

The 17th Infantry Regiment—VFW’s founding unit in 1899—racked up a highly commendable combat record that included seven Medals of Honor. **By Dick Ecker**

Buffalos Leave Imprint in Korea

Sixty years ago, when the U.S. Far East Command committed Army units to help resist the invasion of South Korea by the North Korean People’s Army, the 17th Infantry Regiment (nicknamed the Buffalos) of the 7th Infantry Division remained in Japan as part of a reserve force. Its role in the Korean War did not begin until the Inchon invasion in mid-September 1950. It ended almost three years later with one of the most epic—and costly—battles of the war.

After the invasion at Inchon and the breakout of U.N. forces from the Pusan Perimeter, the 17th Infantry remained a minimal player for the remainder of 1950. History will remember it most in that period for being the only unit to make it all the way to the Yalu River—on Nov. 12—before a massive thrust south by the Chinese army later that month.

When the remainder of the 7th Division was decimated by that offensive, the Buffalos joined the survivors for sea evacuation. They became a driving force in later battles to recover the

ground that was given up to the Chinese army.

Beginning with *Operation Tomahawk* in January 1951 and continuing for the next 10 months, the 17th Infantry helped push Communist forces back across the 38th parallel, earning five Buffalos the Medal of Honor.

On Feb. 26, Sgt. (then Cpl.) Einar Ingman, Jr., leading two E Company squads against withering fire from more than 100 enemy troops, single-handedly destroyed two machine-gun positions. Though severely wounded himself, he continued to

encourage his men until the entire enemy force was routed. Because of his indomitable courage, only two Buffalo fatalities were recorded that day.

Two weeks later, in an operation called *Ripper*, Capt. Raymond Harvey led C Company against a well-entrenched enemy in a number of fortified emplacements. Braving “a hail of fire and exploding grenades,” he neutralized four of those emplacements himself, and though painfully wounded, he refused evacuation “until assured that the mission would be accomplished.”

In the First Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) Counteroffensive in April, the 17th lost 40 KIA and 161 WIA.

In May, the second CCF offensive hit. In that action, Sgt. (then Pfc.) Joseph Rodriguez of F Company distinguished himself when his squad was pinned down by “a fanatical hostile force occupying well-fortified positions on rugged commanding terrain.”

In the face of intense fire, Sgt. Rodriguez rushed up the slope. In a “whirlwind assault to the top of the peak,” he destroyed a number of emplacements and “exacted a toll of 15 enemy



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Officers of C Company, 1st Battalion, 17th Infantry Regiment, gather prior to the first battle of Pork Chop Hill in April 1953. Back row: 1st Lt. Stephen Patrick, 2nd Lt. Jack Birkner and 1st Lt. Pfeifer. Front row: 2nd Lt. Ronald Monier, 2nd Lt. Fred Kamaka and 2nd Lt. William West.

dead.” His actions helped rout the enemy from a “strategic strongpoint.”

The other two Medal of Honor awards for the Buffalos that year came at the end of August in what was to become the regiment’s second most costly battle (116 KIA and 427 WIA) of the war. That battle (Chup’a-ri) is the subject of a separate article on page ??.

‘War of the Hills’

Soon after Chup’a-ri, peace talks in Panmunjom began in earnest and the 17th Infantry joined the U.N. effort to maintain defensive positions that for the most part defined the Main Line of Resistance for the rest of the war. Thus began what became known as “The War of the Hills,” isolated battles over individual hills that each side considered critical to occupy when peace negotiators finally agreed to end hostilities.

The Buffalos were involved in some significant early battles in this final phase of the war, notably the October 1952 skirmishes around Jackson Heights north of Chorwon (which cost 52 KIA and 171 WIA) and in *Operation Showdown* on Jane Russell (63 KIA and 250 WIA) near Kumhwa.

In early November, however, the 17th Infantry replaced the 35th Regiment, 25th Division, guarding the POW camp on Koje Island, off the southern coast of the peninsula. For more than two months they remained there, returning to front-line duty late in January 1953. For the next 10 weeks, activities for the Buffalos were limited to patrol duty, with little action and minimal casualties. Then things heated up.

Pork Chop Hill

The 7th Division manned two prominent outposts in its sector: Old Baldy and Pork Chop. Old Baldy had been taken by the Chinese in March. Pork Chop, about a mile to the northeast, now stood like an island, surrounded on three sides by enemy troops. The outpost was well fortified, with deep trenches and more than 60 covered bunkers.

But the Chinese wanted that hill—and they were willing to pay a high price for it. The 7th Division paid a steep cost to hold it.

On April 16, the Communists assaulted the Chop. The battle raged for 36



Harry Stewart, an unidentified medic and Spencer Smith of D Co., 1st Bn., take a break on Old Baldy, Sept. 1, 1951. The medic was wounded above the eye by shell fragments the first night on the hill.

hours, ultimately requiring commitment of the Buffalo’s 2nd Battalion to help secure the position.

Credit for reaching the top first goes to 1st Plt., K Co., 17th Inf. Regt. It actually secured Pork Chop Hill on April 18. “My unit cleaned up the hill and stayed on it for several weeks thereafter,” said Richard Baughman.

The 17th Infantry losses in the battle were 29 KIA and 157 WIA. During the combat, it had able assistance from other division units, too.

“The Tank Company of the 31st Infantry Regiment provided direct fire support during the battle,” pointed out Donald Robertson. “Also, the company’s utility tracked vehicles transported food and ammo to the troops on the hill, and brought back dead and wounded. Combat was just as vicious for tankers as it was for the infantry.”

For 10 weeks after the battle ended, an uneasy standoff existed. Patrols from both sides probed for enemy capabilities around the outpost.

On one patrol on June 4 by the Buffalo’s K Company, Pfc. Charles Barker earned the Medal of Honor when his patrol came under heavy fire and was ordered to withdraw. Barker voluntarily elected to cover the withdrawal, “gallantly maintained a defense and was last seen in close hand-to-hand combat with the enemy.”

Then on July 6, Pork Chop was attacked in force. As the attack unfolded, Pvt. Angelo Palermo of A Co., 1st Bn., said, “It looked like ... a moving carpet of yelling, howling men—whistles and bugles blowing, their officers screaming like women driving their men uphill.”

The Buffalos battled valiantly to hold the hill. But after five days, 169 KIA and 551 WIA, the outpost was lost.

During that battle, regiment member Lt. Richard Shea “with forceful leadership and by his heroic example ... directed a holding action and ... despite additional wounds ... launched a determined counterattack,” giving his life in the effort. He was awarded the Medal of Honor.

Sixteen days later, an agreed-to cease-fire—on July 27, 1953—ended the hostilities in Korea.

During the 34 months the Buffalos were in combat, they sustained 979 killed (including four POWs and 101 MIAs who died) and 3,552 WIA. Regimental casualties were the 10th highest among the Army’s 28 infantry regiments in Korea. ★

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