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## FIGHTING IN THE GIANTS' PLAYGROUND

### Australians in the Korean War

Cameron Forbes

In October 1950, people in Melbourne read good news on the front page of the *Age*.<sup>1</sup> The headline was: 'Korean War May End this Month: Capture of Wowan Menaces Red Capital'. The prediction had been made by military sources, almost certainly by staff at Douglas MacArthur's Tokyo headquarters. They were, as usual, tirelessly working to burnish their general's reputation. The previous day, also on page 1, was a short report of one of the stranger episodes in the history of the 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR). The heading was: 'Two Australians Hiked to War'. An American correspondent who was, to use the current term, embedded with the US 7th Cavalry, filed this story:

Two grimy, stubble-bearded Australian soldiers dug into a foxhole on Saturday and vowed they would be the first foreign soldiers across the 38th parallel. They are Privates Rex T. Wilson, of Adelaide, and Ernest S. Stone, of Melbourne, who arrived in Korea recently with the first detachment of Australian volunteer troops. Wilson said: 'We joined up to fight, but when we arrived we found our unit too far from the front line, so we just took off and headed for the noise of the firing.' Wilson and Stone

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1 This chapter is based on C. Forbes, *The Korean War: Australia in the Giant's Playground*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 2010.

trudged several miles along the dusty road to the north and then got a ride with the leading tank of a northbound convoy. Stone said: 'We wanted to be the first Australians over the parallel. Now it looks as though we might even beat the Americans. Anyway, we are going to try.'

In fact, perhaps seven diggers, members of 3RAR, had hitched a ride on the American tank. They did not make it across the 38th parallel; they were returned to the Australian camp, luckily to face lenient punishment by the commanding officer, Charlie Green, much admired and soon to be much mourned.

When the North Koreans began their blitzkrieg south on 25 June 1950, 3RAR was Australia's rear guard in the occupation force in Japan. The members of the battalion were preparing to say sayonara to the good life, the soft life—to the Japanese house boys and house girls, some of them to their Japanese mistresses, to the cheap beer and the nice earnings on the black market. But 3RAR was understrength, underarmed and undertrained. In the opinion of the Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant General Sydney Rowell, they were simply not battle-worthy. Yet a month and a day later their fate was sealed. They would be making the short trip to Korea, the land that would become the giants' bloody playground.

Australia's Minister for External Affairs, Percy Spender, moved with unseemly haste to commit Australian ground troops. On 26 July Robert Menzies was safely in his cabin on the *Queen Mary*, on the high seas between Britain and America. Menzies was doubtful about a Korean involvement; he expected it would provoke confrontation with the Soviet Union in Europe and the Middle East. It was the perfect time for Percy Spender to push the commitment. His eyes were on the glittering prize: a security pact with the United States. Despite his misgivings, once the draft of the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty (ANZUS) was initialled in February 1951—and I am obliged to Professor Robert O'Neill for this anecdote—Menzies, a convert, toasted Spender with his best cognac.

The Korean War, of course, became known as the forgotten war. I shared that general amnesia until my interest was aroused by a conversation with a friend, a documentary filmmaker, about the Battle of Kapyong. In mid-April 1951, 3RAR's commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Bruce Ferguson, invited the nearby Turkish Brigade to send representatives to the Australian base in the Kapyong Valley on 25 April.

There, along with the New Zealanders of the 16th Field Regiment, the old enemies, now allies in the world's newest war, would commemorate the 36th anniversary of Anzac Day. Diggers had already gathered wild azaleas from the high hills to weave wreaths; extra beer was laid on. Unfortunately the Chinese Fifth Offensive intervened.

Turks in Korea? Why? Kazim Çeliker, a Turkish veteran to whom I spoke, had not known why when the brigade sailed. He had not even known where Korea was. In November 1950, the Turkish Brigade, hindered by poor communications and faulty intelligence, went into their first action. It was a disaster. Çeliker recalled his commander shouting, 'We are surrounded. Protect yourself. Save yourself. Don't waste your bullets'. Çeliker also recalled:

We took our *sung* [long knives] and fought the bayonets. Half our group died. We had gone to help the Americans. Nobody came to help us. After the battles there we went back to base. We didn't have any more battles until the New Year because we had so many casualties.

The Turks were in Korea because their government, fearful of Soviet expansionism, wanted membership of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). When Turkey became a full NATO member on 15 February 1952, a Turkish newspaper wrote: 'There has been a great and honourable share of the blood of our Korean heroes in the signatories' ink.'

Australian soldiers also paid a blood price for a treaty. The first Australian to die in the Korean War was the operations officer of No. 77 Squadron, RAAF, Squadron Leader Graham Strout. On 28 June 1951, MacArthur invited his favoured correspondents—called, with some envy, the 'palace guard'—to accompany him on his personal aircraft, the *Bataan*, when he went to survey the chaos in Korea and to watch Seoul burning. He told Australian Roy Macartney he wanted No. 77 Squadron as escorts: the pilots were first class, and he particularly needed long-range fighters like the squadron's Mustangs. On 2 July Strout led No. 77 Squadron's first mission (anticlimactic, as it turned out) from the Iwakuni base in Japan. On 6 July he had to abort because of engine trouble. The following day he peeled off to rocket a railway station. A few seconds later, his wingman saw a blinding flash near the railway line as Strout crashed.

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More than three years later, on the night of 25 July 1953, a six-man patrol from 2RAR was pushed up by their mates to the top of the main trench on the Hook, a strategic position on a mountain spur looking across the Samichon Valley to the Chinese lines. Custody of the Hook was shared between 2RAR, 3RAR and the forward troops of the 1st Commonwealth Division. To the left were the US Marines of the 7th Regiment, 1st Marine Division. The patrol was on its way to a forward listening post called Green Finger, on a downward-sloping ridge. The Korean War had been in a bloody, grinding stalemate for two years, but at last discussion of an armistice had begun on 10 July. Day after day in July, 2RAR's war diary had reported troop movements, the weather and the incomings, finishing with the words—and you can sense the relief—'no casualties'. On 22 July, however, the Chinese set up an ambush. As the Australians approached Green Finger, grenades and rifle fire came out of the darkness. Private Frank McDonnell was shot in the back and killed.

So on the night of 25 July the patrol again made the hated scramble to Green Finger, downwards past dead and rotting enemy bodies, tangled barbed wire, unexploded shells and mortar bombs, and discarded grenades. The patrol was in position in the outpost when the Chinese launched a furious assault on the marines, although there was little to gain. 2RAR's war diary records steady Chinese artillery fire during the day, intensifying at 11 pm to 30 rounds a minute, then slowing to a steady beat until a silence at 3 am on 26 July. By that time 20-year-old Corporal Kevin Cooper and 21-year-old Private Ron McCoy lay dead on the Hook. At Green Finger, Private Leon Dawes was hit by a piece of shrapnel that passed through his body. He said only, 'I've been hit in the back'. His mate Jimmy Petrie comforted him for the last three minutes of his short life: Leon Dawes was only 19. He was the last Australian killed in action in the Korean War. The armistice was signed the next day, 27 July. The Australian death toll was 340.

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The Australians of 3RAR had disembarked from the Aiken Victory on 28 September 1950. It seems they were all looking for a fight. They were all volunteers; they had to be, under military regulations, but there would have been a mixture of motivations. Let us start at the top. Lieutenant Colonel Charles Hercules Green enlisted for the Second World War the day recruiting started. He became a superb soldier and a superb leader

of men. Aged 25 in 1945, he was a lieutenant colonel and probably the youngest battalion commander in the war. His widow, Olywn Green, watched him struggle when he returned to Australia in peacetime:

He couldn't seem to find his home, that place he had yearned for during those long nights in the desert sangars or the jungle pit. Dreams were out of reach. He didn't fit. He was not an innocent lad any more; he was a man who had learned terrible—and wonderful—lessons that nobody else knew. It wasn't comfortable finding himself untrained and unprepared for civilian action; his apprenticeship on rifles and bayonets proved inappropriate for peace.

Green went back to the army and back to war.

Major Ben O'Dowd was a child of the Great Depression, a child of a broken home. He left school at the age of 14, basically uneducated, and was working as an underground miner when the Second World War broke out. 'I decided to annihilate all the King's enemies,' he told me. 'I enlisted straight away.' O'Dowd loved soldiering. He was very good at it, and he was at home in the army structure.

Captain Reg Saunders came from a family of Aboriginal warriors. His father, Chris, fought on the Western Front in the First World War. His uncle, William Rawlings, was first bayonet in a bombing team, and won the Military Medal before being killed in action in 1917. As a child, Reg listened to his grandfather's memories of the killing and dispossession of the Wannan tribe, yet, like his father and uncle before him, he went away to war for white Australia when the country needed him. So did his younger brother Harry. Reg survived 11 months in German-occupied Crete, and in New Guinea he was a superb jungle fighter. It was there that Harry Saunders was killed in action. In 1944, a board recommended a commission for Saunders. The matter was so sensitive in racist Australia that it went to the desk of General Thomas Blamey for approval. After the war, Saunders came back, as surviving Aboriginal soldiers had done since the Boer War, to entrenched discrimination in a land in which he could not vote. In August 1950, with relief, he returned to the equality of the army and went to Korea.

Sergeant Ian 'Robbie' Robertson had been taught marksmanship by his father Jim—who had been a sniper on Gallipoli—as they shot rabbits in paddocks outside Melbourne for food and fur during the Depression.

Robbie, a man of humour and charm, talked matter-of-factly about the art of sniping and about his tally of men killed, somewhere around 85. Robbie had been brought up with memories of war and loss. The men in his family had been soldiers. An uncle had died on Gallipoli. At morning school parades, Robbie declared his love of God and country and pledged to honour the flag and serve the King. During the Second World War Robbie, aged 16, attempted to enlist but was turned down by the recruiting sergeant, a mate of his father's. After he turned 18 he managed to be accepted, but as it was 1945 he joined the ranks of the disappointed: he was too late for the fighting. Korea gave Robbie and many others the war they had missed.

Privates Keith Langdon and Denis O'Brien made an odd couple. Like O'Dowd, Langdon came from a broken home and had had a rough childhood. He had a habit of losing his temper, or 'doing his 'nana'. When the government was calling for K Force volunteers, he had a bad day and a few beers, did his 'nana and decided to go to Korea. O'Brien, on the other hand, came from a warm and close Catholic family, imbued with the spirit of Irish nationalism and rebellion, a socialist family. Young Denis was always searching for a cause. The Second World War recruiting sergeant he faced somehow failed to notice he was a boyish 16, and O'Brien got his war and his battles. In peacetime, he went to the University of Melbourne. He became a protégé of Manning Clark, who introduced him to ideological wars. O'Brien, a Catholic crusader, disappointed Clark by becoming an anti-communist soldier. When the call went out for K Force volunteers, O'Brien sent the children home from his one-teacher school in Victoria's wheat belt and joined up. For him, Korea was a cause. Even after being wounded and repatriated, he chose to go back to the battlefield. He wanted to fight alongside his mates; he wanted to fight communism. Keith Langdon once showed me a photograph of his 12th Platoon mates. He pointed to Denis, saying, 'We sang that song the night before Maryang San'. Keith sang part of it for me. It was a traditional soldiers' song, often a drinking song, sad and defiant, sung by British troops in India, by both sides in the American Civil War, and by Errol Flynn and David Niven in the 1938 film *The Dawn Patrol*. Its chorus went, 'Let's drink to the dead already, and three cheers for the next man to die'. That next man was Denis O'Brien. Ten days before, on leave in Tokyo, he had told Langdon he would be smacked the next time they went into action. A Bren-gunner in the leading section, Denis O'Brien was the first Australian to die in the Battle of Maryang San on 5 October 1951. His 82-year-old sister Barbie

still mourned for him as she had given me a copy of a letter that Catholic chaplain Father Joe Phillips had written to her mother Monica, a week after the morning on Maryang San:

Denis was a most extraordinary character. He had a nature that was simple, sincere and just loveable ... It is no wonder that the Good Lord wanted him for himself ... He looked upon me as both a friend and a priest. But a few days before the fatal attack he called down at my tent one evening. We had a very long chat. Then he made his peace with God. Next day he was at Mass and Holy Communion. This was most surely a most beautiful preparation and anticipation of the invitation that our Divine Lord was so soon to make of him.

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As the Australians, with their various motivations, were building up the 3rd Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment, the Americans already on the ground were having a terrible time of it. It was two months after the North Korean strike, and the mighty American military of the Second World War was skeletal and weak. For the Australians who joined them—a small Australian unit in the giant American machine—there were always going to be problems of operational methods, lines of communication and, in general, military ethos. There was at least the modest umbrella for 3RAR of the 27th British Commonwealth Brigade, commanded by Brigadier Basil Coad. Coad was a large man with a pronounced ruddy nose. O'Dowd assures us that the nicknames 'Plonky' or 'Penfolds' were respectfully appended, and Coad did have a deep concern for the welfare of his British, Australian and Canadian troops. For decades after the end of the Korean War, the British War Office withheld a document from public scrutiny. It was labelled 'top secret', and had printed in red on the front cover 'To be kept under lock and key'. This was the Coad Report, a report on the operations of the 27th Brigade between 29 August 1950 and 31 March 1951.

His report was under lock and key to keep it from American eyes. Coad was critical of American tactics in the field. He wrote, 'As usual, the Americans were not holding properly in the hills, the bulk of their men being along the roads'. Basics were ignored, and Coad directed his anger at the ranking officers: 'Complete lack of control by higher HQ [Headquarters] was a feature of the American command.' The report is sprinkled with the signs of his exasperation, sentences often ending

with double or triple exclamation marks and double question marks. Scattered through it are comments on transport and tank support promised but never received, on contradictory orders, on confusion and futile searches for divisional headquarters. He was angered by the lack of communication: ‘With very few exceptions the American staff officers never leave their HQs even to visit lower formation HQs, and never in our experience did a staff officer come to look at any ground.’ At one point Coad writes: ‘To make the position clear, I had seen no superior commander for some ten days. We had no contact with 24th Infantry Division under whom I was serving and [who] knew of course nothing about our right flank.’

The troubled relationship Coad described was not a passing problem. More than 18 months later, 3RAR was part of the 1st Commonwealth Division under the command of British Major General Jim Cassels. Cassels had to deal with the American I Corps commander, General John O’Daniel, known in the usual over-blown fashion as ‘Iron Mike’. Sensibly, Cassels was provided by the British hierarchy with a directive instructing him to appeal to the Commander-in-Chief of British Commonwealth Forces in Korea if he were ordered by any American commander to carry out operations that were either inconsistent with the purpose of UN operations or which imperilled the safety of Commonwealth troops to a degree exceptional in war.

Cassels’s *1st Commonwealth Division Periodic Report, 2 May–15 October 1952*, demonstrates how valuable and necessary this directive was. He wrote:

My main trouble during this period was to convince I Corps that, though we were more than ready to do anything that was required we did like to know the reason behind it. On many occasions I was ordered, without any warning, to do things which I considered militarily unsound and for which there was no apparent reason.

Flawed intelligence was endemic throughout the Korean War. The prelude to the Battle of Kapyong was no different.

In early April 1951, 3RAR was in reserve in a pleasant part of the Kapyong Valley the diggers called Sherwood Forest. They deserved a rest; they had fought as vanguard up the peninsula and as rear guard in bitter retreat. Charlie Green, Ben O’Dowd’s mentor, was dead. The sad irony is that it was O’Dowd, as second in charge, who had sited Green’s tent after the Battle of Chongju in October 1950. As Green rested, a single shell hit a tree and a single fragment pierced the canvas and killed Charlie Green.

On the morning of 23 April, Ben O'Dowd was dozing in the sun. As the battalion's intelligence officer recalled, 'It was a beautiful warm day with clear blue skies. War seemed a long way off'. In fact, it was not far up the valley. The Eighth Army was about to be surprised, despite a plethora of information about Chinese troop movements. Among other signs, a Chinese captive in the 1st Marine Division zone was telling interrogators an attack would be opened before the day was out, which is what happened.

That afternoon 3RAR took up thinly stretched positions. B Company was on a low ridge rising like an island to the west of the valley road. A Company, commanded by O'Dowd, was spaced up a steeply rising spur to the summit of Hill 504, where D Company scraped its position. Saunders's C Company was in blocking position behind them. Four empty kilometres across the valley to the west, on Hill 677, was the 2nd Battalion of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. The 6th Republic of Korea (ROK) Division was supposed to be just up ahead.

Keith Langdon and Dennis O'Brien, in a forward position on Hill 504, looked down to see refugees fleeing south along the valley, then, as Langdon put it, 'South Korean soldiers, a mob of them, throwing their guns and rifles and even uniforms to buggery'. Through a long night, 3RAR fought magnificently and invaluable to hold off mass Chinese attacks. The next day O'Dowd, as senior rifle company commander, planned and supervised the retreat of the Australians, which Bob Breen rightly describes as a superb military feat—although, unjustly, O'Dowd received no official recognition for it. D Company evacuated its hilltop with the marvellous aid of the artillery of the New Zealand 16th Field Regiment. Saunders later wrote, 'At last I felt like an Anzac and I imagine there were 600 others like me'.

Thirty-two Australians died at Kapyong. The Korean War set the pattern for Australian involvement in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. Like Percy Spender in 1950, John Howard in 2001 was eager to get Australian troops on the ground in Afghanistan. For the first time since Spender had lobbied for it, ANZUS was invoked by Australia's government. US Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld kindly said that the Pentagon would include Australia in the operation 'if we can'.

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