



THE HOOK

Korea 1952



"a salient angle or part, as the central outward-projecting edge of a bastion or an outward projection in a battle line."

Webster's Unabridged Dictionary

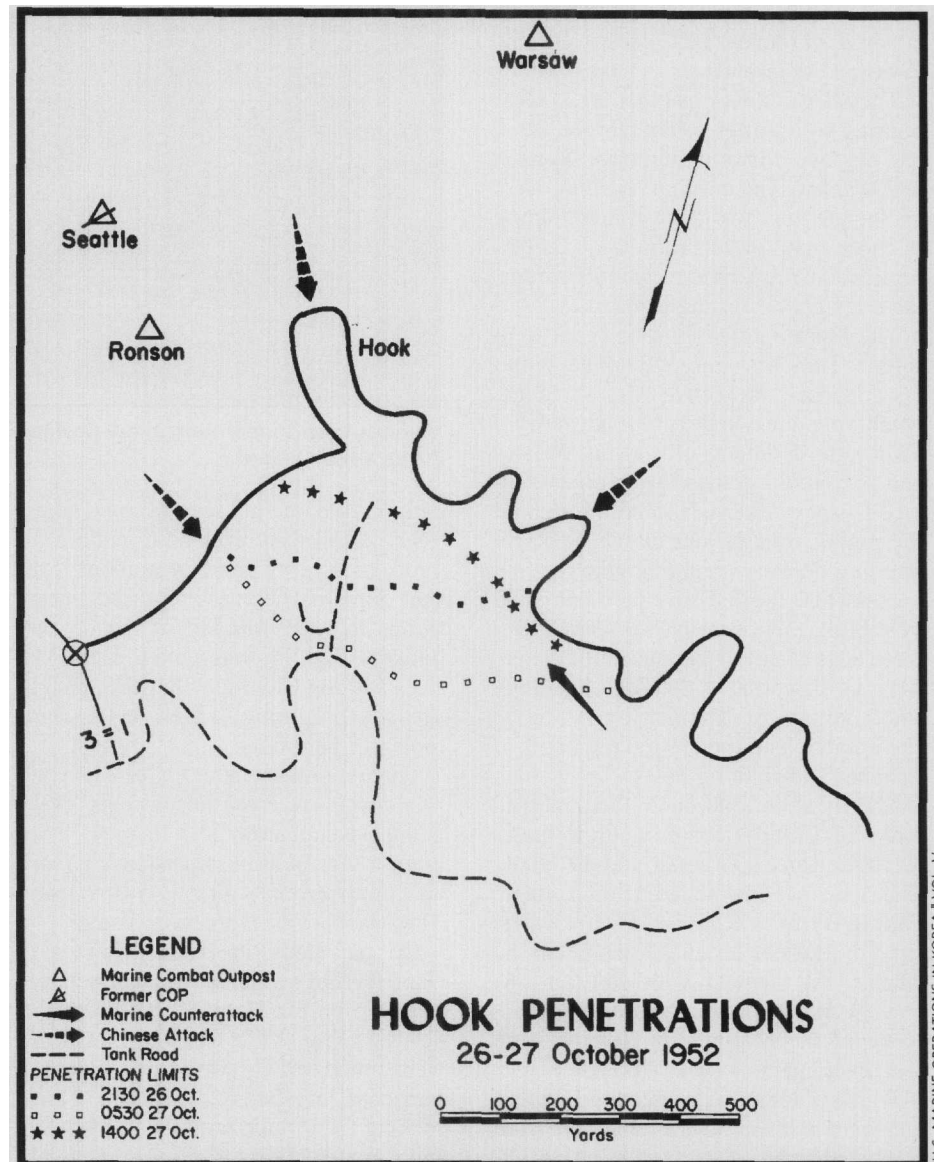
By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua
USMC (Ret)

For the men defending it, a salient is bad news. More men are required to defend a salient than to hold a straight line. Jutting out into enemy territory, the defenders are forced to adopt a fire plan that causes their fires to diverge outward fanlike, making concentrated fire difficult. On the other hand, the enemy outside the salient is able to direct converging fire into it, making maximum use of concentration of fire. The defender of a salient easily can feel that he is being shot at from every direction. Any salient violates the axiom that "the main line of resistance (MLR) should not have sharp angles or salients."

Located at the far right of the First Marine Division's sector of the Jamestown Line, hard by the division's junction with the British Commonwealth Division, the Hook in October of 1952 was just such a salient. Looking like an upside-down letter "U," the Hook marked the northernmost portion of the MLR before the line dropped sharply to the southeast to meet the British Commonwealth Division at the Samichon Gang (River). "Exposed" is a word that comes to mind when considering the Hook.

Why defend it? There was no other terrain that could be defended. Korea is a country of hills, and the MLR had to take advantage of those hills where they were found. Major General M. M. Austin-Roberts-West, commanding general of the British Commonwealth Division, summed up the importance of the Hook: "Had the Hook been lost, a withdrawal of four thousand yards would have been necessary."

The loss of the Hook and a withdrawal of more than two miles would drive a deep wedge between the 1stMarDiv and the British Commonwealth Division. The Chinese would be dangerously close to the Imjin River and the Wonsan-Seoul Corridor, the only natural east-west terrain corridor in all of Korea. The road to Seoul would be wide open. That was ex-



actly what the Chinese had in mind. However, they would have to do something they had never before attempted. They would have to attack the MLR itself. The Hook was a piece of bad news that had to be held.

In the last days of October that job fell to Colonel Thomas C. Moore Jr.'s Seventh Marine Regiment, a regiment that was strung out mighty thinly. From the burned-out village of Toryom, the regiment's left boundary, to the junction with

the British Commonwealth Division on the right, the MLR stretched for 10,000 yards, a frontage more appropriate for a division. Col Moore was forced to deploy all three of his battalions on line, with only a single company held as regimental reserve. Holding the most critical sector, the Hook and its vicinity, was Lieutenant Colonel Leo J. Dulacki's 1st Battalion.

Across the way were two Chinese regiments, the 356th and 357th of the 119th

Opposite page: In the early fighting for the Hook, these leathernecks and corpsmen awaited the word to move out into "no man's land" fronting the Hook. The situation deteriorated as the Chinese launched massive human wave assaults in their attempts to eliminate the Marine salient. (USMC photo)

Division, some 7,000 men in all. Backing up these two regiments were an estimated 10 battalions of artillery, fielding 120 guns ranging from 76 mm to 152 mm. More than 60 percent of all Chinese artillery on the Western Front was deployed opposite the 7th Marines. The Chinese artillerymen were supplied abundantly with shells of all calibers. While Marines were held to a daily ration of hundreds of rounds, the Chinese were able to expend thousands.

They began doing just that on 23 Oct., pouring volley after volley into the Hook and its two forward outposts, Ronson and Warsaw. The constant shelling went on for the next two days, the beginning of more than 34,000 rounds ... 34,000 rounds! ... the Chinese would fire during the fighting for the Hook.

The Marine defenses were reduced to rubble. Trenches were obliterated, bunkers collapsed, protective wire shredded. Hunkering down under constant shellfire all day, the defenders of Ronson, Warsaw and the Hook, assisted by Korean Service Corps workers, labored throughout the nights, digging out trench lines, rebuilding bunkers, stringing wire.

Faster than the defensive positions could be rebuilt, they were blown apart. After three days of never-ending shelling there were no discernable defenses left, only small groups of Marines crouching in shell craters and the blasted remnants of trenches and fighting holes.

Shortly after 1800 on 26 Oct., massed ranks of Chinese infantry threw themselves at Ronson, Warsaw and the Hook. The lone Marine squad from Captain Paul B. Byrum's "Charlie" Company, 1st Bn, 7th Marines holding Ronson had no chance. All contact with Ronson was lost 20 minutes after the assault began. None of the Marines on Ronson were seen ever again.

Warsaw, defended by Second Lieutenant John Babson Jr.'s 3d Platoon from Capt Frederick C. McLaughlin's Able/1/7, held out a bit longer. Assailed by the 9th Co, 3d Bn, 357th Regt, the understrength platoon on Warsaw struck back viciously. Still, the Marine numbers on Warsaw were finite. The Chinese, on the other hand, were able to feed more and more men into the fight.

By 1820, 2dLt Babson was forced to



Marines tried to maintain a low profile on the Hook as Chinese artillery rounds burst in the valley below.

call for "box me in" fires as the Chinese assaulted Warsaw from all directions. At 1907, as a relief force was about to be sent forward, Warsaw reported enemy troops in what was left of the forward bunkers. Fighting was hand to hand, Marines battling Chinese with rifles, pistols, grenades, fighting knives, entrenching tools and bare fists.

Three minutes later LtCol Dulacki's headquarters received the message, "We're being overrun" from 2dLt Babson. Shortly after that Babson requested VT (variable time) airbursts directly over Warsaw. That was the last word from Warsaw.

On the Hook itself the Marines of Capt Byrum's Charlie Co had relieved Able Co on the Hook before dawn that very morning. While Ronson and Warsaw were inundated by waves of Chinese, a hurricane of shells fell on the Hook, rocking the ground with the overlapping shock waves of explosions, turning bunkers, sandbags, timbers and the very earth itself into dust. Out in the midst of it, checking his company's line, Capt Byrum was buried with dirt from near misses four times.

Casualties in the ranks of Charlie Co soared. One of the first of these was veteran squad leader Private First Class John

Kane. Wounded just weeks before in the fighting for Warsaw, Kane suffered flash burns that seared his face and left him temporarily blinded. He would spend the next month as a patient aboard the hospital ship USS *Consolation* (AH-15).

Kane was far from being Charlie Co's sole casualty. By the time a pair of Chinese battalions launched a three-pronged attack on the Hook, Capt Byrum's command was the battered, shredded remnant of a company. In no time at all the Chinese were swarming into what was left of the company's forward positions. Close behind the assault waves came ranks of cargo carriers bearing construction materials for bunkers and machine-gun emplacements.

Charlie Co fought back furiously, making the Chinese pay dearly for every inch gained. Willing to spend the lives of their men without regard to the cost, the Chinese fed more and more men into the battle. When one Chinese soldier fell, three others took his place. When a Marine went down dead or wounded, no one replaced him.

By 2030 the Chinese had penetrated the Charlie Co line, splitting the thoroughly battered company into two separate perimeters. The Chinese swarmed

COURTESY OF THE MARINE CORPS HISTORICAL CENTER

through the gap, cutting off small groups of Marines. A machine-gunner, Private Robert Crossno, fought until his gun was put out of action and he was wounded in the leg and hip by grenade fragments. Crossno crawled down the slope of the Hook and would spend the next two nights hiding from the Chinese.

Slowly, Charlie Co was being cut to pieces and pushed backward. Fighting in small groups, defenders of the Hook gave ground grudgingly, assailed by Chinese from all directions. One group contained three members of a forward observer team from the 11th Marines. Heading the team was 2dLt Sherrod E. Skinner Jr. of Fox/2/11. Accompanying him were radioman Corporal Franklin D. Roy and PFC Vance O. Worster, the wireman, both from Headquarters Battery, 11th Marines.

Skinner suddenly was a very busy man. While continuing to direct fires against the attacking Chinese, he organized the handful of unwounded Marines in the immediate area into a small perimeter, determined to hold his ground. Wounded twice while directing the fires of his meager group, he refused medical aid and fought on until ammunition was exhausted and his team's radio was destroyed.

Overwhelmed by the sheer mass of Chinese, and his position overrun, Skinner instructed the remaining members of his pickup command to feign death as the Chinese continued to throw grenades into the half-destroyed bunker that sheltered them. When one grenade landed between him and a pair of wounded Marines, Skinner unhesitatingly threw himself on top of the sputtering missile, giving his life to save theirs. Second Lt Skinner would be awarded posthumously the Medal of Honor.

Fighting with Skinner, Cpl Roy and PFC Worster battled courageously against insurmountable odds. As the fighting at the bunker raged, Worster positioned himself at the bunker's entrance, fired point-blank into the attacking Chinese and killed 12 of them before his ammunition was exhausted. Severely wounded by grenade fragments, Vance Worster, along with Franklin Roy, played dead until the Chinese searched their recumbent forms and left. Unable to walk, Worster persuaded Roy to fall back to friendly lines and seek assistance.

Recognizing that his friend's wounds were life-threatening, Roy reluctantly left to search for aid. Out of ammunition and weaponless, he was twice wounded by fire. Chancing upon a box of grenades, Roy blasted a path through the Chinese who were all over the Hook. Reaching friendly lines, he refused medical treatment and evacuation until he had given a

complete report on the situation of the Hook.

For their actions on the Hook on the night of 26/27 Oct. 1952, Cpl Roy and PFC Worster were awarded the Navy Cross. Only Roy would live to receive the award.

In the early morning hours of 27 Oct., the situation on the Hook was deteriorating rapidly. Inundated by shells and under unrelenting pressure from Chinese ground attacks, Charlie Co had been forced to the very rear of the only defensible ground left, Hill 146 at the extreme back edge of the ridge line that was the Hook. Low on ammunition and much depleted in numbers, Charlie Co was hanging on by its fingertips.

LtCol Dulacki had to commit his only reserve, Capt McLaughlin's Able Co that had been relieved from the Hook only 24 hours earlier. With Babson's 3d Plt completely overrun on Warsaw, McLaughlin had only two platoons to take forward. Able Co mustered 150 men at most—not many men to counterattack two Chinese battalions.

Lt Stan Rauh's 2d Plt led the charge. The terrain left no alternative but a straight-ahead smash directly along the ridge line under direct fire and observation of the Chinese. Rauh had been wounded in September and had returned to the company only the day before. At the head of his men in the attack he was hit again as burning white phosphorus seared his hands and fused the bolt of his carbine to the receiver. He continued in action.

With him was PFC Enrique Romero-Nieves. Chinese resistance was ferocious as Able Co and what was left of Charlie Co struggled slowly and painfully forward. In the face of withering fire, Romero-Nieves fought his way into the teeth of it to site a machine gun to fire directly against a bunker that was the key to the Chinese resistance.

Then, armed with grenades, Romero-Nieves launched a one-man attack on the bunker. Knocked to the ground by an enemy grenade that riddled his left arm with fragments and left it dangling uselessly, he bounded to his feet and continued forward. Gaining the side of the bunker, but unable to pull the pin of the grenade with his left hand, he hooked the pin in his belt buckle, pulled it free, let the spoon fly and dropped the grenade through a firing port, killing all of the bunker's occupants. PFC Enrique Romero-Nieves would receive the Navy Cross.

Able and Charlie companies held the line. With their combined strength totaling less than a full strength company, they were unable to oust the Chinese from

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Marines moving up with extra ammunition stepped aside as litter bearers quickly carried a wounded Marine off the Hook to a location where he could be treated and evacuated more effectively.

the Hook. Something else was going to be needed.

That something else was the 7th Marines' last remaining regimental reserve unit, Capt Bernard B. Belant's How/3/7. Sent forward and attached to the 1st Bn, How Co arrived at Capt McLaughlin's Able Co position shortly after 0545 on 27 Oct. The Chinese attack had reached the point of its deepest penetration, and the Chinese had seized more than a mile of the MLR. How Co went directly into the attack.

Going along with them was 2dLt Martin L. Givot of Charlie Co, who had been in the thick of it from the time the first

Chinese shells began to rain down on the Hook. He had fought tirelessly throughout the night, drawing his platoon into a tight perimeter after the first Chinese penetration, pulling back step by step under intense pressure. Later, attached to Able Co, he had led a rescue effort to recover a trio of wounded Marines.

Wounded in that effort, he nevertheless stepped forward to guide How Co in its attack over unfamiliar ground. Givot personally led an attack against a stubbornly resisting Chinese strong point, beating it into submission and organizing a hasty defense of the newly won ground. Shortly afterward, he was cut

down by enemy fire. Second Lt Givot was awarded posthumously the Navy Cross.

No less courageous were 2dLt David L. Hyde and 2dLt George H. O'Brien Jr. of How Co. Like Givot, Hyde would receive the Navy Cross posthumously for his inspirational leadership and indomitable courage in leading an assault against a strongly dug-in Chinese company. He died carrying a wounded Marine to safety.

O'Brien would receive the Medal of Honor. Throughout a morning of intense and unrelenting combat, O'Brien, despite suffering three wounds for which he refused treatment, continued at the head of his platoon, engaging the enemy in hand-to-hand combat. At one point he shot down five Chinese in quick succession as they popped from a bunker. A How Co veteran remembered him as "a hell of an officer."

Another full day of fighting and the commitment of elements of the division reserve ousted the Chinese from the Hook. The roll of honor grew. PFC Francis R. Thomas of Charlie/1/7 would be awarded posthumously the Navy Cross during the intense combat that raged all through the day on 27 Oct. So, too, would PFC Lawrence E. Lett of Item/3/1 for his single-handed assaults on position after position until he fell mortally wounded.

By 0600 on 28 Oct., the Hook was once again USMC territory. It had come at the cost of 70 Marines killed, 386 wounded, and 39 missing, of whom 27 later were positively identified as captured. Capt McLaughlin remembered some of the dead years later in a letter to Marine veteran and author Lee Ballenger. Given permission to take a detail forward to search for Marine dead after the fighting, McLaughlin wrote of finding mostly Chinese corpses, "but we did recover quite a number of American boys who had given their lives up there on that awful hill."

The attempt to initiate a decisive engagement cost the Chinese slightly more than 1,000 casualties, most of them killed, and in the end not an inch of ground was gained. Sometimes it takes more than bodies to win a battle. More often than not it takes will. The Marines of the Hook had that in spades.

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.

