

KOREAN WAR

THE LAST BATTLE

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

"Do I remember July of '53? Yeah, I remember it. I remember a helluva lot of rain, and I remember a helluva lot of Chinese. Damn right I remember it."

—Marine veteran Anthony "Tony" Stasiak

With the arrival of spring 1953, North Korea's Chinese rescuers were looking for a way out of the Korean War. Since the introduction of the Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) into the war during the winter of 1950, Chinese casualties had soared to nearly 1,000,000 dead and wounded. Enough was enough.

Still, while the Chinese wanted out of Korea, they wanted to do it in such a way as to make them seem the victors. At the nondescript village of Panmunjom, the charade of truce talks that had dragged on for two years continued. The North Koreans, full of bluff and bluster, were the front men for those parleys, but it was the Chinese who were calling the plays. And it was the Chinese, betting on one final decisive thrust, who sought to use the truce talks to solidify a commanding communist position at Panmunjom.

What was decided upon by the CCF high command was one overwhelming attack that would open the vital Uijong-bu Corridor to a flood of Chinese. The Uijong-bu Corridor was the key terrain of the entire Korean War, the traditional pathway to invasion of the southern regions of Korea, the route followed by the Mongol invasions of 1231-1259 and North Korean communist leader Kim Il Sung's forces two years prior to the Korean War. While the roads and trails in the eastern regions of South Korea led to nowhere in particular, the Uijong-bu Corridor led directly to the South Korean capital of Seoul.

The Chinese attack would have to be overwhelming since it would run up against a pair of formidable obstacles. One year earlier the supreme commander of the Eighth United States Army in Korea (EUSAK or 8th Army) and all Allied forces in Korea, General James A. Van Fleet, USA, had assigned the western section of the Korean front to what he termed "the two most powerful divisions in Korea," the First Marine Division and the British Commonwealth Division.



First Marine Regiment machine-gunners fire on enemy forces in July 1953. (Photo by TSgt Jack A. Slockbower, USMC)

Foremost among the missions of both divisions was denying the Uijong-bu Corridor to any attack from the north.

Knowing what they would face, the Chinese planned their offensive to strike the junction of 1stMarDiv and the Commonwealth Division, opening a breach there, allowing them access to the all-important Uijong-bu Corridor. The main

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—Sgt Vernon Schmidt

attack would fall upon 1stMarDiv positions on a hill numbered 119, a hill the Marines called "Boulder City" for the massive rock outcropping that distinguished it. First, though, there would have to be attacks on 1stMarDiv's combat outpost line, leaving the main line of resistance (MLR) on Boulder City open to direct assault.

The Chinese offensive began deliberately. The Chinese plan called for attacks upon a pair of combat outposts dubbed

Berlin and East Berlin by Marines as an opening move. Both Berlin and East Berlin were ideally sited to support each other and deny the CCF a direct axis of attack against Boulder City, where the CCF hoped to open the gap through which an avalanche of Chinese would pour. The Berlin outposts had to be eliminated before the main CCF attack could go forward.

While geography favored the Berlin outposts in one respect (mutual support), it imposed a serious constraint in another. Ideally sited though they were, neither Berlin nor East Berlin was large enough to hold more than a platoon of defenders. The CCF, willing to expend lives to take ground, could attack both outposts with battalion-size elements. The CCF plan of attack was simple: inundate the Berlin outposts in an avalanche of supporting arms fires and massed infantry attacks.

At approximately 7 a.m. on July 7, both Berlin outposts came under massed artillery and mortar fires that made each of the Berlins appear as erupting volcanoes. Explosion after explosion rocked the hillsides in a classic "drumfire," in which no single detonation could be distinguished in the continuous overlapping roar that shook the

ground as a terrier shakes a rat. For the two platoons of Marines from Lieutenant Colonel Alexander D. Cereghino's 2d Battalion, Seventh Marine Regiment manning the outposts, it was a firestorm. Fires from CCF 122 mm field pieces and 120 mm mortars impacted like hailstones shattering automobile windows. Adding their voices to the ear-shattering roar, self-propelled Russian-made direct-fire pieces blasted away with high-velocity 76 mm shells as fast as CCF gunners could feed them.

Advancing through their own barrage, taking frightful casualties as they came on, two entire battalions of the CCF 407th Regiment hurled themselves at the Berlin outposts in waves. Falling dead and wounded in the torrent of their own shells that blanketed the Marine positions, the attackers pressed forward regardless of losses. As an incoming tide sweeps over a beach, the massed CCF infantry swept over the two Berlins. In a hand-to-hand, face-to-face knock-down, drag-out meleé that lasted throughout the day, East Berlin fell to the CCF. Berlin, defended by only 18 able-bodied Marines, managed to hold out a while longer before it fell, shortly before 10 p.m.

Watching from his bunker on the MLR, Sergeant Vernon Schmidt, a Company I, 3/7 rifle platoon sergeant, was anything but safe and sound. Even as an avalanche of incoming fire blanketed the Berlin outposts, CCF artillery pummeled Marine front-line positions in an effort to suppress any supporting fires. In a rocking roar of explosion upon explosion, entire lengths of trench line were collapsed, bunkers blown into gaping craters. In two particular bunkers, victims of multiple direct hits, there was not enough left of the occupants to identify; to this day they remain listed as missing in action.

"[Private First Class] 'Moose' Moran, who had tried to take a supply train to East Berlin, was caught in it," said Sgt Schmidt. "He had shrapnel wounds all over his upper legs and looked like a hamburger patty that had been dropped in the mud. One eye was hanging on his cheek. When they came to carry him away, he growled, 'I'm going back to New York if I have to crawl.' He was some Irishman."

It could have been worse. It would have been worse had 1stMarDiv been deployed in a linear defense, but the Division had long since adopted the defense in depth favored by the Commonwealth Division. While forward strongpoints bore the brunt of the CCF fire, those in the second or third echelon were relatively unaffected.

What did make it worse for everyone was the torrent of rain that fell in sheets, turning inconsequential streams into raging floods, raising rivers out of their banks

and turning the entire battlefield into a foot-sucking morass. Marines crouched up to their waists in flooded trenches and bunkers that had become mud wallows, taking what nourishment there was to be had from cold canned C-rations, chewing stolidly on ham and lima beans and rock-hard ration crackers, about as appetizing as petrified mulch.

All of the artillery fire wasn't coming from the Chinese side. Every gun of 1stMarDiv's artillery regiment, Colonel Manly L. Curry's 11th Marines, unleashed 105 mm and 155 mm volleys in return, some directed at the Chinese assailing the

Berlins, some pounding away in counter-battery missions. Lending weight to the Marine response, the 1st 4.5-inch Rocket Battery slammed nearly 600 rounds of 43.5-pound high explosive projectiles into Chinese support positions. Two platoons from Co B, 1st Tank Bn blasted away at the Chinese with more than 800 rounds of 90 mm high-velocity, high explosives.

With such support and through sheer determination, counterattacks by a pair of reinforced platoons from 3/7 in regimental reserve began dislodging the Chinese from the ground they had gained. After a three-day back-and-forth contest



Marines wait in the chow line for a hot breakfast near the front lines.



After the cease fire goes into effect on July 27, Marines take a break before moving out.

Much-needed supplies are brought up to the Marines at Boulder City in July 1953. (DOD photo)

of absolute savagery in what was the heaviest artillery duel of the Korean War, the outposts again were in Marine control. It would be only a temporary control. Individually or together, the outposts could not hold enough defenders to stem the tidal wave of humanity thrown at them.

Hanging doggedly to their positions in a bloodbath that left the rain-drenched mire covered with the bodies of hundreds of Chinese dead, the Berlin outposts held out for nearly two weeks. The effort was to no avail if the CCF commanders were willing to continue to spend the lives of their men. They were. On the night of July 19-20, the two platoons of Marines defending the Berlin outposts were overrun by a multi-battalion attack that left a carpet of Chinese dead behind it. At a terrible price the Chinese now were able to mount a major attack on the MLR and attempt to create a rupture between 1stMarDiv and the Commonwealth Division.

"I noticed my St. Christopher medal hanging outside my flak jacket and remembered the words from Mass, 'Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.' I felt old and so very tired," said Sgt Robert Kreid, D/2/7.

As the Chinese consolidated their holdings on the Berlin outposts, the torrential rain never ceased its assault. Ground activity confined itself to patrol clashes throughout the middle weeks of July. Rain



that falls in sheets, rain that never ceases can bring even the most determined human activity to a grinding halt. Marines and Chinese alike were bogged into a mud-caked battle with the elements, one in which simply pulling one foot after another from the glue-like landscape is a triumph of will.

"Go out into your backyard and dig a deep hole. Then fill it with water and crouch in it for a week," said Charles Parkman, a veteran of the battle. "Have your neighbor douse you constantly with a stream of cold water from a garden hose. Limit your

meals to cold beans from a tin can. Do you need a head call? Do it in an empty ration can, then throw the can as far as you're able. Let your neighbor loose a shotgun blast at you any time you raise your head. That would be a small taste of what we had that summer."

Eventually, as July inched toward its final days, the rain finally ceased and the sun reappeared. With the sun came scorching heat and the suffocating, stomach-turning stench of hundreds of unburied, putrefying bodies of dead Chinese that carpeted the field all around the Berlin outposts. Then came the flies, big green blowflies in the millions, feeding upon the dead, crawling over the dead and the living alike, one of the ugliest of the many ugly realities of combat that never find their way into after action reports. Marines tried every tactic they could devise to keep the filth-encrusted flies from contaminating the food they ate. None succeeded.

Marines manning the MLR knew without being told that when the ground dried out, the Chinese would make their move. Some things are self-evident.

On Thursday, July 23, the North Korean delegates to the Panmunjom truce talks abruptly stalked away from the table, fuming and snarling in a fine display of temper. It was all a show, a show orchestrated by the Chinese to buy a bit of time. If all went according to plan and the Chinese succeeded in breaching the MLR, opening the road to Seoul, the communists could return to the negotiations in the driver's seat and dictate the terms of settlement.

That was the intent. What the communist action was accurately seen as on the Allied side of the table was a telltale indication that the main Chinese attack



A wounded 3/1 Marine is looked after by a fellow Marine while being transported to an aid station.

on Boulder City would take place within days, if not hours. The Chinese, too clever by half, had unwittingly tipped their hand.

Even as Col Walter F. Layer's 1st Marines began relieving the Marines along the MLR, First Lieutenant Oral R. Swigart Jr. knew that his G/3/1 had drawn the short straw; they would be defending Boulder City, the one piece of ground the Chinese absolutely had to have if they were to realize their dream of a decisive breakthrough. In briefing his officers and noncommissioned officers, 1stLt Swigart was brutally frank in laying out what was expected of them.

In detailing the situation and the mission, Swigart pulled no punches. The position the company would be defending would almost certainly be the point of the main Chinese attack; it must be held at all costs. The lieutenant went on to say, "If worse comes to worse, and we cannot kill them fast enough, and if it appears that we will be overrun, a prearranged signal will call in all the firepower we have to blow up the hill. We will be right under it, but we will stand."

The Chinese wasted no time in validating Swigart's words. At 9 a.m. on July 24, only hours after G/3/1 had relieved its opposite numbers of G/3/7 on Boulder

City, enemy fire began pounding the Marine lines. Incoming 120 mm mortar rounds were soon joined by artillery bursts until both were impacting Boulder City at the rate of five or more rounds per minute. Before noon, wire communications between G/3/1 and the battalion command post (CP) were out, and the Chinese were actively jamming radio communications.

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"By midday we knew something big was going to happen soon," said Corporal Harvey Dethloff, a G/3/1 machine-gun squad leader, who was awarded the Silver Star. "PFC Timothy Gilmore, my gunner, decided he wanted some hot C-rations, so he made a dash for our other gun because he knew they had a stove. As he backed out of their bunker, a '76' round landed not more than a few feet behind him. We carried him out in a poncho."

The fire from Chinese supporting arms increased to a deafening roar, explosion

coming upon explosion, not only pounding defensive emplacements but tearing away at G/3/1's protective wire, opening a gap for an assault that was soon to follow. Knowing the Chinese willingness to trade lives for ground by throwing their infantry through their own artillery fires, LtCol Paul M. Jones, commanding 3/1, made it clear that despite the risk, the Marines on Boulder City must leave their protective shelters, even as the shells rained down, to take the attackers under direct fire. To do otherwise would be fatal.

True to form, late in the afternoon the Chinese threw a multi-battalion attack against Boulder City, taking casualties from their own fire, those killed falling atop those already killed, the "lucky" ones doggedly pressing forward. As darkness fell, the Chinese assault never let up. With G/3/1's protective wire now blown completely apart, the Chinese were clanging at the foremost Marine positions.

"We were firing our weapons as fast as we could. I remember one who came right up to us before I let him have it. I was afraid of hitting a Marine, so I kept yelling at him, asking if he was a Marine," said PFC Leland "Lee" Snell, G/3/1. "Suddenly, a flare went off and I saw that he had sneakers on; at that point, I let him have it."



Reinforcements from 3/1 arrive at the front lines during the Battle of Boulder City.



The Korean Armistice Agreement is signed by GEN Mark W. Clark, Commander, United Nations forces.

Leland Snell's experience was repeated countless times all along the line with Marines and Chinese locked in face-to-face bloodletting, even as the Chinese fire continued to rain down upon both. With all communications to the forward platoons knocked out, Swigart left the company CP in order to directly coordinate the defense. He was immediately knocked flat by a frag from a mortar round that ripped a long gash in his forehead and knocked him senseless. Finally regaining consciousness, he waved off medical attention and continued to direct the defense, blood streaming down his face.

By the weight of a sheer mass of numbers, the Chinese attackers had reached the MLR. There, Marines and Chinese bludgeoned, battered, slashed and shot each other at such close range as to drench themselves with each other's blood. The MLR became a charnel house, the living locked in a deadly struggle among the dead and wounded.

"The trench line was blocked by the bodies of Lt John Leonhard and PFC Patrick Edmunds. They had been killed about 20 feet from me, and I never knew they were there," said Cpl Richard Champagne, a G/3/1 rifle squad leader. "We crawled over their bodies to an unoccupied bunker and knocked out a sandbag to have a field of fire down the trench line. There were Chinese all over the place."

The Marines of G/3/1 weren't giving an inch, but the mass of attackers being thrown at them was slowly pushing them back an inch at a time. Even in the darkness there was no lessening of the savage combat taking place on Boulder City. At 9:30 p.m., with the fight now raging about

the company CP, Swigart, still dripping blood from his wound despite the battle dressing wrapped about his head, called in artillery fire on the forward slopes of Boulder City in an effort to stop the human tide. It did, but only for a few minutes. The Chinese poured more and more men into the assault.

By midnight, G/3/1 had been reduced to 25 percent effective. With no one to evacuate them in the unending bitter struggle, the wounded did the best they could to aid one another. In the entire com-

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pany there was not a single corpsman still on his feet. Sgt James Everson was one of the walking wounded who "seemed to be everywhere at once," doing his best to treat those less fortunate. For his actions that night he would receive the Silver Star.

The situation was desperate, but not hopeless. As the clock inched its way into July 25, Lt Swigart was alerted that Captain Louis J. Sartor's I/3/1, in reserve, was moving forward to help restore the situation. Although the Marines of G/3/1 were fiercely battling the Chinese attack, there were now far too few of them to stem the tide and throw the attackers from the foothold they had gained. They were a tough lot, though, those Marines of G/3/1. They took their grit and determination from their bloodied company commander, Oral Swigart, who would receive the Navy

Cross for his unwavering pursuit of duty at Boulder City.

It wasn't a one-sided affair. Even as the Chinese plastered Boulder City with mortar and artillery fire, all the guns of the 11th Marines treated the Chinese to a hellfire of their own. The guns of the Commonwealth Division threw their weight into the contest as well, pounding Chinese troop positions and throwing counterbattery fire at the Chinese gunners. Between 10 p.m. and 4 a.m., July 24-25, Marine and British artillery loosed nearly 24,000 rounds of mixed high explosives on the Chinese.

Daylight and a clear sky brought more assistance in the form of Grumman F9F Panther jets from Marine Fighter Squadrons 115 and 311. Between 6 a.m. and 10:30 a.m., the two squadrons combined to batter Chinese positions with 32 tons of aerial ordnance.

Even the Chinese could not continue to withstand such punishment. The Chinese tidal wave began to give way and recede. Slowly, one bunker at a time, one bit of trench line after another, a determined tank-infantry counterattack cleared the forward slopes of all living Chinese. By nightfall the entire Boulder City position was firmly under Marine control. The one position that had to be held was held.

The Chinese attempt to win the Korean War by one decisive thrust had failed, broken on a solid rock of firepower by a relative handful of Marines who held off an entire CCF division thrown at them in waves. At 10 a.m., Monday, July 27, China's North Korean front men signed the cease-fire agreement that would end hostilities at 10 that night. The war that had lasted three years was over.

Author's note: From its beginning in the summer of 1950 to its end at Boulder City in the summer of 1953, more than 100,000 Marines served in Korea. Of those who served there, 4,262 died there. This attempt to tell one small part of that story is for them.

"I have eaten your bread and salt.
"I have drunk your water and wine.
"The deaths ye died I have watched beside,

"And the lives ye led were mine."
—Excerpt from "Prelude" by Rudyard Kipling

Author's bio: Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, a Leatherneck contributing editor, is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars as well as on an exchange tour with the French Foreign Legion. Later in his career, he was an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va.

