26 Days in the Schizophrenic Life of Bearcat I&R

On October 17, 1952, two battalions of the 31st Infantry Regiment (code name Bearcat) were moved up to relieve the 17th Infantry Regiment from its front-line positions just north of the once prominent—now leveled— North Korean city of Chorwon. The move was being made so that the 17th could be committed in a battle that was raging ten miles to the East. For the past three days, the 31st had been pummeled in that battle in an attempt to remove the Chinese from a prominent central Korean elevation called Triangle Hill. Casualties for the regiment in that operation had been staggering, worse by far than for any similar period in its two years of combat in the war: 125 killed in action, 457 wounded in action and 33 missing, never found and declared dead. These numbers are all the more staggering when you consider that, for the first time in history, every U. S. combatant was wearing an armored vest. And, one battalion of the 31st was still sustaining casualties on Triangle Hill as the rest of the regiment moved into this new assignment.

With the regiment decimated from the battle, with no time to secure replacements and a hot spot on the MLR (Main Line of Resistance) to defend, I wasn't at all surprised to learn that my platoon, Bearcat I&R, the regiment's Intelligence and Reconnaissance platoon, was being attached to a front-line infantry company to help with the defense. It had happened twice before. In fact, in the month and a half since I had taken command of the platoon, we had spent far more of our time as front-line riflemen than as reconnaissance specialists. This time, our stay on the line would continue for 26 days. Here are some recollections from those days that did not get included in my book, *Friendly Fire*.

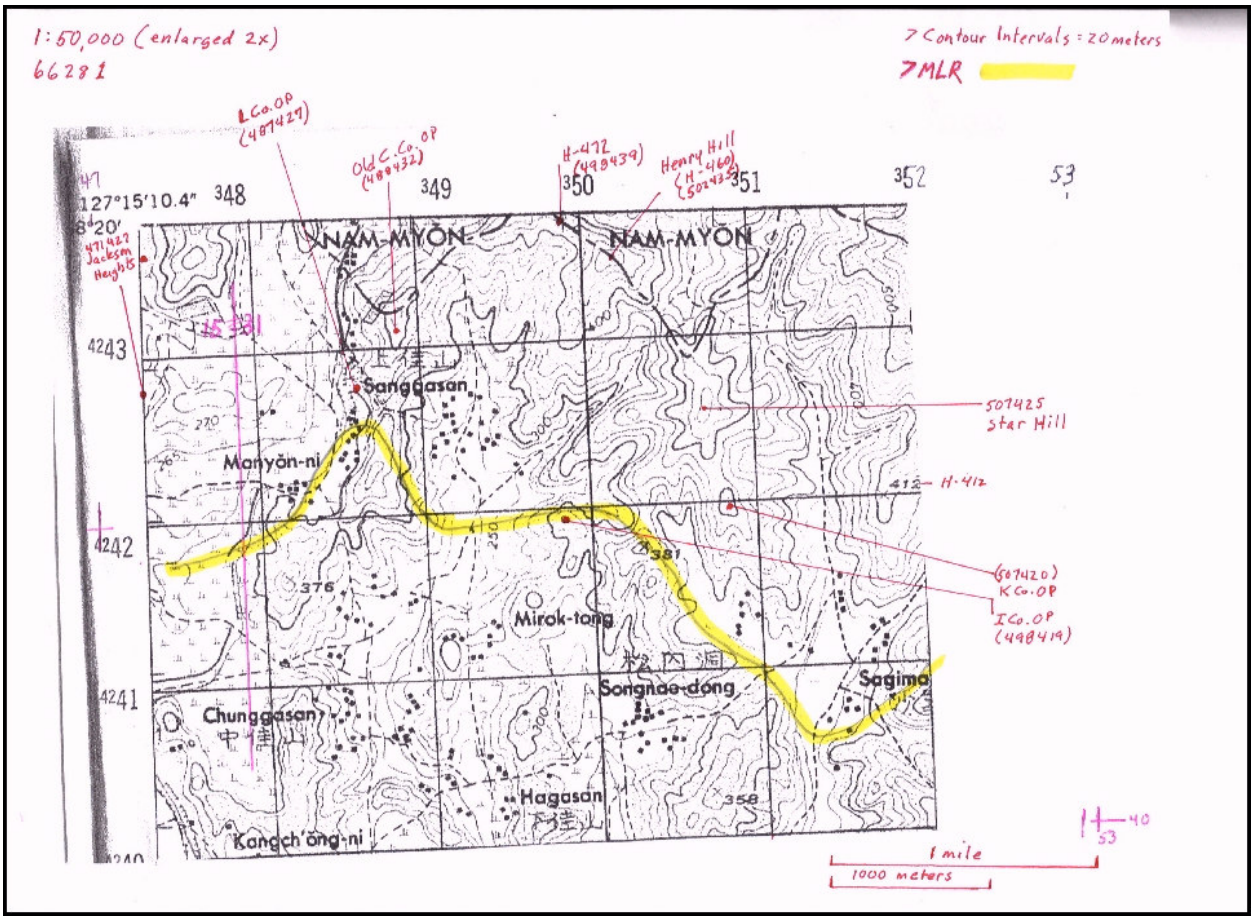
These recollections begin on a dirt road in a valley a mile or two south of the MLR. We had been dropped off there by transport trucks. I don't know why I should have been, but I was surprised to find that we had to walk to get to our new assignment. We were the most mobile outfit in the regiment: 11 jeeps for 33 men. We never walked. This time, however, the tactical situation obviously called for our arrival with much less fanfare. So, we walked—up the valley to the north, into the high ground ahead, where the men of the 17th Infantry waited to be relieved.

We were not going to be contributing much manpower to the defense of the MLR. My platoon was always under strength. But now, the grand poobahs at regiment had decided to hold back a number of my men as drivers, so that some of our jeeps could continue in service as regimental taxis. I don't think I had much more than a couple dozen men in the platoon at that time, including six KATUSAs (attached Korean soldiers). So, our contribution to the Item-Company perimeter was certainly fewer than 20 American soldiers. Item Company had taken a big hit on Triangle Hill and was well under strength itself, so we were going to be a thin line of defense up on Hill 381.

The one thing we found in our favor as we took over our assigned positions from the men of the 17th that day was the kinds of bunkers we were to occupy. We were told that they had been constructed earlier by the Ethiopians (a battalion attached to the 32nd Infantry, when they had occupied these positions a few months earlier.) Those bunkers were phenomenal. We were on that hill for 26 days, took thousands of rounds of enemy mortar and artillery fire and I had only two men wounded badly enough to be evacuated—and both of them were back to duty in a short time.

Hill 381 sat on the MLR about six to seven miles northeast of Chorwon. The topographic map on the following page shows the area that included our position as we moved in. Significant

features in the sector had been identified on this map in red pencil by the people at regimental operations (S3). The MLR is identified on the map by the line highlighted in yellow. Men of the Third Battalion of the 31st Infantry (with the I&R Platoon attached to Item Company) occupied



bunkers along that line. The enemy held the territory to the north—with the exception of the hill to the east of Hill 381, which is identified by the S3 people as K Co OP (outpost). My platoon held positions along the MLR directly across the valley from the outpost.

As I mentioned earlier in praising the Ethiopians' bunker-building efforts, my platoon was often hit by intense mortar and artillery fire. A look at the map will tell you why. We were the closest front-line position to the outpost—roughly where you find the number "8" in the "381,"the number that identifies the elevation of the hill (in meters). Because the outpost was located in close proximity to Star Hill, it was regularly being assaulted by the enemy—mostly at night. We were in excellent position to offer supporting fire when the outpost was under attack. So, when the enemy attacked, it first made sure my platoon was discouraged from offering defensive fire for the outpost. They would saturate our position with mortar and artillery fire. The first time it happened, I was in my CP (command post) bunker, which was located near the crest of the hill, above where the front-line bunkers of my men were spread out along the trench below. The incoming was so intense, I couldn't get out of my bunker and make it to the access trench (about fifteen or twenty feet) without being blown to bits. After about twenty minutes, the risk from enemy fire diminished from suicidal to merely hazardous and I was able to make a mad dash to the access trench. Even in the trench, I had to stay low because of highly concentrated small-arms fire.

In fact, there was little likelihood that this barrage was going to be followed by a ground attack on our position. A look at the map will show you why. Every one of those contour lines represents about 65 feet of elevation. It was a steep and torturous climb to our trench. Yet I couldn't stay in my CP when the possibility of attack existed, as remote as it was. And, thereafter, whenever an attack on the outpost was expected, I would spend the night in one of the bunkers on the line.

However, those attacks were not frequent and, as I pointed out in "Friendly Fire," most of our time—particularly in daylight hours—we were fighting boredom more than the Chinese. Necessarily, most of that time was spent in my bunker. We were living, after all, only about half a mile from a lot of people whose primary goal in life was to do us in. We didn't get a lot of incoming during the day, but you could never tell when a random round of mortar or artillery might drop in. So I didn't stray out much if it wasn't necessary. We did get a direct hit on the CP bunker once during the day, but it did little damage.

Now, I'd like to fill in some details on what life was like on Hill 381 during our stay there. First, from "Friendly Fire" a description of the bunker that was my home, and a comparison to another front-line bunker I had occupied a couple of months earlier:

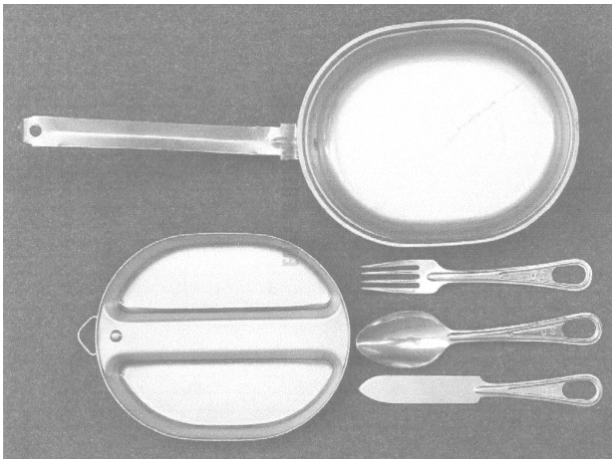
> *"The CP bunker I had occupied over at Easy Company had been built somewhat into the side of the hill, but it was mostly an above-ground structure. It was fairly sturdy, with its log and sandbag walls and roof, but it would never have endured a direct hit from an enemy 120-mm mortar or 122-mm howitzer.*
>
> *"My new CP bunker, on the other hand, was almost more like a cave than a bunker. It was built totally below ground level. The roof was a layer of steel pickets (fenceposts) over which had been packed more than two feet of logs, rocks and dirt. The entrance was a narrow tunnel with a right-angle turn into the bunker, so that the interior was protected from rounds exploding outside the entrance. Its disadvantages were that it was very small and constantly dark without some kind of artificial light. However, those disadvantages were trivial, given the location of our position and the tactical situation in which we had been placed."*

As the platoon commander, I needed my command post to be centrally located in my sector so that I could access either flank of my platoon as quickly as possible. In my sector, that was a bit of a problem. The two flanks were separated by a rocky cliff. The right flank was a short trench connecting about three bunkers. To the left of the last bunker, the terrain was solid rock for the next 50 to 75 feet—past the rocky cliff. A narrow path had been cut in the cliff, but was in full enemy observation, and not the sort of route you would choose if it could be avoided. To get to my left flank bunkers, I had to follow an access trench that opened near the entrance to my bunker and went over the crest of the hill.

This was far from an ideal situation, but it did have its advantages. For one thing, the company mess bunker was in our platoon sector, in a side trench adjacent to our right flank bunker. By this time, I had become very familiar with how front-line troops in Korea were fed their daily meals. We were fed two hot meals every day "on the hill." That mess bunker in my platoon sector housed everything needed to cook and serve a freshly cooked meal every morning and every evening. Every front-line company in Korea was similarly outfitted to prepare daily meals for some 200 men. When you think about it, that was pretty amazing, particularly when

you consider that breakfast was sometime prepared on a morning following a bombardment of a couple thousand rounds on the company position the night before.

Front-line GIs didn't have to serve on KP (kitchen police) so the cooks' helpers were Korean civilians from the Korean Service Corps (KSC). Early every morning, the KSCs began to set up the chow line, which consisted of a series food containers from the kitchen bunker, an empty garbage can for waste and a number of clean metal garbage cans full of clean water into each of which had been placed a gasoline-fired immersion heater. The serving line was set up on a level area on the side of the hill below my CP—and out of view of the enemy on Star Hill. In fact, this setup was not all that different from what we had experienced being fed during maneuvers when we were in training in The States. The big difference was an enemy half a mile away that could lob mortar rounds into our chow like any time they liked. Yet, in 26 days "on the hill," I don't recall any incoming while we were serving chow. I expect that there were at least a couple of reasons for that. First, they probably didn't have that much ammunition to spend on what would be essentially a harassment mission with a minimum possibility of significant casualties. And second, they would invite massive counterfire as our side always had plenty of ammunition. In addition, they were probably aware that we never allowed more than a few well-spaced men in the chow line at any one time.



When the kitchen crew was ready to serve, the squads were called up from their bunkers to get their chow. Each man would arrive with his mess kit assembled so it could be easily sanitized before it was used. The elements of the kit are shown here. All of the aluminum elements—including the canteen cup (not shown)—were assembled over the handle on the upper tray so they could be dipped into the boiling water before—and after—they were used.

At the time, I don't recall thinking anything about how great a challenge it was to feed all of the hundreds of front-line companies two hot meals a day every day. Depending on the terrain, each company had to have its kitchen bunker close enough to the front-line positions to be able to set up its chow line conveniently—which meant that it was always a convenient target for enemy mortars and artillery. Our kitchen on Hill 381 was as proximate to the troops as possible. In fact, I had to walk right past the entrance to it whenever I inspected my right-flank bunker. Yet, as I mentioned, I don't recall having our meals interrupted very often by enemy activity. Following is an excerpt from Friendly Fire describing our earlier experience with front-line chow:

> *…Although complaints were frequent, loud and usually profane, the chow was a lot better than we had the right to expect, particularly considering the conditions under which it had to be prepared.*
>
> *Of course fresh meat was an exceptional treat and most fresh fruits and vegetables were virtually nonexistent. Powdered eggs and Spam were staples, as was that old army favorite, S.O.S., an abbreviation the GIs used to describe creamed chipped beef on toast. If you have had experience with that delightful*

dish, you know what the initials mean. If you haven't, you're better off not knowing.

However, notwithstanding their complaints about the breakfast and dinner menus, no GI would have traded the hot meals for a steady diet of C-rations. A carton of C-rations—a full day's supply of food for one man—contained nine cans; three main dishes, three cans of fruit and three cans filled with a variety of dry items intended to help make the meals a bit more tolerable, such as crackers, instant cocoa, instant coffee and candy.

Because we had only one C-ration meal each day, the contents of each of the cartons we were issued had to be divided among three men. Usually the job of distributing the rations was delegated to individual squad leaders. They did not welcome the task. The men had developed very distinct likes and dislikes for the C-ration main dishes. Spaghetti with meat sauce was the general favorite, with beans and franks a close second. Corned-beef hash was universally despised as the worst of the bunch. Chicken with noodles was considered tolerable if you had a way to heat it. Served cold, it bore a distinct resemblance to semi-solid library paste, so it usually ranked close to the hash.

With likes and dislikes so firmly entrenched, the job of distributing the daily C-rations was a delicate undertaking. The squad leaders earned their stripes every noon, often having to break up arguments and always needing to protect the interests of the Korean soldiers in the squad.

I found it interesting that the Korean soldiers, for whom things like canned spaghetti and corned beef had been unimaginable two years earlier, had totally adopted the GI rating system for C-ration main dishes. Like the GIs, they loved the spaghetti and hated the corned-beef hash. Their problem was that they couldn't read English. Frequently, one of the Koreans would be told by a playful GI that he had been issued a high-rated main dish, only to discover when he opened it that he was facing a meal of cold hash. The mutterings that could be heard from a Korean making that discovery were subdued and unintelligible, but unquestionably profane.

The one thing I need to add to the C-ration story is a description of the can opener. It was a remarkable invention. Here is a photo I found on line illustrating the opener as it was during the Korean War. As I recall, one of these was included in every C-ration container, so they were always plentiful. Early in my service "on the hill," I attached one of them to my dog-tag chain and it was with me for the rest of my days in Korea, even though I didn't have to eat C-rations so often after this last front-line assignment. It was a handy little tool that could be used as a screwdriver as well as a can opener.

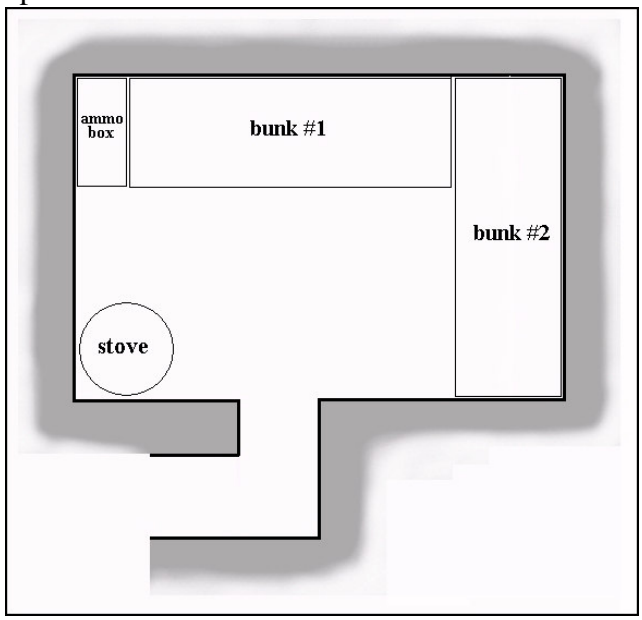
Of course, the other essential facility that had to be available to the front-one troops was a latrine. When you live at the crest of a rocky hill, often the only convenient place for a latrine is on the hill. That's where ours was—on a mostly level area, part way down the back of the hill. Our latrine shared that level area with our 60mm mortar emplacement—just far enough separated to avoid complaints from the mortarmen. However, it was not so far separated that you would like to be occupying the six-holer when the enemy was attempting to target our mortars. It did little to guard against either the enemy or the elements. Regrettably, that's where I found myself one day after we had done some harassment fire on the enemy out on Star Hill and received some counterfire. I wrote about that episode in *Friendly Fire*.

Of course, we also had to have urinals available at convenient locations around the company area. These were simply large metal tubes (probably shipping containers from some kind of ammunition) buried in the ground over a bed of gravel. The tube—known to the GIs as a "piss tube"—had a screen over the opening and was regularly treated with generous quantities of quick lime to mask the smell.

Although incoming during the day was infrequent, the company area was not the sort of place you would choose to spend your leisure time if you didn't have to. So I spent the majority of my time in the CP bunker. I had a telephone circuit connecting all of the bunkers in my platoon so, even when I was in my CP, I had immediate contact with my men. These phones were sound powered, so they didn't require batteries and the caller attracted attention by whistling and calling the name of the person being contacted. Obviously with a dozen bunkers on a network, casual conversation was discouraged.

In many respects the guys down in the trenches had more freedom of movement than I did in my CP. I've described a typical front-line bunker in *Friendly Fire*, so I'll just give highlights here. Those bunkers opened into the trench and were covered with logs and sandbags all across the trench to provide a "fighting bunker" on the far side. The occupants could move more freely in that area and remain out of harms way—barring a direct hit in the trench next to the bunker. My CP was basically a hole in the ground with a narrow, right-angle entrance that blocked shrapnel from explosions outside the bunker—but it also prohibited any significant light from being admitted. So we used a lot of candles as we spent our days in that bunker…and a flashlight was an absolutely essential piece of equipment.

Here is a floor plan of my CP bunker as I remember it. The dimensions were roughly six by nine feet and the modest furnishings were all created on site. The bunks were made of metal fenceposts and commo (communication) wire, all of which were abundant in the combat zone. Fence posts (used mostly for laying barbed-wire barricades) came in two lengths—two feet and six feet. To make a bunk, we drove four of the two-foot posts into the ground at the corners of the bunk and then created a two by six-foot frame using other posts wired to the uprights. The bed was created by weaving commo wire across the frame. An air mattress and sleeping bag completed the bunk.



The wooden ammo box served as a bedside table for telephone and incidentals. Stoves for heating front-line bunkers were as varied as the GIs that designed them. I don't remember much at all about ours. It was probably built by our predecessors. I also don't recall how much we may have used it—probably not much. We were there from the middle of October to the middle of November and, being that far underground, we were pretty well insulated from the North Korean weather. Besides, those things were hazardous. They were fueled by gasoline and I'm sure that the feed mechanisms were primitive at best. We heard of bunker fires, but we never had one in any of the outfits we shared " the hill" with.

Considering that we were roomies in a six by nine underground closet for 26 days, I have little recollection of my platoon sergeant's personal history. I did write home that we played cribbage to help escape total boredom, but apparently we didn't share a lot of personal stuff. Of course, I was an officer and he an enlisted man, but in combat that distinction tended to blur except when we were actually involved in the fighting. And, with a couple of exceptions, I never had much interaction with members of the company to which we were attached. I've written about those exceptions in *Friendly Fire*; i.e., the first sergeant and the weapons platoon leader. I do recall being assigned to take out a reconnaissance patrol one time. Otherwise, we were pretty much left alone by our host company. As I look back on it, there was considerably more boredom than excitement out on Hill 381 most of those days.

Of course, living in a hole in the ground day after day can quickly increase your body odor to intolerable levels, so some remedial action is required. Showers were not an option in our case, so we learned early how to take a bath in a quart of water using our steel helmets as basins. I described that process in some detail in *Friendly Fire*. After a while, it became a tolerable and, given the close quarters, a routine necessity.

Before I end this narrative, I need to introduce you to the other occupants of the bunker we called home—rats. When you live in underground log cabins, you are going to have rats as roommates. I'm sure that every GI who has been "on the hill" has a story about rats in his bunker. Mostly, you never know they are there. You just see the evidence. I remember once I left a piece of C-ration candy on the ammo-box table at the head of my bed. The next morning it was gone—nothing left but the cellophane wrapper, the only evidence left by the visitor. Then one day a bit later, I saw the bugger stick his head out between the logs in the wall behind the stove. At the time, I was carrying a .45 cal. pistol as my weapon of choice—always with a round in the chamber and the hammer uncocked. That way, all I had to do was cock the hammer and fire. It was going to be loud in that confined space, but it would be worth it to evict the intruder. Unfortunately, by the time I got the weapon out of my holster and the hammer back, the rat disappeared. So now I had to uncock the hammer before I could holster the pistol again. This was rather a ticklish proposition, which required holding on to the hammer, pulling the trigger and slowly moving the hammer forward into a safe position. If the hammer slipped in the process, the weapon would fire. In this instance, that's what happened. Fortunately, my foot was out of the way—barely—so all I suffered was ringing in my ears.

After 26 days, my platoon was relieved from the assignment to the front lines and moved back to regimental headquarters, which had been our intended location from day one. Here is how I described my reaction in a letter home:

> *I'd almost forgotten what it's like to live in regimental headquarters. Comfortable quarters with heat, electric lights, plenty of room, hot water, a wash basin instead of a steel helmet, and houseboys to do everything but tuck you*

in…officer's mess with good chow, all you want, a bar and waiters—not to mention plates, cups, table cloths etc…Movies every night with the latest run pictures—not bad.

Quite a change from—a little 4 x 6 bunker complete with rats of all sizes, a home-made tin can stove that gave off more smoke than heat, C-rations, GI mess gear and more Chink artillery than I ever knew existed……

This was the last assignment of front-line duty for Bearcat I&R. Soon after our return to regiment, the whole division was moved back into Corps Reserve, where we were back far enough that we could barely hear the rumblings of the combat still going on up front. When the division finally moved back into the combat zone late in December, my platoon resumed its intended duties as intelligence and reconnaissance specialists.

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