

TACKLING TANGWON-NI

BY RICHARD E. ECKER



For three days in early September 1951, elements of the 3rd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, 25th Division, engaged in one of the Korean War's deadliest battles. It earned participants the prestigious Presidential Unit Citation.

By the first of September 1951, battle lines in Korea had begun to firm up as peace talks became more likely. Units of the U.S. 25th Infantry Division were digging in along the southern leg of the "Iron Triangle," a sector in central Korea bounded by three once-prominent North Korean cities: Kumhwa, Chorwon and Pyonggang.

While these Main Line of Resistance (MLR) positions were being developed

by the main body of the division, the 35th Infantry Regiment was held in reserve. It engaged in training exercises south of the MLR. One of its battalions maintained a patrol base on hills 717 and 682, some 5,000 yards forward of the MLR, in the vicinity of Tangwon-ni.

These two hills, separated by about 1,800 yards, dominated a complex of ridges and spurs that encompassed almost three square miles overlooking the valley leading to Pyonggang to the north.



U.S. ARMY PHOTO COURTESY D.M. GIANGRECO: WAR IN KOREA

The 35th Infantry *Command Report* for that month described the terrain: "Viewed overall, the ridge complex 717-682 forms a natural redoubt with relatively easy communication to the south and is difficult to attack from any other direction."

For almost a month, patrol duty on the complex had been the responsibility of a single company supplemented by some heavy weapons sections. Their reports to regimental operations had been routinely uneventful throughout that period. However, on Sept. 6, as I Company was in the process of replacing L Company

ABOVE: South of Pyonggang in the Iron Triangle, Hill 717 was the scene of a fierce battle in September 1951. The GIs pictured belong to a unit other than the one that fought there when this action occurred.

on the patrol base, it was subjected to withering artillery and mortar fire from the Chinese.

RED FLARES AND BUGLES

Then, all hell broke loose, as described by Cpl. Melvin Granos, a Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) man with L Company on Hill 682. “After the artillery barrage there was a moment of silence and then came the red flares, the bugles and the taunting voices in front of us and then the attack,” he recalled.

The complex was being assaulted in force by elements of the Chinese Communist Force 233rd Regiment. “The strange thing was, they hit us from the south,” said Lt. Paul Fleming, L Company’s 3rd Platoon leader on Hill 682.

For six hours, the Chinese hurled themselves at the perimeters, only to be repeatedly repulsed. Ultimately, the two companies and attached Heavy Machine Gun and 75mm Recoilless Rifle platoons of M Company expended their ammo and fought their way back to friendly lines. But not before inflicting 600 dead and wounded on the Communists.

Clearly, the Chinese had made the same assessment of the terrain as the one reflected in the command report. The patrol base had been occupied by the 35th Infantry for almost a month, and reconnaissance patrols had been sent out daily. Yet Chinese forces managed to avoid detection while they took up positions between it and the MLR.

According to Fleming, over the several weeks that the 3rd Battalion had occupied the patrol base, companies had rotated on and off the hills every five days or so. Each time they carried more ammunition to be stored there. As it turned out, they needed every round—and could have used more.

AMMO DEPLETED

Describing the early morning hours of Sept. 7, Fleming recalled: “We had three light machine guns from the 4th Platoon. By morning, we had burned out the barrels of all of them. We were down to nothing in the way of ammunition.”

Those were the kinds of stories that were happening all across the patrol base that night and into the next day, as the defenders valiantly fought off repeat-



Pvt. Kevin Wolff, a Browning automatic rifleman of L Company, survived the ordeal of Tangwon-ni only to be wounded in October 1951.

COURTESY KEVIN WOLFF

ed assaults. Among the many accounts of heroism that could be related from that battle is the one that earned Pvt. Billie G. Kannell of I Company a posthumous Medal of Honor.

Standing his ground under heavy fire, Kanell jumped on a grenade, absorbing its full blast. Incredibly, when a second grenade was thrown into his emplacement, he rolled over toward it, shielding his fellow soldiers from death.

Efforts to air-drop ammunition failed because the surrounding terrain was nothing but sharp spurs and steep draws. So the beleaguered defenders were finally forced to abandon the hills. The withdrawal, however, was anything but orderly. As Fleming remembered, “It was just chaos. People were peeling off the side of the mountain, trying to catch up with anybody.”

With multitudes of Chinese between them and the MLR, and dozens of wounded to evacuate, their trials were just beginning. Among the strategic positions the Chinese had occupied prior to the attack was Hill 432, 3,000 yards south of the 717-682 axis. This hill had a commanding view of the valleys behind the patrol base. Thus making evacuation of the complex a nightmare and counter-attack from the south a major challenge.

EVACUATION NIGHTMARE

Small groups of GIs—many with walking wounded assisting the more seriously injured—inched their way south through the rugged terrain of the complex.

Pfc. John Randolph, a walking-wounded mortarman with L Company, described the trip down the mountain:

“We had to go very slow because Chinese were all around us. It took a couple of days. We had to carry some of the people between two of us.”

Pvt. Kevin Wolff, a BAR man with L Company, recalled his circular route to the MLR. “We had to dodge Chinese patrols and were without food or water, finally crossing into a sector of the line held by the Turkish brigade. It took us from midnight Thursday to Saturday noon to make the front,” he said.

“When we regrouped, there was an average of two and three to a squad where there had been 10 and 12 when we had left for the outposts a week before.”

The Presidential Unit Citation for the 35th attests to its courage: “Companies I and L and attached units displayed such gallantry, determination and *esprit de corps* in carrying out their assignment under difficult and hazardous conditions as to set them apart and above other units participating in the campaign.”

Meanwhile, efforts to recapture the complex continued for the next several days. It was ultimately successful, but it required the commitment of the entire regiment—and it cost a number of additional casualties as a result of friendly fire.

Among friendly-fire casualties during the battle were those incurred at Hill 717. While located on Hill 682 with L Company, Pvt. Roger G. Spindler observed: “To my horror, a Marine F4U Corsair fighter came in from the west and dropped its napalm short of its mark on the U.S. soldiers getting ready to retake 717 instead of hitting the hill.”

In the end, the total price for the six-day battle was 88 killed (including 16 missing and never recovered), 217 wounded and 15 captured (later returned). It was among the deadliest battles of the Korean War, yet Tangwon-ni rarely rates mention in the war’s history. ☪

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