

Bearcat I&R

When I published recollections of my experiences in the Korean War (*Friendly Fire*, Omega Communications 1996—see www.ocomm.net/fire), two-thirds of the book had to do with my first combat assignment; command of the Intelligence and Reconnaissance (I&R) Platoon of the U.S. 31st Infantry Regiment (code name Bearcat). It is not my intention here to reiterate stories included in that volume, although some of the characters and events may re-appear as bases for the added details that are the purpose of this essay. For a number of reasons, it was not possible—or practicable—to include some of those details in *Friendly Fire*. However, they appeared to me to comprise a story in themselves, so I undertake to describe them here.

I was inspired to take on this project after I read portions of a 1994 master's thesis by Maj. Richard J. Runde, Jr., who was a student at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Ft. Leavenworth, KS. His thesis, titled *The Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon, 1935-1965: Lost in Time*, documented the history of the I&R platoon from its inception till it was eliminated as an active military unit. I will include a bit of that history here, but I intend to concentrate on how the Korean War really began the demise that terminated its existence in 1965.

As it was constituted during the Korean War, the I&R Platoon was actually a unit without a clear mission. That mission had developed out of experiences in WWII, during which the platoon evolved into a highly mobile element providing a regimental commander eyes and ears to the front and to the flanks as his regiment advanced into battle. By the time of the Korean War, that evolution had resulted in a platoon with eleven jeeps, 33 men, multitudes of communication equipment and scads of other stuff that even I cannot begin to recount for you. The reason I cannot is that I never identified most of it. My most vivid memory of it was as a huge, disorganized pile of miscellaneous equipment in the back of a squad tent.

I explained in *Friendly Fire* the details of my becoming the commander of Bearcat I&R. Here is how I described the assignment in my first letter home from Korea:

Finally made it. It took 24 days from the time I left till I took over my platoon.

But it's a bit different type of platoon than I had anticipated. I am the 31st Regiment's Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon leader. It's an outfit organic to the regimental headquarters and does just what the name implies.

I had hoped to get such a position after I'd had some experience but I was quite surprised and I consider I was very lucky to get it...

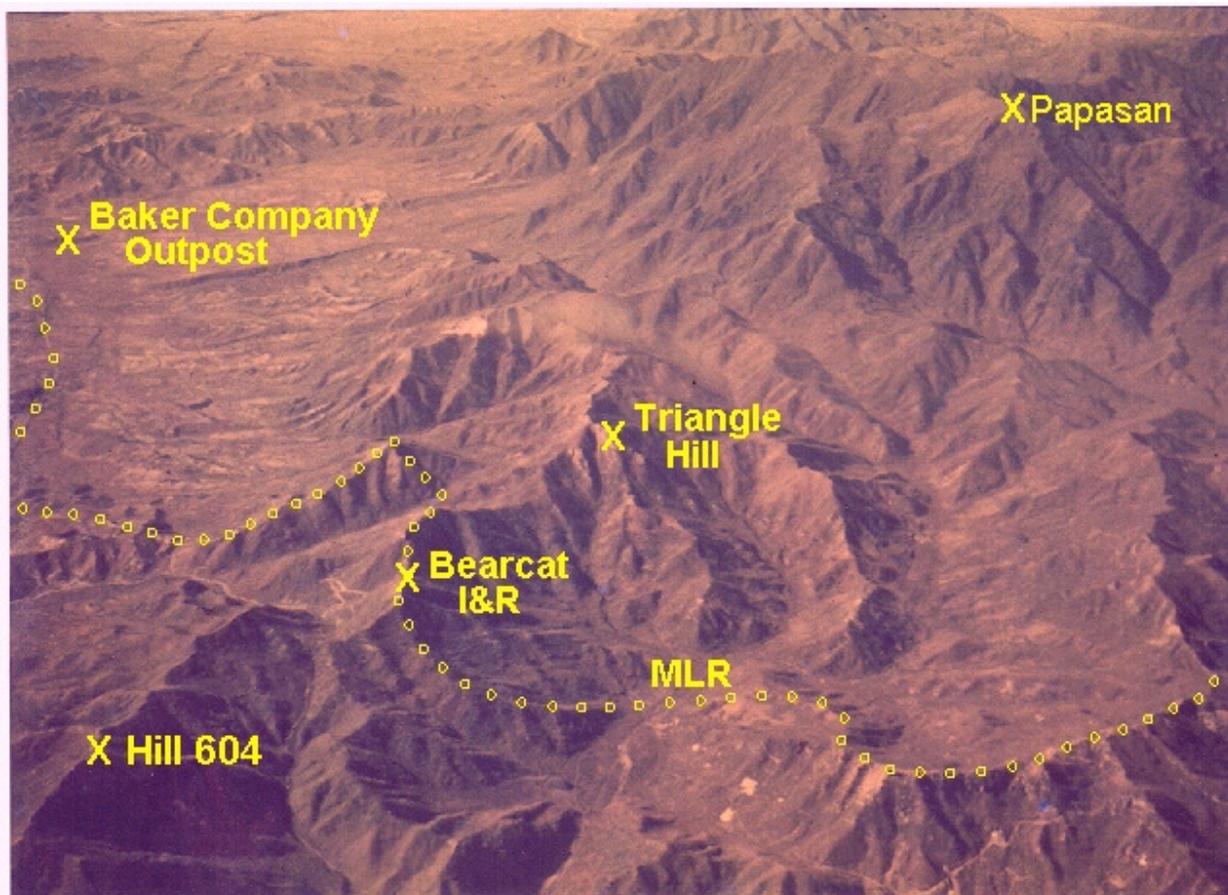
Had the circumstances been different, there is no way that a raw 2nd lieutenant, fresh from the states, would ever have been given such an assignment. However, the current circumstances did not permit the I&R Platoon to be employed as the field manual (FM 7-40, Infantry Regiment) intended, so the qualifications of its commanding officer were not all that critical when I took command.

The evolution of the I&R Platoon described in Maj. Runde's thesis created a unit that was a key element in the success of a regiment on the move. With eleven jeeps, all interconnected by radios, the platoon's primary mission was to lead the point battalion in the move forward and to scout the flanks to maintain contact with adjacent elements or feel out possible enemy penetrations. However, by the last year of the Korean war (I arrived just as that year was

beginning), none of the contesting units in the war was on the move. The battle lines were more reminiscent of the first World War, where the opposing forces occupied trenches and spent much of their time shooting artillery at one another.

The MLR (Main Line of Resistance) in Korea when I arrived was a trench extending from border to border across the peninsula. Even if the tactical situation had been more fluid, the terrain in that country still would have prohibited the platoon from being employed as specified in the field manual. The nature of that terrain can be seen in the aerial photo below:

This photograph (taken by aerial forward observer Harry Darby in October 1952) shows



some typical terrain along the MLR (Main Line of Resistance) in central Korea when I took over the I&R Platoon. The photo was taken looking to the northeast. The MLR is shown by the string of circles on the photo. At the far left, the MLR follows an abandoned railroad coming out of Kumhwa—once a prominent North Korean City. On the right, it trails off to the east. The lower elevation in the upper left of the photo is the Kumhwa Valley. It is probably as large an expanse of territory without mountains as you would find anywhere along the battle line at that time. So it is easy to see why it was not possible to employ the I&R Platoon as specified in the field manual. In fact, as I pointed out in *Friendly Fire*, when I took over the platoon, it was occupying a front-line position, shown by the “X” on the photo. A topographical map of the same general area is shown on the following page. As can be seen from these graphics, the enemy occupied the dominant terrain in this area, including Hill 1062—Papasan, the father of mountains.



I'll recap here briefly why my platoon was attached to Easy Company, because it speaks to how regimental commanders, in the final months of the war, adjusted the missions of their I&R Platoons to fit with their own views on how such units could be employed to their best personal advantage. In *Friendly Fire*, I recounted my initial interview with the regimental commander when I reported for duty:

"In this regiment," the colonel explained, "I have been using the I&R Platoon to perform specialized missions against the enemy—to infiltrate their positions, to gather intelligence and to capture prisoners who can tell us about their troop strengths and battle plans."

At the time, I assumed that the obviously hazardous mission he had just explained to me was the reason he needed a new platoon leader. In a way, it was—but not in the way I expected.

According to reports I got from the men when I took over, Lt. Pertulla (my predecessor) had been sacked and transferred when he refused to sign a recommendation that the colonel receive a medal for his participation on a patrol carried out by the platoon a few days earlier. The men told me that the colonel didn't even accompany the patrol all the way to the objective and that the lieutenant had insisted he didn't deserve a medal. They also were certain that the platoon was sent up on the line with Easy Company to remove from the scene all reminders of that unpleasant affair. Whatever the reason, my platoon was now a front-line unit and, at least for the immediate future, I was a rifle platoon leader.

Thus began my tenure as commander of Bearcat I&R, five months of widely varying assignments, only a few of which were even slightly related to what the field manual specified for the unit. And those assignments were at the whim of two successive regimental commanders. At the time, there were some 20 U.S. Army infantry regiments involved in combat in Korea, each with an I&R Platoon. So, as I relate my own assignments over just five months (and two colonels), you can begin to imagine the different ways in which all of those platoons might have been employed by the multitudes of different commanders during that last year of the war. And, you can also begin to see, with infantry tactics evolving for wars to come, why this was the beginning of the end for I&R as it was initially conceived to be.

The one by-the-book assignment we retained over the months I was in command was the maintenance of regimental observation posts (OPs). That responsibility continued, whatever else we might be assigned to do. At the time I took command of the platoon, the regiment had just one OP on the MLR, shown on Hill 471 on the topographic map on page 3. So, when my platoon was exiled to Easy Company, I still had to have men from the platoon occupying that OP. In addition, an I&R platoon at the time was assigned a lot of equipment—particularly communications gear that was needed for the missions specified in the field manual. Every one of the eleven jeeps organic to the platoon had at least two radios; some had three. At the time, all of those radios, plus some automatic weapons and a lot of other equipment, occupied a huge pile in the back of a squad tent at regimental headquarters. That pile of equipment—plus the personal gear of the men in the platoon—needed to be guarded at all times. (Those two squad tents at regimental headquarters were where the I&R Platoon had permanent billets—while they were “temporarily” helping out up on the front lines.) So I had to have least one man from the platoon stationed back at regimental headquarters to secure the equipment.

Although I have suggested what some of that equipment was, I actually never had any idea what a complete inventory might be. I had signed for it, but I never counted it. It was not possible to count it; it would have taken days, which were not available. It appears that the man I replaced had no better idea than I concerning what was in the pile I had signed for. That was just the way things were done in Korea at that time. I fervently hoped that, when I left the platoon, my replacement would follow the same routine.

Our tenure with Easy Company was brief, only 11 days. However, while we were there, orders came down from regiment assigning our platoon to a combat patrol with a mission to capture a Chinese prisoner off of Hill 598 (Triangle). The colonel may have exiled us, but he hadn't forgotten us. On that now infamous patrol—after which Lt. Pertulla had gotten the sack—the platoon had failed to capture a prisoner. Now he was giving us the opportunity to redeem ourselves. Fortunately, that opportunity was never realized. A few days after we received the order, we were pulled off the hill and moved about three miles to the west to occupy new

positions on Baker company Outpost, shown at the far left on the aerial photo and map on pages 2 and 3.

Now, before I relate what we would be doing out on the outpost, I need to give you a little insight into the makeup of the platoon. As its organization was specified in the regulations, the assigned duties of most of the men in the platoon could be guessed without much prompting. With eleven jeeps, there had to be eleven drivers. Every jeep had at least two radios, so there had to be eleven radio operators—some of whom may have had other duties. The platoon consisted of three squads, each commanded by a squad leader. The command unit consisted of the platoon leader, a platoon sergeant and assistant platoon sergeant. That's 28 out of 33 men. Among the other five, there had to be some intelligence specialists. And, there was at least one fifty caliber machine gun in that pile of stuff at regimental headquarters (and at least one of the jeeps was equipped with a post to mount a machine gun), so at least one weapons specialist was probably included in the Table of Organization (TO).

I can only speculate what that TO might have looked like because we were never employed in the way it specified and none of the men in the platoon (except the drivers and my radio operator) had any specialized training. Not only that, six of the men in the platoon were KATUSAs (Korean soldiers), none of whom could speak much English—and one was a Korean civilian interpreter. So, Bearcat I&R in September of 1952 was a bastard outfit that the colonel felt comfortable assigning to any miserable job that came along. Given that, we could anticipate that, if we were being relieved of the task of trying to grab prisoner off of Hill 598, then the new job the colonel had in mind for us was not going to be a walk in the park. It wasn't.

On the aerial photo and the map, Baker Company outpost appears to be little more than a blemish on the landscape of the Kumhwa valley. However, you need to be reminded that every one of those contour lines on the map represents twenty meters (65.6 feet) in elevation. So, that blemish actually rises over 150 feet off the valley floor. A deep trench circled the crest of that hill and a full, reinforced company occupied bunkers along that trench. It was a veritable fortress. However, Bearcat I&R was not destined to gain any benefit from that fortress because we were being assigned to occupy positions outside the outpost, extending several hundred yards out into the valley to the East. Our orders were to dig foxholes out there and occupy them every night on one hundred percent alert. We would sleep during the day in an old, abandoned tank bunker, a couple hundred yards to the rear. Our mission was to detect any possible enemy penetrations into the valley at night, call in fire on them and bug out (if we were lucky). This was not really an intelligence assignment, but it was typical of what this colonel was inclined to do with his I&R Platoon.

We never detected any significant enemy penetrations and, after thirteen days out there, the regiment was ordered into division reserve. An infantry division in Korea typically consisted of three regiments, only two of which would be committed to front-line duty. The third regiment would be "in reserve" at a location well back from the MLR—but not so far that it couldn't be quickly mobilized to reinforce a front-line unit that got into trouble. Typically, the reserve regiment would be involved in training, where the environment was more hospitable to that kind of activity. Here is how I described my reserve experience in a letter home on October 3, 1952 some two weeks after we came off the line:

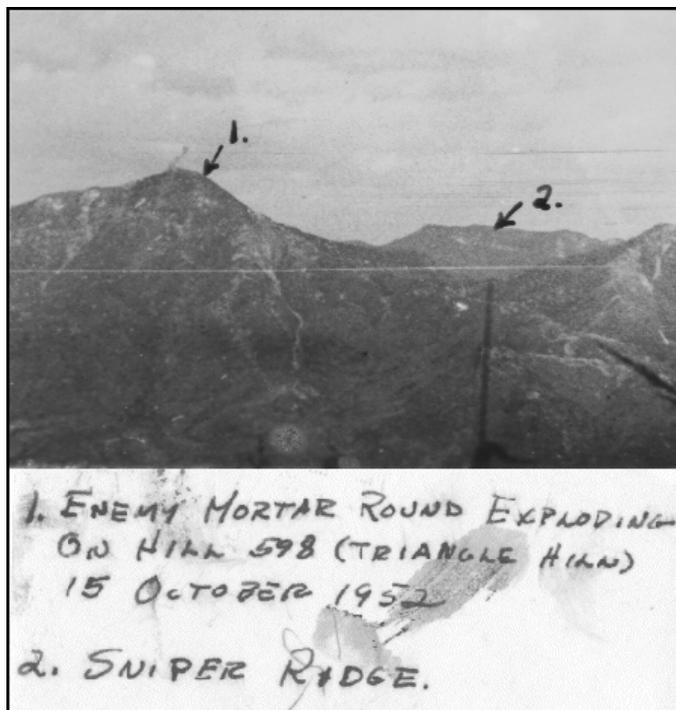
...This reserve is great stuff. Regular hours, training instead of dodging artillery, a fine officers club—plenty of booze, movies (if you can stand the 31st outdoor movie in this weather—it gets down to 40 °F here at night now). Winter soon...

In a letter twenty days later, I filled in the folks back home on details of my activities after the regiment went into reserve:

...I just had my first week's training schedule figured out when someone got the bright idea to move in and evict the Chinese from a bit of real estate called Triangle Hill. So I had to cancel my training and start working on observation posts for the operation (one of the jobs of an I&R platoon is to construct and maintain OPs for the regiment)...

My explanation in this letter makes the building of OPs sound pretty routine. It wasn't—particularly when the OP we had to build was up on Hill 604 (1975 ft.). The regimental OP on Hill 471 was too far to the west to be able to see all of the objectives. So, the colonel needed a new one, where he could watch the festivities from a more advantageous location. The problem for us (Bearcat I&R) was that Hill 604 was a very steep elevation and you could only drive a small fraction up the side of it. After that, it was a 45-minute hike up to the crest. I won't detail all of our experiences up on 604. I did that in *Friendly Fire*. All we managed to complete was a hole in the ground on the top of the hill, and then we were pulled off. However, that OP was completed before the battle so I assumed they must have brought in the engineers to finish the job.

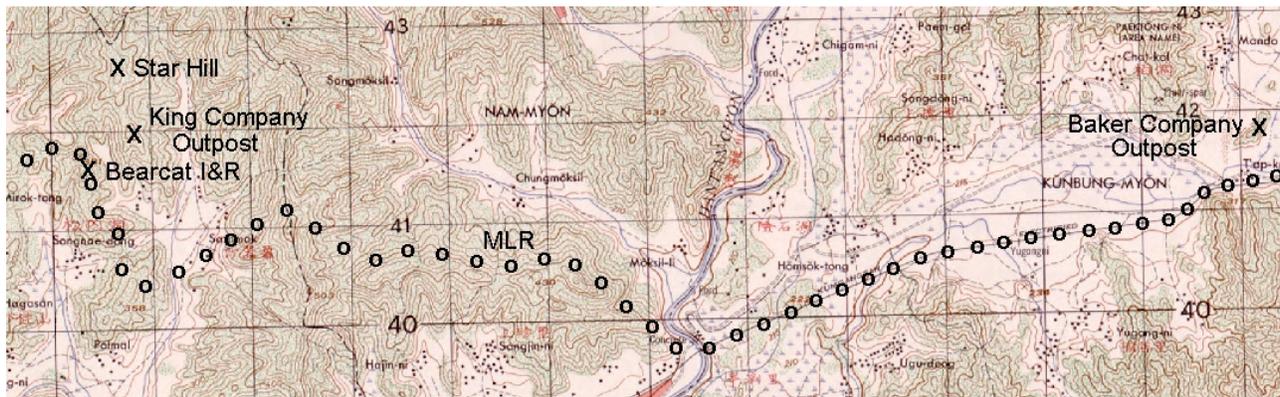
During the battle, which began on October 15, 1952, I assigned I&R personnel to man the new OP and I was assigned to be a liaison officer with the regiment that had replaced us on the line a few weeks earlier. I watched the battle from their regimental OP on Hill 471—the one we had occupied before being relieved. This is a photo I took that day from my position in that OP. The two identifying comments were written on the back of the photo when I sent it home. Sniper Ridge, an enemy-held position, can be seen in the aerial photo on page 2. It is the easternmost ridge in that photo. I can't recall now where the rest of my platoon was located during the battle. Because we were well supplied with jeeps, we were always called upon to provide taxi service for the regimental staff, so I expect a lot of them were doing that. Whatever they were doing, we were all happy not to be up on that hill, where casualties in the regiment were the worst for any one day during the entire war.



By the second day of the battle, the division commander relieved our colonel from command of the operation and our regiment was sent to replace the front-line regiment on the west of the division sector. That regiment was then committed to the battle in our place. The following day, Bearcat I&R was sent up to reinforce Item Company which had been badly shot-

up on Triangle. For the next 26 days we were again a rifle platoon—although ours was a rather meager contribution to the effort because we still had platoon members assigned as drivers and observers. The front-line position we occupied this time was the closest friendly position to King Company Outpost, a hotly-contested hill a few hundred yards forward of the MLR.

The map below shows most of the western sector of the division front. I have included Baker company outpost on the map to show how this sector connects with the map on page 3. The MLR over all but the most western area is just an estimate. Item Company occupied the far



western end of the division sector. Out platoon position was in the middle of the company sector. The primary enemy position in our area was Star Hill. We observed many attacks from it directed on the outpost. We had front-row seats to all the action out there—but we also got a lot of covering fire from the Chinese when things got hot. Here is how I described it in a letter home:

“...and more Chink artillery than I ever knew existed. Man, they can pour that stuff in.

One night when the reds were trying to take over a little hill on our flank they dropped in almost 3,000 rounds in our company area in less than an hour. For 20 minutes I couldn't even get out of my bunker to get down on the line with my boys. Not a man was even seriously wounded in the entire company that night. Just a few scratches...”

On the 11th of November, we were moved off “the hill” and back to regimental headquarters. The whole division was preparing to move back into Corps reserve. I assume that we were involved in guiding regimental units into their rear area locations, but I don't recall any details. In the reserve area, Bearcat I&R was involved in two kinds of activities: training and rear area patrols. The new colonel (the old one had been relieved soon after the Triangle Hill fiasco) had decided to make us into a regimental police force. The primary offenders were Korean prostitutes, although bootleggers ran a close second. What I remember most about the training was the effort by the regimental communication officer to help us resurrect radios out of that pile of stuff we had been storing and to learn how to use them as the book specified for an I&R platoon.

We did get a commendation from the colonel for “maintaining order in the regimental area” during the weeks we were in reserve, but all of our training really went for naught because the platoon was caught stealing the regimental beer ration and most of the men were shipped out to line companies as punishment. When the regiment went back up on the line the day after

Christmas, the I&R Platoon guided the units into their new locations, but all but two of them (my driver and my radio operator) were new men without any specific training for I&R business.

The new regimental area was off to the west of the position we had been in just prior to being called into reserve. The map below shows the west end of that sector. I don't recall the specific track of the MLR in that region, but I have identified the general area in which Bearcat I&R occupied regimental OPs while we were in that sector. I had thought there were just four of them, but I mentioned in one letter home that I had 14 men stationed on OPs, so there may have been more than four because I wouldn't have had more than three men on each. I do recall the location of one of them, because that is where I was during Operation Smack on January 25, 1953.



As I described it in *Friendly Fire*, Operation Smack was a big show for the big brass. (Note: In the book, I placed the date of the operation later in the war, but my recollections of the details are quite accurate.) Spud Hill, an elevation at the south end of a Chinese-held complex called T-Bone, was an ideal location for such an operation. It was small, somewhat isolated from other enemy positions and it was observable from locations all along our MLR. After all, if they were going to have a big show, they needed plenty of front row seats for the big brass. And, who currently occupied those front-row seats? Bearcat I&R. In addition, with eleven jeeps and drivers at our disposal, we were the ideal choice to transport the UN brass to the festivities. So the part to be played by my platoon in the big show was to pick up general officers and deliver them to the front, where they would be welcomed by the I&R occupants of the regimental OPs.

My own part in the festivities was similar, but with an officer of considerably lower rank, and who had a very different interest in the battle. I had to escort an Air Force public relations officer and his photographer to the OP shown on the map above and to answer any questions he might have about what was going on on the ground. They were there to take motion pictures of Air Force jets as they made bombing runs on the objective before the assault. Details of this

costly— and failed—attack can be found in *Friendly Fire*, but I will add here some casualty figures I did not have when the book was written. Of the two companies committed to the action, five men were killed and 52 wounded, ten of them seriously enough to require evacuation to the States.

Ever since the regiment was returned to the fighting the day after Christmas, I had been burdened with increasingly time-consuming extra duties at regimental headquarters, and often I had been required to send my men out on assignments under the command of my platoon sergeant. None of those were combat assignments (among other things, we were still responsible for chasing down prostitutes), but I didn't like it and I finally requested a transfer. So, about two weeks after Operation Smack, I received orders transferring me to command of the regimental Counterfire Platoon. Thus ended my five months as commander of Bearcat I&R. It was a unique experience—and I expect, if you could poll the dozens of other I&R commanders during the war, you would find their testimonies just as unique...and just as confirming of the proposition that this war was the beginning of the end for the I&R Platoon,

Richard E. Ecker, Ph.D.
Downers Grove, IL