

# 11

## **CONQUERING KOWANG SAN, ASSAULTING UNITED**

Myth and misunderstanding in the  
shade of Maryang San, October 1951

Nigel Steel

Without doubt the story of the capture of Maryang San or Hill 317 by the 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR), is a superlative tale of leadership, command and control, determination and aggression. But I am uneasy at the way some histories portrayed the wider British contribution to Operation Commando. The war diaries and other published records of the two main British battalions involved—the 1st King’s Own Scottish Borderers (the KOSBs) and the 1st Royal Northumberland Fusiliers (RNF, or the Fusiliers)—contain sharp conflicts of evidence with many of the accounts in Australia, which is what I want to address in this chapter. I do so in a spirit of intellectual investigation and not in any way to score points or denigrate anyone’s performance.

Regrettably there is no space to give anything but the gist of Operation Commando, which aimed to place the Commonwealth Division on a series of heights west of the Imjin River, close to the current Demilitarised Zone (DMZ). As Map 4 shows, the 28th British Commonwealth Brigade’s primary objective—Hill 355, known as Kowang San—was allocated to the KOSBs. To the south were a series of hills (referred to by the British as Points) named after their heights in metres as Hills 208, 209, 210 and ultimately 227. These were to be taken by the 1st King’s Shropshire Light

Infantry (KSLI). To the north, Hill 317, better known as Maryang San, was the target of 3RAR, supported by a subsidiary attack against Hill 217 by the Fusiliers. Holding Hills 355, 317 and 217 was a full Chinese regiment, with one battalion on Hill 355, another in the area of Hill 317 and a final in reserve. A battalion from a separate regiment held the ridge to the south of Kowang San.

The commander of the 28th Brigade, British Army Brigadier George Taylor, devised a bold and ambitious plan. The terrain over which the brigade was to attack was difficult and complicated and, according to a later account by the KOSB's commanding officer, chiefly 'consisted of steep-sided hills of rock and sandstone, for the most part covered by dense pine forests'.<sup>1</sup> British units, including the 28th Brigade headquarters, used a series of distinctive names for the operation's main features. In particular, as the ridge leading north onto Hill 317 was to be assaulted by men from Northumberland, the features were called in turn Newcastle, United, Football and Club. But those closer to Hill 317 were later renamed, with Football eventually becoming known as the Hinge and Club as the Knoll.

The KOSBs formed part of the 28th Brigade and the assault on Hill 355 was their first major battle. They were to assault the hill's southern and eastern flanks. On the right, B Company would move directly against Finger Ridge, which led up towards the two 220-metre features later assaulted by 3RAR's C Company. On the left, the KOSBs' C Company was first to take the operational features of Long, then Kidney. The remainder of the battalion would finally swing north-west onto the summit of Hill 355 itself.

The battalion moved off shortly before 7 am on 3 October. B Company made steady progress, 'despite heavy artillery and mortar fire', the KOSBs commanding officer noted,<sup>2</sup> and the battalion's war diary recorded that by 8.55 am it had reached its 'objective with no contact'.<sup>3</sup> To the south, C Company, 3RAR had more trouble against Long. By 8.27 am, it had covered half the distance to Long, but 'became engaged in fierce hand-to-hand fighting. The enemy was holding the feature in considerable strength and offered fanatical resistance from well-prepared and

---

1 J.F.M. Macdonald, *The Borderers in Korea*, Martin's Printing Works, Berwick upon Tweed, UK, 1954, p. 31.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

3 1st King's Own Scottish Borderers [KOSB], war diary, 3 October 1951, 0855 [hours], National Archives [TNA], WO281/484.

ingeniously concealed positions'.<sup>4</sup> It was not until 11.15 am that the KOSB's C Company reached the crest of Long. But 2nd Lieutenant William Purves explained some years later that as they did so, he believed, they made a basic error:

That was my first real attacking position and the secret, of course, is that you don't stop at the top. You've got to go over the hill, even though that exposes you to enemy fire, you've got to go over the hill and see what's on the other side, and whether the enemy is dug in on the other side. And while we did it to some degree, I make the excuse that we were all exhausted. But this enabled quite a significant body of Chinese to creep up on us when we were trying to recover from our climb.<sup>5</sup>

Already hit by heavy Chinese mortar fire, the KOSB's C Company were assailed by a series of close-quarter Chinese counter-attacks, mostly by grenade. Under this pressure, C Company was ordered back to regroup at around 12.20 pm before making another effort to take Long.

Realising that C Company was unlikely to be able to succeed on its own, the KOSB battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel John Macdonald, ordered A Company to link up with C Company for the assault. Arriving in the area as C Company fell back, A Company's commander, Major George Duncan, realised something extra was needed to bolster his own men's morale. One of his junior officers, 2nd Lieutenant Jock Foulis, remembered:

The first thing he did was to send for the Pipe Major. He then led us to the position, and he and the Pipe Major—he wielding his walking stick, which was his trademark—he and the Pipe Major led the company with the Pipe Major playing the regimental charge, which I think historically is probably the last time that anybody went into action in a Scottish regiment led by a piper playing the regimental charge. It was a slightly unusual happening! ... He had two platoons down on the right, a platoon down on the left, and George was silhouetted on the ridge line, with the piper, leading the company into the attack. And he was unscathed, the Pipe Major was unscathed and the company never stopped. There has to be a relationship between those things.<sup>6</sup>

---

4 Macdonald, *The Borderers in Korea*, pp. 31–2.

5 Sir William Purves, Imperial War Museum, Sound Archive (IWM SR) interview 20471, reel 2, 05:21.

6 Jock Foulis, IWM SR interview 19661, reel 3, 18:59.

At 2.15 pm, the KOSB's A and C Companies renewed the attack on Long. Within an hour it had been taken. According to the 28th Brigade war diary, 'The enemy by this time had been completely outfought'.<sup>7</sup> Leaving C Company to hold Long, at 4.35 pm A Company moved off to assault Kidney; by 5.15 pm it was firmly established on this feature. By the time the position was consolidated, the CO pointed out, 'it was already getting dark'.<sup>8</sup> It was agreed that the KOSBs would remain in position along Finger Ridge, Long and Kidney, and renew the attack on Hill 355 the following morning.

The intention had been to capture Hill 355 on the first day of Operation Commando; on the second day, the Canadians were set to launch a parallel assault to the south at 6 am. To maintain the full weight of the Commonwealth Division's artillery in support of the KOSBs when they renewed their assault, the Canadian attack was now delayed until 11 am. Further support was also to be given to the KOSBs by the KSLI, who would complete the capture of Hills 210 and 227, by the Fusiliers' 3-inch mortars and by an air strike. The 28th Brigade also ordered 3RAR to send a company to attack two hills, both 220 metres high, which stood to the east of Hill 355 and from which the Chinese had levelled small-arms fire on the KOSBs throughout 3 October. The commander of 3RAR, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Hassett, decided to send C Company from his reserve.

But what task was C Company, 3RAR intended to undertake? 28th Brigade headquarters did not envisage the Australians joining the assault on Hill 355; they were there to support the KOSBs as the KOSBs completed this objective. The 28th Brigade initially noted the Australian company as being told to move onto the first of two 220-metre hills standing to the east of the summit,<sup>9</sup> recording clearly that 3RAR's company 'will not go over 18 grid line Westing', which meant it should not cross the line on the contemporary 1951 battle map that ran clearly north–south through the second 220-metre hill some way east of Hill 355.<sup>10</sup> The 28th Brigade's

7 28th Brigade, war diary, November 1951, TNA, WO281/140 [hereafter 28th Brigade, war diary], Appendix B, Lieutenant C.W. Crossland, 'The Battles of Kowang San and Maryang San', typescript narrative, p. 3.

8 Macdonald, *The Borderers in Korea*, p. 31.

9 28th Brigade, war diary, located as map reference 183198 on G7901 R1 s25 Sheet 6528 II NE, p. 143, s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/awm-media/collection/RCDIG1027454/bundled/RCDIG1027454.pdf.

10 28th Brigade, war diary, 4 October 1951, 0705 [hours].

war diary narrative talks about C Company, 3RAR ‘assisting by attacking the Wangying Myon feature [the map name for the area around the first 220-metre hill<sup>11</sup>] and the small, strongly held hill to the south [the second 220-metre hill] that commanded the approach into the rear of Hill 355’.<sup>12</sup> Confusingly, Robert O’Neill’s official history talks about Hassett being ordered to ‘make a company attack on a 220-metre hill 700 metres north-west [*sic*] of the summit of Hill 355’.<sup>13</sup> But this cannot be so, as neither of the 220-metre hills lies ‘north-west’ of Kowang San. In a significant departure from the orders issued to it by the 28th Brigade, 3RAR’s summary of operations notes the battalion’s objective as being ‘to make a company attack on feature 178192’,<sup>14</sup> and possibly it is this feature to which O’Neill is also referring. But this map reference, well to the west of the 18 grid line, is not one of the two 220-metre hills. It is the north-eastern shoulder of Hill 355 itself, which is where C Company ended up. Both the battalion summary of operations and the official history appear simply to be confirming what actually happened, not what 3RAR was told to do. But even if this is so, this position lies directly north-east of Hill 355, not north-west of it.

C Company, 3RAR moved off at 5.45 am; at around 9.15 am they were cresting the first 220-metre hill,<sup>15</sup> where the 28th Brigade noted they ‘completely routed’ the Chinese.<sup>16</sup> At 9.45 am, the KOSBs began their assault—just as the Australians finished clearing the first 220-metre hill. Shortly after 10 am, the Australians moved on towards the second 220-metre hill. 3RAR’s war diary noted, ‘Heavy opposition met. C Company at 1015 hrs [10.15 am] were attacking enemy along ridge. Action lasted till 1215 hrs [12.15 pm]’.<sup>17</sup> The 28th Brigade recorded at 11.40 am that C Company, 3RAR was involved in ‘hand to hand fighting’ along the saddle connecting the two 220-metre hills.<sup>18</sup> The Australian

11 28th Brigade, war diary, located as map reference 183198, p. 143.

12 Map reference on 1951 battle map as 181191. See 28th Brigade, war diary, Appendix B, p. 4.

13 R. O’Neill, *Australia in the Korean War 1950–53*, vol. 2: *Combat Operations*, AWM & AGPS, Canberra, 1985, p. 187.

14 3RAR, war diary, October 1951, AWM85 4/34 [hereafter 3RAR, war diary], Appendix 10, typescript, ‘Operation by 3RAR—2 Oct–8 Oct 51, “Commando I and II”’, p. 2, para. 19. See also second report in Appendix 12, typescript, ‘Summary of 3RAR ops 1 Oct—9 Oct’, p. 2, para. 10.

15 3RAR, war diary, gives 5.45 am on map traces. O’Neill, *Combat Operations*, gives the time as 5.30 am.

16 28th Brigade, war diary, October 1951, Appendix M, typescript report, ‘Operations against the enemy by 28 British Commonwealth Infantry Brigade on the 3rd to the 7th October 51’, p. 1.

17 3RAR, war diary, annotation on map traces, dated 4 October 1951.

18 28th Brigade, war diary, 4 October 1951, 11.40 am.

official history also has the second 220-metre hill firmly ‘in Australian hands’ by 12.15 pm.<sup>19</sup> All sources consistently show C Company, 3RAR close to hitting ‘its final objective’ immediately adjacent to the 18 grid line shortly after midday.<sup>20</sup>

By this time, D Company of the KOSBs had taken Hill 355 and was dispersing its platoons across the summit. The documentary evidence for this is quite clear. The 28th Brigade war diary records: at 10.25 am, the KOSBs’ forward troops were ascending the steep slope from Kidney to Hill 355; 15 minutes later, at 10.40 am, they were nearing the summit; at 11.04 am, ‘1 KOSB forward troops captured Pt 355 [Hill 355] at 1100 hrs [11 am]—one Platoon on 173189 [the summit of Hill 355], one Platoon at 176189 [forward slopes to the east of the summit leading towards the second 220-metre hill]’.<sup>21</sup>

The battalion’s war diary confirms the capture of Kowang San (Hill 355) at 11 am and 30 minutes later corroborates it with the clear statement, ‘D Company firm on Point 355 [Hill 355] with Battle Patrol remaining on 170187 [westward shoulder of Hill 355]’.<sup>22</sup> An hour later, roughly the same time that C Company, 3RAR was consolidating its hold on the second 220-metre hill, the 28th Brigade recorded the location of the KOSBs’ companies: A Company still on Kidney, C Company on Long, D Company and the battalion’s ‘Battle Patrol’ on Hill 355, and B Company moving up from Finger Ridge towards the north-eastern shoulder of Hill 355 at map reference 176191—almost the same map reference as the final objective for C Company given by 3RAR’s summary of operations.<sup>23</sup>

It seems clear from all the available contemporary documentation that the KOSBs were on the summit of Hill 355 by 11 am and had firmly consolidated their hold by 12.30 pm. Yet this contradicts one of the prevalent Australian views that it was C Company, 3RAR that took Hill 355. How has this come about?

If you look closely at the few timings given in contemporary Australian documents, they do not clash with the British diaries, and the map traces at the end of 3RAR’s war diary refer only to the two 220-metre hills, not to

19 O’Neill, *Combat Operations*, p. 187.

20 Ibid. The map reference 181191 is labelled ‘final objective’.

21 28th Brigade, war diary, 4 October, 11.04 am.

22 KOSB, war diary, 4 October 1951, 11.30 am.

23 28th Brigade, war diary, 4 October 1951, 12.28 pm.

Hill 355. Nor does 3RAR's summary of operations make any mention of 'taking' the hill, talking only of capturing the edge of Hill 355.<sup>24</sup> Referring to 'the area 178192'—which is the north-eastern shoulder of Hill 355—it goes on to state: 'This feature commanded the approach into the rear of Point 355 [Hill 355] and was strongly held. C Company carried out this attack at 0530 hours [5.30 am] in a very efficient manner and pressed it with great determination.'

The 28th Brigade's war diary makes it clear how important this attack was in supporting the KOSB's own assault. It concludes:

This action was of considerable assistance to the Borderers who were attacking 355 with D Company and their Battle Patrol ... Under the pressure of constant artillery fire and the subsidiary attack of C Company, 3RAR, they [the Chinese troops on 355] finally put up only token resistance to the assaulting Scots [KOSB's] who gallantly scaled the precipitous approaches.<sup>25</sup>

3RAR's move is clearly happening simultaneously with the main attack by the KOSBs, but is not the central element in clearing the summit.

At this juncture I must acknowledge a crucial point made to me in person by Maurie Pears, one of the junior officers of C Company, 3RAR, who was at the forefront of the action, and who, when prompted to reflect on the events covered by this chapter, highlighted the importance of the shape of Hill 355 in explaining many subsequent differences of opinion. I trekked up to the Demilitarised Zone in 2007 to look at Hills 317 and 355 from afar. The mist from the Imjin River was so thick that, to my intense disappointment, I could not see either feature. But Maurie Pears was there and saw for himself during the battle. I am sure he is right to say that the shallow crest line of Hill 355, rising and falling some 50 metres around the summit or highest point, is the reason why so much misunderstanding seems to have arisen. The nature of the crest prevents anyone from seeing clearly what is happening on the other side.<sup>26</sup>

The claim that it was 3RAR that took Hill 355 seems to be based largely on personal perception and testimony. In 1985, Robert O'Neill's official history noted that, after arriving on the crest of Hill 355, C Company's commander, Major Jack Gerke, radioed Hassett around 2 pm 'that the

24 3RAR, war diary, Appendix 12, p. 2, para 10. See also Appendix 10, p. 2, para. 19.

25 28th Brigade, war diary, November 1951, Appendix B, p. 4.

26 Maurie Pears, MC, conversation with author, 7 October 2011.

KOSBs were still below the summit, making their way steadily upwards'.<sup>27</sup> Yet, as we have just seen, by 2 pm the KOSBs had been on the summit of Hill 355 for three hours, and its B Company had set off 90 minutes earlier for the same north-eastern shoulder where Gerke apparently was. In addition, although O'Neill observes that 'it was a moment of triumph for Gerke to stand on the crest of that great, round hill which dominated the battlefield of Operation Commando', he also describes Gerke's final assault on Hill 355 as being against 'the eastern end of the summit of Hill 355', not the very peak of the hill itself.<sup>28</sup>

However, it is clear that Gerke believed he had taken the hill. In Bob Breen's monograph, *The Battle of Maryang San*, Gerke is cited as saying, 'I reckoned we had taken 355 but I did not stress this with the CO when I spoke to him at 1600 hr [4 pm]. He, of course, was well aware of the fact'.<sup>29</sup> Gerke's account, and the other accounts in Breen's book, are all legitimate oral history. There is no reason to doubt the memory or recollection they record. But we should question whether they can be reconciled with the documentary evidence. Is what they thought happened what actually did happen?

Once contextualised in a narrative, this kind of recollection is soon established as truth. Setting out C Company, 3RAR's memories in his own text, Breen states:

After clearing the Chinese off the summit and north-eastern approaches to Little Gibraltar [Hill 355] ... at about 1400 hr Gerke reported to Hassett that he held Little Gibraltar. At this time Gerke's men could hear the Borderers making their way up the south-eastern and western slopes accompanied by the jaunty sounds of their bagpipers playing traditional Scottish marching tunes.<sup>30</sup>

---

27 O'Neill, *Combat Operations*, p. 188.

28 Ibid., p. 187.

29 B. Breen, *The Battle of Maryang San*, Headquarters Training Command, Balmoral, NSW, 1991, p. 34. By 1998, Gerke's opinion had not changed. See M. Pears and F. Kirkland, *Korea Remembered: The RAN, ARA and RAAF in the Korean War of 1950–1953*, Doctrine Wing, Combined Arms Training Centre, Georges Heights, NSW, 1998, p. 68.

30 Breen, *The Battle of Maryang San*, p. 41.

Annotating map 3 in his monograph, Breen is even more explicit: ‘Gerke’s men were in possession of Little Gibraltar when the Borderers completed their assault.’<sup>31</sup> Yet none of this agrees with the contemporary documentation.

These facts, once established in print, start to be perpetuated with increasing certainty but without any apparent reference to contemporary sources of evidence. In his *Atlas of Australia’s Wars*, Lieutenant General John Coates makes no mention at all of the KOSBs being involved in taking Hill 355: ‘In a series of quick attacks along the ridge, they [C Company, 3RAR] not only captured their preliminary objective (a second 220 m feature) but also went on to capture Kowang San itself.’<sup>32</sup> The British official history’s attempt to mediate in the matter<sup>33</sup> is rejected by Brigadier Jim Shelton in his trenchant chapter about Hassett in *The Fight Leaders*. He writes, ‘The KOSB claim [to have taken 355] is not accepted by 3RAR or by the 16th New Zealand Field Regiment. The forward elements of the KOSB did not reach Gerke’s position on the summit until at least one hour after the Australians’.<sup>34</sup> Even in a recent Australian account of the Korean War, written by Cameron Forbes and published in 2010, the image is repeated of the Australians on top of Hill 355 watching and hearing ‘the pipers playing the Borderers up the south-eastern and western slopes’.<sup>35</sup>

Immediately following his account of Gerke reaching the summit of Hill 355, Breen goes on to add a further point of great significance: ‘Subsequently, [the KOSB CO] Macdonald never sought the opportunity to meet Gerke or to acknowledge his part in the capture of Little Gibraltar.’<sup>36</sup> This same point is later reiterated by Shelton, who adds that Macdonald ‘never acknowledged the contribution C Company [3RAR] had made in assisting the KOSB in the attack on Point 355 [Hill 355]’.<sup>37</sup> There is clear resentment that Macdonald never said thank you. But from the KOSBs perspective, why was this necessary? All the units involved—the KOSBs, the KSLI, the Fusiliers and 3RAR—were working to the

31 Ibid., map 3, following p. 42.

32 J. Coates, *An Atlas of Australia’s Wars*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2001, pp. 316–17, text 3.

33 See A. Farrar-Hockley, *The British Part in the Korean War*, vol. 2: *An Honourable Discharge*, HMSO, London, 1995, p. 223.

34 D. Butler, A. Argent and J.J. Shelton, *The Fight Leaders: A Study of Australian Battlefield Leadership*, Australian Military History Publications, Loftus, NSW, 2002, p. 132.

35 C. Forbes, *The Korean War*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 2010, p. 406.

36 Breen, *The Battle of Maryang San*, p. 41.

37 Butler, Argent and Shelton, *The Fight Leaders*, p. 132.

same plan issued by the 28th Brigade and, if the timings of the war diaries are to be believed (as they were at the time), the KOSBs' work finished well before the forward elements of C Company, 3RAR arrived on the north-eastern shoulder of Hill 355.

How has it then come to be claimed that 3RAR took the hill itself and gifted it to the KOSBs? I now think the shape of the hill, as Maurie Pears suggested to me, is ultimately the key to this riddle.<sup>38</sup> Men positioned on either side of the summit cannot see each other and can easily be unaware of events on the other side of the crest. In addition, I think there was a degree of misunderstanding at the time. At 4.10 pm, the 28th Brigade war diary noted, '1KOSB reported 3 Platoons arrived on Point 355 [Hill 355] simultaneously led by Lt C.K.W. Wilson, 2/Lt J.W. Lindquist and 2/Lt Henderson'.<sup>39</sup> Now, if the earlier details had not been received or noted, this report might have appeared as the first record of the KOSBs arriving on the summit, leading to a belief that they did not reach it until 4 pm. This would fit with Gerke's view of the situation and his perception that he had arrived first, much earlier in the afternoon. But, within the full context of the diary, it is clearly a retrospective report. I also believe, using the evidence of the war diaries, that the men Gerke saw moving up towards him on the north-eastern shoulder were those of the KOSBs' B Company climbing up from Finger Ridge, not the main body of the battalion, which had arrived on the summit some hours beforehand. There are too many reports in both the brigade and battalion diaries, as well as in the supporting written and personal accounts, to claim that 4 pm was the time that the KOSBs first arrived on Hill 355.

And what of the second part of this story, the fighting for the ridge Newcastle–United–Football–Club? The capture of Hill 217 on 5 October, and the subsequent exploitation up to what were later better known as the Hinge and the Knoll, was tasked to the Fusiliers. The Fifth Fusiliers, as the Northumberlanders are traditionally known,<sup>40</sup> were brought in to supplement the strength of the 28th Brigade at the start of October. They had been in Korea since November 1950 and had already seen considerable action. Their original commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Kingsley Foster, had been killed on the Imjin on Anzac Day 1951

---

38 Maurie Pears, MC, conversation with author, 7 October 2011.

39 28th Brigade, war diary, 4 October 1951, 4.10 pm.

40 The traditional name of the 1st Royal Northumberland Fusiliers is the 5th (Northumberland) (Fusiliers) Regiment of Foot. The unit is referred to in the war diaries of the time as the 'Fighting Fifth'.

and was replaced in the field by the second in command, Miles Speer. By the end of September 1951, the Fusiliers knew that their tour was up and they would soon be leaving Korea. One member of the battalion, Ashley Cunningham-Boothe, later pointed out, 'We'd had more battles than any other British battalion in the Korean War and enough was enough. We were all ready to go home, to be posted out of the theatre. In fact some of the reservists had actually got a date for sailing; that's how close we were'.<sup>41</sup> To support 3RAR's assault on Maryang San, the Fusiliers were to take Hill 217 by first moving along a lateral ridge further south known as Crete. Y Company would then move onto Saw, while Z Company attacked to the north-west against Hill 217, or Newcastle. Once taken, the remaining companies would continue pushing up the ridge through United to Football and join 3RAR at Club.

At 6 am on 5 October, the forward elements of the Fusiliers moved west to Crete. According to the Fusiliers' war diary, they were hampered by the same 'thick ground mist' that was enveloping 3RAR's B and D Companies at the base of the ridge leading up to Hill 317. 'Shortly before mid-day', the diary noted, the mist cleared. Y Company established itself on Saw, having encountered 'little trouble other than sniping'.<sup>42</sup> Z Company reached the base of the steep, narrow slope leading up to Hill 217. It was difficult ground, as the war diary explained:

From Saw leading north the ridge was very steep on both sides, for the most part heavily wooded with thick undergrowth, but with occasional bare patches of rocky outcrop. Thirty yards before reaching Point [Hill] 217 (or Newcastle), however, the trees on the top and east flank thinned out and, as a result of our artillery preparation, were at the time practically non-existent except as stumps to give a hand-hold in the most awkward places. The top itself was a rocky knife-edge some twenty yards long, while the western face, having avoided the ministrations of our artillery by virtue of its steepness, was again thickly wooded.<sup>43</sup>

41 Ashley Cunningham-Boothe, IWM SR 19913, reel 4, 20:00.

42 1st Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, war diary, September–October 1951, TNA, WO281/452 [hereafter RNF, war diary], part I, Appendix K, typescript report, 'Action fought for Point 217, 5–8 Oct '51', p. 1. (A copy of this report was published in A. Perrins (ed.), *A Pretty Rough Do Altogether: The Fifth Fusiliers in Korea, 1950–1951*, Trustees of the Fusiliers Museum of Northumberland, Alnwick Castle, Alnwick, Northumberland, 2004, pp. 200–6.)

43 RNF, war diary, p. 1.

Holding defensive positions among the trees, rocks and long grass was a Chinese company deployed in a series of deep bunkers, well armed with automatic weapons, including a section of heavy-calibre machine guns,<sup>44</sup> which were clearly marked on a sketch attached to the Fusiliers' battle report:

The location of the machine guns shown in the sketch was confirmed by the slits and empty cartridge cases; other machine guns reported may have been moved from place to place or may have been the Chinese version of the Sten gun. There was no doubt that the enemy, particularly during the last counter-attack, was liberally armed with automatic weapons. The trench work also marked on the sketch was filled with boxes of grenades to a scale which was quite fantastic judged by our own standards.<sup>45</sup>

When Z Company advanced towards Hill 217, 11 Platoon on the right emerged out of the mist and surprised a number of Chinese in the open who were 'apparently coffee-housing on the border of the trees immediately below the summit'.<sup>46</sup> On the left, 12 Platoon deployed on the edge of thick trees and undergrowth and met a fearsome response. The platoon commander, Lieutenant Paddy Baxter, recalled:

Two platoons had gone up to my right. I was going into a saddle to their left, to clear that saddle ... And as we came up into that saddle, there were a fair number of Chinamen down below us, on the ridge below us, and of course as you sky-lined, so you hit the target. It was one of these things. I got a bullet in my chest, my sergeant got a bullet in his stomach and my good friend Corporal Bland took the platoon on.<sup>47</sup>

Although both platoons established tentative holds on their objectives, any attempt to join hands was knocked back. The Fusiliers' war diary explained, 'A period now ensued which lasted some ninety minutes and which may seem to the reader to be a period of stalemate though to those on the ground it was packed with sufficient interest and excitement to fill a story in itself'.<sup>48</sup> The Chinese seemed armed with endless stocks of grenades, which rained down on the British in clutches of four or five. Well supported by artillery and air strikes, the Fusiliers fought back.

44 28th Brigade, war diary, October 1951, Appendix M, 'HMG Coy on 217', p. 2.

45 RNF, war diary, Appendix K, p. 4 with later detail on p. 7.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

47 Paddy Baxter, 12 Platoon commander, IWM SR 13145, reel 2, 06:36.

48 RNF, war diary, Appendix K, p. 2.

But their own supplies were limited. Grenades were soon running short, as were stocks of Bren gun ammunition. In the early afternoon, after Z Company's casualties had reached 50 per cent, the company commander pulled his men back towards Crete. The Fusiliers' first attempt on Hill 217 had failed.

With Maryang San in Australian hands by the end of 5 October, this left Hill 217 as the only objective of Operation Commando that had not yet been achieved. Believing it was imperative that Hill 217 should still be taken as soon as possible, at 7.30 pm the 28th Brigade ordered the Fusiliers to send a company overnight from Crete to Hill 317 and in the morning to push this company through the Australians to take Football (the Hinge). At the same time, the rest of the battalion would renew its attack on Hill 217. To redouble their determination, Brigadier Taylor sent the Fusiliers a personal letter:

I look to you to complete the brilliant actions of the capture of Hills 210–317 and 355. You will recapture 217 and move up the ridgeline to join hands above; united with your Australian comrades on Hill 317, who will do their best to help you. I know the fighting Fifth can do it.

Then in a final note he added, 'Watch the ammunition'. No receipt of the letter was noted in the Fusiliers' war diary.<sup>49</sup> Instead the Fusiliers' commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Speer, pointed out to the 28th Brigade that two of his companies had already been involved in heavy fighting that day and the other two would be needed for the new assault on 6 October. As a result, the order to send a company to Maryang San (Hill 317) 'was rescinded'.<sup>50</sup>

Already committed to making a renewed attack on Hill 217 the next morning, Speer decided to make a direct assault from the south, head on against the main Chinese position. This was a strange decision and reminiscent of the way the Americans had tried to capture Hill 317 earlier in the year by assaulting directly out of the valley against the southern face. The 28th Brigade's battle narrative included a description of how strong the defences were:

49 28th Brigade, war diary, Appendix F.

50 Farrar-Hockley, *An Honourable Discharge*, p. 228.

The two medium machine guns on the extreme northern end of the ridge fired at very short range at anything approaching from the south whilst from the west (defiladed from the east and south) ran a trench system containing yet another two medium machine guns which were able to shoot obliquely from the north-west on to the ridge approaching 217. A plentiful number of enemy serving as a counter-attack force with ample supply of grenades were hiding in the dead ground just to the west of 217.<sup>51</sup>

It was precisely to avoid a frontal assault on these kinds of positions that Hassett had decided to 'run the ridges' and take Maryang San from the flank.

The Fusiliers moved off at 9.15 am on 6 October.<sup>52</sup> Y Company established itself back on Saw. But the narrowness of the ridge leading onto Hill 217 meant that W Company could attack with only a single platoon forward. When W Company advanced at 10.40 am, the Military Cross citation for its commander noted that the assault was heralded by a cheer that 'could be heard clearly more than half a mile away'.<sup>53</sup> The 28th Brigade's war diary succinctly encapsulated what happened next:

W Company assaulted [Hill] 217 and captured it except one knob which contained a bunker with three medium machine guns. W Company was counter-attacked and one Northumberland Fusiliers' Platoon was pushed off. Position restored with aid of one Platoon from Y Company. 2nd counter attack on W Company beaten off. 3rd counter attack broken up by artillery. X Company then took over from W Company due to W Company's casualties. X Company made two attempts to take the enemy bunker.<sup>54</sup>

In its battle report, the 28th Brigade concluded, 'Although the Fusiliers got within 15 yards of the [machine gun] nest, they never managed to clear it up and another immediate counter-attack by a reinforced Chinese company forced X Company to withdraw'.<sup>55</sup> By early afternoon, the Fusiliers were finished. In two days, they had suffered 20 killed and 93 wounded, four more even than 3RAR. Yet, unlike 3RAR, they had been unable to overcome the Chinese defences. Although the results

51 28th Brigade, war diary, Appendix B, p. 6.

52 Ibid., 6 October, 9.15 am.

53 Major Reginald David Brook, company commander, W Company, 1RNF, Military Cross citation, cited in *A Pretty Rough Do Altogether*, ed. Perrins, p. 365.

54 28th Brigade, war diary, 6 October, note at end of day.

55 Ibid., Appendix B, p. 6.

were disappointing, as the British official history points out, 'their own persistence had not been futile. An important element of the enemy holding Maryang-san [*sic*] had been occupied continuously over two days',<sup>56</sup> and prevented from moving to the area of Football (the Hinge) and Club (the Knoll).

By the end of 6 October, it was clear that the only way to remove the Chinese from the ridge between Hill 217 (Newcastle) and Football (the Hinge) was to work down from the north. The following day, after A Company of the KOSBs had moved to Maryang San to bolster 3RAR's strength, Hassett despatched B Company, 3RAR against Football (the Hinge). After a day's heavy fighting, the Chinese launched their heaviest counter-attack but were repeatedly driven off by B Company from its new positions. By 8 October, there were signs that the Chinese were beginning to pull back from the ridge. At 12 noon, the KOSBs patrolled down to United and found the Chinese positions empty, with its diary recording simply the patrol made 'no contact'.<sup>57</sup> The Fusiliers then patrolled up to Hill 217 (Newcastle). In meagre consolation for their earlier frustrations, its diary noted, 'At five o'clock in the evening the Intelligence Officer and two sections of the Assault Pioneers walked onto Newcastle unopposed'.<sup>58</sup>

In studying the operations of the Fusiliers on 5 and 6 October, perhaps the most pertinent question is why did 3RAR succeed when the Fusiliers did not? Probably the most important factor was that the Fusiliers' time in theatre was up. On 1 October, the day before the Fusiliers moved over to join the 28th Brigade, Lieutenant Michael Kerney, the battalion's assistant signal officer, wrote in a letter:

At last we have two days rest after having been in the line 22 days. A record for us. Only another fortnight until we finish here for good ... The strain at the moment is terrific and we can only wait for the time when we are relieved and can breathe again in peace.<sup>59</sup>

Many Fusiliers felt that they had already done their bit for Korea. There is also the vital question of command. Lieutenant Colonel Speer was a brave and able commanding officer. But, looking at the way the battalion

---

56 Farrar-Hockley, *An Honourable Discharge*, p. 229.

57 KOSB, war diary, 8 October, 12 noon, 'make no contact'.

58 RNF, war diary, Appendix K, p. 3.

59 Quoted in *A Pretty Rough Do Altogether*, ed. Perrins, p. 198.

undertook its attacks on Newcastle, maybe he did not have the flair or creativity of Frank Hassett. But how many men do? Hassett's command of the assault on Maryang San was truly inspired. Faced with the reality of how strong the defences of Hill 217 were, one cannot help but wonder what Hassett would have done.

The same might also be said about the individual soldiers. Despite their initial reluctance, none of the Fusiliers shirked their duty. They fought well, like their commanding officer. But, on the whole, the Australian soldiers seem to have fought better, again like their commanding officer. There was an edge, a hardness, a sense of daring in the gritty actions along Hill 317 or against the Knoll and the Hinge that just seemed to tip the balance each time in the Australians' favour in a way it did not for the Fusiliers in the battle for Newcastle, despite their persistence. There was also probably an element of luck, and it failed to shine on the Fusiliers.

A perception of the disappointing performance of British units during Operation Commando is intrinsic to the overall Australian understanding of Maryang San. In part this derives from 3RAR's wider situation within the Commonwealth structure in Korea. A justifiable sense of injustice, for example, emanates from Australian anger over the quota of decorations and awards for the operation, summed up by Robert O'Neill's observation that 'the KOSBs had gained more decorations in losing Maryang San to the Chinese on 4 November than they, the Australians, had received for winning it on 8 October'.<sup>60</sup> This was exacerbated when the capture of Maryang San was not originally recognised as a separate battle honour but absorbed into the wider 28th Brigade honour of Kowang San—perhaps adding another reason why it was necessary to be able to claim that this objective was really taken by 3RAR—and made worse when the honour 'Maryang San' was used to recognise the loss of the hill in November.<sup>61</sup>

Another key factor was the personality of the KOSB's Lieutenant Colonel Macdonald. He was not to Australian tastes, being described as 'a Calvinistic Scot, averse to tobacco and strong drink and a professional soldier to the core'.<sup>62</sup> But Macdonald was highly regarded as a commanding officer by his own officers. A strict disciplinarian he might have been, but one officer believed Macdonald to be the 'best commanding officer I ever

60 O'Neill, *Combat Operations*, p. 200.

61 See Breen, *The Battle of Maryang San*, pp. 129–30.

62 M. Hickey, *The Korean War: The West Confronts Communism, 1950–1953*, John Murray, London, 1999, p. 257.

had', adding, 'I never had a finer CO in my life'.<sup>63</sup> Macdonald's perceived failure to acknowledge what C Company, 3RAR had done for him on 4 October, like so many other things, was then compounded after the loss of Maryang San in November. By then Macdonald was commanding the 28th Brigade. Apparently indifferent to Australian sensibilities, he published a tactless message to his old battalion rightly praising them for their efforts in the battle that lost the hill, but inevitably rubbing salt into the still smarting wounds of 3RAR that had been reopened by the loss.<sup>64</sup>

Macdonald's ascendancy to the command of the 28th Brigade was also controversial. From an Australian perspective, he seemed to have been central in getting Brigadier George Taylor sacked, although the conspiracy against Taylor was driven not only by the British but by the New Zealanders as well. This was seen as a hard judgement on a man who had delivered all of his objectives and placed the 1st Commonwealth Division successfully on the new Jamestown Line. Hassett later wrote to Taylor, 'I think one of your senior officers was very ambitious. Perhaps that was part of the trouble'.<sup>65</sup> Taylor was popular with the Australians. He has been described as 'the product of an old North Country Catholic family, gregarious, extrovert, a lover of good food, wines and jovial company'.<sup>66</sup> When he left the 28th Brigade with little warning, 3RAR seemed to have felt they had lost a friend. Sending Taylor a copy of Breen's monograph in 1992, Hassett explained that it contained a degree of 'criticism of some British units, the KOSB in particular': 'Much of this flows from the KOSB having Macdonald as its CO. He disliked the Australians, a sentiment they returned in full measure. I consider him a poor CO and a worse Brigade Commander'.<sup>67</sup>

Combined, these factors have coloured the way Australians remember Operation Commando. As a result, the assault and capture of Kowang San and Maryang San have become yet another chapter in Britain and Australia's shared military heritage, which stretches back over more than a hundred years, through both world wars, to the war in South Africa. History is used to build the foundations of nationhood. Even in Britain,

63 Jock Foulis, IWM SR interview 19661, reel 1, 21:30 and 23:52.

64 Brigadier J.F.M. Macdonald, Special Order of the Day, 7 November 1951, reproduced in Macdonald, *The Borderers in Korea*, p. 39.

65 Brigadier G. Taylor DSO, letter from Hassett, 14 May 1987, Imperial War Museum, Documents Section [IWM DOCS], 96/12/1.

66 Hickey, *The Korean War*, p. 257.

67 Brigadier G. Taylor DSO, 96/12/1, letter from Hassett, 27 February 1992, IWM DOCS.

where people pretend this is not the case, the way the two great wars of the twentieth century were fought is integral to the way most people see themselves and Great Britain's place in the world. But this makes the responsibility of the historian all the greater. In writing and researching history, particularly when it lays the foundations of national myth, we need to look ever more carefully at the contemporary documentation. We have to seek a definitive statement of what happened based on all the records and try to avoid a selective interpretation based on national bias.

With the Korean War, this is particularly difficult to achieve. I am reminded that the war did not take place all that long ago; it is living memory. Contributors to this volume lived through it; some were there. But eyewitnesses only see one part of the bigger picture. What people see, what people remember, is not necessarily wrong until conclusions are drawn from these recollections and from them alone. As historians, we know that oral history has to be used carefully. It has to be substantiated by firmer documentation and contemporary, primary evidence. Personal testimony can be used to support and embellish, but it is often too fragile on its own to form the foundations of history.

This text is taken from *In from the Cold: Reflections on Australia's Korean War*, edited by John Blaxland, Michael Kelly and Liam Brewin Higgins, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/IFTC.2019.11](https://doi.org/10.22459/IFTC.2019.11)