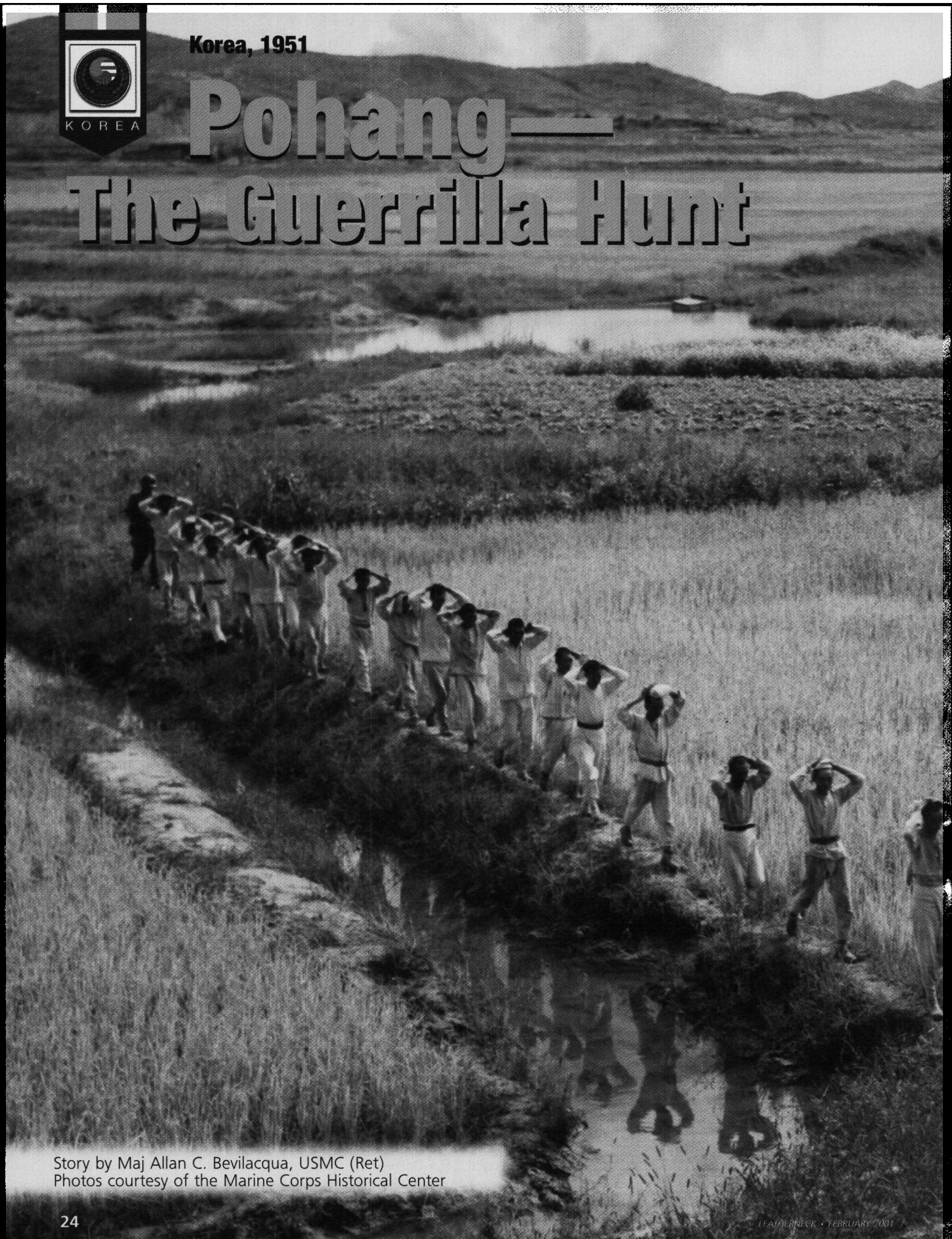




Korea, 1951

Pohang— The Guerrilla Hunt



Story by Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)
Photos courtesy of the Marine Corps Historical Center




"I could always count on the First Marine Division."

*—LtGen Matthew B. Ridgway, USA
Commanding Eighth United States Army in Korea (EUSAK)*

If you visit Masan, Korea, today you will find a bustling, prosperous, modern port city clustered about its scenic bay on South Korea's southern coast some 40 miles west of Pusan. You will have your pick of first-class restaurants and hotels and do your shopping in stores and markets stocked with the abundance of a thriving economy. You may find some of those establishments in a smart, attractive shopping center in the city's northern section, which might leave you thinking you were in Ashtabula, Albuquerque or Atlanta except for the Korean-language signs.

Surrounded by this evidence of a successful free-market economy, you would have a hard time accepting that you were standing on the site of the First Marine Division's bivouac area following the Chosin Reservoir Campaign in late December 1950. Fifty years ago the neatly landscaped steel, concrete and glass of today's shopping center was a farmer's unremarkable bean patch.

The Bean Patch, capitalized. It was always thought of that way by Marines who were there. The Bean Patch, as though there had never been any other. The Marines of the First Provisional Marine Brigade had rested and caught their breath there in-between the blistering fights along the Naktong River in the first



Leathernecks of 1stMarDiv rounded up NKPA communist infiltrators of the 10th Division, who had been sent south to go behind friendly lines and disrupt supply and communication lines.

summer of the war. In December 1950, after 13 days and nights of uninterrupted combat in the frigid mountains of North Korea, the Bean Patch was where Major General Oliver P. Smith took his 1st-MarDiv. One of the first orders of business was a huge bonfire.

It wasn't the bonfire of a college pep rally or a political tub thumping. It was the practical means of disposing of the scurvy, noisome clothing that thousands of men hadn't had off their backs in nearly two months. As units arrived, there were showers, with plenty of soap and hot water. For most men it was their first shower since prior to going ashore at Wonsan back in October. As each man emerged from the shower facility, he was issued entirely new clothing: everything from skivvies and socks to dungarees and field jackets. The old clothing was unceremoniously piled in heaps, soaked with gasoline and set ablaze. There was

no sense in trying to rejuvenate rags.

"Did we ever stink," recalled Corporal Florian Kovalski, a machine-gunner with Lieutenant Colonel John Stevens' 1/5. "I had a shower on the *Bayfield* before Wonsan. That was sometime in mid-October. The next time I had my clothes off was at the Bean Patch in December. I had to have help getting my long johns off. They stuck to me."

Clean and free from the clinging aroma of *eau de night soil*, the next priority was hot chow. Day after day, meal after meal, Marines who couldn't remember their last prepared meal devoured everything that was put in front of them. Bakeries worked around the clock satisfying their appetite for freshly baked bread. In one sitting they wolfed down 40,000 rations of turkey. Then they fell in for seconds. Men who have subsisted for weeks on C-ration crackers and chocolate bars can do that.

Surprisingly, despite the unrelieved exposure to sub-zero temperatures, snow and a relentless wind that they had endured, there were few lasting health effects. The serious frostbite cases had been evacuated, and while everyone, it seemed, had a case of the sniffles, there was little in the line of serious illness. Morale was high, and the fighting spirit that had characterized the division throughout the Chosin Reservoir Campaign was undiminished. Men walked with a heads-up confidence, secure in the knowledge that they had taken on a ruthless, determined enemy and given him an old-fashioned country whipping. With a little rest and a chance to get back into condition, the division would be ready for its next assignment.

No one at Masan was aware of it, but that assignment was taking shape in an unlikely place. Even while Marines were making mess sergeants wonder if they

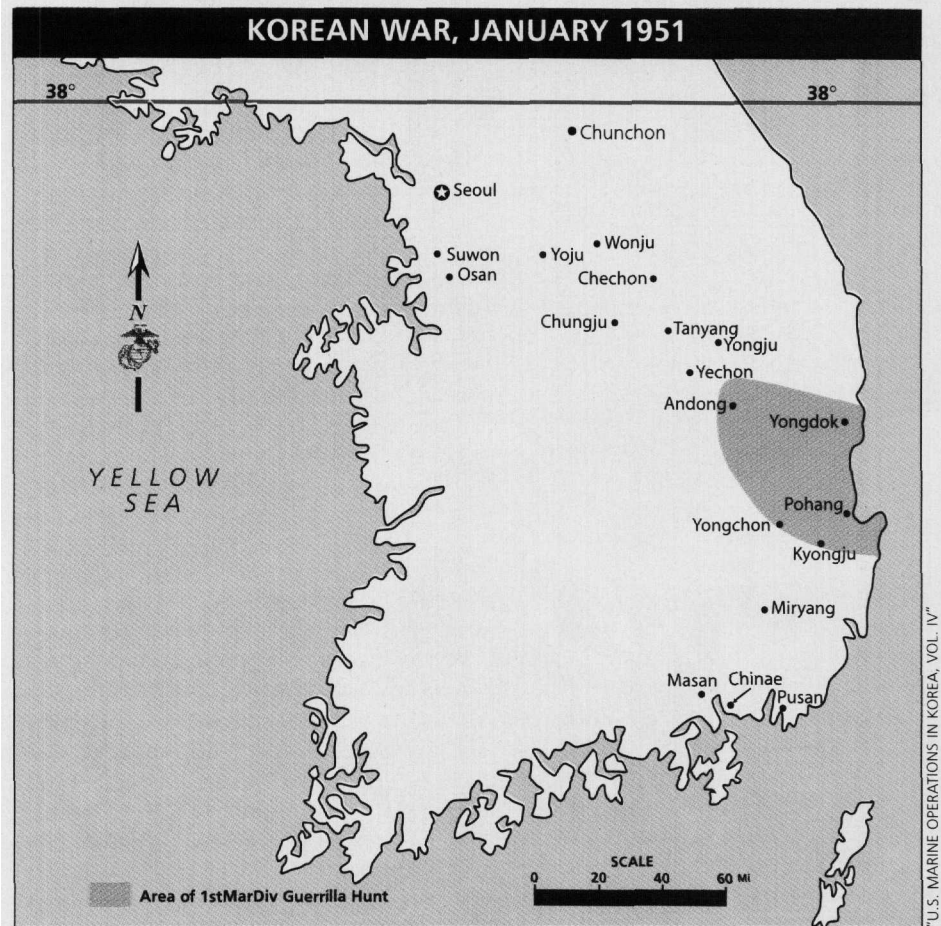


had been set upon by a plague of locusts, the leadership of the Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) was planning to launch a countrywide winter offensive. American and allied forces would be attacked all along the line, from the Yellow Sea on the west to the Sea of Japan on the east. As an adjunct to this attack, communist forces would be infiltrated behind friendly lines to disrupt rear areas while the main attack fell upon the front-line troops.

Among the units selected for the task of infiltration was the 10th Infantry Division of the North Korean People's Army (NKPA). Late in December, while the Marines at the Bean Patch were celebrating Christmas, the 10th Div began moving covertly through mountain defiles and winding dirt tracks into the northeastern regions of South Korea. Its mission: to cut communications and harass rear-area installations in the Andong-Pohang region while operating as a guerrilla force. Looked at objectively, both the unit and its mission were poor choices.

The NKPA 10th Div was not a first-rate outfit. Unlike the North Korean units Marines had fought the previous summer, units made up of highly trained and veteran troops who had fought on the side of Mao Tse Tung's communists

No matter where the communists of the NKPA 10th Div turned, they were hunted down. Pressure was continuous as Marine aerial observers located the enemy and called on the responsive fires from batteries of the 11th Marine Regiment.



in China's Civil War, the 10th Div was relatively new. One of the nine divisions formed in the spring of 1950, its ranks filled with untested conscripts, the 10th Div had been badly mauled when allied forces had broken out of the Pusan Perimeter. Reduced in numbers to little more than 6,000 lightly armed, mostly infantry elements, the division at first glance might have seemed ideally suited for hit-and-run guerrilla tactics. It was to this end that it was reorganized and trained by the Chinese.

There were problems, however. Unlike true guerrillas the 10th Div enjoyed no secure base in the Andong-Pohang area. The men of the division were not native to the area and were largely unfamiliar with it. Unlike the Viet Cong of a later war they did not blend in with the scenery. Most importantly they differed from genuine guerrillas in that they lacked the one element necessary to the conduct of a successful guerrilla campaign: They did not enjoy the support of the local civilian populace. Still, while they may not have been guerrillas in the accepted meaning of the word, they posed the potential for being seriously disruptive rear area raiders. Also on the plus side, by early January 1951 they had not yet been detected.

One thing that cannot be overlooked in warfare is the element of luck. In this

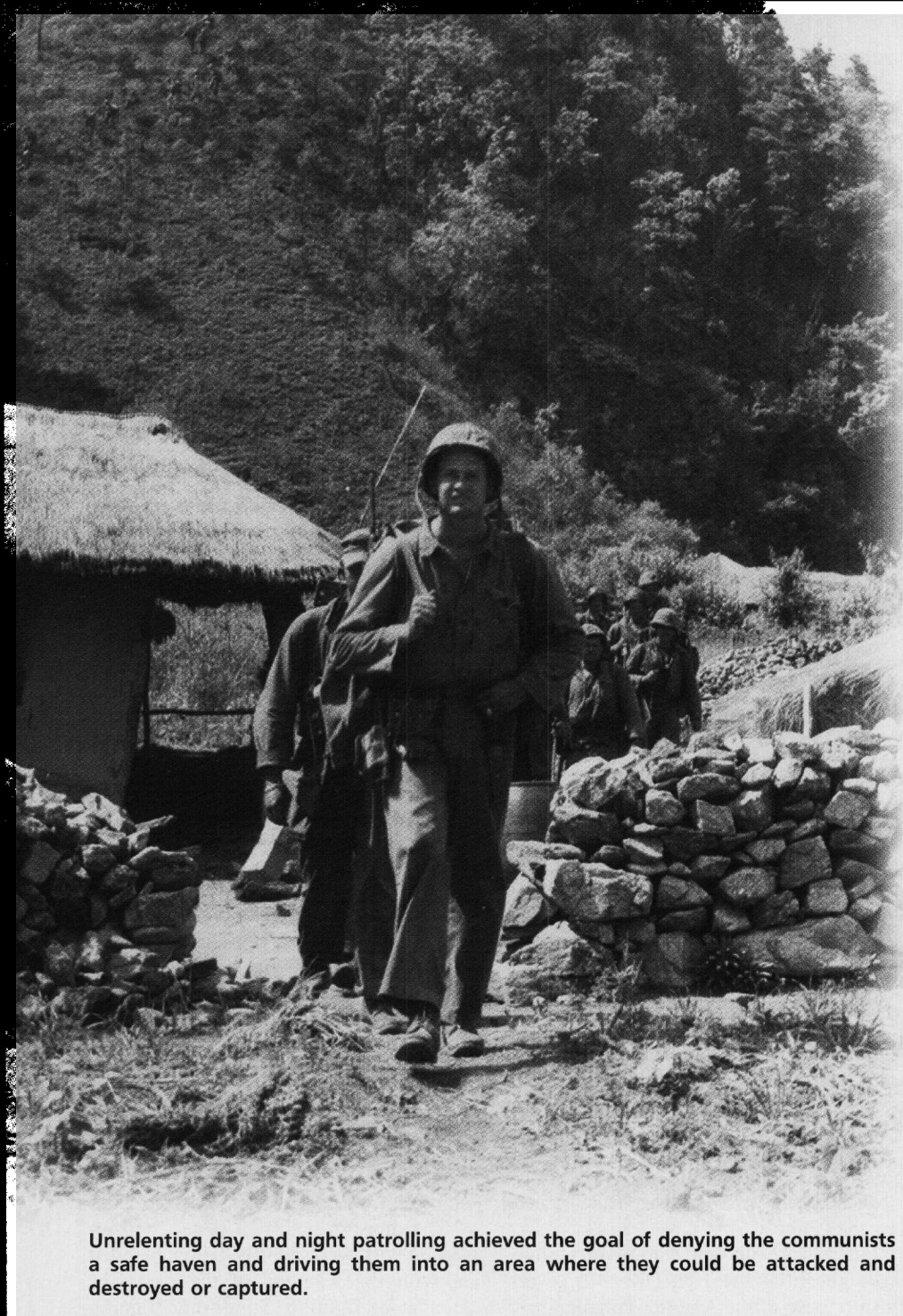
respect the luck of General Lee Ban Nam, the commander of the 10th Div, took this particular moment to turn rotten. On 9 Jan., with the CCF offensive well under way, the 1stMarDiv was ordered by 8th Army to move immediately to the Pohang area with the mission of blocking any enemy penetration beyond Andong and protecting the East Coast port of Pohang. Gen Lee's mission had just taken on some interesting new dimensions that would test him to his limits.

The division was well rested, and replacements were swiftly being blended in with the veterans of the past five months of fighting. Small-unit training was well along, and the division was getting its legs back and the wrinkles out of its belly. The 1stMarDiv, barely more than a month removed from the rigors of the Chosin Reservoir Campaign, was ready to fight again.

Moving by road, rail and sea, by mid-January the division had established a 1,600-square-mile perimeter along the road network linking Pohang, Yongchon, Uihung, Andong and Yongdok. Almost immediately there were unconfirmed reports of enemy infiltrators in the area.

All the confirmation that was necessary was provided on 18 Jan., when a patrol from LtCol Thomas L. "Tom" Ridge's 3/1 came upon an undetermined number of North Korean troops east of

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Unrelenting day and night patrolling achieved the goal of denying the communists a safe haven and driving them into an area where they could be attacked and destroyed or captured.

Andong. The North Koreans took off running like antelopes. Three of the less fleet of foot were rounded up and herded off as prisoners. They sang like a trio of tweety birds, identifying their unit as the 10th Div's 27th Regiment and supplying interrogators with the information that the division's other two regiments, the 25th and 29th, were also in the area. Food was a problem, the prisoners stated, with only what could be plundered from local villages and farms to feed the men in the ranks. Some men in their companies were sick. The symptoms described were consistent with typhus.

Armed with the knowledge of what they were confronted with, Gen Smith and his staff lost no time in devising a

plan to deal with it. The key element, as it always is in war, would be denying the enemy any opportunity to exercise the initiative, forcing him instead to conform to your initiatives. The NKPA 10th Div would be given no respite, no time to gather itself for offensive action. The enemy would be kept on the run, harassed, harried and hounded, kept too busy with trying to escape to have any time for planning mischief. In police terminology Gen Smith was going to "put the roust" on the 10th Div.

The mechanism settled upon to pursue this goal was the tried-and-true basic tactic of constant and highly aggressive patrolling. Out of this grew the practical plan of dividing the division's zone of

action into six sub-zones. Each infantry regiment and the attached Korean Marine Corps (KMC) regiment would have its zone of responsibility. So would the cannoneers of the 11th Marines and the tankers of the 1st Tank Battalion. In keeping with Marine Corps tradition, everyone was going to be a rifleman.

It was largely an affair of lieutenants, sergeants and corporals, a small-unit war often carried on by elements no larger than a fire team. "Rice-paddy patrols" the Marines called them, combing back-country foot paths and trails while larger patrols, some of them motorized and with tank and artillery support, maintained a constant presence along the main roads of the zone. By night the harassing and interdicting fires of the 11th Marines fell on likely assembly areas, making them hazardous to the health of any North Koreans seeking to use them as jumping-off points for attacks. The North Koreans, searching for an opportunity to fight on their own terms, were denied any chance to do so, confined to trying to elude the swarming tactics of the Marines. It is uncommonly hard to attack someone when you're running from him.

Within days Marine patrols were inundating the area. On a single day the 5th Marines alone had 29 rice-paddy patrols operating in terrain that was more vertical than horizontal, in weather reminiscent of the mountains of North Korea.

As the Marines became more familiar with the area, there were more opportunities to bring the enemy to bay and whittle him down. With the advantage of superior communications, patrols led by corporals operating on their own for days at a time were more and more adept at forcing the enemy to fight on unfavorable terms. Supported by the eyes in the sky of Marine Observation Squadron Six (VMO-6), and supplied by helicopters, the Marines quickly mastered the art of boxing in North Korean elements and inflicting telling casualties at a small cost to themselves.

In less than a week Gen Smith had hard evidence that his tactics were paying off. The search of a North Korean prisoner turned up the following message to Gen Lee from the commander of the North Korean II Corps:

"Get all of your troops out of the enemy encirclement and withdraw to north of Pyongyang without delay. Liaison team sent with radio. If you will inform us of your escape route, we will assist by clearing your advance. If you cannot escape, stay in the rear of enemy as guerrillas."

In polite terms Gen Lee was being told he was pretty much on his own. Far from being capable of operating as guerrillas,

his command was fast disintegrating into scattered bands of fugitives.

The tide was now definitely running in favor of the Marines, and it was running at flood. As the North Koreans were squeezed out of running room, there were more and more contacts from which the North Koreans emerged decidedly the worse for the experience. On 22 Jan. a patrol from Captain Robert P. "Bob" Wray's "Charlie" Co, 1/1 flushed a party of North Koreans from their hiding place near Mukkye-dong, several miles from Andong. So hurried was their departure that several North Koreans forgot to bring along their weapons. On 26 Jan. elements of the 7th Marines, operating in conjunction with the National Police, routed nearly 400 North Koreans who had put up a futile resistance near Chisodong. Known North Korean casualties for the day added up to 161 killed or taken prisoner. It was a representative day.

In a score of small firefights during the last week of January rice-paddy patrols operating throughout the division's zone of action chopped up squad- and platoon-size North Korean units with regularity. None of these engagements merited more than a line or two in an after-action report, but all of them were the result of exemplary small-unit leadership by squad and fire-team leaders barely out of their teens. As the North Koreans continued to be battered, it became increasingly apparent that enemy elusiveness was not always the result of superior tactics. As often as not the North Koreans simply no longer had the stomach to fight.

Under unrelenting Marine pressure the North Koreans were showing ever more signs of being interested in nothing beyond attempting to evade contact. More than a few were surrendering, bringing with them tales of rations barely at the subsistence level and a raging epidemic of typhus. By the first week in February it was highly unusual for Marines to encounter groups of more than 50 North Koreans. The rate at which the air was going out of the 10th Div's balloon was not without its moments of comedy.

Cpl Austin "Aussie" Stack was a newly arrived replacement machine-gunner in First Lieutenant John Hancock's Baker Co, 1/5. On a weeklong rice-paddy patrol Stack thought to use some of the South Korean money he had been issued to purchase a few eggs from a Korean farmer. Four men, North Koreans by their ragged uniforms, emerged from the farmhouse. Three of the men fled like grouse bursting from the bushes at the approach of a dog. The fourth, by gesture, indicated his willingness to surrender.

As far as Stack was concerned, the man was a damned nuisance. Stack didn't want a prisoner; he wanted some eggs for breakfast. Grumbling at the unfairness of things, Stack took his unwanted prisoner back to the patrol leader. Stack never did get his eggs. Instead he was congratulated on his capture of a dangerous enemy. He would rather have had the eggs.

The scattered bands of henhouse raiders that had been the NKPA 10th Div would have settled for just about anything edible. What they were subsisting on was scarcely more than bugs and roots. Morale was collapsing. One second lieutenant, accompanied by three of his men, surrendered, bringing with him a tale of the dispirited remnants of entire units seeking only to survive. The division commander himself, Gen Lee Ban Nam, had retreated to a deep mountain-side foxhole, from which he seldom emerged.

Staggering and stumbling from one hideout to another, Gen Lee's shredded command blundered from catastrophe to catastrophe. A force of some 400 North Koreans trying to escape the never-ending pressure applied by the 5th Marines careened headlong into the zone of the 1st Marines northeast of Uisong and was pounded thoroughly. A band composed of elements of the 25th and 27th Regiments fleeing from encirclement by the 5th Marines ran blindly into the 2d and 3d Battalions of the 1st Marines and two battalions of the KMC regiment. They escaped a total slaughter only by fleeing in small groups.

It was increasingly difficult for Marine patrols even to buy a fight with the thoroughly deflated bits and pieces of the 10th Div. There were fewer and fewer North Koreans to be seen. In the zone of the 11th Marines, patrols were using the total lack of contact to combine patrolling with pheasant hunting. It made for a pleasant change in diet.

On 5 Feb. Gen Smith was able to advise 8th Army: "It is considered that the situation in the Division area is sufficiently in hand to permit the withdrawal of the Division." One week later Lieutenant General Matthew B. Ridgway, USA, commanding the 8th Army, alerted what he termed "the most powerful division in Korea" to be prepared to move to Chungju where the heaviest CCF attacks were taking place.

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

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