

Bridge on the Naktong

Overlooking the Ch'angnyong to Ch'ogyo Bridge

“L Company, 21st Infantry Regiment in August 1950 was in position on high ground overlooking the Ch'angnyong to Ch'ogyo Bridge across the Naktong River.”

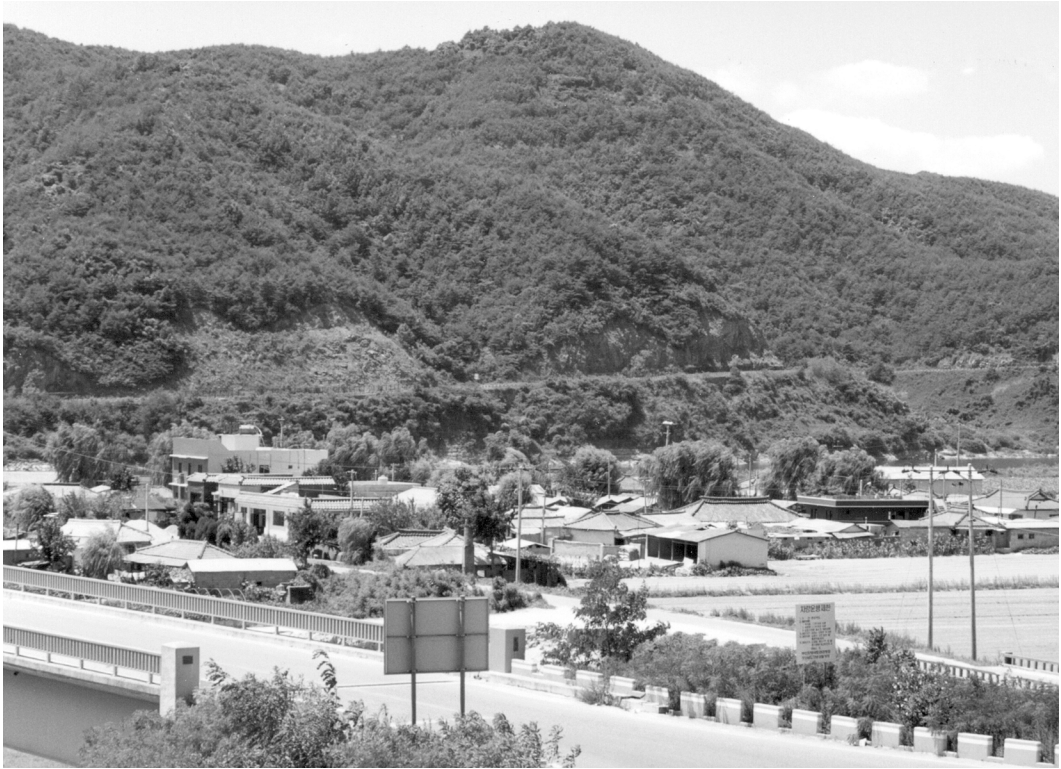
Will it aid memory if we describe the gook train winding its way around the hill trail once a day carrying A-frames laden with jerry cans of water and thermos containers of hot chow? Will it begin to come alive again?

My apologies to our Korean friends, but that is what we called it. Forty some years later I think I know why we called them gooks. I believe a one word question by a Korean native to an American GI “Miguk?” (American?) was misinterpreted as “Me Gook!” by the GI. We knew nothing of Hangul and the guys who had been in Japan usually spoke limited Japanese to the Koreans. After 35 years under the Japanese all Koreans knew Japanese.

Who could forget the ants? In the early days I believed that Korea was one giant ant hill. My first night away from Miryang Replacement Depot had been painful. We had not managed to make it to L Company and the 6X6 I was on stopped in a schoolyard. I believe this is the reason John Marshall and I could never agree on the time of day when we first joined the company on the Naktong. John maintained we had gone on the mountain at night in the dark. I have always remembered going up there in the daylight. I have long since lost the memory it would take to tell anyone the hour. I think John's truck went on that night while we stopped to spend the night at the schoolyard. We bedded down after dark on the side of a nearby hill above the schoolyard.

I could not believe my bad luck when I picked out two locations in the dark, both of which were already occupied by ants. When daylight came, there were ants everywhere! Ants learn. On the Naktong I killed every ant that ventured into my foxhole for the first two days I was there. Then they quit getting into my foxhole.

We augmented our water ration at a dripping spring just across the shallow saddle to the south of my hole and the east across the knob of the hill from the CP where we kept a container sitting to catch and accumulate the water. This turned into a small disaster for me – I had heated some beef stew in my canteen cup but had not been able to wash it. We had no water to speak of on the hill. So I went to the spring and used a little of that water mixed with some of the gravel in the small bed below the spring. Swirling this around for a while in the canteen cup really made it gleam. How could it not be clean. Clean maybe but not germ free. I made some hot chocolate in it and then carried a trenching tool everywhere I went for several days. I borrowed and begged extra toilet paper from most of the guys on the hill.



The new bridge is in the foreground, the approach to the old bridge is just beyond. No buildings were here in 1950. The road snaking along the hills on the far looks very familiar.

Lt. Hap Chandler lay, stripped to the waist sunbathing at the CP overlooking the river. The dark American Indian hardly needed a tan, but there he was anyway soaking up the sun of which there was plenty.

We had an outpost manned nightly down at base of the hill below the CP. God the mosquitos were terrible at night down there where you were much closer to the Naktong River. The mosquitos bred easily in the stagnant water of the rice paddies that seemed to cover every available square-inch of the Korea flat enough to flood. The human waste used to fertilize the soil where the rice crops were grown provided the mosquitos with plentiful nutrients for their larvae.

There was harrassing fire which the artillery dispensed nightly. It would come marching down the road from the north across the river. Boom ...boom ...boom and then when it came to the bridge, twelve rounds just to make certain the NKs were not trying to repair the missing spans and use it. One night nine of those twelve hit the back side of our hill. Good thing no one was back there digging catholes at the time.

I returned to this site in 1992 when I worked a few months in Korea on an engineering job. As I approached from the South all I could see was a new bridge that has been built

just downstream from the old bridge. I couldn't recognize the location as I approached. There is a fair sized village on the east bank of the river around the bridge where there had been none in 1950.

We parked the car at the side of the road, I climbed a short way up the hill to look across the river and try to remember. The far side where the road continued north, snaking along the foothills meshed completely with my memories. Once I had climbed a short distance the old bridge came into view from its hiding place and there was no doubt this was the location. Blown spans had been replaced. This was betrayed by the color of the concrete. It had apparently been used for many years before the new bridge was built.

I think I was here 8 days in 1950. The company had been on position much longer. I'm reasonably sure we moved off the mountain the 23rd of August. We were relieved by elements of the 2nd Division. As we trod down the trail off the hill I met Cpl Tamber among the group coming on. We exchanged hurried greetings and continued our separate ways.

Sometime during the 8 days we decided we should have houseboys even though we certainly didn't have a house. Two kids from the train of bearers that brought supplies to us were asked if they wanted to stay with us and they eagerly accepted the offer. I believe they were kept with squad level units. One was bright and spoke a little english, enough to get by. I understood his name to be Young Sand Dee so it seemed natural to nickname him Sandy. The boy who stayed with the other unit was called Charley. As I said, Sandy was very bright and I thought it would be great to take him to the states where he would have a much better life than war-torn Korea. I wrote about this idea to my mother.

The night of our departure from the hill we stopped to camp near a small dry stream bed. Several of us, maybe as many as four snapped ponchos together and strung them across the pea sized gravel. With a shelter half for a ground cover the gravel felt like a good mattress compared to what we had been sleeping on. The location was a stupid choice. It began to rain during the night and very quickly there was 2 to 3 inches of water running through our "sleeping quarters."