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## **THE BATTLE OF MARYANG SAN**

### Australia's finest feat of arms in the Korean War?

Bob Breen

The Korean War was the first test of the fighting qualities of the newly named Royal Australian Regiment. After the arrival of 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR), a series of encounter battles during the United Nations forces' advance to the Yalu River in North Korea in late 1950 and two deliberate battles at Kapyong and Maryang San in 1951 stand out as fine feats of arms that took place during the manoeuvre phase of the Korean War.<sup>1</sup> Participation in the Battle of Kapyong has the most prominent place in Australia's Korean War military history because American, Australian, British, Canadian and New Zealand troops delayed a major Chinese thrust towards South Korea's capital, Seoul, from 24 to 26 April 1951 and won a US Presidential Citation. The defensive determination of outnumbered Australians and their fighting withdrawal prompted enduring national and international recognition.

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1 R. O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War 1950–1953*, vol. 2: *Combat Operations*, AWM & AGPS, Canberra, 1985, chapters 6 and 8.

The capture of a peak known as Maryang San as part of an effort by UN forces to secure high ground and straighten the line before an armistice in early October 1951 has received far less attention. Fighting for territory is less interesting and noteworthy than saving Seoul from advancing Chinese troops. Although seized and defended against a Chinese counter-attack by 3RAR, Maryang San was later lost and never recovered by UN forces. It stands unoccupied in the Demilitarised Zone between North and South Korea to this day. However, this battle merits consideration as Australia's finest feat of arms in the Korean War. For those who know the battle, such as Professor Robert O'Neill, the official historian for Australia's participation in the Korean War, there is little doubt:

In this action 3RAR had won one of the most impressive victories achieved by any Australian battalion. In five days of heavy fighting 3RAR dislodged a numerically superior enemy from a position of great strength. The Australians were successful in achieving surprise on 3 and 5 October, the company and platoon commanders responded skilfully to [Commanding Officer] Hassett's directions, and the individual soldiers showed high courage, tenacity and morale despite some very difficult situations ... The victory of Maryang San is probably the greatest single feat of the Australian Army during the Korean War.<sup>2</sup>

Lieutenant General John Coates, the Australian Chief of the General Staff in 1991, echoed O'Neill's assessment:

The scale of manoeuvre of the rifle companies of 3RAR during the action-packed five days of the battle—by night, in fog, across rugged terrain and for much of the time under artillery and mortar fire—can only challenge contemporary Australian infantrymen to strive for similar levels of excellence. The display of endurance, courage and aggression during the battle are timeless benchmarks for offensive operations.<sup>3</sup>

General Peter Cosgrove, former Chief of the Australian Defence Force, opined in the foreword to John Essex-Clark's biography of General Sir Francis Hassett, 'No other major battle in the Army's modern history more aptly underpins the qualities the Army strives for today'.<sup>4</sup>

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2 Ibid., p. 200.

3 Lieutenant General H.J. Coates, Chief of the General Staff, foreword to B. Breen, *The Battle of Maryang San*, Headquarters Training Command, Balmoral, NSW, 1991.

4 J. Essex-Clark, foreword, *Hassett, Australian Leader: A Biography of General Sir Francis Hassett*, Australian Military History Publications, Loftus, NSW, 2005.

## Against the odds

The comments of O'Neill, Coates and Cosgrove suggest that 3RAR must have been an experienced, superbly trained, cohesive and well-equipped battalion to have achieved in five days what American and British battalions had failed to achieve in other costly attacks.<sup>5</sup> Not so. Lieutenant Colonel Frank Hassett, a 33-year-old Duntroon graduate, had taken command in July 1951 without meeting his predecessor.<sup>6</sup> He had 10 weeks to adjust to working within a newly formed 28th British Commonwealth Brigade under its inaugural commander, Brigadier George Taylor.

The strength of 3RAR lay in the experience of individuals, not in unit cohesion. By the end of September, many of those who had fought during the winter campaign were returning to Australia at the end of their 12-month tour of duty. Hassett described the battalion as 'a "transit camp" in action ... [I]n August/September there were perhaps over 200 replacements and this continued up to and including the battle'.<sup>7</sup> Fortunately, many of the replacements were experienced Second World War veterans, but others were new. Hassett described the unblooded reinforcements as 'K Force volunteers, patriotic and adventurous young men fired up by the experiences and stories of the Second World War'. There were differences and rivalries between the older veterans and the newly arrived enthusiastic infantrymen. He opined later that 3RAR 'was basically an organised collection of well-trained individuals which had been strung out in a defensive position for the past three months and was quite unpractised as a unit in the battle procedures and techniques required for a battalion in attack'.<sup>8</sup>

The preparedness of the companies for offensive operations was low. Ahead was a multiphased attack against well-fortified positions occupied by experienced troops who had repelled US battalion attacks with heavy casualties. They would also repel British attacks during what was called Operation Commando.<sup>9</sup> Major Jack Gerke, commanding C Company, had a small number of non-commissioned officers and soldiers with some previous experience in action. He was the only officer in the company who

5 O'Neill, *Combat Operations*, p. 184 (American attacks) and pp. 186–7 (British attack).

6 Essex-Clark, *Hassett, Australian Leader*, p. 170.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

8 Breen, *The Battle of Maryang San*, pp. 7–8.

9 Essex-Clark, *Hassett, Australian Leader*, p. 6.

had been under fire.<sup>10</sup> Two of his platoon commanders were Lieutenants Maurie Pears and Arthur ‘Bushy’ Pembroke, who had both graduated from Duntroon in December 1950 and arrived in Korea in July 1951. Major Jack ‘Basil’ Hardiman, commanding D Company, remembered that his heart stopped for a second when Hassett told him that he was to be first in the assault on Maryang San. His company was down to 72 men from its entitlement strength of 140. The other companies of 3RAR were also well below full strength. He later noted: ‘I thought how unprepared we were for such an operation—too many new faces, lacking some items of equipment and not fit enough for a long, tough attack. We [had] spent the last three months in defence. In attack you use entirely different muscles to defence.’<sup>11</sup>

## Bold attack plans

Brigadier Taylor’s attack plan worried his two British battalion commanders, one of whom reportedly feared it might cost a thousand casualties.<sup>12</sup> Taylor had little choice but to accept the objectives given to him by his divisional commander, Major General Jim Cassels.<sup>13</sup> Cassels’s promise of the division’s artillery, together with US batteries from Corps and Eighth Army, as well as close support from Centurion tanks, should have comforted Taylor’s British subordinates. Hassett trusted Cassels and Taylor, and kept his own counsel.<sup>14</sup>

For phase 1, Taylor directed Lieutenant Colonel John Barlow, commanding 1st Battalion, King’s Shropshire Light Infantry (KSLI), to drive Chinese defenders from three hills south of the phase 2 objective, a large hill (Hill 355) known locally as Kowang San and nicknamed ‘Little Gibraltar’.<sup>15</sup> Lieutenant Colonel John MacDonald, commanding 1st Battalion, King’s Own Scottish Borderers (KOSBs), had the mission of seizing Little Gibraltar in phase 2. For phase 3, Taylor ordered the Australians to capture Maryang San, a towering hill that rose sharply to a pinnacle located across a valley north of Little Gibraltar. Taylor gave

10 Breen, *The Battle of Maryang San*, p. 10.

11 Ibid., pp. 11–12.

12 Essex-Clark, *Hassett, Australian Leader*, p. 9.

13 A. Farrar-Hockley, *The British Part in the Korean War*, vol. 2: *An Honourable Discharge*, HMSO, London, 1995, p. 218.

14 Breen, *The Battle of Maryang San*, pp. 13–14.

15 Farrar-Hockley, *An Honourable Discharge*, pp. 219–20.

1st Battalion, Royal Northumberland Fusiliers—a unit seconded from the British 29th Infantry Brigade and scheduled to leave Korea after Operation Commando—the task of capturing a hill adjacent to Maryang San, nicknamed ‘the Hinge’, after seizing a heavily fortified Chinese position on Hill 217, located on the ridge line south of the Hinge.<sup>16</sup>

Hassett matched Taylor’s audacious plan with one of his own. Despite his youth, Hassett was a veteran of the South-West Pacific campaign in the Second World War, and he had seen Australian battalion commanders use ground and timing effectively against Japanese defensive positions.<sup>17</sup> He persuaded Taylor to withdraw his direction for the Australians to attack Maryang San frontally across the valley. Hassett wanted to surprise and split the fire of the Chinese, in both the timing and direction of attack by assaulting out of the morning gloom along a line of knolls from a flank (nicknamed by the British as Victor, Whiskey, Uniform and Tango). At the same time, he would distract them with a noisy diversionary attack from Major Jim Shelton’s A Company, positioned in the valley with Centurion tanks from the 8th Royal Irish Hussars.<sup>18</sup> Hassett’s plan obliged his assault companies to navigate silently by night, over rough terrain (hills with thick timber and long grass) and creep up to Chinese fortifications, taking advantage of first light to assault over a short distance and be among the defenders with grenade, bullet, butt and bayonet before everyone was awake: close combat through a labyrinth of trenches, foxholes and bunkers.<sup>19</sup>

## Adaptability

The Australians and the KSLI successfully captured the forward Chinese positions on 2 October, and the remainder of the brigade deployed for phase 2, but Taylor’s plan faltered the next day when the KOSBs failed to take the heights of Little Gibraltar (or Kowang San). Early on 4 October, Taylor directed Hassett to support a renewed attack by the KOSBs by driving the defenders from two hills close to the main Chinese fortifications. Chinese flanking fire from these two hills had worried the

16 O’Neill, *Combat Operations*, pp. 183–5.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 184; see also Essex-Clark, *Hassett, Australian Leader*, p. 15.

18 Breen, *The Battle of Maryang San*, pp. 18–22, and O’Neill, *Combat Operations*, pp. 185–94.

19 For a detailed description of Hassett’s thinking at the time, see Essex-Clark, *Hassett, Australian Leader*, pp. 18–27.

KOSBs the day before.<sup>20</sup> Twenty-one-year-old Lieutenant Maurie Pears's platoon led Jack Gerke's C Company's assault at first light after a pre-dawn approach march. The element of surprise resulted in the first hill falling quickly, and the second fell after heavy fighting. Maintaining momentum as the Chinese withdrew in front of them, the Australians raced to high ground on top of the north-eastern end of Little Gibraltar.<sup>21</sup>

As it happens, whether 3RAR could claim to have taken Little Gibraltar that morning is highly contested, as Chapter 11 by Nigel Steel explains. Steel suggests that Australian authors were influenced by nationalistic bias. For his part, Bob Breen, who wrote his monograph on the Battle of Maryang San on the basis of interviews with Australian veterans of the battle and Robert O'Neill's Australian official history, clarified Australian claims in 2011.<sup>22</sup> He observed that Little Gibraltar had two peaks that were assaulted simultaneously and occupied by British and Australian forces at different times. No one would know who arrived at one of the peaks first without also knowing the exact time artillery fire was lifted from the peak to allow infantry to occupy. Michael Hickey, a British military historian, wrote accurately, 'Both units were to claim, correctly, that they had taken "Little Gibraltar", for neither would have got there without the unseen support of the other'.<sup>23</sup>

Nonetheless Taylor's two-pronged Australian–British attack during the second attempt to capture Little Gibraltar split the enemy fire. Fearing being overrun by simultaneous Australian and British assaults, the Chinese defenders withdrew north to the Maryang San defensive positions. The KOSBs fought up three ridge lines and moved through, bagpipes playing, to occupy vacated Chinese defensive positions around the heights.<sup>24</sup> The Australian attack had been 'of considerable assistance to 1 KOSB in the final stages' of the capture of Little Gibraltar.<sup>25</sup> Taylor

20 O'Neill, *Combat Operations*, p. 187; also D. Butler, A. Argent and J. Shelton, *The Fight Leaders: A Study of Australian Battlefield Leadership: Green, Ferguson and Hassett*, Australian Military History Publications, Loftus, NSW, 2002, p. 132.

21 O'Neill, *Combat Operations*, pp. 187–8.

22 B. Breen, 'The Battle of Maryang San: Australia's finest feat of arms in the Korean War?', [www.awm.gov.au/visit/events/conference/korea](http://www.awm.gov.au/visit/events/conference/korea).

23 M. Hickey, *The Korean War: The West Confronts Communism 1950–53*, John Murray, London, 1999, pp. 256–9.

24 J.F.H. MacDonald, *The Borderers in Korea*, Martin's Printing, Berwick-upon-Tweed, UK, 1954, pp. 32–3.

25 Directorate of Infantry, AHQ, 'Operation Commando, Korea, 2–8 Oct. 1951', *Australian Army Journal*, no. 34, March 1952, pp. 5–13; quote from p. 7.

was delighted with the Australians' performance.<sup>26</sup> His attack plan was one day behind schedule, but he had succeeded in taking the first of the brigade's three objectives—one of the most important in General Cassels's overall plan.

For phase 3 of the brigade's attack, Hassett regrouped his companies and adapted his plan to accommodate his reserve company's casualties. The Australians prepared for their assault on Maryang San on 5 October, and the Fusiliers prepared to attack towards the Hinge via Hill 217. Although Hassett did not know it then, the Australian assault force of 320 men (approximate numbers in A, B, C and D Companies)<sup>27</sup> faced a fresh, well-equipped and well-supplied regiment of three battalions (571st Regiment), numbering about 2,000 men. Of this force, a battalion of at least 600 or 700 men awaited the Australian and British infantrymen on Maryang San and the Hinge.<sup>28</sup> It would have been unthinkable for an Australian national commander to have signed off on this attack plan during recent operations in Iraq or in Afghanistan in the 2000s. The preference at the time was for the ratio of attackers to defenders to be 3:1, not 2:1. Taylor depended on indirect firepower (approximately 120 guns, howitzers and mortars), as well as tank and medium machine-gun fire to make up the difference, while using age-old tactics such as deception, surprise and different axes of assault.<sup>29</sup>

## Resilience

On the morning of 5 October 1951, four companies made up of three platoons of less than 25 men each set out to meet their fate through the night and fog—a navigational nightmare but a tactical godsend. The fog lifted by mid-morning as D Company, the forward assault company, found themselves less than 50 metres from the edge of the Chinese positions.<sup>30</sup> B Company, the other assault company, had become lost during the approach march and took no part in the attack, but provided useful flank security for D Company. A Chinese medium machine gun fired into Major Hardiman's D Company headquarters as the fog lifted, wounding

26 Breen, *The Battle of Maryang San*, p. 105.

27 Various sources put Australian rifle companies at between 70 and 90 strong on 2 October. The figure of 320 is reached by multiplying the average (80) by four companies.

28 O'Neill, *Combat Operations*, p. 184.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 184.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 190.

him and one of his platoon commanders, Geoff Leary. Another platoon commander, Lieutenant Jim Young, took command of the company. Its three platoons were now being led by sergeants, one of whom, Sergeant Bill Rowlinson, went on to earn a Bar to the Distinguished Conduct Medal that he had won at Kapyong in April.<sup>31</sup> The company regrouped under new commanders and attacked the Chinese positions, inflicting heavy casualties as they went—savage, close-quarter fighting with point-blank shooting and the use of grenades and bayonets, accompanied by the yells of men killing surprised Chinese defenders, and roaring orders and warnings to each other.

## Endurance

Young and his men took the first knoll leading to Maryang San, sustaining further casualties but inflicting many more. Hassett and his New Zealand direct support battery commander, Major Arthur Roxburgh, prepared an artillery and mortar-fire plan to support a further attack on a second knoll, but Hassett feared that Young and his men would be spent if they succeeded, and would therefore be unable to assault the final objective, the peak known as Maryang San. Another company would need to punch through after Young took his next objective. Hassett turned to Jack Gerke, his reserve company commander who had been so aggressive on the approaches to Little Gibraltar the day before, and ordered him to get in behind Young's men and move through them to assault Maryang San after they had taken their objective.<sup>32</sup> Gerke's men headed out for a forced march as Young's men waited for the end of the artillery bombardment of the Chinese positions ahead of them.

During D Company's earlier assault, Major Jim Shelton's A Company attacked the Chinese positions from the south-west to draw fire away from the main assault by D Company. His was the dangerous task of assaulting forward with tank and machine-gun support to get close enough to draw Chinese fire without risking significant casualties. Shelton's forward platoons, led by Kapyong veterans Sergeant George Harris and Lieutenant 'Freddy' Gardiner, emulated the aggression of their compatriots in C and D Companies and penetrated the Chinese defences, causing heavy enemy casualties in savage, close-quarter combat.<sup>33</sup>

31 Breen, *The Battle of Maryang San*, pp. 50–5.

32 O'Neill, *Combat Operations*, pp. 193–4, and Breen, *The Battle of Maryang San*, pp. 66–7.

33 Breen, *The Battle of Maryang San*, pp. 60–3.

When artillery and mortar fire lifted, Young and the remnants of D Company commenced their assault against the stunned Chinese, whose machine guns were pointed south and did not have time to turn and fire on the Australians: surprise, speed and aggression won the day. Nearly 70 Chinese defenders lay dead. More than a hundred wounded and 30 dazed prisoners fell into Australian hands. Three Australians were killed and 14 wounded. Just over 35 exhausted men remained unscathed.<sup>34</sup>

The victorious Jim Young and his men clapped and cheered as Gerke and his warriors pushed through their lines towards Maryang San. Ahead of the final Australian assault, artillery and mortars pounded the peak, shattering the enemy's confidence; they abandoned the heights now that the eastern approaches were in Australian hands. The Australian assault was an anti-climax of climbing on hands and knees to the summit for a grand view of the surrounding countryside. The honour of taking a second summit in 24 hours fell to Maurie Pears.<sup>35</sup> Hassett consolidated his blackened, bedraggled and exhausted troops around his prize, and for the first time in four days of fighting and moving with heavy loads, the Australians had a night of rest interrupted only by sentry duty.

The next morning Lieutenant Arthur 'Bushy' Pembroke's platoon attacked a Chinese company occupying an adjacent feature on the Maryang San ridgeline (Sierra) to give the Australian position some depth before expected counter-attacks. Pembroke's dawn attack without preliminary artillery or mortar bombardment caught the Chinese by surprise; he and his 21 men, outnumbered and outgunned, drove off more than a hundred startled Chinese defenders, inflicting casualties in a brisk action.<sup>36</sup>

## The Hinge

Once again, Taylor's attack plan faltered. This time the Fusiliers failed to capture the Hinge on 5 October or during a second attempt the following day.<sup>37</sup> He turned to Hassett again. This time Hassett assigned Captain Henry 'Wings' Nicholls's B Company to form up behind the position of Pembroke's platoon on Sierra and to assault the Hinge after an

34 Ibid., pp. 55–60.

35 Ibid., pp. 68–70.

36 Ibid., pp. 78–80.

37 O'Neill, *Combat Operations*, pp. 195–7; Breen, *The Battle of Maryang San*, pp. 82–6.

artillery bombardment once the morning mist had lifted. The assault was successful, but the ensuing retaliation from Chinese artillery and mortars forced Nicholls and his men into the Chinese trenches. Indeed, the whole Maryang San position had become perilous as the Chinese pounded it in preparation for a major counter-attack.<sup>38</sup>

## Defence of Maryang San, 7–8 October

By this time, the Australians had been moving and fighting for almost five days without respite, and had sustained more than a hundred casualties—almost a third of their starting number. Taylor had overextended them to occupy the Hinge. Hassett later recalled:

Platoons were now down to 15 to 20 strong, too low for orthodox tactical use. It was not just the casualties. Most were physically exhausted. Lack of sleep and battle stress apart, just moving under heavy load, let alone fighting, in hilly, difficult terrain was most demanding. The Battalion was just about spent.<sup>39</sup>

The Chinese had given the Australians some respite on the night of 5/6 October before shelling them on 6 and 7 October. Hassett and his men now dug in on Maryang San and the Hinge, evacuating wounded and running the gauntlet to supply everyone with ammunition, rations and water before the coming battle. For this dangerous work, stoical Korean porters made round trips under steady Chinese artillery and mortar fire. As night fell on 7 October, Chinese assault formations crept stealthily to the edge of Australian positions on the Hinge. The time had come to test whether the Australians were as good at defending as they were at attacking.

At 8 pm Chinese artillery and mortars began a 45-minute preparatory bombardment, followed by the first assault.<sup>40</sup> Like a battle cry, the Australians shouted to each other, ‘Watch your front!’ The Chinese attacked twice more during the night. Low on ammunition, the Australians took to the enemy as they arrived in pitiless hand-to-hand fighting, kicking, strangling and bayoneting many to death. While under fire, brave Korean porters carried ammunition in and wounded Australians out on

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38 O'Neill, *Combat Operations*, p. 197.

39 Breen, *The Battle of Maryang San*, p. 88.

40 *Ibid.*, pp. 92–3.

stretchers.<sup>41</sup> American, British and New Zealand artillery and mortars scythed through the ranks of attacking Chinese, leaving more than 120 bodies and hundreds of body parts strewn in front of the Australian positions the next morning.

Taylor decided to relieve the Australians with the KOSBs after their night of battle; they had done enough after six days of forced marches and combat. After dawn on 8 October, Hassett permitted Chinese medical orderlies and stretcher parties to come forward and collect scores of wounded under a flag of truce. The Australians began to withdraw from their hard-won territory later that day. Taylor recalled later that Frank Hassett and his men had exemplified the attacking spirit required take Maryang San and the terrain leading to its peak. 'It was a very emotional moment for me when I went to see the battalion after it occupied new positions to thank all ranks from the bottom of my heart for the great part they had played in ensuring victory in a very tough battle.'<sup>42</sup> During the six days of fighting, 3RAR suffered 20 killed in action and 89 wounded in action, with 15 of the wounded remaining on duty.<sup>43</sup> In combination with artillery, mortar and tank fire, it was estimated that two Chinese battalions had been decimated and a brigade forced to withdraw from well-prepared defensive positions.

The final word goes to General Sir Francis Hassett:

Unquestionably, the soldiers won the Maryang San battle, not just because they were brave, but because they were smart also. They recognised that if they were to get 317 [Maryang San] at all, let alone without massive casualties, then they had to move quickly. This they did. There were no heroes' welcome home for these warriors. They left from Australia [in 1950 and 1951] as individuals or in small groups and returned the same way, unheralded and unsung. Somehow, it did not seem to matter. There was much quiet satisfaction just knowing that one had fought at Maryang San.<sup>44</sup>

41 Ibid., pp. 96–100.

42 Ibid., pp. 100–1.

43 Breen, *The Battle of Maryang San*, pp. 111–12.

44 Ibid., p. 125.

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