

Korean War Veteran

*Internet Journal for the World's
Veterans of the Korean War*

March 25, 2015



The horrible Hook

The United States Marines move to the west front and prepare for the first Battle of the Hook
With ROK Marine Regiment attached

Perspectives

In early November, 1952, the rifle companies of the newly arrived 3rd Battalion of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry were in semi-reserve positions on the left flank of the west central front. C Company was within a mile of the 1st U.S. Marine Division front line positions, which were further to the West.

Holdover soldiers from the Patricia's 1st Battalion had previously served in fairly quiet positions to the East throughout the summer. However, soldiers of The Royal Canadian Regiment, who had been on the flank of the Patricias, had been holding Hill 355 and its constituent features. They had been heavily shelled all summer.

Then, on the night of October 23/24 the enemy had hit the Royals with what until then was the heaviest artillery bombardment of the war. Their infantry stormed in and briefly held the high central Gibraltar feature of the position until driven off by allied barrages and a company-scale counterattack by the Royals' D Company.

Now, in their very quiet positions behind the marines in November, the Patricias could hear each night the machineguns of the marines putting harassing fire on the enemy. On many nights there were patrol clashes along the marine front, with a cacophony of shots and grenade bursts. The M-1 rifles of the marines made distinctive sharp cracks. The *burp* submachine gun bursts from the enemy were an eerie reply.

Sometimes the action was accompanied by haunting orange or sparkling golden light from flares, which hung over the action. These fighting patrols and clashes with the enemy on Chinese-dominated outpost hills, and the enemy's probes at the marines, were regular events. Yet along the adjacent Commonwealth front at that time, the front was quiet. Clashes in no-man's land were much less frequent.

Each morning the C Company Patricias could clearly see the U.S. Air Force Shooting Star jets swoop down and strafe in front of the marine positions. Sometimes it would be done by the Marine Corsair propeller driven planes, or their Panther jets, launched from aircraft carriers far off the west coast.

The long trail of greasy dark smoke would trail off as each plane fired and a couple of seconds later the roar of the plane's cannon would reach the Patricias. On some of these two-plane runs bombs would be dropped.

In greatest incongruity, often at the time of the air attacks, the Patricias were actually practicing close order drill on their hilly positions; a move their battalion headquarters thought was prudent, to give the newly arrived soldiers and those who were holdovers from the 1st Battalion, sharper discipline.

Platoon sergeants were peeved that the men seemed distracted by the attacking fighter bombers and bent on watching them instead of focusing on sloping arms, fixing bayonets, and so forth.

One thing was clear to all: The United States Marines were indeed having a war with the Chinese Peoples Volunteer armies; virtually every night and day.

It was almost unbelievably ironic that as close as the Patricias were to the places where marines were fighting and dying, on at least one night the Battalion's projectionist set up his projector and screen to show a full-length movie. All of the soldiers of C Company huddled in a little hollow with the Hollywood action lighting the screen – while a mile distant, where marines could probably see that screen, the real action was taking place, and soldiers were being killed.

The Patricias did not know that they, themselves, would be in action very soon, and would be the battalion that held the line on the immediate right flank of the marines.

They also did not know that during the spring and summer the marines had suffered heavy losses in daylight action, and in October, they had a colossal battle on a position called the Hook.

The Patricias had heard a little about the Hook. C Company was designated as a counterattack company, should the Black Watch company that was then holding it be attacked and overrun.

They did not know that the Black Watch had taken over the bloody Hook positions after the marines had fought a ferocious three-day battle there, and lost more soldiers killed and wounded than in any other battle fought by any of the UN Forces units, anywhere along the front in 1952.

They did not know that the Black Watch would fight a horrible battle there, too, or that the soldiers of C Company would be part of it.

The Marines move to the western front

The history of the Hook position in the spring months of 1952 recounts that there had been much patrol action, and a good deal of artillery shell and mortar placement on the defenders of the Hook and its outlying positions.

First, units of the 1st ROK Division had held it, then, in succession, Britain's Welch Regiment relieved them, and then the Welchmen had been relieved by companies of the 1st Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry.

On the night of March 15/16, the enemy raided No. 7 Platoon of the Patricia's C Company, which was holding the Hook's Warsaw combat outpost. The Canadians were hit by an estimated two reinforced platoons of about 100 soldiers. The firefight went on for four hours.

With the aid of colossal fire from Commonwealth Division artillery, the 20 men defending the Warsaw defeated the enemy. Thirty-five of their enemy soldiers were killed and two taken prisoner. It was assumed that many other enemy soldiers had been wounded, but holed up in no-man's land until they could be evacuated.

Very soon after that attack on the Warsaw something occurred on the front that was an amazing, gigantic maneuver, worthy of textbook citation.

U. S. Eighth Army, parent of all American Army units and those from all allied nations, including the Commonwealth, decided to move the entire 1st U.S. Marine Division westward. The Division mostly had served under X Corps, which had a separate command and reported to U.S. Supreme headquarters in Tokyo, but the marine division was then attached to 8th Army.

The deployment took place on an almost immediate basis, beginning on March 17, once the decision had been made. It involved redeployment of the entire Division from the Punchbowl area on the eastern front, to the west central front and western front on the Jamestown Line , just west of the Commonwealth Division positions. The Division would relieve most units of the 1st ROK Division, which were spread from an area just west of the Hook and the Saimichon River all the way to the Imjin River delta and the great island of Ganghwa on the Yellow Sea.

Called Operation Mixmaster, it was vast; staggering in proportion. Likely only the American Forces could have had the logistical wherewithal to make such a brassy move successful.

It required transfer of the 1st, 5th and 7th U.S. Marine Corps Regiments, as well as 4,400 marines in a constituent ROK Marine Corps Regiment; a total of 30,800 soldiers, including their officers and all their organic support equipment.

To make the huge switch required nearly 6,000 truckloads of men and materiel, 63 flatbed trailers for heavy equipment, 83 railroad cars and 14 landing ships that brought materiel from Sokohoori on the East coast to Incheon on the west.



Units of the 5th U.S. Marine Regiment on the move in Operation Mixmaster haul cannon and heavy equipment through incredibly mucky trails as they take up positions along the Jamestown Line.

The great switch from east to west was an astounding feat. It began on March 17 and the marines had repositioned their battalions on their new ground by March 25 and were relieving units of the 1st ROK Division.

Despite what seemed like a high number of men, the front assigned to the marines was vast and stretched all of their resources.

From the Hook position on their extreme right flank, adjacent to the British Commonwealth Division, the marine line extended 10 miles by line of sight to the corridor that ran through the lines to the Panmunjim armistice talks site.

By actual frontage, the 1st Marine Division line extended more than 14 miles from the Commonwealth Division boundary to the Panmunjom corridor. If the frontage was measured around each of the forward slopes of the features being defended, it would be much greater.

From the Hook on the east, or right flank, the marine line extended westward and included (going westward) outpost hills East Berlin, Berlin, Vegas, Reno, Carson, Siberia, Bunker Hill (Hill 122), and positions along the Panmunjom corridor.

Of these, the hills from the Hook to Carson covered a line of sight front of a little over three miles.

Beyond the Panmunjom corridor the main line of resistance wove and stretched further west to the Kimpo Peninsula, which huge land mass was formed by the Han River on the east and the Yumhwa River on the west. The great ancient fortress island of Ganghwa is on the left bank of the Yumhwa and the island's westerly shores front on the Yellow Sea.

(HISTORICAL ASIDE - History is most times fuzzy, sometimes inaccurate. But ironically, the Island of Ganghwa was the site 81 years before, in 1871, where an American landing force of U.S. Navy “bluejackets” and U.S. Marines fought Korean forces holding a string of the island’s forts. The deciding battle was at ‘Fort McKee,’ where a Korean defending force of some 300 soldiers was defeated in brutal hand to hand fighting. The Koreans suffered 243 soldiers killed in action and 20 were taken prisoner. The American sailors and marines lost three men killed in action and 10 wounded. The fort was “named” by the Americans after Navy Lieutenant William R. McKee, who had led the assault. The records show that six small American Navy vessels sailed from Japan to

Korea to conduct peaceful business, but also to recover the remains of the crew of the S.S. Sherman, a side paddlewheel steamer that had sailed up the Taedong River to Pyongyang seeking trade in 1866. The Sherman had been attacked by Korean forces when it did not yield to demands to shove off. Crew members not killed in the ensuing fights were beaten to death when captured. The Sherman had a crew of just 20, of all hands. Present day North Korea has concocted a version of the story that says an ancestor of North Korea's Kim Il-song, and his clan, including the present Kim Jong-un, victoriously attacked the American ship, which it called an American armed warship on an imperialistic mission. All had gone well with the 1871 expedition until one of the Korean forts fired on one of the six small American ships. The commander of the fleet subsequently landed a force of 542 sailors and 109 marines and defeated the Koreans who were manning the forts. Not a small part of the action was fought with swords. Anyhow, 81 years before the Marines took over the west front from the 1st ROK Division in 1952, for a few days, they had been at war with the Koreans on Ganghwa Island).

The distance from the Kimpo segment of the marine front to the Division's right flank position adjacent the Commonwealth Division was some 30 miles.

The deployment could not be a thin line along the front. It had to be one of depth, including deployment in the Kimpo Peninsula and in other intermediary positions. However, as much as possible, battalions were placed on the line where they faced the enemy.

The 1st U.S. Marine Division had been moved west because 8th Army command (UN Command) was concerned that defences in the area of the Kimpo peninsula were inadequate, which was the historic invasion route to Seoul. Seoul was little more than 30 air miles from the Division's Eastern boundary and Incheon a little less than 30 air miles from its extreme western flank.

It is almost a given that whenever any unit from any nation relieves another on the front lines, they always find the field to be less than satisfactory and set to work at once to bring it up to a higher military standard.

On the western front positions, the old saying rang true.

The positions the marines inherited were inadequate. The bunkers were poorly constructed, formed mostly to keep weather out without a regard for mortar bombs or shells. Mines were strewn haphazardly and inconsistently.

There were few defences in depth. There were many undefended gaps in the line.

The front had not been regulated, actually inviting the enemy to exploit it. In one sector farmers were planting crops on ground in no man's land between the UN and the Chinese positions.

Moving into their assigned sectors, many of the companies of the various marine battalions found themselves making their way through mine fields that were very poorly designated, or in some places through minefields that had not even been charted. There were casualties from mines in many locations.

The roads, where there were roads, were a wretched mess.

Action in the Saimichon quadrant

All along the front, and in many areas where the defenders had often been docile, the marines launched aggressive patrols.

The enemy was no less aggressive. They were shelling some of the marine positions, putting out ambush patrols.

They made probing attacks against the ROK Marines and the left flank of the U.S. Marines during the last week of March.

The marines were sending out fighting patrols in the first week of April, hitting at enemy positions.



Marines moving out on daylight fighting patrol

Once they had secured the western stretches of their new sector and held the enemy in check, the marines shuffled eastward to relieve the 25th Canadian Infantry Brigade.

On April 15 two battalions of marines relieved The Royal Canadian Regiment, and also the Princess Patricias, who were holding the vital Hook and its constituent positions.

The give and take along the marine front continued through the spring and summer.

The marines kept up their aggressive patrol action, while preparing better defences. Thousands of huge timbers were taken to their positions to build bunkers that could

withstand mortar hits, hopefully even shell hits. Trenches were dug deep, barbed wire was strung out.

Mines were placed and sensibly charted. Artillery was ranged in on all of the enemy positions. The marines also sharpened their skills with variable-time fused proximity shells, or air bursts and with what they called "box me in fire," to be used defensively.



Marines manning 155 millimeter howitzer.

With all the tenacity, constant casualties, patrols bumping each other, each side jabbing the other, one side or other was bound to make a bold move and try to seize some ground from the other.

On August 9 the enemy shelled and then hit the outpost hill the marines called Siberia. It was a hill that could hold a lean company, but because of thin numbers and the great expanse of front they had to cover the marines had positioned a single infantry squad on it. The enemy attacked with two full platoons, ten times their numbers, and the squad withdrew.

By training and by history and by desire the United States Marine Corps is an attack force, and that has been its role since its formation. Its only assignment as defenders has been and still is to guard U.S. embassies around the world – in very small numbers.

So within hours of the enemy settling and digging in on Siberia the marines began attacking.



Marine squad moving up on Siberia feature, August, 1952

“Began” is appropriate, because they would have to make a series of repeated attacks under heavy mortar and shell fire, and the enemy was persistent in counterattacking whenever the marines retook took the crest.

The enemy's strong defence was made even after Marine panther jets bombed and napalmed the position.

These seesaw battles for the Siberia outpost, small in scale by some standards, resulted in 17 marines killed in action and 243 wounded, all in a little more than two days and a few hours of night hours.

The enemy artillery and their defensive actions on the Siberia outpost were being directed by others holding the heights of nearby Hill 122, called Bunker Hill (There were other positions also known as Bunker Hill on other sectors of the line).



Marines directing air strike against Hill 122, Bunker Hill.

The marines would eliminate the enemy holding Bunker Hill.

But it would be far from easy.

It's never easy. Undoubtedly the marines, like most soldiers, would know sickly, icy fear before the action, shudder uncontrollably a little, then get over it and face what must come in a near blur, as though someone else was doing the directing and pulling the strings. The marine, like all soldiers had then put his faith in Our Lord and in his training.

If he comes through whole and unhurt, he will probably be sapped, joyous that he breathes and moves, wretched of mind maybe for what he had been through. Likely he may falsely resolve never to do it again, to give his mind respite, although he knows that he will do it again if he must.



On August 11 a marine force made a tank supported attack at nightfall on Siberia to take attention off the main attack on Bunker Hill. One tank used a searchlight to illuminate the enemy with quick bursts of light, enabling the others to sight and fire quickly on their targets.

Later that same night a company of marines fought their way to the crest of Bunker Hill - the "military crest," which means the enemy's trenchline that circumscribes the position. The enemy pulled back, but many pockets of Chinese soldiers were left in position.

The shootout went on throughout the night. The enemy put shells on the marines who were holding their ground and continued the bombardment until dawn.

A Chinese force counterattacked in the middle of the afternoon on August 12.

The battle was a constant dice roll for the next three days, with marines on Bunker Hill often calling for "box me in" artillery fire.

On August 16 a Chinese battalion hit the company of marines holding the hill.

There would be seven different enemy counterattacks on Bunker Hill by the end of that month.

The marines defended and counterattacked and suffered, and with their blood, they prevailed.

On Bunker Hill they lost 48 officers and men killed in action, 313 others with serious wounds, and some 200 with less than serious wounds – casualties that amounted to roughly one full scale front line battalion. (The regulation U.S. Marine battalion was constituted by three rifle battalions of 200 soldiers each).



The marine casualties suffered at the battles to retake the Siberia outpost and then that of Bunker Hill totaled 65 marines killed in action and 556 seriously wounded, with as many as 200 suffering less serious wounds.

It should also be noted that the casualties along the marine sector of the line were even higher than that. The numbers cited apply to two outpost hills.

The enemy, when they hit Bunker Hill, also hit other marine positions on the flanks to divert and confound the marines' ability to gain support.

There were other casualties along the line caused by aggressive patrol actions, probes at the enemy, and by the enemy's increasing use of artillery and mortar fire.

The marine replacement situation was seriously short. The incoming drafts of replacements from the United States were specially augmented by an additional 1,000 men that summer, in addition to the regular numbers.

Additionally, large numbers of volunteers from the echelons and from Japan were also taken on strength in the line companies.

They were holding an entire string of key outpost features to the west of the Hook and its environs, all the way to Ganghwa Island. But the Hook was a strategic target for the enemy because of its height and advantages for observing other positions westward along the Saimichon Valley all the way up to the big bastion position called Hill 355, or Little Gibraltar.

The marines knew that the enemy would try to take it – not just raid it, but actually try to capture it and hold it.

Enemy artillery

For some reason, historians of the Korean War have never tried to tie the action of the October 23/24 raid on Hill 355, which was held by the 1st Battalion of The Royal Canadian Regiment, and attacks on the 1st Battalion of the 7th Marine Regiment on the Hook, which was hit very heavily on the night of October 26/27 after monstrous artillery barrages on October 24 and October 25.

The same guns that had savaged the central Gibraltar feature of Hill 355, putting 5,000 shells on the position in a single hour, were turned on the Hook features, which were at most just five miles from the Hook.

The enemy guns were in equidistant positions and could easily barrage both positions, and in fact, many other positions along the marine front.

Despite the UN Forces having complete domination of the skies and constant aerial surveillance of the front, the enemy were able to bring in hundred of cannon of all calibers. Obviously they were able to move forward tens of thousands of shells to feed the guns.

The doddering armistice talks and the order that the UN Forces would hold the present line with no further advancements had enabled the enemy to build a superb front, five miles in depth, where field guns and tanks could be secreted in caves, where colossal stores of ammunition and great numbers of troops could be held safe, often 10 to 30 feet beneath the mountainsides.

On the Marine Division front at the time, shells for the field guns were actually limited by order. A special order was needed to increase the shoots necessary for protecting the Hook features and driving out the enemy.

Though the attack on Hill 355 had been horrible, and the Royals suffered 18 soldiers killed, 35 wounded and 14 captured, it was a raid and not an attempt to take the huge position. The enemy left at dawn offering little resistance to the Royals' counterattack company. (*While holding the Hill 355 positions from August through October, the Royals had suffered some 200 casualties, including 41 soldiers killed in action*).

The assault against the marines on the Hook would be different. The enemy shock troops would come in with their sappers and engineers advancing with them. They were toting construction tools and materials to rebuild the defences their artillery had devastated. They planned to stay, not to raid.

It would be a sad, heartbreaking battle to hold low lying hills along a front that by orders was never to move northward.

There were no epic stories about it, no hot copy for the world's yawning press - except that two of the marines were awarded the Medal of Honor, one of them posthumously.

Since the marines moved from the Punchbowl to take over the western front positions in March through the Battle of the Hook in October, their members would be awarded eight medals of honor, six of them posthumously.

People in the home countries, including America, were waiting impatiently for the armistice to be signed. There was no doubt about the conclusion of the war; it would be a negotiated end, with the front line not greatly different than the international boundary between South Korea and North Korea had been before the war started.

Knowing there was no victory to come from it, people read news of the war with boredom and many put it out of their thoughts. Those who did included politicians serving in the various governments.

Their governments were not strongly supportive of the needs of their troops in the field. Opposition members of the various democratic governments were pressuring those in power to get out of Korea and bring the troops home.

Some in the home nations did not truly know if the war was still being fought, or if it had ended.

Of the 36,574 American servicemen and servicewomen who lost their lives in the Korean War, 4,508 of them were members of the United States Marine Corps.

All of the other UN Allied Nations together (Not counting the Republic of Korea) lost 4,400 servicemen and service women in the Korean War, a little less than the 1st Division of the United States Marines.

This edition of the Korean War Veteran uses photographs from the archives of the United States Department of Defence, and the United Kingdom's Imperial War Museum.



Aerial view of Panmunjom conference building and quarters - squalid little place where the world's hopes were focused. The world had wanted the armistice negotiations finished in two or three months. The soldiers wanted them finished *any second!*

When the talks dragged on for more than a year, with no progress to report, the world grew weary of hearing about them. Yet all along the front soldiers and airmen would suffer, die, be wounded and maimed.

Suffering in highest numbers would be the soldiers of the Chinese Peoples Volunteers and the North Korean Army. Their governments were sacrificing them like checkers on a playing board, in concert with their unyielding strategy in the armistice talks.

Some allied soldiers, especially those who could at night see the searchlight shining straight skyward to mark the Panmunjom joint security area, wondered if their own governments were not doing the same.

The wretched prefab hut where the military armistice agreement was signed still stands in the North Korean portion of the Panmunjom Joint Security Area. It is not accessible to anyone visiting the UNC side of the JSA.