

Bifflehead

I served as an officer in the infantry for two years on active duty and five years in the active reserve. That service ended in 1958 and, if I now remember the names of any of the men that served under me during those seven years, it is usually because of some memorable incident involving them that makes a story worth telling. So it is with Wallace, a hillbilly from Kentucky known affectionately by his platoon mates as “Bifflehead.” However, to tell his story, I need to provide some background information.

My first three months in the Korean War involved three different assignments in which my platoon of reconnaissance specialists were attached for front-line duty with rifle companies that were shorthanded because of combat losses. The reason we were available for those front-line assignments was that the original mission of our platoon did not fit into the tactical situation in Korea at that time. Ours was a highly mobile outfit with eleven jeeps, organized to support a regiment on the move. However, in the third year of that war, nobody moved—on either side of the battle line. Our side occupied a trench that meandered across the country, from coast to coast. The enemy, a mile or so to the north, occupied a line of similar fortifications there. Following is how I remembered my introduction to our trench—in a different sector of the battle line—a couple of months earlier (see www.ocomm.net/fire):

The entry trench opened into another trench, about six feet deep and perhaps two and a half feet wide. It extended the full length of the ridge and up over the hills on both sides of it. I could see bunkers built into the trench at regular intervals. Like the CP bunker we had just left, they were constructed of logs, sandbags and dirt.

Although they varied slightly in detail, these front-line bunkers all followed the same general design. For the typical three-man bunker, the rear wall of the trench was dug out to form a chamber large enough for two bunks along the sides and a little living space in between. The front wall of the trench was dug out to the same width as the living chamber, just large enough for two men to sit or stand and remain out of the way of traffic along the trench. A wall of logs and sandbags was built forward of this chamber. The wall had a single aperture, large enough for two men to aim through with their rifles, but small enough to provide a difficult target.

The walls of the living chamber were built up with logs until they were the same height as the forward wall. Then the whole structure was covered with logs and reinforced with sandbags. Although the common roof made it a single structure, the GIs identified the two sections by separate names. The area forward of the trench, with its narrow aperture facing the enemy, was called the “fighting bunker.” The area to the rear was called the “sleeping bunker.” The reason there were only two bunks in a three-man sleeping bunker was that at least one man from the team was expected to be on guard in the fighting bunker at all times.

In the current situation—our third attached status assignment—we were situated on a hill just north of the once-prominent, now leveled, North Korean city of Chorwon. Across the valley to the north, our hill faced a principal enemy fortification we called “Star Hill.” The trench in our platoon sector was perhaps 150 feet above the valley floor and, for most of that sector, the hill was very steep, making an enemy assault very difficult. However, our right-flank bunker stood at the top of a draw that followed a much gentler slope into the valley. If we were going to have any enemy incursion into our sector, it would most likely be coming up that draw. Thus, it was imperative that I do whatever I could to reinforce the defense of that bunker.

As it turned out, we had just the weapon to serve that purpose. We possessed a .50 caliber machine gun—at least one. I don't recall how many, because we were never before in a situation that called for us to use them. They were for mounting on some of our jeeps and, for now, they remained in storage back at regimental headquarters. This was not the kind of weapon you would find in a front-line rifle company. Typically the .30 caliber light machine gun was the highest caliber automatic weapon available for their use. However, our host company was not offering any of theirs for us to use. So, because our current situation gave us a critical need for some extra firepower, we retrieved a .50 caliber from storage, along with a tripod for setting it up on the ground.

Wallace was the senior member of the three-man team that occupied the bunker in which the weapon would be placed. So, when we delivered the weapon I discussed with him how I wanted it set up and asked, "Do you know how to set the headspace and timing on that machine gun?"

"Oh, yes sir," he responded enthusiastically.

"Good. Put it in the bunker where we discussed and set the headspace and timing. Then test fire it and let me know when it is ready for action."

"Yes, sir."

The primary difference between the .50 caliber machine gun and its lower caliber relative is the need to have correct headspace and timing before the weapon can be fired. These settings are required primarily because of the much larger size of the individual cartridge. They assure that the round is properly seated in the chamber before the firing pin strikes the cap and that the firing takes place exactly when the round is seated. Improper settings can result in a cartridge casing being stuck in the chamber or, worse, a premature firing before the round is chambered.

It might be argued that I was tempting fate to give such a responsible assignment to a man his peers called "Bifflehead," but he was the senior man and he accepted the assignment eagerly. Irrespective of his nickname, when he told me he could do it I had no reason—and no business—micromanaging the task. However, about half an hour later, the sound-powered telephone in my Command Post (CP) bunker screeched with a loud whistle and the voice at the other end shouted, "Lieutenant! Wallace is wounded! Call the medics!"

I told my platoon sergeant to alert the medics and headed down the hill to Wallace's bunker. What I found was a machine gun with its cover blown off and Wallace trying to extricate himself from under it, clearly in some pain. His wounds were not severe but he was going to require some medical attention. He had obviously attempted to test fire the weapon with the timing set wrong. A round had fired prematurely and shattered the cartridge casing into fragments of brass, a number of which had found targets in Wallace's thighs. He was transported to the battalion aid station, where they removed the shrapnel, patched him up and sent him back to duty.

Meanwhile, I found an NCO who was more of a weapons specialist, could repair the damage to the machine gun and make the proper settings to put it into firing condition. Both the weapon and its operator were back on the job before the sun went down—and Wallace had provided me ample reason to remember him well into my dotage.

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