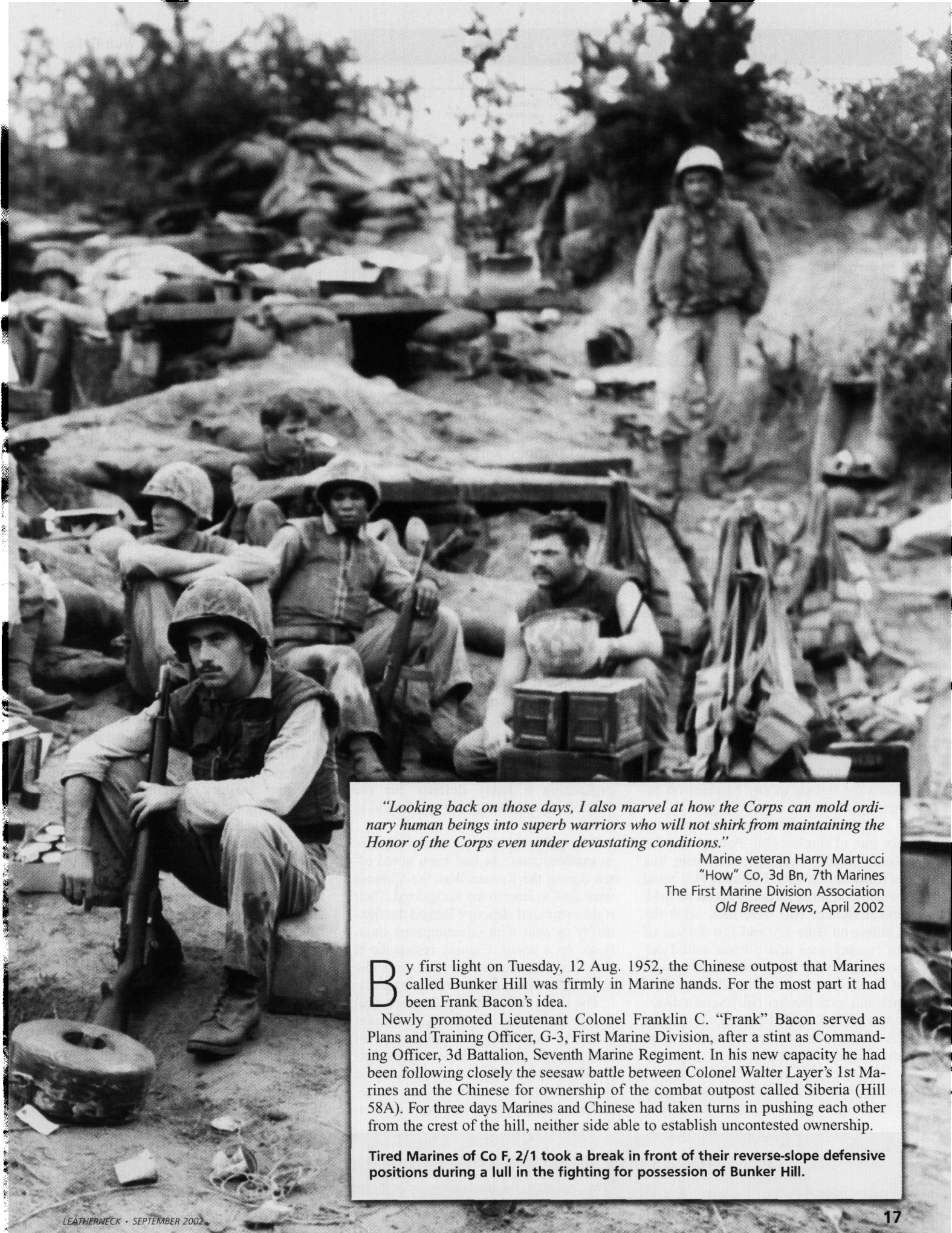


Korea 1952

The Battle at Bunker Hill: Part II, The Conclusion

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



"Looking back on those days, I also marvel at how the Corps can mold ordinary human beings into superb warriors who will not shirk from maintaining the Honor of the Corps even under devastating conditions."

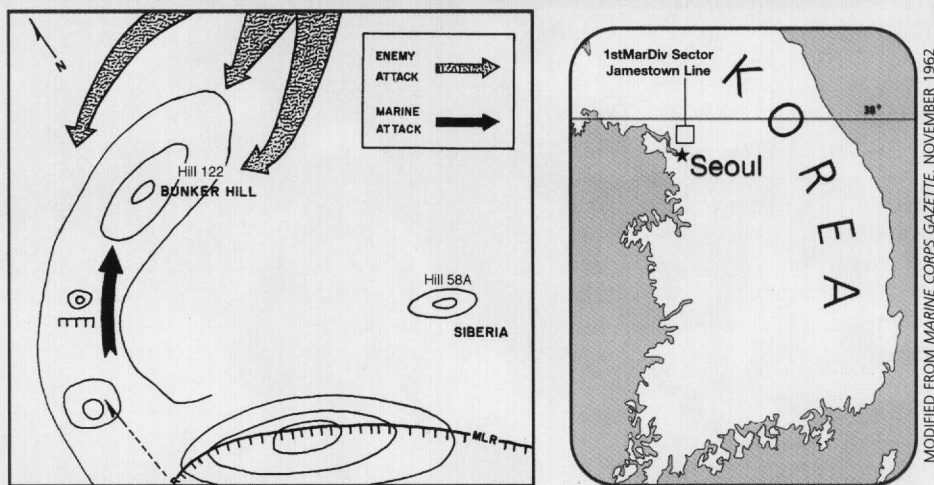
Marine veteran Harry Martucci
"How" Co, 3d Bn, 7th Marines
The First Marine Division Association
Old Breed News, April 2002

By first light on Tuesday, 12 Aug. 1952, the Chinese outpost that Marines called Bunker Hill was firmly in Marine hands. For the most part it had been Frank Bacon's idea.

Newly promoted Lieutenant Colonel Franklin C. "Frank" Bacon served as Plans and Training Officer, G-3, First Marine Division, after a stint as Commanding Officer, 3d Battalion, Seventh Marine Regiment. In his new capacity he had been following closely the seesaw battle between Colonel Walter Layer's 1st Marines and the Chinese for ownership of the combat outpost called Siberia (Hill 58A). For three days Marines and Chinese had taken turns in pushing each other from the crest of the hill, neither side able to establish uncontested ownership.

Tired Marines of Co F, 2/1 took a break in front of their reverse-slope defensive positions during a lull in the fighting for possession of Bunker Hill.

Bunker Hill, 11-12 Aug. 1952



The more LtCol Bacon studied the situation the more it became apparent that Siberia could not be defended. As Col Bacon, USMC (Ret) reflected years later, "While we could take Siberia any time we wanted, we could not hold it without heavy losses."

The problem lay with three other hills that dominated Siberia. Slightly to the northwest and northeast respectively, Hills 120 and 110 looked down on Siberia's north slope. To the southwest, controlling the rear of Siberia and the approaches leading to it, stood the much larger Bunker Hill (Hill 122). Bunker Hill was more of a northeast to southwest running ridge than a hill. From Bunker Hill proper at the upper end a shallow saddle (Bunker Ridge) trended to the southwest, ending in Hill 124. So long as the Chinese occupied Bunker Hill and Hills 120 and 110 they would be looking down the throats of any Marines on Siberia. Siberia was a poor bargain.

As Bacon saw it, though, the same was not true of Bunker Hill. Possession of it would greatly strengthen the main line of resistance (MLR). If Bunker Hill could be taken, it most certainly could be held, and if Bunker Hill were held, what the Chinese on Hills 120 and 110 did was of no consequence and Siberia would become irrelevant. Why not take advantage of the Chinese fixation on Siberia and attack and seize Bunker Hill? Send a diversionary attack against Siberia, then, when the Chinese reacted to it, launch the main attack against Bunker Hill.

With this plan in mind LtCol Bacon approached his immediate superior, Col Russell E. Honsowetz, the 1stMarDiv's

Assistant Chief of Staff, G-3 (Operations). "There's only one thing wrong with that plan; I didn't think of it myself," Col Honsowetz replied. "Let's go see General Selden."

Major General John T. Selden, Commanding General, 1stMarDiv, saw immediately the opportunity in LtCol Bacon's idea. It could be done, but it would have to be done quickly, and it would have to be done by the unit on the scene, Col Layer's 1st Marines.

Col Layer wasted no time. On the night of 11-12 Aug., following a successful diversionary attack on Siberia, Captain Sereno Scranton's reinforced Company B, 1/1, from regimental reserve, stormed Bunker Hill. After sharp initial resistance, B/1/1 pushed the Chinese defenders from the crest. There was no time wasted in celebrating. The "Baker" Co Marines immediately began organizing a hasty defense for the Chinese counterattack that was bound to follow.

Strangely, that counterattack was slow in materializing. As had been noted often during the Korean War, the Chinese were slow to react to the unexpected. Their rigid command structure lacked the flexibility to deal with unanticipated situations. As a result, Chinese resistance at first was limited to artillery fire. Sporadic at first, the fire quickly rose in intensity.

The firing inflicted significant casualties in the ranks of Baker Co. Bunker Hill was essentially one solid mass of rock, almost impossible to dig in. Exposed and practically without cover, the Baker Co Marines suffered from the relentless shellfire, more and more of them

falling killed and wounded. With Baker Co's ranks seriously reduced by casualties, shortly after noon Capt Howard J. Connolly's Item/3/1 was sent forward from the MLR to lend added muscle to the defense. Both companies pulled back from the crest of Bunker Hill to reverse slope positions that offered better cover from incoming fire.

At 1600 the Chinese struck at Bunker Hill with a vengeance. Chinese infantry supported by a thunderous barrage of mortar and artillery fire stormed up the forward (northwestern) slope of Bunker Ridge. They were met by the combined fires of Baker and Item companies, 3/1's 81 mm mortars, the 1st Marines' 4.2-inch mortars and the fires of the 11th Marines' direct and general support artillery battalions. From their FO bunker on the MLR, Major Bill Biehl and Capt Bernard Peterson directed the fires of supporting arms and the circling Corsairs.

For more than an hour the Chinese battered at the Marine line, seeking to create a breach. Each thrust was blunted and thrown back. Denied their objective, the Chinese broke off the engagement and hunkered down on the forward slope of Bunker Hill and Bunker Ridge while the Marines held their line on the reverse (southeastern) slope. In between, on the crest, was an area where a wise man, Marine or Chinese, did not show his head.

No one doubted that the Chinese would be back. Around midnight, as the calendar turned a page to 13 Aug., a large Chinese force attacked the Marine squad outpost on Stromboli (Hill 48A) well to the east of Bunker Hill and forward of the MLR sector held by Capt Clarence G. Moody's Fox/2/1. While Chinese mortars and artillery pounded Fox Co's MLR positions, Chinese infantry, firing rifles and submachine guns and hurling grenades, threw itself at the outnumbered defenders of Stromboli. Time and again the Chinese attempted to overrun the handful of Marines holding the outpost, only to be thrown back in fierce hand-to-hand combat.

With all three of his rifle platoon leaders wounded, Capt Moody, ably assisted by his noncommissioned officers, took command of the action. Exposing himself to intense enemy fire, Moody ranged the firing line, directing the fight from up front. Then, with all of the defenders of Stromboli wounded, he led his reserve platoon forward to the beleaguered outpost to hurl back the attacking Chinese,

Time and again the Chinese attempted to overrun the handful of Marines holding the outpost, only to be thrown back in fierce hand-to-hand combat.

re-establish a strong defense and see to the evacuation of his wounded Marines. Stromboli and the MLR held. For his actions that night, Capt Moody would receive the Navy Cross.

As the fighting at Stromboli grew, the Chinese threw their main attack at Bunker Hill. It and Bunker Ridge erupted in a rain of barrage fire from Chinese mortars and artillery. An entire regiment of Chinese infantry, the 118th, surged at the crest in their mustard-colored uniforms. The crest was being held by the Marines of Capt Connolly's Item/3/1 following the withdrawal of the thoroughly exhausted and badly depleted Baker/1/1. The Chinese were met by a wall of metal thrown up by Item Co's organic rifles, Browning Automatic Rifles, machine guns and 60 mm mortars.

Lending their fires to the defense were the salvos of the howitzers of the 11th Marines called down by Connolly. In addition, Marine 4.5-inch rockets unleashed more than 600 high-explosive shells against the swarming Chinese. From the MLR the tankers of LtCol John I. Williamson's 1st Tank Bn weighed in with more than 800 rounds of high-velocity, high-explosive shellfire.

The Chinese pressed home the attack, ignoring their casualties, until the fighting all along the line became a point-blank affair. Marines firing into the Chinese ranks saw the muzzle blasts of their weapons set the uniforms of Chinese soldiers to smoldering. Private First Class Gus Mendez, an Item Co BARman, remembered shooting one charging Chinese soldier at such close range that the dead body fell into Mendez's fighting hole.

At the height of this fighting Second Lieutenant John E. Watson led a reinforcing element from Headquarters and Service Co, 3/1 forward to determine the strength and disposition of enemy forces threatening Item Co's left flank. That accomplished, 2dLt Watson then led a

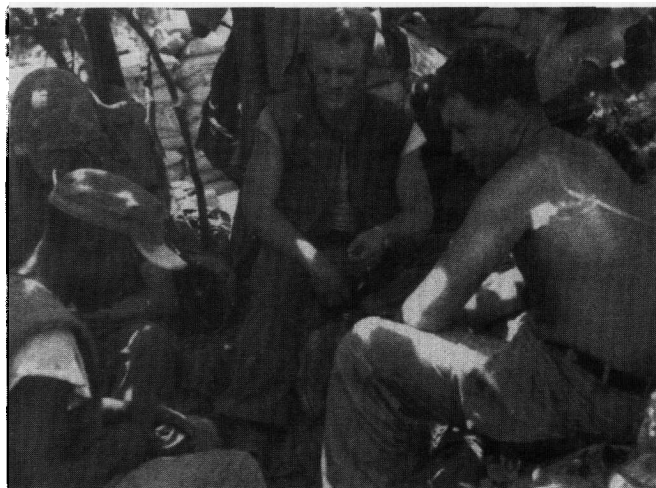
small pickup force in a daring counterattack against Chinese elements, throwing the Chinese back over the crest and restoring the situation. Throughout the night Watson led his handful of Marines in hand-to-hand combat as they stood off three separate Chinese attempts to storm the hill. For his example of courageous leadership and total disregard for his own safety, 2dLt Watson would receive the Navy Cross.

Casualties in Item Co were mounting, and shortly before 0300, 13 Aug. Capt William Vanzuyen's George/3/7 was rushed forward from division reserve to strengthen the defenses of the hill. Leading his 1st Platoon forward, Kentucky-born 2dLt William A. Watson passed through an area littered with dead, mostly Chinese, but some Marines. At one time he stepped into a pool of blood, slipped and fell. In some places it was impossible to walk without stepping on bodies or parts of bodies, slipping and sliding through wide pools of blood. Bunker Hill was a slaughterhouse.

Dawn brought a breathing spell, but not an end. Determined to retake Bunker Hill, the Chinese grudgingly withdrew to regroup and get fresh troops into the fight. They took many of their more than 1,000 dead and wounded with them. They left behind a continual splattering of shells. Marines crouched down in whatever cover they could find, each man hoping that the next one would land someplace else. The initial 29 members of 2dLt Watson's 1st Plt were reduced by five, and still the platoon had yet to fire a shot in return.

There were nearly 250 dead and wounded Marines, mostly in Item Co. Gus Mendez remembered only 20 men in the company who weren't wounded. He wasn't one of them. Thrown into a tangle of barbed wire by a near miss, he walked off the hill with blood trickling down his legs.

Capt John G. Demas' How/3/7 was



These leathernecks grabbed some personal time during the seesaw battle for Siberia, Hill 58A.

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ordered forward from division reserve. When the How Co Marines assumed responsibility for the defense of Bunker Hill at noon on 13 Aug., more than 5,000 rounds of mixed Chinese mortar and artillery fire had fallen on Bunker Hill.

Throughout the afternoon and evening of 13 Aug., the How Co positions were constantly under enemy mortar and artillery fire. For years after the fighting on Bunker Hill, How Co rifleman Harry Martucci had vague memories of being blown completely out of his fighting hole by a near miss, but was never certain whether or not it really happened. He had the foggy recollection of flying head over heels through the air. After the passage of nearly half a century, he learned what happened during a reunion of How Co veterans.

"I thought you were dead for sure when I saw you flying through the air," related former platoon mate Darwin Rawson, "but you barely hit the ground before you were up and diving towards another foxhole." Another veteran of that day on Bunker Hill, Don McClure, confirmed that it was his fighting hole Martucci dove into. Fifty years is a long time to wait to tie all the pieces together.

At 2100 the incoming fire reached a crescendo, and a fresh Chinese battalion launched yet another attack. Under the cover of mortar and artillery shells, the Chinese battered How Co from two directions. At some points the line was pierced, but each incursion was thrown back and sealed off by How Co. Marines stood firm to meet the challenge. It had gotten to be a personal matter. Nobody was going to push How Co from that hill.

Hospitalman John E. Kilmer, braving the intense enemy fire to tend to wounded Marines, fell wounded himself. Rising to his feet, Kilmer ignored his own wounds to continue administering to others in need of aid. At one point he was warned not to go to the aid of a wounded Marine who lay unprotected and in the open.

"You'll die out there," he was told. "So will he, unless I do something," replied Kilmer. Crawling across the fire-swept field, Kilmer reached the side of the stricken Marine just as a volley of shells erupted all about him. Kilmer threw himself over the prostrate Marine to shield him from further harm and was wounded again himself. This time his wounds were mortal. HN John E. Kilmer, a distant relative of poet Joyce Kilmer who died on a French battlefield in 1918, was awarded



Marines crouched in the shelter of a trench as they readied to continue the fierce struggle for another outposted hill that fronted the main line of resistance.

posthumously the Medal of Honor.

The Chinese came back again and again. For three days the fighting on Bunker Hill raged. Chinese mortars and artillery pounded Bunker Hill around the clock and were answered in kind by the 11th Marines. By day Marine aviators swooped low over the hill and ridge, as the Marines below savaged the attacking Chinese with gunfire, rockets and bombs.

On Bunker Hill in the ranks of How Co, Capt Demas was everywhere, ignoring enemy artillery and small-arms fire to range the line and direct the fight. Wounded but ignoring it, he was constantly at the point of the heaviest combat. At one point a volley of incoming 82 mm mortar shells bracketed him, hurling him to the ground, his clothing smoldering and in tatters. Momentarily stunned, but miraculously unhurt save for minor cuts, he staggered to his feet and went back about the business of fighting. Some said that while there were a lot of rocks on Bunker Hill, John Demas was the hardest. For his courageous and inspirational leadership, Capt Demas would receive the Navy Cross.

Throughout August and into September the Chinese repeatedly attacked Bunker Hill. Every day brought incoming mor-

tar and artillery fire. There were probes. There were raids. There were small-unit attacks and large-unit attacks. In mid-September, the Chinese were forced to accept the fact that, despite their every effort and more than 3,200 of their dead and wounded, Bunker Hill belonged to the 1stMarDiv. It would remain so for the rest of the Korean War.

Did the ownership of Bunker Hill merit the lives of 48 leathernecks and the more than 300 who were seriously wounded there? The answers may be found in what MajGen Selden hoped to accomplish by seizing Bunker Hill. There were three such objectives, and each was an unqualified success.

The initial objective, the tactical surprise in using Siberia as a diversion to attack and take Bunker Hill, was fully attained. The Chinese were caught flatfooted and never fully recovered. Secondly, Bunker Hill's subsequent usefulness in providing observation into the Chinese outpost line greatly enhanced the 1stMarDiv's ability to detect and break up Chinese troop concentrations in that sector. Lastly, Bunker Hill greatly strengthened the MLR, a fact that was not lost on the Chinese. Small-unit actions in that sector might continue, but the Chinese were forced to abandon any further large attacks. Bunker Hill was simply too tough a nut to crack.

Author's note: The works of two Marine veterans, Lee Ballenger and Joseph Saluzzi, were invaluable in the preparation of this article. Volume I of Marine veteran Ballenger's two-volume series, "U.S. Marines in Korea," presents a detailed and comprehensive account of the fighting at Bunker Hill. Saluzzi's "Red Blood...Purple Hearts" is a first-rate compilation of the personal awards that were conferred for that action and the entire Korean War as well. Special thanks are due also to Col Franklin C. Bacon, USMC (Ret) for his insights into the planning for Bunker Hill.

Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua, a former enlisted Marine and later an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, served in the Korean and Vietnam wars. He 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.



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