

NOT long after I joined Company L, 21st Infantry, 24th Division, in September 1950 I was given command of the 5th or "Gimlet" platoon, as the attached Republic of Korea troops were called in the 21st. The platoon consisted of 22 Koreans who had been with the company a short while, and 20 untrained Koreans who had joined us the night before I took over the platoon. My company commander, Lieut. Planter Wilson, gave me M/Sgt. Lester Studebaker and Sgt. Leon Wilson for assistants.

In training they worked hard to be soldiers and in combat they earned the right to "belong."

Looking back, I say

My ROKs Were Good

Lieutenant Lindsey P. Henderson

When I first inspected my platoon it was easy enough to tell who the old combat men were. I can't explain it exactly, but there is something about a combat man that you can feel.

After the inspection the two sergeants and I got to work. The sergeants told me who the new men were and their opinions of the old men. We then reorganized the platoon.



LIEUTENANT LINDSEY P. HENDERSON, Infantry, served as platoon leader in the 21st Infantry, 24th Division, in Korea. He told another story about his Republic of Korea soldiers in the September 1951 issue of this magazine.



Shortly after the crossing of the Naktong in September 1950, these four members of the "Gimlet" platoon were snapped by their Platoon leader. The man hidden behind the moustache is Master Sergeant Lester Studebaker, the platoon sergeant. Next is Sergeant First Class Leon Wilson, then Kim, the radio operator, and finally Yum, the platoon interpreter."

One of the tanks destroyed by the platoon on 23 September was photographed three days later. The bandaged man is Corporal Cho Byung Je who attacked one of the enemy tanks with grenades. Squad Leader An Nak Chan stands beside him.

Two of the men, Ryang Hyong Jin and Lee Han Tok, had officer's training and Lee had been in the police force. I appointed them first and second lieutenants, respectively. Hong Chang Ki had been a district school superintendent. He was made first Sergeant. Sergeant Wilson told me that Kim Hong Kwan, Kang Si Tae, Kim Ju Tong and An Nak Chan were the roughest, toughest, most fearless of the combat men, and were looked up to by the others. I appointed them sergeants first class and made them squad leaders.

As soon as the platoon was reorganized I called a meeting of my key men and told them what I intended to do and why.

First of all, I had to be sure that they felt like they "belonged," even though they were Koreans in an American outfit. Then I had to be sure that they understood what we were to do and that they had to earn the right to "belong."

Our job, I told them, was to point the attacks, do most of the extended patrolling and man listening posts. We were fighting in Korea and they knew the terrain and understood the language.

I told them that they would be responsible for the training and discipline of the men.

ORIENTAL justice and discipline is foreign to the American way of thinking and doing things. It is forceful, swift and sometimes brutal, but it is what they expect, understand and respect. But I did not let my American noncoms use it for two reasons: our repugnance for brutality, of any kind, and "Face." It wouldn't do to have an Occidental strike an Oriental. There are those who would condemn an American officer who turned his head from native brutality but here I stand on the end results. My platoon gave me complete faith, devotion and loyalty.

Sergeant Studebaker, Sergeant Wilson and I supervised and made corrections where necessary. We spent every minute we could and on teaching the care and cleaning of weapons and tactical training. Hand-and-arm signals were thoroughly taught and learned. Signals were a universal language and, in combat would eliminate any confusion that might result from the loss or lack of an interpreter and the breakdown of communications. I made it clear that with few exceptions a man only makes one mistake in combat. Whenever we came off the line, if mistakes had occurred, we would double the training to iron out the bugs. The more training we had, the less likely we were to be killed.

The Gimlet platoon had forty-six warm bodies, including mine, and I hoped that in combat they would all be hot. In mock attack, the Gimlets looked and sounded ferocious. They were developing as a team, and the hand-and-arm signals seemed to be

working. I wanted to work more with each squad and develop my fire teams to a fine point, but there wasn't time. The few days we had were much too short. I needed two more U.S. noncoms. With one for each 10-man squad I could exercise closer control. I was lucky in Sergeant Studebaker. He had been first sergeant of an outfit in the rear, but wanted action. He jokingly said he had been sent forward to be killed. He asked for it often enough, but he was a superior soldier, an old hand at combat and knew his business. Sergeant Wilson was young, sometimes rash and headstrong, but all guts; he knew his business too. He had been in combat since the first day in Korea, one of the few original men who survived and remained with his company.

After a few weeks I did get two more noncoms. Sergeant Todd and Corporals Weber and Rounds each had something that we needed in the Platoon. Due to the nature of our missions we were assigned an aid man. Good medics lift morale.

There has been much talk of AWOL, but the men of Company L reversed the procedure, they went AWOL to the unit. Officers and men who were lightly wounded in action were constantly skipping channels and leaving the hospitals as soon as they thought they were ready to return to the company. They knew they were needed. My Gimlets were no exception. As soon as they could walk, they left the hospitals and started looking for the company.

One day my ROKs were paid. Not much, to be sure, but it made them happy. Then a delegation, representing each squad, visited me. They wanted to contribute their pay to their own Government; it was enough that the U.S. Army fed, clothed and armed them. Deeply moved, I accepted their money and, through channels, sent it to the Minister of Defense of the Republic of Korea. Sometime later an acknowledging letter came back. In it the Minister spoke of his gratitude to his fellow citizens in the platoon and of his happiness that American and Republic of Korea soldiers "could fight for the common cause of humanity."

But I've gotten ahead of myself.

On 16 September we pushed back to the Naktong River and took up positions about five miles south of Waegwan. On 18 September we crossed the Naktong in assault boats under a murderous fire. We took the high ground on the enemy side of the river and the half-green platoon acquitted itself admirably. From that point on, we were on the upgrade.

At about 1630 hours 21 September 1950, Company L was pointing the advance of the regiment on the Waegwan-Kumchon road. When elements of the company were well within a town which was the headquarters for one of the crack Red tank divisions, tanks and automatic weapons opened up with heavy fire on us. The enemy fire was so

strong our forces were ordered to withdraw. The artillery wasn't up yet, but the Old Man called for an air strike which was on the way. Sergeant Wilson had a patrol with a bazooka team on the left flank in town and I had one on the right flank. When the withdrawal was ordered, I got the word OK, but Wilson couldn't be reached. As soon as I got back and heard about it, I took two men and went looking for him. Private First Class Charles Mersing, a volunteer, was my bazooka man and Corporal Yu Ok Sang, my runner. We had only one 3.5-inch round when we entered the town.

Sounds of a hell of a big fire fight broke through the general din of the battle. We headed in that direction, dodging Reds when we could, killing them when we couldn't. We found Wilson and his patrol engaging two T-34 tanks. As I looked over the situation, I saw Corporal Cho Byung Je running toward one of the tanks. He was evidently trying to get aboard. At that moment a Red stood up in the turret with a burp gun. He threw a burst at Cho and I saw Cho's helmet fly off as he fell to the ground, his face covered with blood. He struggled to his feet and wiped the blood from his eyes with his left arm as he pulled the pin from a grenade with his teeth and threw it at the gunner's turret which was still open. It was a perfect shot which exploded just inside, blowing pieces of the Reds out of the tank. Cho collapsed.

Another T-34 came up to join the show but we were out of bazooka ammo. In broken Japanese and Korean I asked Yu to try and make it back for more ammo. We had a beautiful position for that other tank and the gooks didn't know where we were. Yu stripped down for the run, as I wrote a note asking for more ammo and to have a litter jeep ready for protection. He was scared, but he was all guts. As he slipped away I wondered if I'd ever see him again. The air strike was on and if the Reds didn't get him, one of our planes might.

Meantime, Sergeant Wilson had spotted us and worked around and through the Reds to our position. We waited awhile for the ammo, but as Cho had lost a lot of blood and had what looked like a serious head wound, I decided to withdraw to our lines. We had to stop and fight once or twice and during one of these breaks, Yu reappeared with a note. He had successfully infiltrated the enemy lines three times that afternoon. I'll never forget it.

"No more ammo. Find Sergeant Wilson and return immediately. We're leaving town." All the way back, Cho had refused to be carried. The stamina of those ROKs is terrific, to say nothing of their guts. And believe me, it takes guts to throw grenades at tanks, and to take off into a swarm of Red fanatics with only a knife for protection.

It was at this point, I believe that whatever doubt there may have been about my Gimlets completely disappeared. My ROKs were good. But as time went on they became better. Being a 5th Platoon gave us a unique slot in the TO&E of the rifle com-

pany and gave me the opportunity to mold and develop them into a highly specialized raider-type unit that could do and did do almost anything. With the highly skilled American noncoms I had for my staff functioning like a group of G3 inspectors at every break from actual combat, the individual ROKs were sharpened into first-class fighting men. Fire teams and squads soon developed into unbeatable combat teams.

Probably the biggest problem I had was teaching defensive tactics. Making my Gimlets understand that in the attack, on patrol, setting an ambush, no matter what the immediate mission might be, every time we halted we were on the defensive and must take security measures, wasn't easy. When they learned that lesson, their effectiveness as raiders was greatly increased. Whether at squad or platoon level, I found that "simple and direct plans, promptly, boldly and thoroughly executed, are usually decisive."

Some outfits in Korea didn't get much use out of their ROKS. Some of them tried the "Buddy system," sometimes successfully, but most outfits generally used them as ammo bearers. The trouble, it seems to me, is that the average American soldier lacks the patience of the Oriental. This lack of patience, the language barrier (which in itself was an almost insurmountable obstacle) and the apparent lack of advance briefing on, and understanding of the ROK soldier, created real difficulties. Then there was the sour hangover from the first days of the war when the partially trained, inadequately armed and poorly led ROKs almost completely disintegrated in the face of the enemy. Units of well-led ROKs that fought well were forgotten. We solved the problem in Company L just by facing up to it. You have to recognize that some American soldiers will always take advantage of a "not so bright" buddy, no matter what his race, color or creed. Because they didn't understand the ROK, some American GIs used him as a pack horse. It's no wonder that these men lacked spirit.

ONCE one of my patrols picked up a scared, sick, war weary young Red. We fed him and kept him until we had bagged a few more to make it worth while to send an escort back to the battalion POW compound. When he found out he wasn't going to be killed or mistreated, he told us that about twenty-five of his friends wanted to surrender but were almost as afraid of their leaders as they were of us. I took a chance on him. I wrote out a safe-conduct pass in case he should tangle with one of our patrols, and at dusk let him slip through our lines. It paid off. The next morning he returned with twenty-six of his friends. We fed them and sent them back to battalion S2. This side venture, we figured, had saved a lot of ammo and maybe a few lives.

It took a great deal of self discipline for my ROKs to take prisoners at all. They had found their towns and villages laid waste and their families gone, many never to return. Every one of my Gimlets had at least one close member of his family to revenge. Some had lost their families; like Lieutenant Ryang Hyong Jin. Although his home was at Kaesong, his family had been living in Seoul, and when we went into the assembly area

a few miles north of Seoul, I let Ryang go home. He returned the next morning and reported in to me. He told me that friends told him that his mother, father and brother had been executed by the North Koreans, and his sisters had been added to a Red brothel and were taken north when the Reds withdrew.

Ryang requested permission to take over the training for the rest of the morning. Knowing that work would occupy his mind, I said OK. He saluted and with cold hatred in his voice said, "The communist dogs will pay, Lieutenant Dixie; they will pay dearly."

Just before Thanksgiving of 1950, we got orders to advance into forward assembly areas. My ROKs were jubilant – primed for a fight.

"This is going to be a reconnaissance in force," our company commander told his platoon leaders. "The whole front is moving forward on line. It's going to be a slow process. We will advance from seven to ten miles a day, dig in and send out patrols to probe for the enemy. If the patrols don't make contact, the front will move forward to the next phase line and the process will be repeated until the enemy is contacted or we reach the Yalu."

He continued with the briefing, outlining what each platoon would do and their areas of responsibility. Then he turned to me.

"Dixie, I've got an extra job for your Gimlets. The S2 says that we have Korean agents behind the enemy lines that will be infiltrating through to us. They will carry identification. They are to be sent back to battalion without delay as soon as we meet them. But I want to know what's out front, too. How do you think we can work it?"

I suggested sending one of my squads out with each patrol (they had to be big anyway) and my men could interrogate PWs or agents as they were brought in. This would eliminate delay at our CP and still give us immediate intelligence. The plan was approved. When we moved at daybreak Company L was on the battalion's left flank. King was on our right and Charlie was on our left. We met only token resistance.

We took Chongju again, dug in and sent patrols out. If all went well, we would make the border in five days. All didn't go well.

Corporal Rounds' patrol brought in three Allied agents, four Reds and a new Russian jeep. He reported a mine field being laid on our front. The agents reported thousands of mounted troops about fifteen miles to our right front. This information was phoned back while the agents were back for further interrogation. We were ordered to dig in solid. Other reports were coming in.

The honeymoon was over. Before the information could be completely evaluated, the Reds hit the center again. Another bugout, the biggest, was on the way. However, the enemy had been forced to fight before he was set. By making him fight then, costly though it was to us, it threw him off balance and prevented his buildup for a winter offensive that might have pushed us out of Korea.

MY ROKs fought well as they always did. They were men who traded, borrowed and even liberated BARs from rear-echelon troops so that they could have two to a squad and make the fire teams more effective. They were men who calculated their risks and had only twenty-seven casualties, none killed, while inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy. They were the men who attacked in helmet liners or fatigue caps. They were the men who charged the enemy with bayonets gleaming, confident of victory. They were men, (just cogs in the great Yo-Yo that swung up and down the Korean peninsula, from victory to bugout to victory again), secure in the knowledge that they were a part of the best company, battalion, regiment and division in the world. They believed it. So do I.

My Gimlets proved to me that ROK troops or any troops can be good — if given superior training and a feeling of belonging.

