

KOREAN WAR

The Last Hill

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

"[T]he Corps Commander [will] firm up his line by 20 September and ... plan no further offensives after that date."

—LTG James A. Van Fleet, USA
Commanding Eighth United States Army in Korea (EUSAK)
to Commander X Corps, 16 Sept. 1951

The hill did not have a name. Throughout American history there have been hills with famous names: Bunker Hill, where the patriots waited until they saw "the whites of their eyes" before unleashing a devastating volley; Little Round Top at Gettysburg, the hill on which Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and the 20th Maine stood off attack after Confederate attack and saved the day; San Juan Hill, where the Rough Riders and the Buffalo Soldiers charged into the enemy guns; Mount Suribachi, that needs no introduction to Marines. The hill in North Korea had no name, only a number: 812. Marines who fought there in September 1951 would never need anything more to remember it.

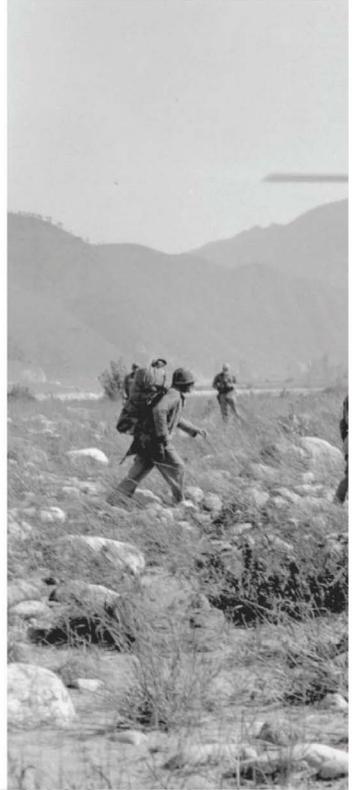
First, though, they would have to get there. Getting there began in April 1951 when the Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) launched what their high command termed the "Fifth Phase Offensive." The offensive was to be an all-out push with the goal of driving friendly forces to the sea and imposing communist rule over the entire Korean peninsula. The CCF high command was fully confident that its forces would be victorious. What they got was a disaster.

Initially successful, the CCF attack all too soon ran into serious opposition. Fighting bitterly, friendly forces, under the overall command of Lieutenant General James A. Van Fleet, USA, traded space for time, all the while inflicting ruinous casualties on the attacking Chinese. Rather than

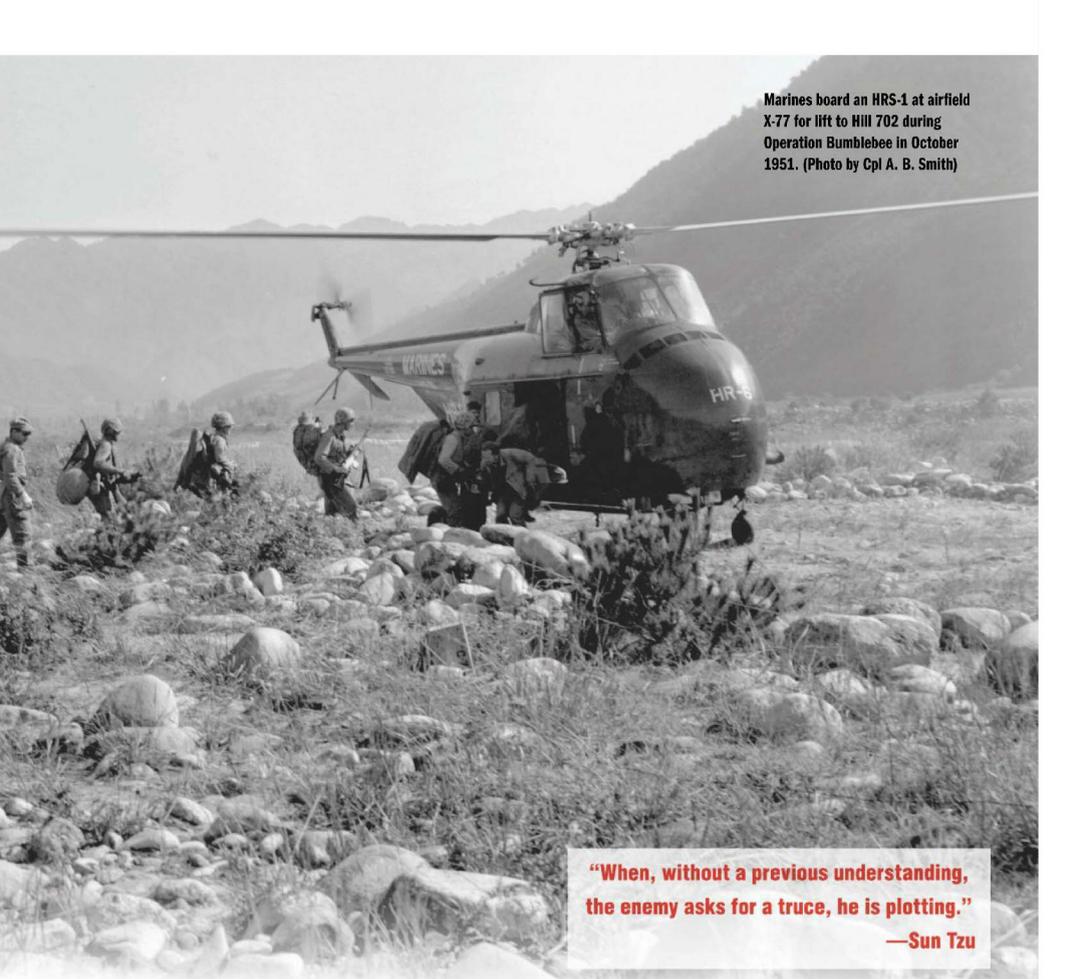
pursuing a defeated enemy, the Chinese more and more were confronted by what became a controlled delaying action that was chewing them up. By late May the air was out of the CCF balloon, and the Fifth Phase Offensive had run out of steam, stopped dead in its tracks by a solid wall of friendly firepower.

With his enemy gasping for breath, LTG Van Fleet unleashed a series of attacks across Korea with the primary objective of destroying the CCF. Gaining ground and rolling back the CCF were secondary considerations. The first priority was killing enemy soldiers. Bluntly put, ground taken today can be lost tomorrow, but an enemy soldier killed today will not fight tomorrow.

By late June the CCF had been wrecked. More than 100,000 Chinese soldiers were dead, wounded or missing. Another 10,000 had been herded into prisoner-of-war camps. With its army in shreds and tatters, the CCF high command shifted gears and fell back on Plan B. On 23 June, Jacob Malik, foreign minister of the USSR and delegate to the United Nations, proposed



Helicopters, like the Sikorsky HRS-1 in Operation Summit, September 1951, brought new capabilities for lifting Marines and supplies up on the hills. These two First Marine Division machine-gunners, Cpl C. Papake, foreground, left, and Cpl J. J. Raftery, right, were among the leathernecks who took part in Operation Summit, the first helicopter vertical envelopment in a combat zone.



Marines board an HRS-1 at airfield X-77 for lift to Hill 702 during Operation Bumblebee in October 1951. (Photo by Cpl A. B. Smith)

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

—Sun Tzu

that truce talks be undertaken to end the Korean War. Not entirely by coincidence, the Chinese Communist government “unofficially” endorsed Malik’s proposal on 25 June.

With its army beaten bloody and on the ropes, the CCF high command desperately needed time to get that army back on its feet. A long, drawn-out charade of truce talks would buy that time. By continuing to fight by other means, the communists could use that time to reconstitute the CCF and create a system of defensive works. The truce talks themselves could serve as useful propaganda.

Held at the Korean village of Kaesong in western Korea, immediately the truce talks were seen by many for what they

were. French newspaper correspondent Raymond Cartier dismissed the talks for a sham, writing that they were “just a crafty trick devised by the Communists to gain time and build up again the badly mauled Chinese armies.” The truce talks at Kaesong were exactly that: a back-door ploy that might save the CCF by dragging things out and perhaps convince the American public that the fight in Korea simply wasn’t worth the bother.

It might have been an ideal time for friendly heads to consider the words of another Chinese, Sun Tzu, who wrote, “When, without a previous understanding, the enemy asks for a truce, he is plotting.”

Plotting was exactly what the Chinese communists and their North Korean front

men were doing. While the communist emissaries at Kaesong used the travesty of the truce talks to play for time, other communists were working feverishly to breathe life back into the shattered CCF. In addition, a large-scale construction project was underway.

North Korea in the summer of 1951 was being transformed into the Western Front in France of 1916. All across that front, a system of fortified defenses in depth theretofore not encountered in the Korean War was being thrown up. Fighting trenches, communications trenches, reinforced bunkers, shielded mortar positions, camouflaged observation posts and protected command positions were being built around the clock.

Coming in for its own share of all this digging and building was the hill without a name, the hill with only a number: 812. It was a natural defensive position. Not a hill as that word generally is understood, Hill 812 was the eastern end of a long east-west ridge. Running from that ridge was another north-south ridge, both landforms creating a distinct "T" form that presented any attack from the south with decided tactical problems.

Even to reach the approaches to the hill, an attacker first would have to neutralize hills 673 and 749, a pair of smaller hills to the south. From there the approach to Hill 812 itself would be faced with crossing entirely open ground that had been surveyed and registered for supporting fires and was under constant observation from Hill 812 and two even higher hills to the north, Hill 980 and Hill 1052.

These last two heights and the T-shape of Hill 812 itself presented the friendly commander with nothing but bad choices. No matter from which direction an assault on Hill 812 was launched, the attacker would be faced with cross fires from either arm of the T and the north-south ridge that formed the upright. Adding to the problem

would be observed direct fires from Hill 980 and Hill 1052. All in all, an assault on Hill 812 was not a pleasant prospect.

Thrown into the mix as well was a new element, or perhaps it was a refurbished old element. The North Korean People's Army (NKPA) that had been thoroughly smashed and routed one year ago was back on the scene. Far to the north, shielded behind its Chinese rescuers, the NKPA had been resurrected, reorganized, re-equipped and retrained. As late summer gave way to early autumn, elements of three North Korean regiments were settled comfortably into a carefully sited system of mutually supporting positions on and around Hill 812, waiting to see what developed.

What the North Koreans, elements of the 3d, 14th and 45th regiments, saw was a vicious four-day fight for control of Hill 749 that took the lives of a confirmed 771 defenders. Even so, for Colonel Thomas A. Wornham's 1st Marines, taking Hill 749 had not been a walk in the sun. When the dust settled, 90 Marines had been killed and 714 wounded, most of those in Lieutenant Colonel Franklin B. "Brooke" Nihart's 2/1. Watching it all, the defenders

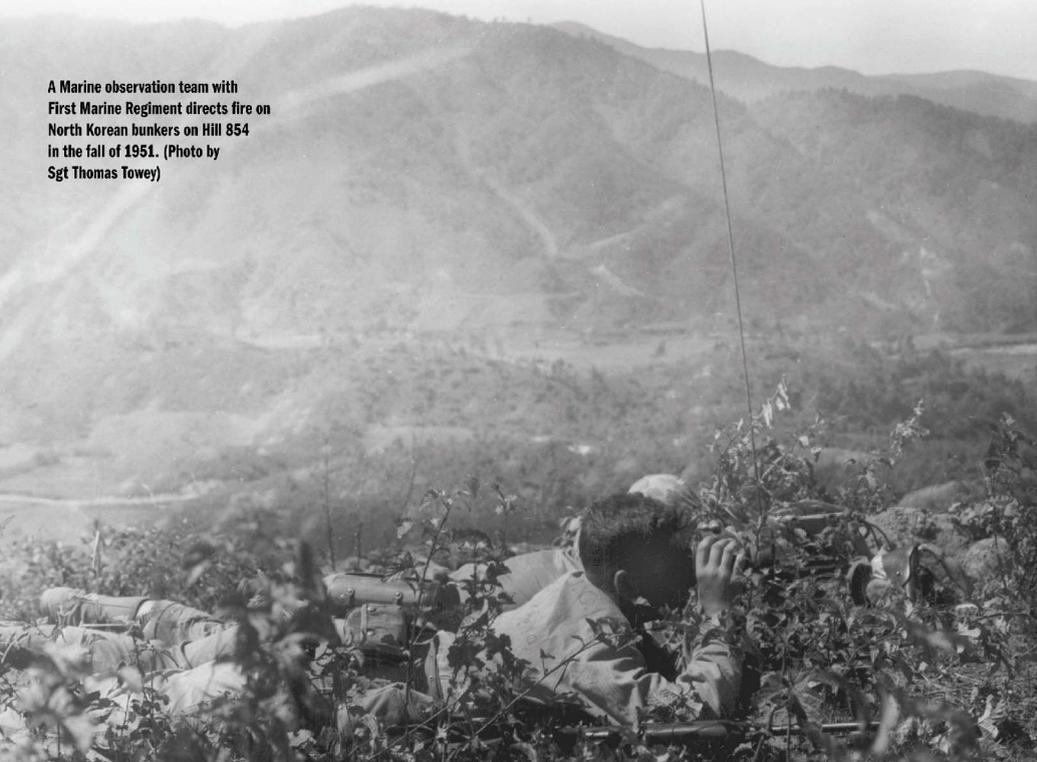
of Hill 812 enjoyed a live-fire primer in Marine infantry tactics and supporting-arms coordination. It was an education they would put to good use.

The North Koreans on Hill 812 began using that education in the early afternoon of 16 Sept., as soon as LtCol Houston Stiff's 2/5 moved up to attack Hill 812. The attack had been scheduled for early morning, but unforeseen delays in the 5th Marines relief of the 1st Marines had cost valuable time. Those delays also left 2/5 completely in the open and under enemy observation.

Before even crossing their start lines, Captain Ray N. Joens' "Dog" Co, 2/5 and Capt William E. "Bill" Melby's Fox/2/5 were subjected to a withering hail of 82 mm and 120 mm mortar fire, the red and black bursts of 76 mm mountain guns and crisscrossing streams of fire from a score of machine guns. Fox Co caught the worst of it, two platoon leaders falling in the first volley, to be joined quickly by more than two dozen other dead and wounded.

Fighting their way every inch of the way, the assault waves struggled forward, raked by fire as they fought step by step across the open ground and onto the lower

A Marine observation team with First Marine Regiment directs fire on North Korean bunkers on Hill 854 in the fall of 1951. (Photo by Sgt Thomas Towey)





A Marine HRS-1 helicopter lands reinforcements for Republic of Korea troops on the front lines in September 1951.

slopes of Hill 812. Every Marine learns the sheer physical strain of hill climbing. Doing that with burning legs and gasping lungs, while at the same time being the central target in a shooting gallery, is a special form of agony.

“Hold in place and dig in” was the order. The Marines of Fox Co needed no prodding to comply with that word. In no time at all there was a flurry of burrowing that would have done credit to a prairie dog colony. The North Koreans undoubtedly would launch a counterattack that night. Unprotected and in the open was no place to be. Holes, holes and more holes were dug, and Marines settled down under a 50 percent alert to obtain what rest they could, one man in each hole awake at all times.

There was no counterattack. A cloudless sky and a big, round full moon lit up the slopes of Hill 812 like a Hollywood romance movie. The North Koreans may have been communists, but they weren’t idiots. Why get out in the open in what wasn’t much less than broad daylight? They would hunker down in their bunkers and trenches and wait for the Marines to come on again.

When dawn broke on Monday, 17 Sept., the Marines of Fox Co, very few of whom had slept the previous night and even fewer who had eaten anything other than several spoonfuls of cold C-rations, clambered from their holes. They were met by a storm of fire that dwarfed the hurricane of the previous day. Raked by fire in a situation that common sense would tell a man was not a good place to be, they battered and bludgeoned their way to a point just short of the crest of the ridge.

There, Capt William L. Wallace’s Easy Co passed through to continue the attack.

The attack may have all but taken the ridge, but the North Koreans were not about to concede the issue. Easy Co was met with the same dogged resistance that greeted Fox Co. While the hill was honeycombed with earth and log bunkers, one was posing a particular problem. There seemed to be no safe way to approach it. Platoon Sergeant Frank Bilski and squad leader Sgt Jim Pella asked if anyone in Pella’s squad would take a crack at it. Two Marines, Ray Hernandez and John “Duke” Alston, stepped forward.

Marine veteran Gene Sledge, in his magnificent personal account of combat “With The Old Breed,” wrote of ordinary men who “routinely perform incredible acts of bravery.” Few such acts receive any form of official recognition; most simply are seen, even by the men who perform them, as only what is needed to meet the needs of the moment.

Meeting the needs of the moment, Ray Hernandez and Duke Alston worked their way carefully forward as the rest of the squad poured in covering fire. Crawling into a barely discernible dead zone, Alston thrust the muzzle of his Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) into a firing port and emptied a full magazine into the interior of the bunker. Hernandez armed a grenade, held it until the last second and then dropped it inside. The bunker fell silent, and the advance clawed

its way toward the crest. “Incredible acts of bravery” performed in the course of a day filled with such acts.

The North Koreans continued to resist viciously, clinging to their hold on the crest of the ridge through a morning of intense combat, denying the Marines the summit. Throwing everything into the assault, supporting artillery and all the organic and attached weapons of 2/5 laid a blanket of fire on the North Koreans. Close on the heels of those fires, Easy Co drove straight for the crest. At the same time, 2d Plt of Fox Co, that had become separated from its parent unit, edged in close and attacked the defenders from the left. Fierce close-in fighting with rifles, automatic weapons and grenades finally wrenched Hill 812 and the eastern portions of the ridge from the grip of the North Koreans.

Stubbornly, the North Koreans clung leechlike to the western portions. Separating friend and enemy was a massive granite outcropping that quickly became known as “The Rock.” Directly athwart the ridge line about 700 yards west of Hill 812 itself, The Rock bulged some 12 feet into the air. In one of those rare and unusual tactical oddities that sometimes pop up in battle, Easy Co outposted the eastern side of The Rock while the North Koreans outposted the western side. Close enough to the North Koreans on the other side of The Rock to hear them, Easy Co turned to the job of setting up a hasty defense in preparation for the inevitable counterattack.

Two such counterattacks were repulsed early on 18 Sept., but the position of 2/5 was anything but secure. The battalion was under constant observation from Hill 980 and Hill 1052. Anyone who moved during the day was a target. The objective had been taken by 2d Bn, but keeping it wasn’t a given. The North Koreans could be counted on to have another try at taking it back. They didn’t give up easily.

Sometimes, battles are a matter of the right man in the right place at the right time. Major Gerald P. “Gerry” Averill, the battalion S-3 (Operations) officer, was that man for 2d Bn, 5th Marines. Averill enlisted in the Marine Corps early in 1941 and following boot camp at Parris Island, S.C., volunteered for parachute training at Lakehurst, N.J. Commissioned in late 1942, he saw combat with LtCol Victor H. Krulak’s 2d Parachute Bn at Choiseul in the autumn of 1943. Later, at Iwo Jima,

Alston thrust the muzzle of his Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) into a firing port and emptied a full magazine into the interior of the bunker.

Marine 1stLt Robert L. Kletzker interrogates a Chinese Communist prisoner while Cpl Douglas Stephens, rear, looks on.

he served as a company commander in the 26th Marines.

Assigned to exercise on-scene operational control of the battalion's forward elements on Hill 812, Averill lost no time preparing for what every front-line Marine knew was coming. After a relatively quiet night of 18 Sept., the entire day of 19 Sept. was a day of near constant incoming fire for the Marines of Easy Co and the attached 2d Plt of Fox Co. As it turned out, that was just the preliminary. The main bout began just after 0200 on 20 Sept., when, as Gerry Averill would remember it, "The sky fell in."

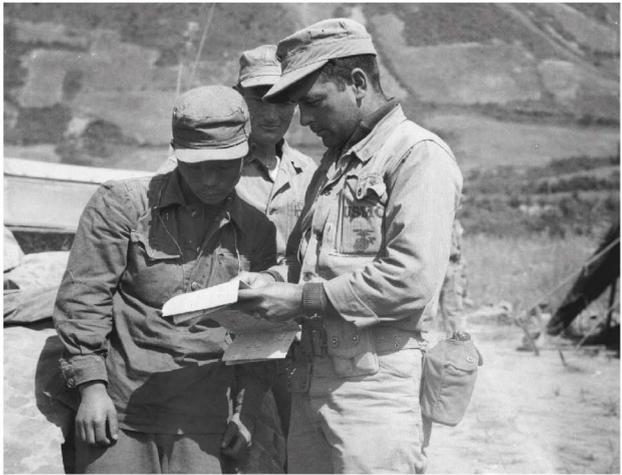
For a solid 30 minutes, a downpour of 120 mm mortar rounds that literally shook the hill under the feet of the Marines holding it gave evidence that this was the North Koreans' all-out effort to retake the hill without a name. Hill 812 and the ridge line west to The Rock erupted, ripping the night apart with overlapping explosions.

Hugging its own barrage and getting in close, the North Korean infantry, too many of them to count, surged toward the Marine line as soon as the fire lifted. The fighting was immediately at point-blank range, as attackers and defenders lit up the darkness with the explosions of grenades and the muzzle flashes of scores of rifles and machine guns. If the North Koreans wanted Hill 812, and they certainly did, they were willing to die to take it. As fast as one fell, another took his place.

In the end, as badly as the North Koreans wanted to reclaim ownership of Hill 812, they were met by Marines equally determined to stop them. Along that torn ridge line between Hill 812 and The Rock there were other right men in the right place at the right time. Laying .30-caliber BAR rounds down a draw leading directly to his fighting hole, many thoughts flashed through Duke Alston's head. Packing up and running weren't included.

Dribbling blood from a half-dozen fragmentation wounds, Cpl Peter "Rip" Meletis laid into the attackers with grenades, clip after clip from his M1 rifle and finally the butt of that rifle. Staff Sergeant Stanley "Stan" Wawrzyniak led his 2d Plt of Fox Co into a countercharge that tore into the North Koreans where they were most vulnerable, earning a Navy Cross in the process. And there was Gerry Averill, who seemed to be everywhere at once, living his dictum: "Rank gets paid to be seen." The right men were in the right place at the right time.

Dawn on 20 Sept. 1951 marked the end



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of the fighting for Hill 812. It also marked the single-most significant change in the entire course of the Korean War. From that point, the war of movement in Korea ended. There would be almost two more years of fighting ahead, but the war in Korea would become a war of position.

What brought about that change? Had it been LTG Van Fleet's order that no further offensive actions be undertaken after 20 Sept.? No. In publishing the order, LTG Van Fleet was making directive to his subordinate commanders a decision that had been made at the highest national level, a decision drawn from the first Principle of War: the Principle of the Objective.

Prior to late summer 1951, the objective of the war in Korea had been to inflict a military defeat upon North Korea. That would no longer be the case. The objective would become preserving the territorial integrity of the Republic of Korea, South Korea.

Was that the right decision? That question has been argued pro and con for decades. Little would be served by arguing it again here. One thing that cannot be argued, though, is that the national objective of the Korean War, preserving the territorial integrity of the Republic of Korea, was realized.

South Korea, a tiny country less than half the size of Alaska, today is a thriving, vibrant society, an economic powerhouse that ranks among the top six manufacturing

countries in the world.

Someone watching a DVD on a Samsung DVD player/recorder might be surprised to learn that the tallest building in the world, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, was built by the Samsung C&T industrial conglomerate. More than half of all the merchant-shipping tonnage built today is built by South Korean-owned shipyards. The Incheon (it's pronounced "Incheon" today) International Airport consistently has been rated the best airport in the world by the Airports Council International. Citizens of South Korea, a country once ground under the harsh heel of war, today enjoy one of the highest standards of living anywhere.

Perhaps the Marines who fought on Hill 812 and all the Marines who fought on all the hills of Korea, those who are still with us, can look back 60 years

and contemplate what they accomplished. Perhaps they can justifiably say: "Yes, we did do something good. We did do something worthwhile, as the song goes 'Yesterday when we were young.' " They can say that because they did.

Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars. Later in his career, he was an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va.

