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THE BATTLE FOR HILL 317 (MARYANG SAN)

One man's account

William Purves

Nigel Steel, in Chapter 11, provides a detailed review of the tactical and operational detail of a multibattalion brigade plan in a divisional setting, which was part of a much larger war effort. This chapter takes a different but complementary view: the view of a British soldier. From the perspective of a British soldier of the Korean War, it is important to understand the composition of the British forces in Korea. Conscriptioin in Britain was in force during the 1940s and 1950s. On my eighteenth birthday, an envelope came through the door, 'on His Majesty's service', telling me that in a few months I would be called up for my two years' National Service. In May 1950, it happened. For some reason I was badged into the Black Watch and sent to Fort George near Inverness for basic training. While there, I was fortunate enough to pass an officer selection board and went to Eaton Hall, where the infantry officers were trained. The training course ran about two months, and during that time I managed to talk my way out of the Black Watch into my territorial regiment, the King's Own Scottish Borderers (KOSBs). I suppose I did so because I thought it would be quite nice to do some travelling at the King's expense, as the KOSBs were in Hong Kong. So I duly arrived as a very raw, young-looking second lieutenant in Hong Kong, and soon afterwards my regiment was mobilised to go to Korea.

Earlier in 1950, after a UN resolution, the British Government was under pressure to send forces to Korea. British Prime Minister Clement Attlee said he was not prepared to reduce the garrison in Hong Kong, so two battalions were earmarked to go to Korea. Apart from the mobilisation, they were not allowed to go by sea and, as you know, the North Korean advance down the Korean Peninsula was so fast that the war might have been over before they got there. So, on 18 August, Brigadier Coad got a message to say that the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and the Middlesex Regiment were to go immediately to Korea.

They were both understrength, and a company of the Queen's and East Surreys were sent to bolster the Middlesex Regiment. At least 60 per cent of the troops were national servicemen. Having been told on 18 August that these regiments were to move, we actually embarked on 25 August and reached Pusan on 29 August, by which stage the perimeter had shrunk considerably. We had no vehicles and were dependent on US help for transport. The battalions were sent up to the edge of the perimeter and, as you know, late in September, we were joined by the 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR).

The Argylls and Middlesex were ordered to break out of the perimeter with some US forces on 16 September, and they had to cross the Naktong River. Within 10 days, the Argylls had suffered a terrible accident. A US aircraft napalmed one of the companies, and the company and support troops suffered 90 casualties, 20 of whom were killed. It was there that one of their company commanders, Major Kenny Muir, won his posthumous Victoria Cross.

Soon afterwards there was the Inchon Landing, which took the pressure off the perimeter very quickly. Over two or three days, the two battalions were lifted by air to Kimpo and 27th Brigade joined the race north. The roads became jammed and infantry got onto tanks, and up they went through Pyongyang almost to the Yalu River. Most of the actual fighting, I think at that stage, took place with 3RAR, which stopped short of the Yalu River, and in late October, China entered the war.

There was fighting at Pakchon in the second half of November. Then started what I suppose is the biggest bug-out in history, and the UN troops raced back and were severely attacked in the Uijongbu corridor in early January. They crossed the 38th parallel on 11 December, coming south, and re-established a line well below Seoul. Of course, the biggest

enemy in January and February was really the cold. Forty degrees below zero at night, and one had to be careful. If you removed your mitten and picked up a jerry can or something metallic, the skin froze immediately and would get torn off. We were facing north, as you can imagine, and the blizzards from Mongolia and beyond really came down very severely. So it was a very difficult period. The platoon commander every morning had to inspect each man's feet to make sure that we did not get frostbite. By the time you had done that for a couple of weeks, you did not need to look at the Jock's face; you knew who he was from his feet.

Then, as far as the British forces were concerned, the 29th Infantry Brigade was formed under Brigadier Tom Brodie. It arrived in Korea, and not long afterwards was involved in the battle of the Imjin River between 22 and 25 April 1951, in which the 1st Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment was essentially wiped out. Any prisoners taken after three days of fierce fighting—by which time they had run out of ammunition—were marched north where they either died or endured more than two years in appalling prison camps. The other two battalions were the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers and the Royal Ulster Rifles. They were mainly reservists, with a few national servicemen, and I think it is fair to say their hearts were not really in it. Many of them were called back to the colours about two weeks before their reserve years were due to end. They had young families at home, and I think it was extremely difficult for them to go to war. Most of them had been involved in the Second World War; they were not volunteers, unlike the Australians; and they found it very difficult to get morale up to the peak that was required. The Gloucestershires were led by Colonel Carne, who was captured and eventually given a VC for his battlefield efforts.

Chapters 3 and 4 of this volume explore the Battle of Kapyong at the end of April 1951. I was not involved so all I will say is that it was well recognised in British circles that it is thanks to 3RAR and the 2nd Battalion of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (2PPCLI) that those attacks were repelled.

By the end of April, the 27th Brigade had been renumbered to become the 28th, with Brigadier Taylor in charge. The KOSBs and the King's Shropshire Light Infantry (KSLI) relieved the Argylls and Middlesex, who returned to the United Kingdom; and 3RAR and 2PPCLI moved from the 27th Brigade to the 28th Brigade. In July 1951, the Commonwealth Division was formed under Major General Jim Cassels. He was highly

respected by everyone, and soon the division really began to operate as an effective member of the UN forces. Before that, individual battalions had been pretty well left to manage as best they could.

We were, of course, supported by the New Zealand gunners, and they did a marvellous job for us. They were nearly all Second World War veterans. We then moved north of the Imjin River to straighten out the line, and did not really meet a great deal of opposition in the process until we mounted a major attack in October 1951. Then the brigade started to prepare for Operation Commando, taking first Hill 355 (Kowang San), and on 3 October, I and my platoon, 7 Platoon of C Company, started off at dawn to climb the foothills of Hill 355. It was steep, and there was quite a lot of fire from various sources coming towards us. We were held up and suffered quite a number of casualties. The rest of the company passed through and, by 3.30 pm that afternoon, had taken and established themselves on ground higher up.

I guess that my platoon was marooned a little bit there. My platoon and D Company went up the western side of Hill 355 while the Australians came up the eastern side. My regimental war diary says that D Company was further along to the west of us at 11.30 that morning. There was no peak to the hill, as you have read. I went up on the following days to look at the situation from the top of Hill 355, and frankly there did not seem to be a high point. One side was the same height as the other. So I do not think my regiment, anyway, got into any kind of argument as to who took the hill first. We were delighted to see the Australians at the other end of the summit.

Then on 5 October the Australians moved, in this brilliant move that you have read about, flanking round from the right, from the east. I was quite interested, because that morning there was heavy fog lying right along the valley. We were on top of 355 and could see the top of 317 (Maryang San) and some of the other hills; we might call them foothills. They were all pretty steep. And it was there that A Company of 3RAR were moved off, and I don't know whether there is any truth in it, but it is said they got a bit lost in the fog. They certainly took some time to be able to participate in the subsequent battle. Well, the speed at which 3RAR moved was quite remarkable.

I think that the Chinese were expecting an approach from a different angle, but by the end of the day on 6 October, all the high features of Hill 317 were held by the Australians, who then suffered two days of severe counter-attack. On 9 October, by which time they must have been quite exhausted, my regiment moved in to take over from them and they were able to have a rest.

What was supposed to happen from there, of course, was that the Northumberland Fusiliers were supposed to take Hill 217, also known as Newcastle. They nearly got to the top on 5 October but failed to take it until the following day. But 3RAR held all the main positions around the top of Hill 317, and the KOSBs took over from them on 9 October.

The KSLI were in reserve. Hill 217 was heavily defended, which proved to be quite an obstacle to the Northumberland Fusiliers attempting to take it. The KOSBs stayed on Hill 317 until early November. My platoon was on one of the summit knolls, reinforced by a platoon of D Company. The rest of Charlie Company and B Company were up on the high ground, with A Company in reserve. For the next few weeks we were engaged in wiring, patrolling and generally preparing for potential counter-attacks. The patrolling was by and large ineffective because the Chinese were so good at camouflaging and holding back and only working at night.

On 28 October, I had a significant observation post near the crest. And we had heard some tracked vehicles moving forward the previous night, but on that afternoon at about 4 pm, a shell obliterated the observation post and both men in it were killed. I guess we had become a bit slack in moving in and out, and the enemy could see us, because we had a marvellous view of the valley. From 28 October until 4 November, there was heavy patrolling, generally through the Hinge, with fighting patrols going out to the north.

I think it was on 2 November that I was asked to take a patrol down the valley to our north, which was very open, with a village at the far end, which only had a few houses still more or less intact. I began to get the impression I was being watched as we went down there with an 88 wireless. Generally speaking they were useless, but we had to keep radio silence anyway. I got down to the village with six men and started to have a look round. There was evidence of meals and cooking, all quite recent. There was one particular house with a straw roof, and lying below it was a ladder. It was a two-storey house in remarkable condition so I decided to

have a look into it. I put the ladder up, slid open the wooden door—and you might not believe me, but there in front of me was a rather beautiful young lady. Of course, we had heard about comfort girls quite near the front line for senior Chinese officers. It told us one thing: that there was a major concentration of Chinese building up. It flashed through my mind that if I did not get the hell out of it, I certainly would not get back to my position. I did not tell the Jocks (KOSBs) what I had found.

We gingerly went back as fast as we could, and by that time I was absolutely certain that we were being watched. I suppose we were not wiped out because it would have spoiled the enemy's surprise attack, which was launched on the evening of 4 November. During 2 and 3 November there was a lot of digging. And in the area below the Hinge, the land was quite soft, so there were trails dug in, and it was from that source that the major attack took place at nightfall on 4 November. The main Chinese attack came from the north, the north-west and the north-east.

We were really well wired up round our positions, and those of you who have been on it will know that the top of Hill 317 is bare and rocky. I think one reason the platoon of D Company up there was pushed off was because they had very little wire out in front of them. The sheer volume of attack here started with blowing of bugles, yelling and, before that, heavy artillery bombardment. Then it lifted, and waves of Chinese infantry came right over the position. In B Company, there was the headquarters and two platoons and one platoon on a small feature. This platoon was never heard of again. I believe that three of them were taken as prisoners of war, but I do not have proof of that. But the regular lieutenant and the rest of his platoon were clearly wiped out. Quite a number of our troops from B Company and C Company came under attack. I was sitting up on a knoll, and I could see people running down to the south, which was a bit disconcerting, to say the least of it.

As the hours went on we were able to hold this position. It was quite steep, and we had a good supply of M36 grenades; they were effective and a lot of Chinese were killed round here. D Company was not like that. A platoon from D Company was attacked here, and Lieutenant Barney Henderson was in command of it. He was wounded early on, so I took command of the two platoons. And about 11 o'clock or midnight, I began to realise we were being strafed. We were receiving friendly aircraft fire from our own gunners, who were trying to obliterate the entire area. I managed at some stage to get a message through to D Company, which had fallen back a bit,

that we were still there. And although we suffered some casualties, they were all wounded, not killed, but there was no further communication—as I say, the 88 wireless was pretty useless. Then at about 2 am I managed to establish contact with somebody in D Company and reported that we were firm and holding quite well.

At about 3 am I got a direct order to evacuate the position, which we started to do. Not very easy; it was dark, quite steep. We found a path down somehow, and we managed to bring out the wounded on stretchers. We had some strong Korean porters who were in similar uniform to ourselves. I was surprised to see that 3RAR's porters were in white, because of course you could see white from miles away. These porters managed to carry the stretchers. There were three carrying five people, and at some stage, instead of turning right, I discovered there was nobody behind me and they had started to go up here. I ran after them and managed to stop them. All I could hear at that stage was noisy jabbering in Mandarin or Korean.

We got down. There was quite a lot of firing still going on but somehow or other it missed us. The platoon from D Company was reunited with the rest of the company, and my own platoon came down to battalion headquarters. Having handed over to someone else, I was evacuated to hospital with wounds, so I have no idea what happened immediately after that. Attempts were made to recapture Hill 317, but it remained under Chinese control.

I was evacuated to Japan, had some patching up and, in the middle of January 1952, got back to Korea, where the war had become entirely static and the patrolling carried on. I would add that one of the difficulties was the water in the valley had frozen and you know what happens: the ice stays on top, and there's nothing underneath. As you walk down on patrol, if you stood on a bit of ice, it went 'bang'. It was like a shot being fired, and everybody was alerted, and the Chinese put up flares, so you had to freeze. If you showed any movement, then you were under fire. So it was a bit tricky. I have to tell you that on a couple of occasions, once after seeing the girl and once having been caught out in the middle of no man's land with flares all over, I felt very lonely indeed.

At any rate, as the months went on, the static phase of the ground war started, and the KOSBs and KSLIs were relieved in May 1952. The brave troops that followed us were the Duke of Wellingtons and the Black

Watch, then the Devons and the Camerons. The war, of course, had changed in April, with May 1952 being entirely static, which is described very effectively by Robert O'Neill in Chapter 1 of this volume.

The citation for the Distinguished Service Order that I received, recommended by my brigade commander and General Cassels, during the Korean War reads:

Number seven Platoon of C Company 1 King's Own Scottish Borderers, commanded by Second Lieutenant Purves, was holding the western portion of the knoll feature when the enemy attack on 1 Battalion of the Borderers developed at 16.15 hours on 4 November. The remainder of C Company was some 300 yards to the west of the knoll, whilst a platoon of D Company under operational command of C Company was adjacent on the east side of the knoll. Ignoring the fact that the rest of C Company had been forced off their positions by 18.00 hours, thereby completely exposing his left flank, Second Lieutenant Purves unhesitatingly fought on with his platoon. At about this time the commander of the D Company platoon having become a casualty, Second Lieutenant Purves also assumed command of that platoon. The platoons were repeatedly attacked by large numbers of enemy, each of their onslaughts being prepared by intense mortar and artillery fire. Although in great pain from a serious wound in his right shoulder, Second Lieutenant Purves was undaunted. Under heavy fire of all natures, he dashed from section to section in both platoons encouraging them, directing their fire, and himself hurling grenades at the enemy in the wire. Although it was apparent that point [Hill] 317, which completely dominated his position from 400 yards to his right, was in enemy hands by 21.00 hours, Second Lieutenant Purves, with his position now completely isolated, fought on. It was not until 01.45 hours that Second Lieutenant Purves got a message through to battalion headquarters reporting the situation and asking for information. He was then ordered to try and extricate the platoons towards the rear platoon of D Company, south of point [Hill] 317. Though under heavy mortar fire and under the very nose of the enemy on point [Hill] 317, Second Lieutenant Purves carried out this manoeuvre with great skill and coolness, bringing down the precipitous feature 12 wounded men and all the platoon's arms and equipment.

At 04.15 on the 5th of November, Second Lieutenant Purves reported to the battalion command post that his platoon was outside, fully equipped, and ready to fight. It was not until he received a direct order from his commanding officer to report to the regimental aid post that he gave any consideration to his severe and obviously painful wound. The outstanding leadership, personal bravery and resource of this young officer of 19 years of age, together with his exceptional sense of responsibility, was an inspiration to all, whilst the stubborn defence of his feature contributed materially in preventing the battalion from being overrun.

At times, under constant bombardment from communist artillery and small arms fire, we did run short of ammunition on the front line, and of course, there was often no question of resupply during a battle. We often had to stockpile ammunition grenades before a battle over the weeks. I was issued with a cheap Sten gun, and I hope that the Owen guns used by the Australians were better because our Sten guns were next to useless. Whenever you found yourself with the Chinese in front of you, the thing jammed. They were hopeless.

During the battle for Maryang San the artillery fire seemed to be coming from both sides. These features were quite narrow, and I dare say that is why we survived. Even the Kiwi gunners could not land many shells on the top; a lot of them went over and exploded underneath the other side, and a lot of them landed on the back slope. We were sprayed with shrapnel, and I was hit in two or three places, but little bits of shrapnel do not actually blow your head off, so we were quite fortunate because of the terrain—unlike the Hinge, which was relatively flat and where the initial charge dislodged so many of our men. The communist forces artillery was very effective, the Chinese mortars in particular.

In terms of how effective our defensive positions were, we unfortunately did not have overhead cover and everything was through trenches, which were often not very deep because of the rocky terrain. But you learned to keep your head down when there was incoming fire. And if there were wounded, they simply had to stay where they were. There was one young man who was in my headquarters and was in charge of the 2-inch mortar. I rather think that as the ammunition went down, he picked up a mortar bomb that would have already been fired and had not exploded. Anyway, it exploded in the barrel, and he received a bit of shrapnel, which went through his eye and came out the back of his head. And that was a nasty

mess, to say the least of it. He was a little fellow from Perthshire, a joiner and roofer. I thought there was no way he was going to make it; I pumped some morphine into him for the first and only time in my life. We all had a couple of shots of morphine, as platoon commanders. When the time came to pull out, he was very light, and I was able to put him on top of somebody else who was on a stretcher. We got him out, but I never expected to see him again. Well, many years later, I met him and his wife. An artificial eye, a great hollowed-out bit of his skull, but there he was alive, and he still had a functioning brain, despite the seriousness of his injury.

In general, the morale of British troops during the Korean War, including those under my command, was remarkably good. Unlike Australian forces in the Korean War, it is important to remember the vast majority of British soldiers were national servicemen. I had lost my platoon sergeant so our sections were led by corporals or lance corporals—again, most of them were national servicemen. As a result of us being relatively the same age, we got to know each other pretty well over the months. There was definitely a sense growing between me and the other ranks, particularly because we had one or two lucky escapes, I guess, when we were patrolling. So somehow or other, I felt that they were with me and we were a team.

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