

Background: Carl Hulsman wrote a detailed diary of his military service so that his son would better understand what his father's life was like in the Army. Few soldiers have recorded such extensive details of their experiences, reactions and observations. His very personal record of one man's perspective on life with the Dragon provides details many of us may have forgotten, or never knew. While the record begins with his enlistment in the Army one week after his 17th birthday, well before he joined the 2nd Cml Mortar Bn, and continues after he left the Battalion in Korea, our unedited excerpts are only from the time he was with the Battalion, early 1949 to July 1951.

13 Oct 1950 - The Battalion received 300 Republic of Korea privates and 3 ROK officers. The privates, having just entered the ROK army with no training of any kind, were assigned 75 to Hq Co and 75 to each of the three mortar companies. I don't know how the three officers, who had just graduated from OCS, were assigned. This "experiment" did not work out. They could speak no English and we could speak no Korean. There are limitations on communication when one is restricted to showing by example, making gestures and other waving of the arms and hands, and loudly swearing in a language that isn't understood. Not their fault, but they knew nothing about being soldiers in general nor mortarmen in particular. Worst of all, they had never heard of field sanitation. After several weeks of trying, their survivors were transferred to the 1st ROK Division.

I was a member of a party of three officers and three sergeants that went by train, while the rest of the Battalion came north by road in its vehicles. At Taegu one officer and one sergeant got off the train to find a bivouac area the Battalion might use when it arrived. At Taejon another officer and sergeant got off for the same reason. That left the intelligence officer, the position now occupied by Capt Murrell, and me to get off at Seoul on 17 October to find a bivouac area. We found a suitable area near Nakpongni (the suffixes ni and ri on a place name mean village in Korean) at about 1230 hours on 18 October. The leading vehicles of our Battalion arrived at 1500 hours and the last stragglers, followed by the motor maintenance section, came in at about 0400 hours on the 19th. I spent the night of the 18th-19th at the Han River bridge watching for our vehicles and directing them to the bivouac area.

At night, between Taegu and Taejon, the train we were on was attacked by North Korean soldiers that had been bypassed by our forces as they rushed north to link up with the Inchon invasion force. The North Koreans apparently had nothing heavier than machine guns which, along with rifles, they used to pour fire into the train. We were helpless to do anything other than to lie on the floor of our car and hope that the slow moving locomotive would not be disabled. I felt certain that if the train stopped, it would be destroyed and all personnel on the train killed.

That was my first experience under fire. I don't know the extent of casualties on the train. When the Battalion arrived in Seoul, we learned that it too had been attacked as it came through that area. Sometime later I learned that the 65th Infantry Regiment had been detailed to clean up those North Koreans who, by then, being without any source of supply from their own army, had become guerrillas.

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26 Oct 1950 - Artillery and mortar fire all day. We were getting low on ammunition. It was confirmed that Chinese soldiers were in front of us in all directions. This was the first report of Chinese Communist Forces units (as opposed to individual Chinese "volunteers") against American units on line anywhere in Korea.

27 Oct 1950 - Artillery and mortar fire continued all day. In the morning, ammunition and gasoline were parachuted to us from ten C-119 "Flying Boxcars". Some of it fell to the Chinese. Kicker crews were from the 187th Airborne Infantry Regiment.

In the afternoon Co A moved off its map to Yongsongdong. Some explanation as to our maps might be helpful here. Our maps were of the scale 1:50,000, which means that a mile on the ground is about an inch and a quarter on the map. A single map sheet would represent an area 11.6 miles north and south and 13.7 miles east and west. Among my duties as intelligence sergeant was the responsibility to furnish each company with an adequate supply of the appropriate maps.

But back to Co A's need. I knew their coordinates as of when they had last radioed in, so, loading a supply of maps into my jeep, I took off alone in their direction to find them. Cresting a little hill, I saw a large throng of infantry down in the valley, perhaps five hundred yards ahead of me. I stopped the jeep and peered at them. I could see that they were not Americans, but I would not expect Americans since we were supporting ROK infantry. No American infantry was within our perimeter. But how could I tell friendly Asiatics from enemy Asiatics?

As I sat there, I saw that they were not paying any attention to me. They were either South Koreans or else very unobservant North Koreans or Chinese. Alone in a jeep with only a carbine, I felt wholly defenseless. The thought crossed my mind that perhaps the prudent thing would be to go back with the excuse that I had been blocked by enemy soldiers. But Co A needed those maps. They were helpless without maps. I eased forward and soon noticed that some of the men had pieces of yellow cloth pinned to their left shoulders. That meant they were 1st ROK Division. What a relief!

These men were probably of the 11th Regiment which was what Co A was supporting at the time. As I drove in among the men, many of them smiled and waved at me. I was nearly overcome with relief. One motioned to me to stop and asked if I would give some wounded a ride. Five men with various bandages climbed on. As I drove slowly along down the middle of the road with a file of troops on either side of me, I noticed that, while most men carried American M1 rifles, quite a few men had no weapons at all. Others had old swords, some had clubs and some had what looked to me to be farm pitchforks.

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3 Nov 1950 - Left Suudong 1400 hours, arrived Yonghungni 1530 hours. We left the 1st ROK Division and became part of Task Force Allen.

A word about fording rivers. The ignition system of an internal combustion engine can "short out" and "die" if it gets wet. Therefore, vehicles are limited in the depth of water through which they may be driven. I've seen tanks go through water that was up to the top of their track treads, which would be four feet or more of water. Trucks, weapons carriers and jeeps can make it through only progressively shallower water.

To drive a jeep through as much as two feet of water, we would slip the engine's fan belt off its pulleys so that the fan, not spinning, could not throw water back onto the engine thereby getting the spark plugs wet. We would take the flexible spout of a gasoline can, ram it into the end of the jeep's exhaust pipe, and bend the spout up so as to in effect extend the exhaust pipe up several inches, hopefully to keep its opening above the surface of the water. The driver must then drive steadily through the water but slowly enough so that he doesn't create too high a "wall" of water in front of his vehicle.

A river can have natural places which are shallow enough to drive vehicles through. After a rain even those places may become too deep. Sometimes a ford has to be built. This can be done by creating what is in effect a submerged dam by dumping loads of stones and gravel, materials often readily available at a river, in the proposed roadway through the water. This is done with heavy equipment: bulldozers, loaders and dump trucks. A ford can also be built manually by using sacks of stones and gravel to raise the bottom of the river.

I must digress. Korea, at least the parts I saw, was a very primitive country in 1950. The most complex piece of manufacturing equipment I ever saw there was a machine which reminded me of a sausage grinder. Rice straw was put into the machine through a flared or funnel-shaped opening in its top. A large hand crank was turned, and out came a rope made of twisted straw. That's it. Some thirty years later the Koreans were building automobiles that competed for sales with American cars in the United States. I don't understand.

Anyway, such rope was used in many ways, one of which was to make mats on which people slept. A mat, perhaps thirty by fifty inches, could be folded over and sewed to make a sack thirty by twenty-five inches. Filled with stones and gravel, that sack, along with a large number of others like it, could make a ford. Can you imagine the amount of very hard work that was done at the ford site? How much do you suppose a filled sack weighed? Could two men handle it?

A driver had to watch where successful vehicles ahead of him were going. If he fell off the ford, he was in deep water, no pun intended. Driving through water gets the vehicle's brakes wet which renders them inoperable until they are again dry. Our routine was, as soon as we were well out of the ford's traffic jam, to drive along with a foot on the brake pedal, thereby heating the brakes and drying them out.

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23 Nov 1950 - At Kang Jong. Thanksgiving Day dinner, turkey, dressing, gravy, cranberry sauce, the works. I don't know how the cooks did it. I ate while standing, with my messkit using the front fender of a weapons carrier as a table. We were on the southeast side of the Chongchon River where it flows from northeast to southwest. The river passes through a gorge there about fifty yards deep and three hundred yards wide at the top. We noticed some Chinese soldiers moving around on the top of the opposite bank, but we couldn't make out what they were doing.

Someone asked the colonel if he should pick off a couple with his rifle, but the colonel suggested that we enjoy our dinner while we could, saying that if we disturbed them, they might call in some heavy stuff on us. Someone else must have seen them too, because soon a flight of four F-80 Shooting Stars came and strafed, rocketed and napalmed them. The four planes set themselves up in a vertical circle like a Ferris wheel. Each time a plane came down, it unloaded on the Chinese. Some wag commented that this was the Korean version of dinner theater.

As part of General MacArthur's "Home by Christmas" campaign, the 2nd Division executed an all out attack led by a task force made up of the 9th Infantry Regiment, a company of tanks and our Co C. The attack progressed until the night of 25 November. Co C was surrounded from midnight til 0800 hours 26 November.

Enemy tactics were to fight at night by infiltrating UN positions and attacking on a bugle signal making plenty of noise. Very often there was more front line than we had soldiers to cover it. Gaps of hundreds of yards could exist between companies or even between platoons. Generally our riflemen would be on hilltops or along ridge lines.

Korea, being a hilly country in many places, had many little draws and valleys with streambeds. On dark nights, Chinese soldiers sometimes picked their way along these low places without being noticed by our men up on the heights. If the geography permitted it, the Chinese could pass through our lines and get to areas behind our lines where, since enemy soldiers were not expected there, security was not as alert. The Chinese were then in position to attack our line from both the front and the rear, or to cut off our route of supply or withdrawal.

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5 Feb 1951 - I went on a water run with George. Having drinking water available while one is living out in the snow presents a problem. Water in one's canteen freezes solid in December and thaws out in March, or something like that.

Each company had a 400 gallon water trailer to supply the men's drinking needs and the kitchen's cooking needs. Unfortunately the company was in four different places: the two platoons each in its own area, the FDC somewhere behind them and the kitchen, maintenance and supply people somewhere farther behind. Wherever the trailer was, three parts of the company had no access to it. That mattered in above-freezing weather when I can remember taking water out of a steam locomotive once and once dipping water very carefully out of a rice paddy so as not to stir up the muck under the water. You do know how rice paddies are fertilized, don't you? Halozone tablets can make some pretty awful water safe to drink.

But in below-freezing weather, even the water trailer, or at least its faucets, freezes. There is a fair-sized hatch on the trailer's top through which it is filled. It's pretty awkward, but it is possible to reach in through the hatch with a hand axe in order to chop through the top ice to get at the water. In very cold weather, though, the ice is solid throughout the trailer's tank. So in winter the trailer stays with the cooks who bring it into the kitchen tent, thereby keeping it from freezing. Of course when the kitchen moves, the tent must be packed up, and the trailer is again subject to freezing.

When the cooks bring meals up on line, the men drink as much coffee as they can.

So where do you get water to put in the water trailer? The Army's Corps of Engineers is charged with the responsibility to supply drinking water to the troops. In the field they set up "water points" along rivers. A water point is a small water purification plant. I don't even pretend to know the steps involved in the process of drawing water out of a river, filtering it, chemically treating it and holding it ready for issue to anyone who drives up with a water trailer. I don't know how they can tell that the water that they dispense is safe to drink, but I have faith in them.

Anyway, this seemed like it would be an easy day, so when the mess sergeant sent word up asking for someone to get the water trailer filled, I said George and I would do it. Since water points often have to move, and therefore you never know where they're going to be, they put up a lot of roadside signs giving directions to a water point as soon as they select a place to set up. We found a water point with no difficulty. I did have some difficulty with my stomach, however. Walking around their big, collapsible, canvas tank that reminded me of someone's backyard swimming pool, I got to the riverside where a large hose was pulling water out of the river. In the shallow river were two dead horses and six dead Chinese soldiers. I asked the GI overseeing the operation if he couldn't have found a nicer place to set up. His response was something like, "Oh, you mean those. I was here first. Don't worry, I'll be out of here before they get ripe." Everybody has his own war, I guess.