

## Near the Yalu

November 2, 1950 — Near the border of Manchuria in North Korea.

Something awakened me. It was a bright, crisp autumn morning just as it might have been back in Arkansas or any of the places a soldier calls home. We had come to this position the evening before, that is my platoon had come up the evening before from the company position some two miles down the road to the south. We were supposed to guard a few 105mm howitzers that were in the field between us and the road, but I am afraid that it was precious little guarding that was done by the first platoon that night. As I said, something had awakened me (I never was sure, but it may have been William Sharp, my squad leader.). The sun beamed through the few brown leaves that clung to the skeletons of the trees in front of us. The last thing I remembered was going on guard at around midnight. I had fallen asleep on guard as had apparently, the rest of the platoon. The guns were gone — and even three tanks that had been near had departed sometime during the night without awakening me. I was a little confused by the absence of the equipment we were supposed to have been guarding, but as I had been one of the ones to fall asleep I thought perhaps it would be better if I didn't say too much about it and besides everyone else seemed to be in a hurry to get the bedrolls bundled up so I set to work on mine.

The platoon was soon ready to go and we tramped out of the woods and through the now empty field where the sun was relentlessly and quietly drying up the early morning dew. Rumors started to fly as soon as we struck the road and started south towards the Company, but they didn't carry their usual weight because it was becoming apparent that no-one in the platoon was really sure of where we going, why or where the guns and tanks had gone, except that they had received orders to pull out. There was the hopeful speculation that the war was over and that we were on our way home. That could have very well been true, because we were within eight miles of the Manchurian border at the time and had met with only scattered and sporadic fighting in the last few weeks. In short we had gone through North Korea like a dose of salts and were now ready to reap the benefits. I had ceased to worry about falling asleep on guard the night before since Sharp hadn't said a word about it and the march took on the jaunty atmosphere of a bunch of school boys on a field trip. I looked around me and noticed that everyone else seemed to be feeling likewise.

There was almost a spring to our steps, rifles were slung on shoulders straighter than they had been since the push started. We passed the hill where the company had been the day before. We had gotten word that the company had pulled back to a village a half mile or so on down the road. The village came into view and it soon became apparent that our company was the only unit there. The outfit was scattered in small groups of three or four just talking or lying back on the rolled up bedrolls, some sleeping, some just walking around. We also broke up into groups as we came into the village

and set about to “learn the score.” Again no-one seemed to know anything for sure, but the rumors were much more abundant and more elaborate and more authoritative, each preceded by some explanation of the source such as “Heard it straight from the orderly at General So and So’s headquarters who overheard it accidentally.”



“North Korea gave up unconditionally.” or...

***“Come out of there Bogey! I don’t think Bogey was in there at the time this picture was taken but I believe this is the cellar.”  
“Toady” Dreisonstok and Joe Griffith***

“Just mopping up to do now. The South Gooks can handle it. “ or...

“We’re goin’ home.” or ...

“We’re supposed to go straight to Pusan and leave for the states. Be there by Thanksgiving.” or...

We’re going to Taegu and train a Gook outfit to replace us and then we’re going home.” or... etc . etc .

The only thing we found out for sure was that we were waiting on trucks to take us someplace. We all hoped it was to the rear to get ready to go home. Towards the middle of the morning we had a little excitement. It seemed that two of the South Korean boys that were attached to the company had gone off through the village in search of some apples supposedly. After a while, when they didn’t return, two of the boys went to find them. They found them – in a house at the edge of town – one dead – the other dying of knife wounds. They had run across a woman in the house and thinking her alone had undertaken to take advantage of the situation. She hadn’t been alone, much to their regret. This was of course told by the one who was dying since the woman and her husband were nowhere to be found.

Around noon C-rations were issued and soon after the tension began to mount. It was, I think, not knowing what was going on that began to gnaw at our nerve fibres. That, coupled with the knowledge or at least strong belief that we all alone there. The other outfits that we knew had been there had all left the general vicinity early in the morning by truck and for all we knew were the only troops within a hundred miles of there, friendly troops that is. Then, to make matters worse, about three in the afternoon several F-80 jets began to circle the town. To be exact, there were three of them. It wouldn't have been so bad if we had been sure that they knew there were still Americans up there, but we weren't sure that we hadn't been just forgotten. We had no communication with the jets and we knew from past experience that a low flying fighter pilot cannot recognize uniforms or faces. So the jets began to circle the town staying about two miles out and we began a slow sweat. Some of the boys who had had near miss experiences with our own planes before began to go near nuts, not so slowly. Lee "Bogie" Wines, who always reminded me of a living incarnation of Al Capp's "Pappy Yokum," started to pace the narrow dirt street like an expectant father who has been too long at the hospital. Two or three others did likewise and all of us began to watch the three jets like children watching the three rings of a Barnum and Bailey showing, first one and then the others. All of the time we put ourselves in the flight leaders position and tried to decide what he was likely to do. It was no use, we just hoped that he would go on and get the hell out of there, but they kept up their slow circling. Somebody discovered a cellar. Bogie got in the cellar and said "I'm not comin' out until those sons of bitches leave."

After a long while an AT-6 mosquito spotter plane arrived and made a low pass over us. He gave us a big wag of the wing and the F-80s immediately flew off much to everyone's relief.

The sun was getting low in the sky when it was decided to start marching south down the road. We were not sure at all what had become of our transport and so began the trudge down the road.

Probably no further than a mile and a half to two miles we met the trucks and piled on board.

This road may have been a little better than usual but was still just a dirt road with a little gravel topping it off. Perhaps an hour or two after dark we passed a tank burning on the left side of the road and the entire convoy swung into a large field on the west side for a refueling stop. 5 gallon Jerry cans were all over the place and the trucks and other vehicles were fueled as quickly as possible. When our truck, which had most if not all of the first platoon was ready we headed back out to continue the journey south. Our truck made it only to the road — the engine sputtered and quit. We had no idea what was wrong — we knew only that we did not want to remain north while everyone else was going south. We split up and a squad of us managed to board another truck. It

ran perhaps a quarter mile and also sputtered to a halt. Someone had mixed about 5 or 6 cans of water with the cans of gasoline. At that point it was every man for himself. Three of us flagged a Russian truck being operated by the artillery. It was loaded level to the top of the sideboards with boxed artillery ammo. It sounded and pretty much looked like an old D-35 International that I had driven for my father before going in the army. It coughed and sputtered all through the night but never quit. About daylight we crossed the Chongchon River close to Anju North Korea and pulled into the assembly area for the artillery unit that operated the truck. They fed us breakfast which seemed better than the usual breakfast we got. We then set off east to try to locate Love Company.

I don't recall how we found them but several miles east they were located in a shallow valley running between some low hills.

This was the location we left from to cross the Chongchon to fight the battle described in Love Company's Four Days. As we marched across the bridge someone shouted "Lookit them chinks!" There had been heavy fighting here to hold the Chinese to the north bank of the river. The north shore bore witness to this by the presence of 15 to 20 enemy bodies. Some GI with a macabre sense of humor had turned each body on its back and placed an unlit tailormade in its lips.

As we gained the north side and continued up a gentle rise in the road sweeping to the left there was another Chinese body on the right with his feet in the ditch and his head almost to the road. As we passed I glanced back to see a sight I've never been able to forget. His head on the north side had a large hole and the skull was completely bare inside. He looked like watermelons I've seen back in Arkansas that have been picked clean internally by crows working through a hole in the rind.

Several days later after the battle we returned to the site and went into reserve for many days. I sent my rifle to ordnance. It had started firing the first 2 or 3 rounds from a clip and then refusing to feed. The remainder of the clip had to be fired by working the bolt handle by hand. This might have got me in trouble although it never had. In a few days it was returned and I set off a half mile or so south to a draw being used for test firing. Again it wouldn't work right. After trying several clips worth I was ready to give up. Some guy from another outfit had an M-1 and he was burning that hillside up. I wished mine would fire like that. About that time he yelled out "Does anyone want this M-1? I found it in the road and if I take it back to the company, they'll take it away from me." I immediately shouted "I'll take it!" It looked as if it had been run over by a wide assortment of vehicles and the stock was scarred and scratched but as long as I had it, it never failed to fire.

We had Thanksgiving dinner here of as traditional a fare as the military can provide in the field. Afterwards I decided that I had to have a bath. The weather was already cold with few warm days. I knew I would not be able to voluntarily put the creek water on

me to rinse the soap off. I asked a buddy if he would throw the rinse water on me when I was ready. Naturally he was only pleased to oblige. I stripped off and waded into a little wider pool in the shallow creek. The water was only 6 to 8 inches deep. As I was just getting soaped up good a NK civilian came running up excitedly. "Mama San come, Mama San come!" I didn't like the options and replied loudly "Let 'er come!" As they passed I looked to see her with eyes tightly closed being led by a male on either side by the immodest American in the creek. When I had finished I told my buddy to throw the water and with each canteen cup of cold water my lungs involuntarily inhaled large gulps of air. He seemed to enjoy his task a little too much. I think this was Leroy Ellison but it's tough to remember after almost fifty years.

The squad acquired some sweet potatoes here. We bummed some grease from the kitchen and that night by the campfire we peeled a couple, sliced them as thin as we could and cooked sweet potato chips over the fire. They were really good but then everything was good when you were as hungry as we were.

I think we left here on trucks eventually — headed south — giving ground to regroup and fight again another day. We were leapfrogging south and at some point we dismounted the trucks and took up positions on the hills that made a sort of bowl of the valley. The troops who had been behind us moved through. I was on top a ridge that had a footpath along the crest. Sometime the second day, John Shields caught the hillside on fire. Three times I beat out small fingers of the fire as it reached the path. Then it was chow call for the noon meal. I didn't see any more fire and my down sleeping bag was on the north side of the path where the fire had been on the south side. I went to chow. Returning I found the sleeping bag with several large smoldering holes in it. It was a loss. I went to supply to get another but they were only able to give me two old WWII blanket bags. These kept you from freezing at night but just barely.

When we left this area we rode out on tanks at night. It had turned very cold and the tanks were really miserable to ride. If you were alongside or in front of the gun turret the cold of the steel worked through your boots until you were sure your feet would freeze and fall off. Because of this we shuffled in a circle continuously, up alongside the turret, across the gun and down the left side of the tank. By the time you were sure your feet were numb you had reached the grillwork over the engines. A few inches below the grill two large mufflers ran cherry red and by the time the circle had carried to the right side your feet were hot almost to the point of pain.

Eventually I found a brand new GI down sleeping bag in an attic space of a South Korean house we were staying in. It was an L shaped house. There was a small storage room separated from the house by a "breezeway." The Korean who had lived here apparently lived a little better than most. He had a drum of kerosene and a bag of cement in the store room, items I had never seen in a Korean residence and quite unexpected in a village such as this.