

## The actual fighting

My experiences during the Korean conflict were gained after the frontline had been consolidated along the general line of the 38th Parallel during 1953 when I commanded a platoon of 3RAR on Hill 355 and later on the 'Hook'

(At the Hook, during the last few hours prior to the eventual cease-fire agreement, the enemy launched an all-out general offensive which resulted in hundreds of their casualties in front of our positions, which had sustained fierce and constant artillery and mortar fire. The stench of the decomposing bodies strewn over the battlefield in the summer heat was unbearable.)

It was absolutely necessary at that stage to dominate no-man's-land by means of constant and vigorous patrol action and effective artillery, mortar, machine gun and air support.

Patrols by both the enemy and our troops took place by night, and consisted of fighting patrols of about fifteen men as well as reconnaissance patrols of up to six men. In addition, the odd 'snatch' patrols were launched with the aim of capturing prisoners.

The forward slopes of our defensive positions were extensively covered with minefields which were surrounded by barbed wire and which required to be under constant surveillance and to be accessible by aimed fire against enemy interference.

The aggressive patrol programme employed by the Australian troops effectively prevented any incursion into and beyond our positions as the equally vigorous actions by our enemy would have undoubtedly enabled them to establish diggings close to our perimeter in preparation of a major assault with horrendous consequences.

Some of the units who previously occupied Hill 355 failed to embark on a patrol programme, satisfying themselves with 'battening down' in a fortress-like perimeter. Consequently our task of regaining domination of no-man's-land became all the more arduous.

Bunker life was particularly unsavoury, with having to share one's abode with rats, mice, and other vermin and being inundated with various insecticides and smells of petroleum-burning heaters in a confined underground situation. This was however preferable to being subjected to the impact of constant hostile shelling and mortar bombardment. As a platoon commander, this meant constant movement from trench to trench and into dugouts in order to reassure and placate the soldiers.

Furthermore, the minefields required constant maintenance which involved working parties driving steel pickets into the ground making noises easily detectable by the enemy. These parties needed protection by special patrols drawn from the various platoons.

In order to give some idea in what manner the fighting occurred whenever an enemy patrol came into contact with one of our side, it must be visualised that both sides blasted away with small arms and light machine gun fire, throwing grenades and eventually breaking contact by removing their casualties wherever at all possible.

On many occasions, when an enemy force has been located, the patrol leader would signal his base for fire support which hopefully would effectively neutralize the enemy. On such occasions a fierce artillery duel would take place and often affect our own troops most devastatingly.

I myself experienced a number of minor contacts with the enemy when leading patrols into the valley in front of our positions, and must emphasize that, subsequent to detailed reconnaissance and meticulous rehearsals, unless complete and effective control is exercised whilst on patrol, inevitable failure and disaster would ensue.

Whenever a battalion was relieving another one in the line, a carefully planned system of silent movement by night by each sub-unit was employed, so that at such an extremely vulnerable phase, the enemy would remain oblivious of the action.

In order to ensure that the relief in the line would be conducted satisfactorily and in complete secrecy, each sub-unit sent a representative to the position to be occupied by their respective comrades. They then led them to their places previously reconnoitered whilst the members of the outgoing force moved out similarly in strictest silence. This being a night time operation, it required a great deal of minute staff work and attention to detail.

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## Command and Leadership

Significantly, the majority of Command and Staff appointments in the Australian force in Korea were occupied by professional, regular officers. However many of the officers came from the ranks of battle experienced men of WWII, who in the main were posted as Company Commanders, Company Seconds-in Command or platoon commanders. Warrant Officers and NCOs also comprised a mixture of both regular and K Force men.

Leadership was most effectively exercised on battalion level by meticulously and constantly keeping all ranks informed of the current situation relating to our own forces, the enemy and our plans. As already stated, equally meticulous attention was being paid to preparations of patrol actions with careful studies of the relevant terrain and related aspects.

Whilst in the front line, battalion, company and platoon commanders made their presence and support constantly known by moving over tortuous terrain through lengthy entrenchments by checking the effectiveness of weapons covering fields of fire as well as fire support systems. From a leadership point of view, such actions were vital for the maintenance of good morale.

It is also important to mention here that our force enjoyed an excellent system of communications, which enabled the most junior commanders on platoon level to make rapid contact with their immediate superiors. However, communications between subunits and their various headquarters could not always be exercised by means of radio, as this system was vulnerable to enemy interception whenever urgent or vital tactical matters were being communicated.

To overcome such a problem, an elaborate system of telephone lines was established within the defensive perimeters. This placed enormous burdens on the signal platoons who had to negotiate most difficult terrains.

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## The Battlefield

The battlefield as seen from the point of view of the consolidated front-line along the 38th Parallel represented an extended 150-mile swathe of valleys running from east to west. The valley system was bounded by a line of hills and mountains skirting its northern and southern rims, which in turn become the fortifications of the two opposing forces.

The hills were completely denuded of all vegetation as a result of bombardments, shelling and natural fires. Mostly, however so, because of the action by the former Japanese colonial masters of Korea, who robbed the country of its trees for use by their own home industry.

The freezing cold winters and atrociously hot summers as well as the hazards brought about by heavy snowfalls, rains and storms caused extreme hardships to the defenders of our positions as they enjoyed hardly any means of protection whilst facing a determined and unrelenting enemy.

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## Tour of Duty

In contrast to the practice which existed during WWI and WWII, when service personnel were required to remain on overseas duty for prolonged and undetermined periods of time, during the Korean conflict a tour of duty consisted of twelve months precisely, which was also the case during the Vietnam war.

Whilst such a system gave an assurance of 'tenure' it tended to have a number of detrimental effects, which distinguished themselves in the constant counting of days still to be served in the theatre and in wide spread custom of asking one another on a daily basis: 'How many days have you got to go ?' which was usually answered by : ' exactly .... days and a wakey'.

To my mind it was a rather soul destroying system as soldiers tended to slacken off or shirk their duties during the latter part of their 'stint' not wanting to become a casualty at that time. Company commanders also tended to take that into consideration by excusing time expired soldiers from dangerous tasks.

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## Weapons and Support

Our battalion enjoyed excellent and reliable fire support from a vast array of artillery, armoured and air resources which could be rapidly mustered over an efficient communication system.

The enemy did not have the advantage of air superiority, but made good use of his heavy weapons and artillery when bombarding our positions and supporting his troops during patrol contacts against our troops.

The infantry of our units was still equipped with the .303 bolt action rifle we used during WWI and WWII as well as with the Bren light machine gun and [Owen](#) submachine gun of WWII !!

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## Provisions and Comfort

By the time when the line had become relatively static, adequate clothing to provide for the bitter cold was made available to our troops. This consisted of Parkas and layers of winter clothing suitable for the climatic conditions.

Rations were generally adequate in quality and quantity and every effort was made to bring hot meals to the remotest and hardly accessible outposts along the front line. Needless to say, this had to be done in strictest secrecy under cover of darkness.

Whenever possible, individual soldiers or subunits were given the occasional rest in reserve positions and also sent on R+R to Japan.

It must again be stressed here, that the situation prevailing in defensive warfare as contrasted with fluid operations, placed different hardships on the infantryman. In defence, enormous burdens are heaped upon the soldiers, involving them in extremely arduous physical work in constantly having to improve the defences against the inevitable encroachments or attacks by a most aggressive enemy.

This involved constant digging, minefield erection and maintenance, sentry duty, patrol actions and carriage of heavy defence stores onto high ground.

The constant exposure to pesticides, DDT spraying, rat infested bunkers and petrol fumes emanating from underground heaters in close quarters were aspects largely contributing towards ill health.

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## Medical Evacuation

The treatment and rapid evacuation of battle casualties was of a high standard. Wounded and killed soldiers suffered similar wounds to those experienced in WWII. These were caused in the main by mortar, artillery, machine gun, small arms and grenade sources.

Although we sustained quite a few casualties as a result of hostile artillery bombardment against our fortifications, the majority of our casualties occurred whilst the soldiers were on patrol in no-man's-land.

This placed enormous hardships on those having to carry the wounded and dead uphill in the dark whilst often under sniper or artillery fire. The mateship among our diggers came to the fore on such occasions!

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## Conduct of the War

As a newly initiated regular officer, my personal participation in the war was based largely on professional reasons, which appeared to be the case with the large majority of my peers.

In contrast to that, the K Force officers and some of their Warrant officers seemed to have motives of their own, as they all had to have had experience during WWII and tended to harbour a sense of adventure whilst dissatisfied with civilian life. There was also the odd 'remittance man' adding a certain aura reminiscent of the French Foreign Legion. Similarly, the other ranks comprised identical types.

After the 1951 cease-fire negotiations had been conducted I, as well as many of my peers and our soldiers, tended to express their dismay with the protracted fighting and the constant flow of casualties sustained in an obviously unwinnable conflict which could only result in an inevitable stalemate!

There were also some malicious rumours stating that the president of South Korea, Syngman Rhee, had his own people bombed in order to have the cease-fire negotiations stalled.

My present thoughts on the matter are confined to such aspects as the totality of the Cold War experience and, as far as Australia's involvement is concerned, how important it seemed to be for us to participate in the effort of the United Nations to combat aggression.

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## Some Personal Considerations

Having introduced myself as a 'professional' officer, I must also stress that I served in the South West Pacific Area as an Infantry soldier and later as an NCO and newly commissioned officer with BCOF prior to commanding a platoon of 3 RAR in Korea after a number of postings in Australia.

The honour bestowed upon me of giving me the opportunity to command an Australian platoon under active service condition has given me the privilege of being a respected and liked member of an exclusive 'family' or 'club' with lifelong friends and true mates. (Being a native born German, this has been particularly important to me !!)

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## Comparisons with other Military Situations

Service with BCOF gave our men and servicewomen a life of unprecedented luxury, which they also never experienced since. Attractive barracks, laundry services, all the amenities mentionable

in a military setting and the lack of all dangers, contrasted starkly with experiences of a recently hard fought war under rather dangerous circumstances and untold hardships and discomfort.

When comparing our WWII experiences with those in the Korean conflict, it is relevant to make mention of the fact that the fluid nature of most operations, with the possible exception of those like the Tobruk siege, contrasted with those experienced when our troops had to hold ground along a heavily fortified line reminiscent of WWI warfare in France and Gallipoli. This, as already mentioned, involved elaborately established minefields, dugouts and constant aggressive patrolling.

As our battalions were an integral part of the British Commonwealth Division and part of a four-battalion Brigade of two British and two Australian battalions, our soldiers had ample opportunity to experience the great spirit and traditions which distinguished our British friends, whose professionalism and cheerful camaraderie was truly inspiring.

I had the opportunity of commanding a platoon of the Durham Light Infantry as an exchange officer during the campaign for a period of three weeks whilst our battalion was in reserve. This, to me, was a most enjoyable and educational experience.

The famous ANZAC spirit was also rekindled by the New Zealanders providing accurate and reliable Artillery support to our troops during our occupation of the front. It was also significant to find the Turkish units at our flank, which resulted in the occasional social get-togethers with the inevitable realisation of fighting for a common cause!!

The Americans were naturally in the majority and some of their infantry most certainly lacked the high professional standards of the US Marines, whose dedication and gallantry in battle was always an inspiration to all those of us who were privileged to witness their performance, or learn of their great achievements on the field of honour.

The Canadians were equipped far better than the other Commonwealth formations. This was particularly evident in the roadworthiness of their vehicles.

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-Major Alec Weaver, Royal Australian Regiment, (Ret)