Men continued to die and the Korean War bogged down in the trenches while United Nations and communist Chinese and North Korean delegates negotiated in Panmunjom. (Photo by MSgt Fred Braitsch Jr.)

A Different Kind of War

Story by Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret) • *Leatherneck* file photos

If a Marine who landed at Pusan with the First Provisional Marine Brigade in August of 1950 had returned to Korea as 1951 drew to a close, he would have had a hard time in figuring what to make of things. He would have found a war as different from the war he fought as C-ration ham and lima beans was different from sirloin steak. His war in Korea had been a war of movement and maneuver, a war in which he seldom spent two nights in the same place. He had followed that war from the southernmost tip of South Korea to the high mountain regions of North Korea and everywhere in between. He did it mostly on foot, for if Korea was anything, it was an infantryman's war.

A Marine of that first year of the Korean War had seen much of what Korea had to offer. The trail had led him to places like the Naktong River, Inchon, Seoul, Wonsan and the Chosin Reservoir, battling North Korean and Chinese communists all the way. Always dishing out punishment far greater than he endured, he had fought them through ruined places such as Wonju, Hoengsong and Chunchon, countless run-down wayside towns and villages with their clusters of woeful Korean civilians. Along the way he had climbed a myriad of hills, some with numbers, some with names. Slogging through choking summer dust and the snow, slush and half-frozen mud of winter, he had logged enough miles to make him wonder ever afterward exactly how far he had humped it through the Hermit Kingdom.

"We met the attack and routed the enemy. We had him beaten and could have destroyed his armies. Those days are the ones most vivid in my memory—great days when all the Eighth Army, and we thought America too, were inspired to win. In those days in Korea we reached the heights."

—GEN James A. Van Fleet, USA (Ret)
in *Life* magazine, 11 May 1953

All that had changed dramatically as 1951 entered its final weeks. The dynamic war of movement had given way to the static war of position. Where terrain once was calculated in miles, it now was reckoned in yards. All across the 135-mile width of the Korean peninsula two armies were settling into opposing networks of trenches and bunkers reminiscent of the Western Front in France in World War I.

Burrowing into the sides of hills, the armies faced each other across the valleys in between, showing themselves less and less often in the daytime, for to do so was to invite an immediate volley of artillery and mortar shells. The prudent man seldom showed himself after sunrise. If the war had become static, it was fast becoming nocturnal and subterranean as well.

On the slopes of a hill numbered 749, Second Lieutenant "Mick" Trainor (Lieutenant General Bernard E. Trainor, USMC (Ret)) met his first combat Marines of this new and different war. Freshly assigned as the platoon leader of the 2d Platoon of "Charlie" Company, 1st Battalion, First Marine Regiment, Trainor saw "scruffy, mole-like creatures pop up from the ground, survey us, and quickly disappear from whence they came." It was his initial glimpse of the Marines of Charlie Co.

Another second lieutenant, Jim Brady, a platoon leader in Captain John Chaffee's (the late Senator John Chaffee of Rhode Island) D/2/7, remembered November of 1951 as "trenches and bunkers, just like France. We had an elaborate setup of barbed wire in front of us. In the early morning when the mist would lift, one could easily turn the clock back to 1918."

What had brought this about? How had a dynamic war of movement become a static war of position? How had Korea been transformed into France in WW I?

The answers to these questions lie in the ill-fated Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) "Fifth Phase Offensive." Launched on 16 May 1951, the Fifth Phase Offensive had as its goal nothing less than driving American and allied forces from Korea and imposing a communist regime from the Yalu River in the far north to the port of Pusan on Korea's southern tip. In the entire history of warfare, few military operations ever blew up more completely in the faces of the generals who devised them than did the Fifth Phase Offensive.

After some early successes, the CCF bid to overrun all of Korea foundered on the rock of massive friendly firepower. Biding its time, LTG James A. Van Fleet's Eighth Army conducted a skillful delaying action while inflicting horrendous casualties on the attacking Chinese. Then, when the Chinese offensive ran completely out of steam, the Eighth Army went over to the attack. Battering the Chinese mercilessly, stacking the bodies of Chinese soldiers in windrows, the Eighth Army drove the shattered Chinese farther back into North Korea than they had been before they launched their offensive.

The Chinese army in Korea was wrecked. Entire divisions had been destroyed. The CCF losses in dead, wounded and prisoners approached 200,000. Morale was nonexistent as units disintegrated, the starving and demoralized survivors seeking only to escape the killing ground. The magnitude of the catastrophe stunned and shocked Chinese leadership from the company commander on the ground all the way up to Mao Tse-tung in Peking.

Having all but lost the war on the battlefield, the communist leadership began hunting for a way to pull the fat out of the fire by other means. But how?

The first hint of an answer came on 23 June, when the Soviet Union's delegate to the United Nations, Jakob Malik, suggested that truce negotiations be opened between the opposing sides. Two days later the Chinese communist leadership in Peking issued a carefully worded endorsement. "Let's sit down and talk this over," the communists seemed to be saying.

No one in Korea was fooled. What the communists were desperately attempting to do was buy time, time to breathe life back into their critically wounded army. That and they were trying to find a way out of the predicament they had gotten themselves into, but in a way that would leave them with the fruits of victory without having to fight for them. The American and allied forces in Korea had grown too strong to defeat in a stand-up fight. On the other hand, if the commu-

A Marine prepared to fire a rifle grenade into no man's land between the communist and UN trench lines. (USN photo)

nists played their cards right, perhaps the American people and the American government could be maneuvered into getting tired of the whole thing and just walking away from it. Borrowing from Sun Tzu, the Chinese were plotting.

The communist timing couldn't have been better. America was entering an economic boom unlike anything seen ever before. The reaction of the American public to the fighting in Korea was fast coming to be a giant yawn of disinterest. A generation of Americans had endured the hardships of the Great Depression of the 1930s, fought its way across Europe and the Pacific and tightened its belt yet again in the post-WW II economic recession. "Hard times" was a phrase that had come to permeate American conversation.

All that was changing. There were jobs. There was money to spend. There were consumer goods to spend it on. There was opportunity. There was prosperity. After two decades of doing without there were all the things that had been done without. The sky was the limit.

A war in some far-off country in Asia? More and more the average American in the street cared less and less. The war in Korea that had been headline stuff a year earlier was relegated to the back pages by the autumn of 1951. The new car that Dad brought home was of far greater interest than yet another battle on yet another hill in a country many Americans couldn't locate on a map. The American public that had been totally involved in WW II—*We're all in this together!*—was becoming totally uninvolved in Korea.

In Washington the American government was trying to become uninvolved in Korea also, but in a different fashion. At the national level the threat of Soviet aggression in Europe was seen as an ominously growing menace. In the arena of global strategy, Korea occupied a position of importance nowhere near that of Western Europe. As the fear of a Soviet attempt to overrun Europe grew, the war in Korea came to be seen as a sideshow that was draining off valuable resources, resources critical to counter a massive Soviet attack in the West.

Washington's strategic thinking in respect to Korea was changing. Initially, the strategic objective had been the military defeat of North Korea and the unification of North and South. That goal now was increasingly viewed as not worth the cost. The national strategic objective was shifting to one of preserving the territorial integrity of South Korea, essentially an objective of maintaining the situation that existed prior to

Incoming communist mortar rounds sent hot shrapnel whining through the air, and the Marines hunkered down in their holes waiting for their opportunity for payback. (USN photo)

the outbreak of war in June of 1950. If that objective could be attained at the bargaining table, then let there be truce talks.

There were truce talks, first at a nondescript village called Kaesong, later at an equally unknown hamlet by the name of Panmunjom. From the beginning they were a farce and a sham and a blatant communist propaganda show. Every aspect of the truce talks was stage-managed with a view to portraying the U.N. negotiators as hat-in-hand supplicants come to beg favors. Messengers, supposedly allowed free and unhindered access to the truce sites, were halted and turned back by scowling, gun-toting communist guards. Minute points were haggled over endlessly. Then when agreement was at hand, the communist position would change, and the process would start all over again. The charade descended to the childish level, as when the legs of the chief U.N. negotiator's chair were shortened so that he would have to look up at his communist opposite number.

All the while the Chinese were busy putting their shattered army back together. Decimated units were withdrawn and disbanded. Entire new divisions were introduced from China. Where Chinese divisions of 1950 had been equipped with a hodgepodge of weapons, the new units sported standardized families of the latest Soviet military hardware. The artillery-starved CCF of 1950 was lavishly outfitted with first-line Soviet artillery and mortars, giving a CCF division of late 1951 far more impressive firepower than its predecessor of the previous year.

Modern weaponry wasn't the only thing arriving from the Soviet Union. Elements of the Soviet Army itself, an air division and an antiaircraft division, were arriving in the theater as well. The equipment, completely covered from view, traveled on closed military trains which civilians were forbidden to approach. In among the passengers of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, the troops rode in civilian clothes. Years later a Russian veteran of this move wondered aloud how many bystanders were deceived by this camouflage. Not many, he suspected, since he and every member of his unit had been outfitted with identical ill-fitting civilian clothing, right down to cheap carbon-copy shoes and neckties.

Beyond getting well, the Chinese were moving, abandoning Eastern Korea and shifting their troops westward. Why? The Korean geography explains everything.

Helmets and flak jackets were necessities of life as the daily routine usually began with an incoming communist mortar attack. (USN photo)

The eastern regions of the Korean peninsula are a jumble of mountains totally without any pattern, as though all the materials left over from the creation of the planet had been dumped there willy-nilly. Tossed in among the mountains, seemingly without rhyme or reason, are countless swift-flowing streams and rivers that cut steep-sided channels along their courses. In 1951 roads were few and far between, many of them leading nowhere in particular. Militarily, Eastern Korea offered little to nothing in the way of mobility. It was slogging country, not country that presented anything in the line of a decisive advantage. No army that ever sought victory in Korea won it in the East.

Western Korea is a different story. Hills rather than mountains dominate the landscape. The only natural North-South terrain corridor in all of Korea lies in the western region of the peninsula. It was through this corridor that the Mongol invasion of the 13th century flowed over Korea. In the early years of the 20th century the Japanese followed this route in reverse during their subjugation of the country. If there were any advantage to be gained by the Chinese, it would lie in Korea's western region. By midsummer the entire CCF was sidestepping to the right.

As Chinese units departed the Eastern Front (the zone of action of the First Marine Division), their places were taken by refurbished elements of North Korean dictator Kim Il-Sung's so-called North Korean People's Army (NKPA). The NKPA had been battered from pillar to post in 1950. Beaten bloody, the NKPA had all but disappeared from the fighting by the end of the year. Now the hastily patched-up North Korean forces were beginning to appear again, taking over from the departing Chinese.

The North Korean elements moving in to oppose the 1stMarDiv weren't capable of serious offensive action. They had neither the strength nor the staying power for that. They didn't have to undertake offensive action. Their mission wasn't to attack but to defend. Holding ground, not gaining ground, was the task of the sketchily trained conscripts in the ranks of the NKPA.

In holding their ground, the North Koreans had a natural ally in the terrain. Those trackless, steep-sided mountains, all cut up by swift-flowing watercourses, give every advantage to the defender. If the defender is diligent, if he builds solid earth and log bunkers and sites his weapons to cover every approach, if he makes his positions mutually supporting, so that to attack one is to be taken under fire by two or more others, he can be uncommonly hard to dislodge.

The North Koreans were diligent. In no time at all they had constructed a network of interconnected defenses as lethal as those encountered by Marines in the Pacific in another war. As they did, they were handed an unexpected bonus from an unlikely source.

"When, without a previous understanding, the enemy asks for a truce, he is plotting."

—Sun Tzu, "The Art of War," 350 B.C.

Marine mortarmen raced to get their tubes into action as incoming mortar fire shifted. A communist infantry assault usually was not far behind the shifted fires. (USN photo)

Far off in Washington the decision was made that tactical actions in Korea would conform to the new strategic objective of maintaining the territorial integrity of South Korea. From Washington to theater headquarters in Tokyo to Eighth Army headquarters in Korea the orders flowed. All offensive operations aimed at gaining further ground were to be halted. Only limited local operations in nothing larger than battalion strength were to be undertaken. The Eighth Army was to assume a defensive posture. GEN Van Fleet's order to this effect was issued on 20 Sept. It was on this date that the war in Korea ceased to be a war of movement and became a war of position.

Marines don't like static warfare. It runs contrary to the very nature of a Marine. From its earliest beginning the training of a Marine is geared to inculcate the spirit of the offensive, which is the only decisive form of warfare. The spirit of aggressiveness, the will to close with the enemy by fire and maneuver and destroy him in close combat, has been the hallmark of Marines throughout the long history of the Corps. Now, as the enemy was on the brink of destruction, the order was "Hold what you have."

Executing the new mission was going to take getting used to. It also was going to take leadership, for it became apparent that this new war in Korea was to be a war of captains and lieutenants, sergeants and corporals. Small-unit leadership, critical in every form of combat, was going to be doubly important in a war of raids, bushwhackings, patrols, ruses and deceptions. It would be vitally necessary in maintaining a spirit of aggressiveness. A fighting man sitting passively in a trench, a bunker, a foxhole can become comfortable there, so comfortable that he doesn't like to leave. He can also become a sitting duck.

Fortunately, Marines are adaptable, able to adjust to changing situations. Constant and aggressive patrolling, usually under cover of darkness, ranged across the 1stMarDiv's front. In addition to reconnaissance and combat patrols, numerous ambushes and raids sought to keep the NKPA off balance and confused.

It was on one such patrol that Mick Trainor, the new platoon leader, was accepted into the brotherhood of fighting men. Trainor's early efforts at leadership had been closely monitored by his veteran platoon sergeant, Gunnery Sergeant Harold Wagner. Wagner, a West Virginian who was killed in action in 1952, was the best type of Marine staff noncommissioned officer, always courteous and unobtrusive, but always firm in guiding an inexperienced young officer.

It was on a night raid in which his platoon had been assigned as fire support that Wagner, in his understated way, let the novice platoon leader know that he had passed his final exam in combat leadership. After picking out what seemed to be an advantageous position, Trainor asked Wagner's opinion of the choice. "I guess so, Lieutenant. You're the platoon leader," Wagner replied.

"It was my epiphany!" LtGen Trainor related years later. "I had arrived. He had just relinquished command to me. While I had won my bars earlier, it was at that point that I won my spurs."

Young Lt Trainor's experience could have been the story of what the war in Korea had become and what it was going to be. All across Korea the trench lines stretched, snaking their way along the military crests of hill and mountain, their occupants warily eyeing one another across the intervening valleys and watercourses. The routine of raid and counterraid, patrol and ambush would go on. Marines would continue to live like moles, venturing out Draculalike to practice their craft only after the setting of the sun.

Still, Marines never have been without a flair for the dramatic. This was demonstrated to the NKPA on 10 Nov., the Marine Corps birthday, when a massive time-on-target barrage pummeled the North Korean observation post on Hill 1052, a commanding point that overlooked nearly all of the 1stMarDiv's front-line positions. Promptly at 1200 every gun of the 11th Marines, supplemented by the fires of 90 mm tank guns, mortars and machine guns, opened up on the NKPA observation posts on 1052. Hill 1052 disappeared in a volcanic upheaval of red and black explosions.

The dust had not even begun to settle when 83 planes of the First Marine Aircraft Wing roared in. Led by the commanding general, Major General Christian F. Schilt, a winner of the Medal of Honor in Nicaragua, Marine aviators plastered Hill 1052 with bombs, rockets, napalm and gunfire. It was a spectacular show, a never-to-be-forgotten Marine Corps birthday that was wildly cheered by Marines manning the forward positions. It is entirely possible that Hill 1052 measured somewhat less than that by the time the sounds of the last explosions drifted away on the breeze.

The fireworks over, the Marines of the 1stMarDiv went back to their underground burrows to wait for darkness when it would be time to go back to work. For them the war in Korea was going to go on, but it was going to be a different kind of war.

"It was very easy to start a war in Korea. It was not so easy to stop it."

—Nikita Khrushchev, Chairman of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, speaking to the Bulgarian Communist Party leadership, 1959

Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua, a frequent contributor to Leatherneck, *is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars.*