The Fugitive

As I related in my book Friendly Fire, the men in the regimental Intelligence and Reconnaissance (I&R) Platoon I was given as my first combat command in Korea had been assembled by my predecessor on the basis of qualities that served them well in combat but not necessarily in more peaceful circumstances. They tended to have little patience with the military disciplines required of them when they were away from the fighting and when they were confined to the more structured environments of life in the rear area. So, as I pointed out in the book, when our division was ordered back into corps reserve (a long way from the fighting), the colonel's assignment of I&R as the regimental police force was viewed by many at regimental headquarters as an incongruity of immense proportions. However, with eleven jeeps, I&R was the most mobile unit in the regiment. And, patrolling was a major part of our combat mission, so I'm sure the colonel considered us to be uniquely equipped to carry out the task assigned to us—"to maintain order in the regimental area."

And, in fact, we were later credited with doing just that in a letter of commendation from the colonel. But that letter was received only shortly before my whole platoon was disbanded—with all but two of my men sent to serve in front-line units—because they had been caught stealing the Headquarters Company beer ration. Yet, even with a platoon full of replacements, we still retained the assignment as the regimental peace officers. So, when I was requested one day somewhat later to report to the regimental intelligence officer—who was our immediate tactical superior—it turned out that I was being requested in my capacity as his number one peace officer.

It seems that a GI that had been confined awaiting trial for possession and use of heroin had escaped his confinement and had disappeared. The major wanted the malefactor apprehended without delay and returned for trial. I didn't have to ask whom he wanted me to send on this mission. Every one of my experienced NCOs had been shipped out. All that remained from my original platoon were my jeep driver and my radio operator. It was clear that I was going to be the bloodhound in this chase. So, he gave me the name, rank and description of the man and advised me that the escapee probably was headed for Chunchon. Having been deprived of the drug during his confinement, he was likely beginning to experience the pains of withdrawal. Chunchon was a nearby civilian city where he would most likely go to find the drugs he needed to overcome the withdrawal.

I quickly rounded up my jeep driver and another man from the platoon (probably one of my Korean soldiers), told them to arm themselves and pick me up at my quarters without delay. In a few minutes we were on the road to Chunchon in my open jeep. As I look back on it now, there is no way I had any business going on this mission. It was a job for the MPs—and they were no farther than a telephone call away. In fact, there was a company of MPs at division headquarters just down the road. They were trained for this kind of work…I wasn't. Unquestionably, the major didn't want any outsiders involved in this affair. Our regiment had let him escape and our regiment was going to find him…quietly and quickly.

However, I don't recall that any of this occurred to me at the time. I was given a job to do and I set out to do it. I have no idea how I proposed to find a single GI in a city of several tens of thousands of civilians…plus military men from at least a dozen different countries. Chunchon was the location of the rear (administrative) headquarters of our division and it was the supply hub for all military activities in the central sector of the country. If he were a clear thinking fellow, our fugitive could have found a hole to hide in where we never could have located him.

But, our man was an addict in withdrawal and his track would probably be a lot easier to follow. And, as it turned out, we didn't have a very long track to follow.

As we drove into the northern outskirts of Chunchon, I noticed a GI standing on the opposite side of the road, attempting to hitch a ride to the north. He fit the description of our fugitive, so I had the driver turn around and approach him slowly from the south. He did not seem overly concerned about our approach, even when two of us dismounted and confronted him with weapons at the ready. He was apparently unarmed and, at least at the moment, at total peace with the world and everyone in it. I had him assume a vulnerable position and we searched him for weapons and I checked his dog tags to assure his identification. We had our man. He had clearly found a source for the heroin he needed, had dosed himself with a generous quantity, was feeling no pain and was currently content with his lot in life. Every bloodhound should have such an easy chase.

The return trip to the regimental command post was also uneventful. Our prisoner hardly stirred in the back of the jeep, although we kept a close eye on him in case he made any effort to resist capture. He didn't and he calmly followed our directions as we led him into the tent housing the regimental intelligence team, where we were greeted with surprise and relief. I reported to the major with a brief account of our activities and when I had finished he asked, "Did you find anything on him when you searched him, lieutenant?"

"No, sir. He was clean."

He gave me a wry smile and said, "Perhaps we should look a little harder."

At the time, I was a 22-year-old kid from rural Iowa. For me, dope addicts were creatures from fiction. Even during almost two years in the stateside Army, I had bee involved in training—either as a trainee or as an instructor—and I had been pretty well insulated from many of the realities of the real world of military life. During my tour in Korea so far, I had spent most of my time "on the hill" (the combat zone). So, this sudden introduction to another side of life in the military was becoming, for me, an education that had been seriously neglected.

I don't recall now how much of a "strip search" I did at the major's urging, but I do recall clearly what happened when I "unbloused" his fatigue trousers from his boots. To understand that term, you need to know how most GIs connected their trousers to their boots. The photo on the right shows the typical configuration at the time. Most of us fixed heavy rubber bands around the top of the boots and tucked the cuffs of our trousers under these restraints. We called this "blousing." Then, to make sure that the trousers hung neatly around the top of the boots, we inserted weights into the bloused trousers. I used a chain with a hook on one end to make a neat circle around each of my boot tops.

When I pulled the first of the prisoner's trouser legs from under its restraint, out popped a small, multi-folded piece of paper containing bit of white powder. The other trouser leg produced a similar object. The rest of my search produced nothing else and the major, now satisfied that my mission was completed, dismissed me with thanks.

As is most often the case, I never learned what happened to my fugitive after I returned him to the authorities. What was in the packages I recovered? I assume it was heroin, but I was never told.