



The Summer of '52

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)



"Good morning, it's a lovely day in Korea! The roof is leaking, the rain is coming down, the rats are running around. ..."

Cpl Roger Baker, USMC
"Able" Co, 1st Tank Bn
Korea, summer 1952, in a letter home

Start by making a random selection of 100 Marines who served on Korea's Western Front in the summer of 1952. Next ask them to recount their memories of that summer half a century ago. Chances are you will hear as many different tales as there are men to relate them. They will all be immersed in the war right up to their belt buckles, but each man will remember the war differently.

It's a good bet, though, that despite the different memories of those 100 Marines there will be one common thread. Sooner or later, almost to a man, they will get around to talking about how much it rained.

Summer is the rainy season in South Korea. The temperature and relative humidity soar to stifling, suffocating heights, and the rain falls. During the summer of 1952, one of the wettest in years, it rained far more than normal. Rain fell in torrents, swelling rivers out of their banks, washing out bridges, turning roads into liquid mud and transforming the landscape into a quaking, jellylike bog.

From his home in Montana, Marine veteran and former Corporal Claude Hyder, who served with the 1st Shore Party Battalion, remembered it that way—rain, rain and more rain.

On loan to Lieutenant Colonel Harry D. Clarke's 1st Engineer Bn to assist in bridge building and mine-clearing operations, Hyder's recollection was of a time of being constantly soaking wet. Hyder's war was a war spent alternately in wrestling bridge sections into place or probing and groping through thick globs of mud for the hundreds of buried mines that saturated the ground. The summer of 1952 was a time of never-ending, nerve-racking tension.

War is a contrary thing. It doesn't give a two-penny damn for the weather. In war there is no inclement-weather plan. The game is never called for rain. There is no time out. The event is never moved indoors. The war goes on, and in the rain-soaked summer of 1952 the war on Korea's Western Front went on with a vengeance.

By the time June gave way to July, the

ripping crackle of gunfire and the heavier crump of exploding mortar and artillery rounds had become a near-daily occurrence. All along the First Marine Division's front, a constant snarl of nasty little engagements kept things in a continual state of alert. Usually they were inconclusive affairs, flaring to a raging intensity, then sputtering out, only to burst into flame anew in another sector. Nevertheless, a man could be killed quite dead in one of them.

A man could rise to the very heights of courage too. Certainly, Staff Sergeant William E. Shuck Jr., a machine-gun unit leader with "George" Company, 3d Bn, Seventh Marine Regiment, did during the night of 2-3 July. Outpost Yoke had been the site of fierce fighting scarcely more than a week before. Intermittently occupied by the Marines during the day, Yoke was usually outposted by the Chinese at night. On that night, the mission was a raid by two reinforced platoons for the purpose of taking prisoners.

Shortly before 0630 the advance platoon was taken under heavy fire by the Chinese defenders of Yoke. The platoon was raked by rifle, automatic-weapons and machine-gun fire and pummeled by a rain of mortar and artillery shells. The Chinese were on Yoke in strength, fully a battalion of them on the low hill. Casualties among the Marines were immediate and severe. Nonetheless, the attack fought its way forward, due in no small part to the outstanding leadership of non-commissioned officers who stepped forward to fill the void when officers fell.

When the leader of one of the rifle squads fell wounded, William Shuck, although wounded himself, took command of the squad. Forming an assault force with it and his own machine guns, Shuck launched two coordinated attacks against the entrenched Chinese, suffering a second wound in the process. Standing fearlessly in the face of blazing enemy fire and undeterred by his wounds, Shuck refused medical attention, breaking off the attack and pulling back only when ordered to do so.

It was the summer of 1952. General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower was nominated for President on the first Republican ballot and chose Senator Richard M. Nixon as his running mate, while pledging a "total victory" crusade. Meanwhile it was hot and wet in Korea, but members of F/2/7 (left) did get a respite. They and other companies of their battalion were relieved on the line by leathernecks from 3/7, who then promptly ran into fierce fighting on the Yoke.



Even then Shuck skillfully organized an orderly, grudging withdrawal, ensured that all the unit's dead and wounded were evacuated and personally made certain that no one was left behind.

While seeing to the evacuation of the last of the wounded, Shuck was instantly killed by a single round of small-arms fire. For his courageous and selfless action and indomitable leadership William Shuck posthumously would be awarded the Medal of Honor.

Courage was common among the Marines of the Western Front. Without a doubt, Private First Class Walter P. Johnson and Sergeant Perry A. Mallette had their share. Johnson, an Easy/2/5 rifleman, was one of the defenders of a platoon outpost that came under heavy attack by the Chinese on the night of 4-5 July. When a grenade sailed directly into the midst of his fire team, Johnson unhesitatingly threw himself atop the deadly missile, shielding his fellow Marines and absorbing the full force of the blast himself. Against all the odds Walter Johnson would live to receive the Navy Cross.

The following day, 6 July, Sgt Mallette, a member of a forward observer team from Dog/2/11, was accompanying Captain Robert Owens' Charlie/1/7 in a

large-scale raid against the Chinese defenders of Yoke. Exposing himself to murderous enemy fire time and again, Mallette never faltered in his mission of adjusting fire on the dug-in Chinese until he fell seriously wounded. Even then he wasn't quite finished.

From where he lay on a stretcher Perry Mallette could see machine-gun fire from a Chinese bunker flailing the advancing Marine line. Brushing aside further medical treatment, Mallette, bleeding profusely and in excruciating pain, forced himself to his feet and launched a one-man grenade attack on the enemy position, blasting it into silence. Struck again, Perry Mallette went down fighting. Like Johnson, Mallette would cheat the law of averages and live to have the Navy Cross pinned to his chest.

It was during this period of constant melee that PFC John J. Phelan, an artilleryman with How/3/11, had an unusual meeting with his battalion commander. After firing in support of LtCol Gerald F. Russell's 3/7, Phelan, after being relieved, turned in to grab some sack time.

Phelan's rest was interrupted around 0200 by a shower of 76 mm and 122 mm rounds falling directly in the How Battery area. Rushing to his gun, clad in only

his skivvies, boots and helmet, Phelan and one other Marine began to muscle both gun trails in a new direction in order to be able to sight in on an alternate aiming stake, the primary stake having been shot away. While doing this, he noticed a Marine standing by watching.

"Don't just stand there!" Phelan barked, directing the Marine to pick up and move the left trail. Only then did he notice that the bystander was his battalion commander, LtCol Henry E. W. Barnes. Grinning, LtCol Barnes picked up the left trail and heaved. Almost 50 years later, when he received the Major General John H. Russell Leadership Award, John J. Phelan, former chief executive officer of the New York Stock Exchange, drew appreciative laughter when he related the incident.

It wasn't only Marines along the main line of resistance (MLR) who were having a busy time during that rain-soaked July. LtCol Harry Clarke's engineers had their hands full trying to keep the main supply route (MSR) open so Marines up front might be adequately supplied. An around-the-clock effort was mounted to protect the four vital bridges across the Imjin River: Freedom Gate, Honker, X-Ray and Widgeon. Far upstream, near the 1stMarDiv's junction with the British Commonwealth

During one of the wettest years on record, South Korea's rivers spilled over their banks, causing heavy damage and making the war more difficult. An American (below) pondered the significance of it all while leaning on what remained of X-Ray Bridge that once spanned the Imjin River. (Courtesy of Claude Hyder)



Division, Cpl Hyder was gauging the river's crest and transmitting regular radio reports to battalion headquarters.

Between 27 and 30 July some of the heaviest rains ever recorded turned the Imjin into a raging torrent. The decking of Widgeon was completely submerged before nightfall on the 27th. To prevent Honker from being carried away, engineers removed the decking, allowing the floodwaters to flow cleanly through. Nothing could save X-Ray. The bridge collapsed under the onslaught of waters fed by more than 3½ inches of rain that fell on the 29th. Only Freedom Gate bridge remained to link the division's forward elements to the south side of the Imjin.

Through all of this the sound of gunfire never entirely died out along the MLR. There were firefights every day. No night passed without patrols and ambushes clashing in the hills forward of the 1stMarDiv's line. The guns of the 11th Marines banged away every day. So, too, did those of the Chinese, and the cry of "Incoming!" sent Marines diving into bunkers and hunkering in trenches somewhere or other.

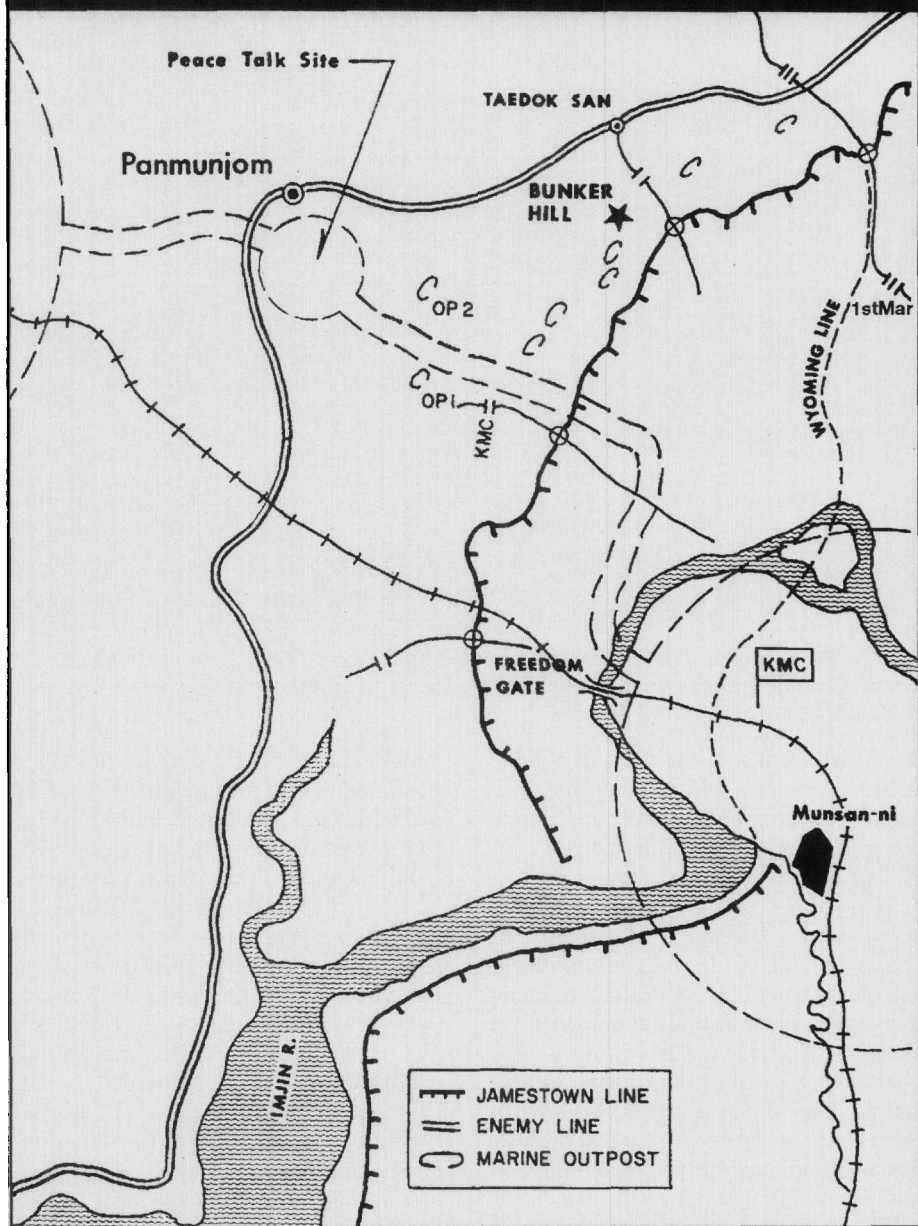
August brought no letup in the action or the rain, both of which followed the same pattern. Sometimes their intensity was greater; sometimes it was lesser. They were always there, though. They never went entirely away.

The Chinese were extending their trenches toward the MLR. Operating after dark, Chinese elements would occupy favorable ground to dig trenches and construct bunkers, returning to their own lines just before dawn. After the position was fully prepared, the Chinese would move in, set up housekeeping and launch new attacks.

Action such as this set off the Western Front's biggest engagement up to that time, the fight for Bunker Hill. A major Chinese outpost, Bunker Hill, in early August, was in the zone of action of LtCol Roy J. Batterton Jr.'s 2/1. A detached squad from Easy Co held a much smaller outpost, Siberia, slightly northeast of Bunker Hill. Siberia provided the match that ignited the powder keg of Bunker Hill, an affair that would eventually chew up some 700 Marines and more than 3,200 Chinese.

Siberia, officially Hill 58A, was a thorn in the side of the Chinese. As long as the Marines held Siberia, the Chinese across the way could not bring accurate, observed fire on the Marine MLR. As the Chinese saw it, the Marines on Siberia had to be evicted, and just before 0100 on 9 Aug. they set about doing just that. From a pair of heights to the north, Hill

Bunker Hill 1st Marines Sector of Jamestown Line



110 and Hill 120, several platoons of Chinese threw themselves at the lone squad of Marines on Siberia.

There were too few Marines and too many Chinese. Taken under heavy fire from three sides, the defenders of Siberia fought like demons, but after holding on against overwhelming odds for 30 minutes, they were left with no choice but to withdraw. Without covering fire, an orderly withdrawal that also evacuated the squad's wounded would be impossible.

Without being ordered to do so, PFC Ramon Nunez-Juarez remained in his exposed forward position, laying into the attackers with accurate and deadly rifle fire. Wounded and with his ammunition exhausted, he braved the open ground to get a resupply, then resumed his one-man stand against the advancing Chinese, holding his ground while his comrades

withdrew. The last man off Siberia, Nunez-Juarez died of his wounds several hours later back within friendly lines. His Navy Cross would be presented to his mother.

The Marines lashed back immediately. At 0300, supported by artillery fire, a reinforced platoon from Easy Co launched a determined attack to drive the Chinese from Siberia. Met by artillery, rifle and machine-gun fire, the platoon, after three attempts, was forced to withdraw to the MLR.

A second Marine assault met with greater success. First, Marine F9F and Air Force F-80 jets plastered Siberia with 500-pound and 1,000-pound bombs and canisters of flaming napalm. Hot on the heels of this, a reinforced platoon from Able/1/1, the regiment's reserve battalion, followed a thunderous barrage by



LEATHERNECK FILE PHOTO BY MSGT FRED D. BRAITSCH JR.

Marine F9Fs, similar to those shown above, and Air Force F-80s flew sorties between Marine artillery barrages to a small outpost named Siberia to drop their 500-lb. and 1,000-lb. bombs.

the 11th Marines to the crest of Siberia despite ferocious resistance by the Chinese. The Marines held the crest and south slope of Siberia. The Chinese clung doggedly to the north slope.

While the Able Co platoon on Siberia set up a hasty defense in anticipation of the inevitable Chinese counterattack, LtCol Batterton sent Easy Co's remaining unengaged platoon to provide added resistance. The Easy Co Marines were greeted by a hailstorm of Chinese mortar and artillery shells that set off a bitterly contested firefight that raged across Siberia throughout the morning and into midafternoon.

Siberia all but disappeared as Marine and Chinese artillery each weighed into the contest. Neither Marines nor Chinese were willing to give an inch. More than 5,000 rounds of Chinese mortar and artillery fire pummeled the shell-blasted hillside, causing casualties to soar among the Marines. Chinese fell in windrows before Marine fire. Finally, with casualties reaching the 75 percent mark, the Marines were forced once again to relinquish their hold on Siberia.

It wasn't over yet. At 0105 on 10 Aug., Capt Casimir C. Ksycewski's Charlie/1/1, after approaching by a different route under the cover of darkness, charged up the slope of Siberia. Surprised, the Chinese reacted violently with a blizzard of automatic-weapons fire and grenades. The struggle quickly became hand to hand. Some Chinese fought to the death. Most, however, were forced off the hill by the sheer momentum of the Marine

attack. They left grudgingly, clinging to positions on the north slope and setting off a firefight that lasted four hours before giving up and withdrawing.

Still, there was no peace on Siberia. Shortly after daybreak the hill was assaulted by a reinforced Chinese company supported by massive mortar and artillery fires. For the third time the Marines were forced to withdraw from Siberia and return to the MLR. Incoming mortar and artillery rounds unleashed by the Chinese exceeded 7,000.

Either side, if willing to pay the price, could take Siberia. Neither side could hold it. For the Marines most of the problem stemmed from those other two hills, 110 and 120, that overlooked Siberia. For all practical purposes these hills commanded Siberia. From them the Chinese could launch ground attacks and direct observed artillery fire. There had to be a better way.

For Colonel Walter F. Layer and his regimental staff of the 1st Marines that better way was Bunker Hill. Located slightly southwest of Siberia, Bunker Hill (Hill 122) dominated Siberia and overlooked Hills 110 and 120. In addition, it was much more defensible than Siberia and offered promising possibilities for a surprise attack.

That attack began as night fell on 11 Aug., when four M-4 flame tanks and four M-46 gun tanks from Co C, 1st Tank Bn, with infantry support, staged a diversionary attack on Siberia. At 2110 the four M-46s opened up on Siberia with high-velocity 90 mm fire, covering

the advance of one section (two tanks) of flame tanks that burned their way up the slope of Siberia. Close behind the flame tanks came the 3d Plt of Capt George W. Campbell's Dog/2/1. The Marines swept over Siberia in a rush, then, in accordance with the plan, withdrew, their part in the operation successfully concluded.

Meanwhile, the main attack force, Capt Sereno S. Scranton Jr.'s Baker/1/1, reinforced by tanks and combat engineers, closed on Bunker Hill with a rush and swarmed up its sides. Ten minutes later one platoon had reached the crest, and one was at the hill's base, sweeping forward along the west slope.

Taken by surprise, the Chinese seemed confused. Eventually, Chinese resistance increased and solidified, small-arms fire rising in intensity while Chinese defenders rained a shower of grenades on the attacking Marines. For a few hectic minutes there was a vicious, point-blank firefight all along the crest of Bunker Hill. Then the momentum and intensity of the Marine attack swept the Chinese from the hill and sent them tumbling down the west slope.

The Chinese fought back briefly with a barrage of mortar fire, but by 0230 Capt Scranton was able to report that the shellfire had lifted and Bunker Hill was solidly in friendly hands. Preparations to consolidate the position began immediately. The final shots of the battle had barely died out before Marines and members of the Korean Service Corps were hustling to Bunker Hill with fortification materials that would be much in need. Bunker Hill, it turned out, was one solid mass of rock overlaid by a thin topsoil. There wouldn't be much digging. Any shelter on Bunker Hill would have to be built or blasted.

The surprise night attack on Bunker Hill had been a complete success. The former Chinese outpost was firmly in Marine hands. Now all that remained was to hold on to it. As events would prove, that would take a bit of doing.

(This is the first in a two-part article. The defense of Bunker Hill, a battle that raged throughout August and into September, will be described in next month's issue of Leatherneck.)

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.

