

For 10 days in August and September 1951, the U.S. 7th Infantry Division was locked in deadly combat with a Communist Chinese division. The 17th Regiment played the leading role. **By Dick Ecker**

Chup'a-ri: A Forgotten Battle

This is not a name you will find in many history books, but as we commemorate the 60th anniversary of the start of the Korean War, it is a place well worth remembering.

In fact, in describing the 1951 action by the U.S. 7th Infantry Division in that unit's official history, the division archivist reported:

"After a brief rest, the division was ordered into defensive positions north of Hwachon. Toward the end of August, a number of limited objective attacks were ordered to take key terrain features and improve the front lines. In 10 days, the division captured five important hills, in what one division historian has described as 'the best fighting in the entire division's history.'"

'Buffalos' Up Front

For the 17th Infantry Regiment (nickname *Buffalos*), this 10-day engagement turned into one of its bloodiest battles of the war. The *Buffalos* alone suffered almost three-quarters of the division's losses in the action. Two *Buffalo* KIAs were awarded posthumous Medals of Honor for their heroism.

The cost was high, but the objectives were critical to the consolidation U.N. forces were attempting to achieve before expected peace talks would establish a limit to further advances.

A look at the hills under dispute in this battle, just east of a valley that included the village of Chup'a-ri—and the only major north-south road in that sector—clearly shows their importance to the advance of U.N. forces.

Whoever controlled those hills controlled that road—and access to strate-

gically important territory along the Kumsong River about two miles to the North.

Preliminary combat began on Aug. 26, as the *Buffalos* attempted to establish themselves on the southernmost hills in the area. After two days of give-and-take fighting over those hills, inclement weather essentially closed down the operation for three days. Then the fighting began in earnest.

For the next five days, the regiment was locked in mortal combat with elements of the Chinese 81st Division, fighting for control of three hills.

Hill 461 was on the west, overlooking the valley and its access road; Hill 682, a mile directly to the east of 461; and Hill 851, another mile farther to the east. The 1st Battalion's objective was Hill 461 and its adjoining terrain. 2nd Battalion was assigned to capture Hill 682. Hill 851 was the goal of the 3rd Battalion.

By Sept. 4—10 days after the battle began—all objectives were in friendly hands. But the *Buffalos* had paid dearly for their success.

'Wiped Out'

Here is how one survivor, Cpl. Dale Kohman, of Company I, 3rd Battalion's assault on Hill 851, described the battle in a letter home to his wife:

"We got wiped out... They really got it. There isn't a Third Battalion. K Company, I Company wiped out completely. There are a few of us yet and we're holding 851. We got this hill the morning of the first and the next morning at 12:30 we got banded by three regiments of Chinks. It lasted until 7:30 in the morning.

"And we only had a few rounds of ammunition left. They said we wiped out two regiments of Chinks and it sure looks like it around here. A guy can't walk unless you stumble over a Chink... That's the worst we ever got it. They blew a whistle and away they came..."

Other members of the 3rd Battalion echoed Kohman's recollections of that night. Pfc. Gerald Price, an I Company 57mm recoilless rifleman, remembers, "They hit us bad. As I recall, one of my buddies told me when I got back that there were something like 218

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—Cpl. Dale Kohman, I Co., 3rd Bn., survivor

men in the company when we went up there and, after that night, they had only about 80 that weren't killed or wounded."

Sgt. David Blunt, a K Company mortar squad leader, recalls:

"We got the daylight shot out of us. We took that hill and the Chinese wanted it back and they wanted it bad. We were shorthanded. Half of our men were gone. We were filling in wherever we could. I had a whole mortar crew when we went up that hill, but they were all [eventually] either dead or wounded.

"I was the only one left. I filled in with this BAR gunner. He lost his assistant, so I was taking cartridges out of a machine gun belt and loading them into magazines for him."



Soldiers of D Company, 1st Battalion, 17th Infantry Regiment, at the main line of resistance in August 1951. First row: Cpl. Hollis Phelps, Sgt. Carl Cook. Middle row: Drasher (first name unknown), Pfc. Spencer Smith, Sgt. John Berns. Back row: Sgt. Fred Staton, Pfc. Herbert Crider and Sgt. Harry Stewart

Fight to Finish

Over on Hill 682, the 2nd Battalion was having an equally vicious fight.

On Aug. 31, “When his platoon leader was killed, Cpl. William F. Lyell, Company F, assumed command and led his unit in an assault on strongly fortified enemy positions located on commanding terrain,” reads his Medal of Honor citation. “When his platoon came under fire, Cpl. Lyell seized a 57mm recoilless rifle and delivered deadly accurate fire, completely destroying an enemy bunker, killing its occupants.

“When the unit was again subjected to intense hostile fire from other bunkers, he charged forward hurling grenades, and although painfully wounded in this action he pressed on throwing grenades as he ran forward.

“He then led his platoon to the north slope of the hill where effective fire was delivered against the enemy in support of friendly troops moving up. Fearlessly

exposing himself to enemy fire, he continuously moved about directing and encouraging his men until he was mortally wounded by enemy mortar fire.”

Pfc. Tony DeSantis from H Company remembers that in the Sept. 1 battle, 17 men were lost from his machine gun section—killed or wounded. When he took those names to the company CP the next morning, one KIA on the list was Pfc. Anthony Kahooohanohano.

This native Hawaiian is due to receive a posthumous Medal of Honor. His original Distinguished Service Cross citation reads: “Pfc. Anthony T. Kahooohanohano, Company H, was in charge of a machine-gun squad supporting defensive positions when a numerically superior enemy force launched a fierce attack. Because of the overwhelming numbers of the enemy, it was necessary for the friendly troops to execute a limited withdrawal.”

Although he was painfully wounded, Kahooohanohano continued to face the

enemy alone. Fighting fiercely, he eventually ran out of ammo. Then he fought hand-to-hand until killed.

Eleven enemy soldiers were found lying dead before the emplacement and two inside it, beaten to death with an entrenching shovel.

His one-man stand inspired his fellow infantrymen to launch a successful counterattack.

Despite the heroism of these men and many others, the 7th Division sustained severe casualties in the Battle of Chup’a-ri: 175 KIA and 594 WIA.

It was emblematic of the sacrifices made by all of the war’s veterans. This virtually unknown yet epic battle deserves to be remembered as a highlight of the *Buffalos’* considerable contribution to South Korea. ★

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Cpl. William F. Lyell

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