



The Last Battle: Korea 1953

Story by Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

Photos courtesy of the Marine Corps Research Center, Archives Branch

"I've always felt the [communists] knew for some time they were going to sign the cease-fire. They were willing to lose thousands of more troops just to take all our high ground."

—Cpl George Broadhead
"How" Co, 3d Bn, 1st Marines

In the predawn hours of 7 July 1953, after two months in I Corps reserve, the First Marine Division began moving back into its old positions on the Western Front's main line of resistance (MLR), relieving elements of the 25th Infantry Division. The months of May and June had been the first time since its return from the Chosin Reservoir campaign in December 1950 that the Division had been out of contact with the enemy. After a brief rest and an extended period of active training, it was time to go back to work.

That work was going to be hot and heavy, for while neither George Broadhead nor anyone else knew it, the Chinese were looking for a way out of the Korean War. But the Chinese did not want to simply walk away from Korea. They wanted out, but they wanted out in a way that would allow them to look like vic-

tors. A decisive tactical success along the traditional invasion route to Seoul, the route guarded by the 1stMarDiv, would let them realize that ambition.

Even as the Marines were settling back into their old positions, the Chinese were winding up their best punch. As they had done so often in the past, they were preparing to "lose thousands of more troops," spending the lives of their soldiers in an effort to inundate the Marine lines in an ocean of bodies.

That effort wasn't long in coming. On 7 July, while Lieutenant Colonel Alexander D. Cereghino's 2d Battalion, Seventh Marine Regiment was still in the process of relieving elements of the 25th Infantry Division's Turkish Brigade in the division's right sector, heavy mortar and artillery fire began falling along the MLR and the pair of small outposts known as Berlin and East Berlin. The incoming fire, which began around 2130, quickly reached a crescendo that heralded an all-out attack by the 407th Rgt, 136th Div.

In a tactic that was by now all too familiar, Chinese infantry, advancing in waves through their own barrage, surged up the forward slopes of both outposts. Once again the Chinese were spending

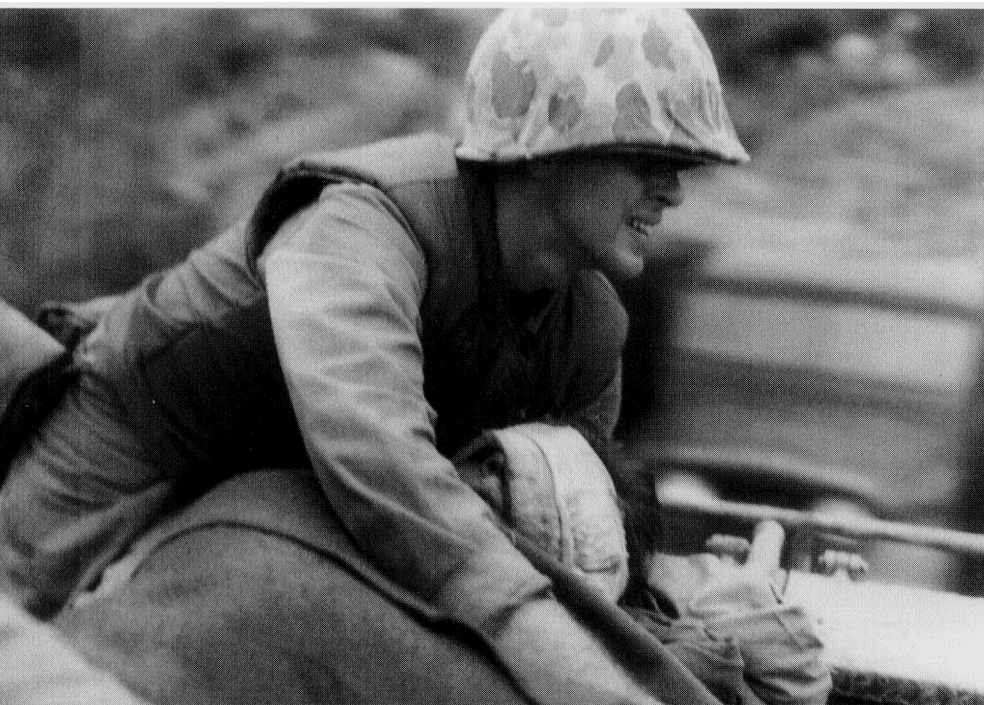
the lives of their soldiers to take ground. By 2345 the defenders of Berlin and East Berlin were locked in hand-to-hand combat with the attackers. At the same time, an intense artillery barrage saturated the MLR in order to isolate the two beleaguered outposts. From his heavy machine-gun squad's position on the MLR, Sergeant Roy Seabury of Weapons Company, 3/7 described it: "The shells were coming in so heavy it was impossible to move. The Chinese infantry attacked OP East Berlin while their artillery pounded us. They were all over the OP like ants."

Despite fierce resistance, East Berlin, hopelessly outnumbered, was overrun at 2355. Two counterattacks by elements of "Fox"/2/7 were thrown back, and further assaults were put on hold in favor of a thorough pounding by supporting arms.

Throughout the following day, 8 July, East Berlin and Chinese troops in supporting positions were pounded by every weapon in the Marines' arsenal. During the early morning hours of 8 July, the 1st 4.5-inch Rocket Battery blanketed Chinese support positions on nearby hills with 576 rounds of 43.5-pound, high-explosive rockets. Firing point-blank, two platoons from Baker Co, 1st Tank Bn sent some 800 rounds of 90 mm high-explosive shells ripping into the Chinese. Lending their voices to the onslaught of fire were all four artillery battalions of Colonel Manly L. Curry's 11th Marines, along with seven Army and Turkish artillery battalions that were still in position.

On Outpost Berlin a small force of 18 Marines, having beaten off determined Chinese attacks during the night, squinted warily along the ridge line that separated them from East Berlin, now held by the Chinese. They soon were joined by a reinforced squad from Fox/2/7, another 18 members in all. More reinforcements weren't feasible. Berlin was simply too small to hold a larger force.

At 1000 the Marines on Berlin looked on as East Berlin shuddered under the weight of 1,600 rounds of mixed mortar and artillery fire. Hard on the heels of this firestorm, a pair of reinforced platoons from George and How companies, 3/7, from regimental reserve, jumped off in a savage counterattack against East Berlin. In minutes there was a violent hand-to-hand and grenade fight in East Berlin's main trench. Firing on call, Ba-



Because of the high number of casualties during heavy fighting in the Berlin area, the battalion aid stations were fairly close to the front lines, and armored personnel carriers could get the wounded to a doctor in short order.



Leathernecks of 2d Bn, 1st Marines climbed aboard armored personnel carriers for transport to the MLR as the battalion began to relieve elements of 7th Marines during Berlin operations.

ker Co tankers blasted away at Chinese positions only a few short yards forward of the attacking infantry. Mortar fires pounded Chinese troops on the crest and forward slopes of the blasted hillside.

As Marines and Chinese soldiers battled back and forth over the crest of East Berlin, Fox Co squad leader Sgt David E. Smith realized that his squad had become isolated and surrounded. Faced with the necessity of withdrawing from an untenable position, Sgt Smith skillfully extricated his men from the encircling enemy, beating off repeated attempts to trap them, at one point calling friendly machine-gun fire on himself to prevent the Chinese from endangering his wounded.

Learning that one wounded Marine was unaccounted for, Sgt Smith directed his senior fire-team leader to continue moving the squad back to friendly lines and went back into the swarming Chinese. Fighting his way along the trench line, battling at muzzle blast range with the Chinese confronting him, Sgt David Smith fell in a hail of submachine-gun bullets, his last act that of trying to help a wounded comrade.

Inspired by Smith's selfless act, other

Marines shot, blasted and slashed their way into the Chinese who were trying to hold onto the crest of the outpost. Those Chinese who weren't killed were flung down the forward slope of East Berlin. By 1233 the outpost was firmly in the grasp of 20 exhausted Marines. Sgt Smith never would know that his courageous actions had brought him a posthumous award of the Navy Cross.

Chinese attempts to reverse the situation came to grief in a deluge of bombs from Marine F9F Panther jets from Marine Fighter Squadron (VMF) 311. Led by squadron commander, LtCol Bernard McShane, a four-plane flight of Panthers whistled in through the rain and clouds to plaster Chinese reinforcements and command bunkers with five tons of high-explosive ordnance.

In the unrelenting rain that was turning the landscape into a waterlogged morass, the quiet that fell over Berlin and East Berlin was relative only in that it was broken by very few exchanges of small-arms fire. Artillery, friendly and enemy, more than made up for the absence of the sound of crackling rifles, the stuttering of machine guns and the crump

of grenades. During the 7-8 July action on the Berlins, an estimated 19,000 rounds fired by some 17 Chinese artillery battalions fell on Marine positions. Marine, Army and Turkish gunners responded with nearly 21,000 rounds. No one rested much.

Marines who served on the Western Front in those middle weeks of July 1953 remember it as a time of torrential downpours and constantly flaring gunfights that flashed and crackled all across the front. Nightly the patrols went out through the pelting rain, slogging their way through ankle-deep mud and water in darkness as black as the bottom of a coal chute. There were never-ending eruptions of gunfire lighting up the gloom with flickering orange flashes as Marine and Chinese patrols stumbled into one another as they felt their way along.

Through it all the rain fell in sheets. Everyone got soaking wet. Everyone got coated with mud. Everyone got heartily sick and tired of it all. And the rain kept falling. Spoonbill Bridge across the Imjin River disappeared under 11 feet of water as the Imjin overflowed its banks, then was washed away in a brown torrent.



As they readied for more action in the Berlin area, Marines of 3/7 cleaned the bore of an M1 carbine that had a rifle grenade launcher attached. A sandbagged steel culvert made a somewhat secure resting place for one Marine.

On 14-15 July the Imjin crested at 26 feet at Libby Bridge, leaving only Freedom Bridge available for the movement of supplies to the Division's forward supply point. Soaked to the hide, Marines of Col James A. Moreau's 1st Combat Service Group cursed their way through liquid mud to deliver much-needed ammunition, rations and all the 1,001 items of supply needed to keep the war going.

Along the MLR there was another problem: mines. A new type of Soviet-made antipersonnel mine, the POMZ-2, which featured both pull and tension-release fuzing, was encountered. Perhaps the mines had lain dormant through the winter months, then became active with the arrival of warmer weather. Perhaps they had been emplaced recently. For whatever reason, the mines became an additional hazard, claiming 12 Marines killed or wounded in one day alone.

The Chinese disappeared underground, more molelike than ever. In the 5th Marines sector on the Division's left, the voice of the female propagandist known as the "Dragon Lady" made up for the comparative lull in action. "Surrender

now. What is your girl doing back home?" The response from the Marine lines ranged from laughter to more pointed comments as to what the Dragon Lady could do. Rain, mud and the Dragon Lady aside, no one thought the Chinese had called it a day and gone home.

The Chinese hadn't gone home. Any thoughts along that line were laid to rest in a nasty series of patrol clashes on the night of 16-17 July. Private First Class Roy L. Stewart, a 5th Marines rifleman, earned the Navy Cross in one of those, when despite being seriously wounded he single-handedly repelled repeated Chinese attacks that had inflicted 50 percent casualties on his patrol. Firing into the ranks of Chinese with deadly effect, hurling enemy grenades back at the attackers, killing them as fast as they approached, Roy Stewart, the only man still physically able to fight, stood his ground, refusing to abandon eight seriously wounded comrades. He stood upright in the open, a fighting Marine who wouldn't budge an inch. And he was personally instrumental in saving the lives of eight wounded and helpless Marines.

When the rain finally let up in late July, the Chinese emerged from their underground burrows. They wasted no time in making their presence known. Once again, the focal point of their activity was the Berlin outposts. This time they got what they were after. Berlin and East Berlin, each manned by less than a platoon of Marines, were overrun by multi-battalion Chinese attacks on the night of 19-20 July despite fierce resistance by the Marine defenders who inflicted hideous casualties on the Chinese.

A planned counterattack was called off for the best of reasons. While the Berlin outposts could be retaken, it was evident that they could not be held if the Chinese were willing to pay the price in blood. The Chinese had taken some 500 casualties in wresting Berlin and East Berlin from their defenders. There were more where those came from. Berlin and East Berlin, too small to hold enough men to defend against a large-scale attack, were written off.

Encouraged by their success at the Berlins, the Chinese next turned their attention to Outposts Esther and Dagmar. Both hills came under heavy Chinese mortar and artillery fire on the night of 24-25 July, with Esther bearing the brunt of the assault. Intense fighting raged throughout the night, as the Marines of Second Lieutenant William H. Bates' How/3/5 platoon battled like wild men, hurling back attack after attack, bending but never breaking. A severely wounded William Bates would earn the Navy Cross there, refusing medical treatment and standing fast, always leading by example where the fighting was heaviest.

Liberal as always with their artillery as well as the lives of their men, the Chinese showered Esther with more than 4,000 mortar and artillery rounds, lighting the night sky with overlapping red flashes. Enough of the incoming fire hit PFC Donald E. Nelson to have him swathed in bandages and "looking like a mummy," according to his squad leader, Sgt Peter Martini. Hit time and again, Nelson kept going back for more. When morning came and it was finally over, Nelson turned to Martini and wryly remarked, "I hope today will be easier. I can't take too many days like yesterday."

Intense as the fighting at Esther was, it was only the prelude to the Chinese all-out push against Boulder City (Hill 119), the climactic engagement of the Korean War. There LtCol Roy D. Miller's 3d Bn, 1st Marines would be put to the test.

Boulder City lay to the rear of the lost Berlin Outposts and was one of the key positions in the 1stMarDiv's newly adopted system of defense in depth, a type of



North Korea's propagandea campaign used leaflets and frequent broadcasts by the Dragon Lady over a public address system. Leathernecks of Fox/2/5 reported, "She wasn't a bad-looking dish." (*Leatherneck* file illustration)

strong-point defense utilized so successfully by the 1stMarDiv's neighbor, the British Commonwealth Div. The linear defense that had been employed since the Division arrived on the Western Front the previous spring was abandoned. Now the line would be held by a series of mutually supporting strong points, with the intervening ground controlled by fire and aggressive patrolling.

When the 1st Marines relieved the 7th Marines, the defense of Boulder City fell to First Lieutenant Oral R. Swigart's George/3/1. Swigart knew that Boulder City was the key to everything and the logical point for the main Chinese attack. Prior to moving into position, he told his company officers and key noncommissioned officers that Boulder City must be held at all costs.

Staff Sergeant Timothy A. Tobin remembered his words: "If worse comes to worse, and we cannot kill the enemy fast enough and if it appears that he will overrun us, we have a prearranged signal that will call in all the firepower we have in our area to blow up the hill. With Boulder City in the hands of the enemy, they would be in position to take Seoul without too much to stop them. Pass the word

to your men to be ready to move out as soon as we get the word." Swigart's meaning was clear: Alive or dead, George Co was going up to Boulder City to stay. There would be no stepping back.

At 0900, 24 July, only hours after George Co finished relieving its opposite numbers of George/3/7, Chinese mortar and artillery rounds began landing on Boulder City. An hour and a half later, the incoming fire had reached a rate of three to five rounds a minute. Soon 120 mm mortar rounds were chewing up the protective wire on the forward slope, and large numbers of Chinese infantry were seen moving forward into assault positions. The curtain was going up.

For the next 36 hours, two Chinese battalions clawed, blasted, shot and battered at Boulder City, desperately attempting to drive off the George Co defenders. A rain of shells, 60 mm, 82 mm and 120 mm mortar rounds liberally mixed with 76 mm and 122 mm artillery projectiles, tore and ripped the earth of Boulder City into a fine dust. George Co Marines fired into the ranks of charging Chinese at such close range as to set the uniforms of Chinese smoldering.

At one point an exploding mortar round knocked 1stLt Swigart senseless. Painfully wounded by fragments, he shrugged off treatment and went about the business of directing the fight, leading the charge to oust the Chinese from their foothold in the forward slope trenches.

It was a swirling, raging barroom fight, a deadly barroom fight, with Marines and Chinese all locked in a tangle, shooting, stabbing, clubbing and bludgeoning each other in darkness lit by muzzle flashes and the blasts of exploding grenades and mortar and artillery rounds. With George Co forced back to the reverse slope by massive pressure, Swigart, dripping blood, called in VT (variable time)

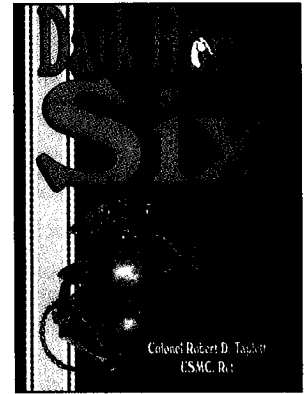
Korean War Campaign, Service and Award Streamers of the United States Marine Corps

During the Korean War, the following campaign, service or award streamers were added to The Battle Color of the Marine Corps as a result of the outstanding performance of Marines who fought in the war:

- Presidential Unit Citation Streamer (Navy-Marine Corps)
- Presidential Unit Citation Streamer (Army)
- Navy Unit Commendation Streamer
- National Defense Service Streamer
- Korean Service Streamer
- Korean Presidential Unit Citation Streamer

Editor's note: The above is courtesy of the Marine coordinator, 50th Anniversary Korean War Commemoration.

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A Fitting Epitaph

Sergeant Robert A. Gannon arrived at Inchon as a replacement on a cold, dreary, rainy day. As he waited in ranks while awaiting transportation forward, he noticed a large stack of seabags off to one side. He knew without being told that they were the seabags of Marines who had been killed "up north," Marines who would not be coming back. The vision of those seabags stacked in the misting rain never left Robert Gannon. Years later he wrote these words:

Seabags in the Rain

When clouds are
gray and lowering
And fog obscures the plain,
I sometimes think I
catch a sight
Of seabags in the rain.

I know it is a vision
Too ethereal to last,
But it brings a wisp of sadness
And a haunting from the past.

We had come ashore at Inchon
In Nineteen Fifty-Two—
An administrative landing,
Just a unit passing through.

We were mustered
at the railhead,
Lining up to board a train,
When through the
stormy darkness
I saw seabags in the rain.

There was no need to question
Why they were lying there
Looking lonely and abandoned
In the damp Korean air.

Their owners had gone
northward
And would not return again
From where hills of bitter battle
Took the lives of fighting men.

Now when fog and
darkness gather,
I rarely can restrain
My saddened thoughts
of Inchon
And seabags in the rain.

"Seabags in the Rain," a fitting epitaph for "The Forgotten War." Forgotten except by those who fought it. For them it has never gone away.

fires from supporting artillery against the Chinese on the forward slope. Boulder City rocked with explosions as it roared with gunfire.

By midnight barely more than half of the George Co Marines were still on their feet and able to fight. More than a few of them also were wounded. But they were possessed of a fighting spirit that would not give in. And they were supported by Marine artillerymen, tankers and aviators who would not let them down. In three hours, from 2100 to 2400, the gunners of the 11th Marines fired 157 counterbattery missions, one of the regiment's most intense shoots on record. Marine tankers ripped into the Chinese with more than 500 rounds of 90 mm high-explosive and white phosphorus shells. With daylight the Panthers were on station to pound the Chinese with bombs and napalm.

With George Co reduced to 25 percent strength, welcome reinforcements arrived in the form of Captain Louis J. Sartor's Item/3/1. Together with what was left of George Co they lit into the Chinese, driving them down the front slope of Boulder City. The strong point that could not be lost had not been lost. The slopes of Boulder City were littered with the corpses of Chinese soldiers who had tried and failed to take it. It was a weary 1stLt Swigart who led what was left of his company away from Boulder City. In time he would receive the Navy Cross.

The Chinese, desperate for some success, would try again. They would fail

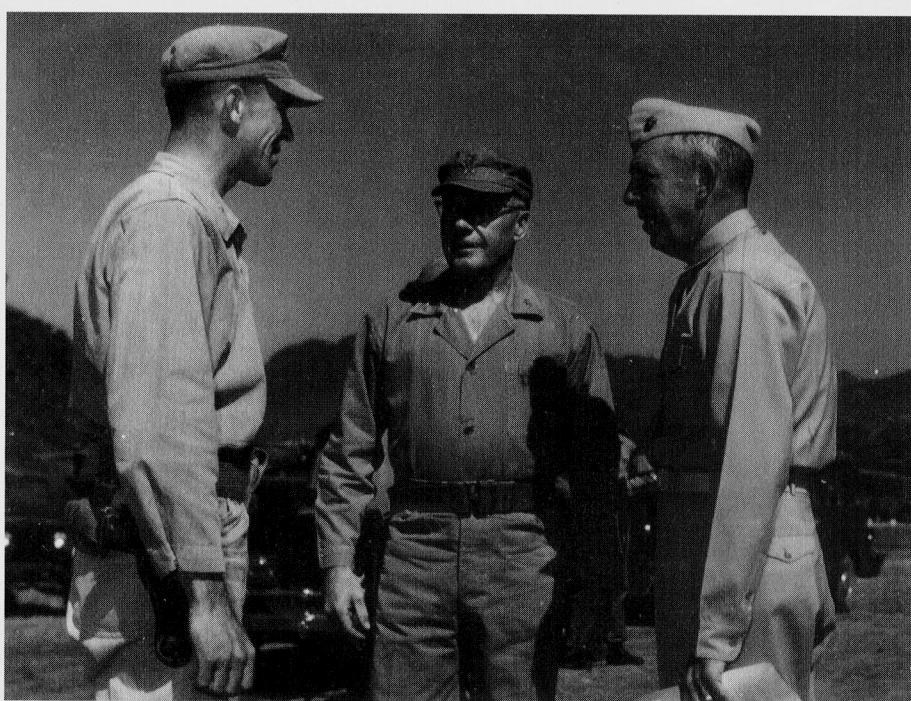
again. During the night of 26-27 July, like a winded fighter, flailing wildly, they would lash out at the Marines of Capt John Zulkofski's How/3/1 holding Boulder City's near neighbor, Hill 111. Corporal George Broadhead was a company wireman that night. Shortly after midnight, in the early minutes of 27 July, he set out from the company command post to repair a break in the telephone line.

Knocked sprawling and wounded by grenade fragments, Broadhead kept going until he found and repaired the break in the line. "Great job, Broadhead," he was told upon arriving at the CP, "but we lost it again." An incoming shell had cut the line once more.

"Skipper," he told Capt Zulkofski, "I'm going back. I'm going to fix that sonuvabitch or die trying." George Broadhead found the new break, repaired it and returned once again to the CP. For his actions in the early hours of 27 July 1953, Broadhead would receive the Silver Star, one of the last medals for heroism awarded in the Korean War.

The guns fell silent in Korea at 2200 on 27 July 1953. The war that had taken the lives of 4,262 Marines was over.

Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua, a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars, has been a contributor to Leatherneck's Korean War commemorative series since July 2000.



Major Dermott H. MacDonnell (left), commander of the Division reconnaissance company, spoke with the 1stMarDiv commander, Major General Randolph McC. Pate (center), and the departing Division commander, MajGen Edwin A. Pollock, after the 15 June Division change-of-command ceremony.