding general, Major General John T. Selden. It was not a social call. LTG Van Fleet had come to brief MajGen Selden on a major development. The 1stMarDiv was going to be moving. The entire Eighth Army was going to be moving.

Dubbed Operation Mixmaster, the move would involve nothing less than the total realignment of Eighth Army forces across the entire width of Korea. All told, it would entail the movement of more than 200,000 men and all their equipment over distances ranging from 25 to more than 150 road miles.

For the 1stMarDiv the operation would mean the longest movement of any Eighth Army unit, a lateral shift completely across Korea. After six months of defensive actions along what was called the Minnesota Line in eastern Korea, the division was to sidestep all the way to the Korean West Coast to take up new positions on the Jamestown Line. To accomplish this, the division would have to traverse nearly 160 miles of roads that left much to be desired in weather conditions that ranged from marginal to atrocious.

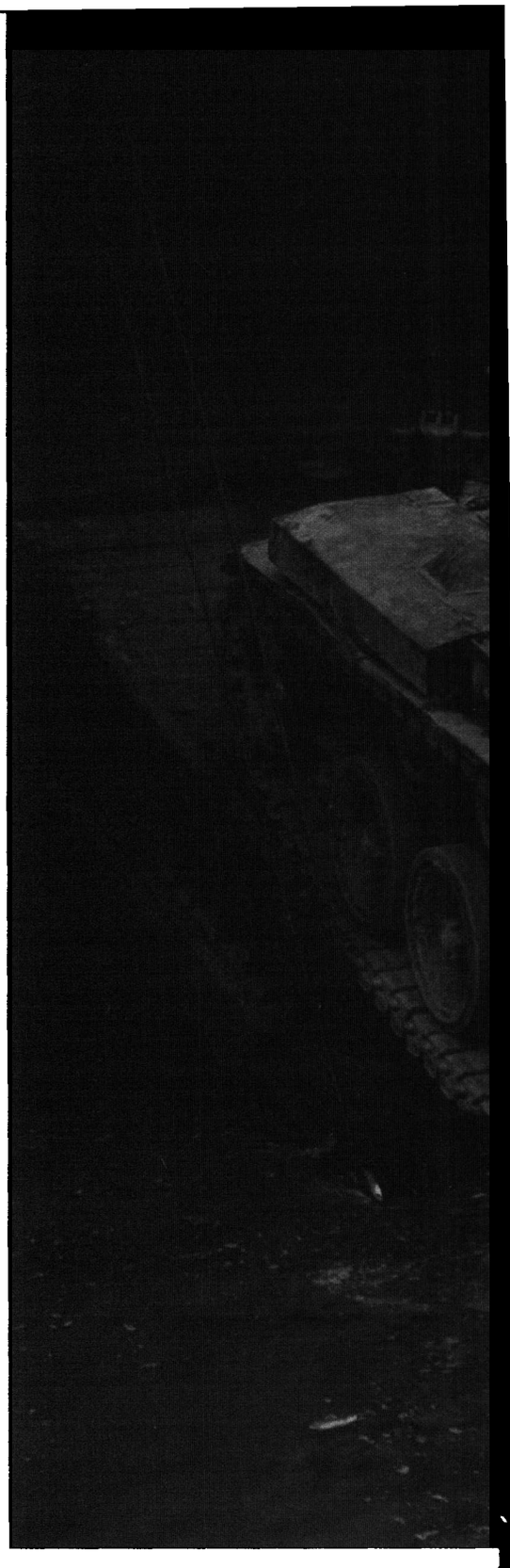
After outlining the 1stMarDiv's new assignment LTG Van Fleet dropped his bomb. The division would have to be in place in its new sector by 1 April. MajGen Selden had exactly 20 days to complete an incredibly complex logistical operation involving nearly 30,000 Marines and their equipment. In the words of the division's Assistant Chief of Staff, G-3 (Operations), then-Lieutenant Colonel Gordon D. Gayle, "This presented many logistic problems beyond belief." Colonel Robert A. McGill, Assistant Chief of Staff, G-4 (Logistics), and his staff were going to have their work cut out for them.

What had brought all this about? Two things: the Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) and the geography of Korea.

After the horrific casualties of the spring and summer of 1951, casualties that had wrecked the CCF, the CCF high command had begun withdrawing the mangled remnants of its army from eastern Korea. Hand in hand with that, the Chinese set about creating an entirely new army to replace the forces that had been destroyed, while casting their eyes in a new direction. The focus of the Chinese effort would now be the western regions of Korea. Over the next six months, while communist negotiators stalled for time behind the sham of truce talks, decimated units were withdrawn, and a new CCF fighting force was built up. By mid-March 1952, two new CCF armies, the 63d and 65th, totaling nearly 80,000 troops, were in position opposite the sector the 1stMarDiv would be occupying. The division would be outnumbered by more than two to one.

Not only were the Chinese there in numbers, they were also well equipped with the latest in Soviet-made weaponry. The Marines would be facing the forward regiments of four infantry divisions that were supported by 10 artillery battalions numbering some 106 guns ranging from 76 mm to 152 mm. The Chinese also had mortar companies capable of delivering 82 mm and 120 mm fires. For the first time in the Korean War, Marines would be facing an enemy with significant artillery assets.

The CCF soldiers themselves were well trained, well disciplined and well led. They had had ample time to construct a solid defense in depth, protected by wire, mines and antitank obstacles. Sheltered by the farce of the truce talks being dragged out endlessly at Panmunjom, the CCF had been well supplied and were capable of conducting large-scale operations without letup. All things considered, the Marines of the 1stMarDiv would be confronting a very able and determined enemy, an enemy far removed from the beaten, shredded wreckage of an army that had been routed the previous summer.



What had brought the CCF to its present positions was Korea itself. The 63d and 65th CCF armies and the 1stMarDiv would be facing each other astride the traditional invasion route into the south-

The Eighth Army and the 1stMarDiv had 20 days to move 200,000 men and their equipment over distances ranging from 25 to more than 150 road miles in an effort to realign forces. To accomplish that task, Operation Mixmaster put everything into use. A Landing Ship, Tank (above) was drafted to help haul Marine tanks from one battlefront to another. (Photo by Sgt Angelo Robert Caramico)

ern regions of the Korean peninsula, the Uijongbu Corridor. Passing through Uijongbu and the South Korean capital of Seoul, the corridor twists through rolling country to Suwon, Chongju, Taejon, Kumchon and Taegu to Korea's southern tip at Pusan. It was through this corridor that the Mongol hordes had swept over Korea centuries before. North Korean dictator Kim Il Sung had sent his army smashing along the corridor and deep into South Korea in the summer of 1950. The Uijongbu Corridor was the strategic key to South Korea.

It was with this strategic importance in mind that LTG Van Fleet was deploying his two best divisions, the 1stMarDiv and the British Commonwealth Division, to thwart any CCF attempt in that direction. But first the 1stMarDiv would have to get into position, traversing nearly the

entire width of Korea, from the Sea of Japan on the east to the Yellow Sea on the west.

The movement began on 17 March, St. Patrick's Day, when elements of the Republic of Korea (ROK) Eighth Division began relieving forward units of the 1stMarDiv. In the five days that had elapsed since LTG Van Fleet had briefed MajGen Selden on the division's new assignment, planners had tackled a monumental logistical challenge that would involve 5,800 truckloads of men and equipment. In addition to the workhorse 6x6 truck, the move would require 63 flatbed tractor-trailers, 83 railroad cars and 14 landing ships to handle an estimated 50,000 tons of equipment and vehicles.

Traffic-control planning alone was a nightmare. Many of the vehicles involved would be making as many as a dozen round trips, running day and night without letup. They would be making those trips over narrow, winding, primitive mountain roads in the typically ugly weather Korea can provide in late winter. To complicate matters even further, the division's vehicles would not have the roads to themselves. The same roads traversed by the 1stMarDiv's convoys also were used as supply routes by a dozen other divisions. If a monster traffic jam were to be avoided, scheduling would have to be as precise and coordinated as that necessary to run a major railroad or choreograph a performance of the Bolshoi Ballet. Somehow, it was all worked out.

Unfortunately, one thing that could not be worked out was the comfort of the passengers. They would have to make do as best they could. For most Marines, that left much to be desired. There was only a finite number of trucks, and each truck offered only a finite amount of space. It quickly became apparent that there were more bodies and gear to cram into that space than the space could accommodate.

During six months of static warfare, warfare that had come to resemble the Western Front in France, vintage 1916, the 1stMarDiv had accumulated an unholy lot of extra baggage. Stoves, field desks, rolls of barbed wire, crates of rations and ammunition, locker boxes, lanterns, cots and all the hundred and one incidentals that went to making life in a dank, smelly bunker more endurable had to be loaded into trucks. Even the logs from which the bunkers themselves had been constructed had to be stuffed in there somehow, for in one of the truly absurd facets of the Korean War it was against the law to cut trees in the division's new zone of action.

Ohio-born Private First Class Marc Gutierrez, a 4.2-inch mortar gunner with the Fifth Marine Regiment, never did figure that out: "Here we were in the middle of a war," Gutierrez remembered, "and it was against the law to cut down a tree. It was okay for you to get your butt shot off, but you couldn't chop down a damn tree. What were they going to do, fine you, put you in jail? Who the hell did they think we were, the Civilian Conservation Corps? Silliest damn thing I ever heard of."

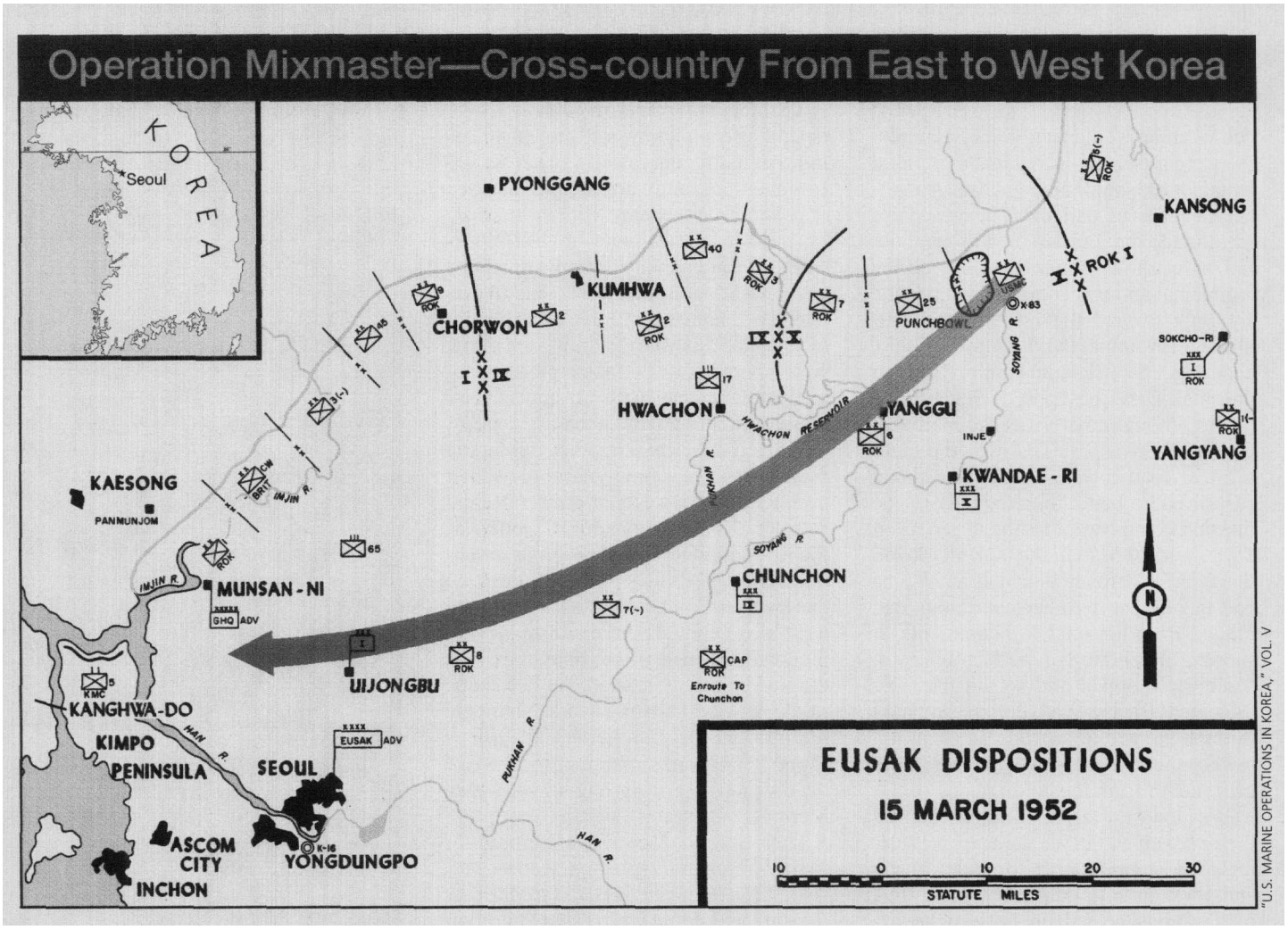
Silly or not, the logs from the division's bunkers would be piled in there with the rest of the gear. Then Marines could be shoehorned into what space remained. If for some reason a truck wasn't loaded to the top with equipment, then more Marines were crammed aboard for the trip that would take as long as 13 hours. If a truck was so overloaded with equipment and supplies that there was no room in the bed for human cargo, the human cargo had to perch atop the load. For sheer discomfort there was a notch on the scale even worse than that. Some of Col Sidney Smith Wade's 1st Marines had to endure the trip lashed into sleeping bags on the canvas tops of trucks like so many trussed-up turkeys headed for market.

The trip was an endurance contest. Start with coming directly off the firing line, wearing clothes you hadn't had off your back in three weeks. Clamber into the back of a 6x6 with your individual weapon and equipment, ammunition, pack, sleeping bag, C-rations and any additional creature comforts you may have picked up. Squeeze in between two other Marines just as scroungy and smelly as you are and lower yourself onto the unyielding wooden slats of the long bench that lines the side of the truck bed. Now you're as ready as you're ever going to be for hour after endless hour of grinding up and down hills, bouncing, lurching and jolting over rutted, twisting roads while you get soaked to the skin by a mixture of rain, sleet and snow.

That was the picture of most Marines who took part in Operation Mixmaster. The weather was exceptionally ugly, and although the trucks had canvas tops, the sides of those had been rolled up for purposes of security. Everyone got wet. Everyone got cold. A poncho helped some at first, but it didn't take long at all for a man's legs to get a cold soaking and for icy rivulets to begin running down

SGT ANGELO ROBERT CARAMICO

The move created monster traffic jams. Trains were choreographed like a ballet, as stoves, field desks, rolls of barbed wire, crates of rations and ammunition, locker boxes, lanterns and cots all took a place on something, anything, that moved. Marines such as Cpl LeRoy J. Eller still had to eat, so he took time to heat his rations before resuming the march.



his back. For variety there was the fine misty shower of cold, muddy slush churned up by the trucks' passage through the soupy gruel the road had long since dissolved into. There was some inventive cursing and grumbling at first. Then, like Corporal Mike Alessandrini, everyone settled down to tough it out.

There were no stops for meals. What skimpy meals there were consisted of cold C-rations scooped from a can and a swig of water from a canteen taken on the move. At infrequent intervals there were stops for head calls. If a man was absolutely unable to wait for one of these stops, his fellow passengers let him know it was preferred that he attend to matters over the tailgate. Even men covered with dirt and grime can be fastidious about some things.

Sleep? Forget it. The constant bouncing and lurching, the growling and snorting of a truck's engine as it crawled its way up and down hills, the shifting of gears, all combined to make sleep as likely as Jack the Ripper's chances for sainthood. Almost to a man the Marines of the 1stMarDiv sat woodenly, disinterestedly watching Korea crawl by, wondering how long it would be before the next stop and a chance to stretch their legs and get the kinks out.

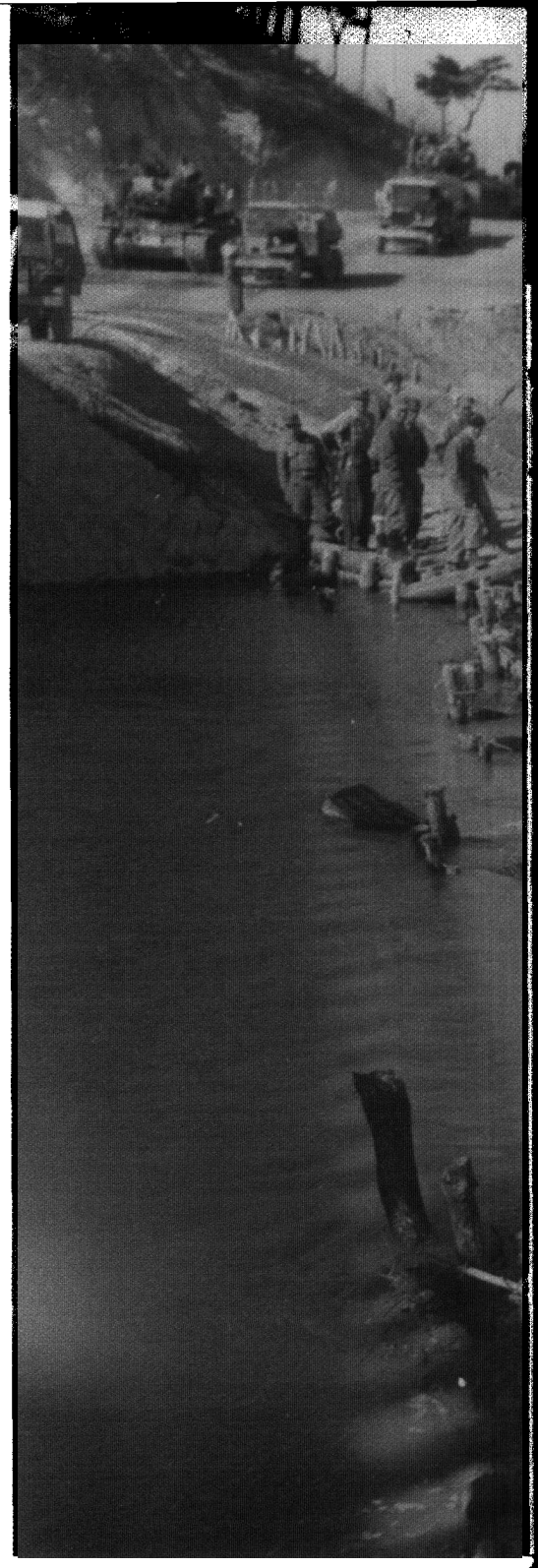
Day and night the convoys ground on, passing through run-down Korean villages, no more than a cluster of thatch-roofed houses with their scattering of dirt-poor civilians. War can be hard on civilians, and from appearances the war had been uncommonly hard on the civilians of Korea. At first the Marines in the passing trucks knew sympathy for the unfortunate Koreans they saw. After a while, though, they lost interest. A man who is soaking wet, cold, hungry, red-eyed from the lack of sleep, stiff as an oaken plank and smelling like a barnyard compost heap can get to feeling that way. And 13 hours can get to seeming as long as the Thirty Years' War.

All things considered the trek to the Western Front was the stuff from which lasting memories could be made. Certainly it left an indelible impression on Cpl Brian McKenna, a 7th Marines squad leader, who recalled years later: "It wore my ass out. I was a healthy 21-year-old when I came off the line and climbed aboard that truck. When that trip finally ended after 12 hours of perching on top of a pile of ration boxes, I felt like an 80-year-old who had been run over by a bus. I've heard tell that the weather wasn't too bad for some outfits. All I remember is sleet and snow and rain, usually all at the same time, freezing my tail off and being stiff from head to foot. If we had been prisoners, it would have been cruel and unusual punishment."

Cpl Arthur Bell had it a little better than that. Bell was a driver with Major Herbert Pierce's 7th Motor Transport Bn and as such enjoyed something better in the line of creature comforts than those his passengers had to put up with. For Bell, behind the wheel of one of those long lines of trucks grinding their way across Korea, Operation Mixmaster came to be a blur of days and nights all running together until they became indistinguishable from one another.

Upshift, downshift, fight the wheel to keep the truck on what passed for a road, keep it from slipping into the truck behind on the uphill climbs or getting away and careening into the vehicle ahead on the twisting, treacherous downhill legs. Peer through a mud-smeared windshield until it seemed that the whole world had narrowed down to the cab of his truck. When it was all over, Arthur Bell could not tell exactly how many round trips he had made. He had lost count.

Not all of the 1stMarDiv's units made the trip to the Western Front by road. The sketchy Korean road network, stretched to its limit by ordinary truck traffic and



It was a time for improvisation. Marine tanks fording muddy streams found the crossing easier over hastily constructed fording foundations made of rock-filled straw bags hauled into place by Korean laborers. (Photo by SSgt Robert Mosier)

bad weather, would have collapsed under the weight of truly heavy loads imposed by tanks and amphibian tractors. A number of loads of palletized heavy equipment made the journey by a roundabout rail network. The tank platoons of the regimental antitank companies joined the 1st Tank Bn and the 1st Armored Amphibian Bn in making the move by ship, boarding LSTs (Landing Ship, Tank) at the small East Coast port of Sokcho-ri.

First, though, there was the matter of getting to Sokcho-ri. That would require a bit of road travel. The tankers going east fared no better than the bulk of the division going west. Moving in serials on 18, 19 and 20 March, the tankers ground their way over roads as bad as any Korea had to offer, in weather conditions that ranged from abysmal to abominable. It snowed. It snowed a perfect blizzard. Visibility dropped and so did the thermometer. Bleary-eyed drivers squinted through the veil of swirling snow, trying to keep the road in sight while their faces grew numb from the cold.

The long-armored columns clawed their way up and down the narrow twisting road, stopping only to rotate drivers and allow time to gulp a few mouthfuls of C-rations heated on hot engine exhausts before churning on through the half-frozen slush and mud of the roadway. Eventually, feeling their way through the wind-driven snow, winding along in single file, the columns inched into Sokcho-ri to load aboard ship for what would be a five-day sea voyage to the port of Inchon and then on to the division's new railhead at Munsan-ni. The seas were rough, and the trip around Korea on shallow draft LSTs was equally rough. Still, Marines who rode the waves to the West Coast had a chance to get warm and dry, creature comforts denied those who traveled overland.

Creature comforts aside, the 1stMarDiv, moving in increments, began relieving elements of the First ROK Division within days of the beginning of the transplacement. It was all done smoothly and professionally, a tribute to the detailed planning done at all levels.

By 28 March the final elements of the 5th Marines, the last units to depart the Eastern Front, moved into their new positions on the Jamestown Line. Only 16 days after being alerted by LTG Van Fleet, and three days under the target date for its arrival, the 1stMarDiv had completed an amazingly complex tactical and logistical operation. An entire Marine division had disengaged from contact with a defending enemy, traversed more than 160 miles of indifferent roads in severe weather conditions and moved into position opposite a new enemy without a single misstep. It had all gone off like clockwork, a monumental accomplishment by any measure of military efficiency. Years later Col Thomas A. Culhane, who commanded the 5th Marines during the move, remembered it as "a masterpiece of logistical efficiency with no unnecessary paperwork and no undue harassment."

What the Marines of the 1stMarDiv found when they finally arrived at their destination was a Korea quite different from the Korea they had left. Gone was the forested, steep-sided, tortuous mountain terrain the division had known on the Eastern Front. The hills, while they were steep enough, were still hills—not mountains. Brush, rather than trees, was the predominant vegetation. The new home of the 1stMarDiv was a Korea strangely reminiscent of Southern California's Camp Pendleton, so familiar to many of the division's rump-sprung, travel-weary Marines.

Then-Second Lieutenant Bernard E. "Mick" Trainor, a platoon leader with "Charlie" Company, 1st Bn, 1st Marines, remembered it that way: "That afternoon we wheeled into a broad field behind a hill massif named Paekhak-san, north of our detrucking point. It looked like we were back in Southern California, with terrain, flora and fauna right out of Camp Pendleton." Trainor also recalled, one of his fellow passengers, road worn and dirt covered, delightedly shouting, "Where's Case Springs?" as he took in the scenery that was so reminiscent of another time and place.

While the geography of the division's new sector may have been reminiscent of Southern California, the tactical situation was straight out of a commander's nightmare. Operating as an element of I Corps and given the mission "to organize, occupy, and actively defend Line Jamestown," MajGen Seldon was appalled with the amount of real estate he would be responsible for.

From the northwest tip of the Kimpo Peninsula the division's line hugged the south bank of the Han River, then followed the Imjin from the point where that river flowed into the Han. Beyond the Sachon River the line crossed to the north bank of the Imjin and trended northeast until it connected with the British Commonwealth Division at the Samchon River. Up hill and down dale, following the line previously held by the South Koreans, the 1stMarDiv's line stretched for an incredible 35 miles, six times the conventional frontage of a division. Even with the added manpower of the Korean Marine Corps Regiment, MajGen Seldon was going to have his hands full.

Adding to the complications was the fact that the 1stMarDiv's new area of operations, unlike the sparsely settled region the division had just abandoned, was a veritable suburbia. Populated villages sprinkled the landscape between

friendly and enemy lines, and farmers went about their pursuits under the gaze of Marines and Chinese alike. In one area between the lines there was even a functioning school. Immediately in the division's rear a brisk traffic of civilians crossed and recrossed the Imjin River. The opportunity for infiltrators was all but limitless, and the prospect was unsettling.

If all of this wasn't enough, something else quickly became apparent. The ROK troops the Marines relieved had left behind certain unpleasant souvenirs in the form of liberal scatterings of mines, few of which they had bothered to record or mark. Apparently, the South Koreans had seldom ventured forward of their own lines, preferring instead to seed the area generously with mines. These unmarked minefields made their presence known immediately.

On 24 March, shortly after moving into position, a Marine from Item Co, 3d Bn, 1st Marines tripped an antipersonnel mine that killed one Marine and wounded another. The next day, Charlie, 1/1 lost six Marines wounded by mines. It was just the beginning. Life on the Western Front wasn't going to be dull.

Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua, a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars, 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.*