

DULCE ET DECORUM EST...

Panning along a pitted, bare and scarred Korean landscape, a surviving patch of greenery under our butts reminded us of what could have been in this beautiful country. The second platoon, resting between the shrubbery and on patches of grass awaited a briefing from Lt. Theiss, our platoon leader. John Hollier was muttering something in Cajun while rubbing my scalp. Wayne told him to stop it; it was his turn. Lt. Theiss interrupted the nonsense with an announcement.

"We have a company sized patrol in two days. Before we leave, test fire your weapons. Pick up your bandoliers and grenades from Massey. Any questions?"

"Where are we going?"

"To an area we have been looking at since we moved up here. We're going to move along the ridgeline on the other side of the Imjin, directly opposite our positions and onward to Hill 117."

Charley interrupted,

"I didn't know the Gooks are there."

"There doesn't appear to be much activity in the area. But battalion has info that a platoon of Chinese moved up a few days ago."

"Why do we need a company just to see if a platoon moved up?"

"Because battalion said so, that's why."

The usual bitching was followed by speculation whether C rations or a hot meal was on the menu for supper. It was a hot meal. Ever since Sid insisted that the cooks move closer to the MLR, our C ration can openers were in semi-retirement.

Darkness was approaching. It was Wayne's turn to stand guard. I began to drowse inside our bunker to the muffled bursts of artillery. Rarely did I nap the allotted two hours. Tugging on my shorts which crawled into the crevice of my rear, I stepped out, stretched, scratched then joined Wayne.

"Anything happening?"

"There's nothing happening here and there's nothing happening in Frackville. When I return, it'll be as if I never left. Shit, I'm going to make a career of the army. I'll have three meals a day and a bed. Three hots and a flop as Charley says."

"Yeah, now we have frequent three hots and a thin fart sac as a flop," I replied.. "But wait until we return from the company patrol. In two days, you'll change your mind."

Two days followed. Two days of waiting. Waiting for food. Waiting for mail. Waiting to cross the river.

The date was August 8, 1952. Fifty years later, the events of that night still gnaw at the men who survived the patrol.

The platoon was to move along the western heights of the Imjin River. In reviewing the operation at battalion headquarters, Lt. Sidney, our company commander requested artillery fire to soften Hill 117. Battalion disapproved. It would compromise the secrecy of the operation, they said. But, in deference to his caution, they agreed upon artillery concentrations once contact was made with the enemy.

At dusk, we gathered on the reverse slope at our armorer Massey's supply bunker. He distributed bandoliers, grenades and canisters for the machine gun teams.

In a grove near the Imjin River, dense with trees, Lt. Sidney reviewed the order of attack.

"Any questions?"

"How far are we going?"

"Until we make contact."

The chaplain was always there to see us off. I fell to my knees along with the platoon as the 23 Psalm tried to penetrate the barrier that was quickly building within me.

"How many times have we gone through this? How many times did I glance at my buddies and wonder which of them will be on the chow line with me tomorrow? Of course, I was going to be there."

It was the usual smoldering, humid, Korean summer evening. With a lid formed by the canopy of the trees, the humidity just sat there mingling with the odor of decaying vegetation to form a hot and putrid gas. Wrapped in those damned plastic, laminated, olive drab armored vests, our torsos resembled the grainy shell of a horseshoe crab. They promised that sweat will flow but not evaporate. My clammy discomfort made me wish I could, like a crab, molt the vest and free my ribs from its grip.

I was the runner for this operation; that is, to be the contact between our point man, Charley Kauneckis and our platoon leader, Lt. Theiss.

We gathered at the base of the Imjin near the metal stake which anchored a thick, braided rope spanning the river. The little jon boats lay scattered along the shoreline like empty sardine cans littering my backyard in The Bronx. Four men in a boat. Moonglow on the river reflected off the plastic shells of our armored vests bringing them sharply into view and leaving the rest of our torsos and darkened faces in the background. The rope was grasped by Hollier. Hand over hand he started to pull us across. Wayne, behind me, began singing, "I'd like to get you on a slow boat to China..." Whitefeather told him to shut up.

On the western shore of the Imjin, we assembled at our outpost called, The Bubble. Lt. Sidney told us to move out. Charley pointed the way. Our trek towards our target led us past

the men manning our outposts, Little Nori and Big Nori. The usual well meaning, "Give 'em hell! and "See you on the way back" brought me as much comfort as the 23 Psalm.

We were on the heights overlooking the Imjin River to our right. Single file, we trampled over brush and into the blackness of "no man's land".

When the enemy decides where and when an action will take place, they have the upper hand. They know the terrain. They know the ideal fields of fire. They can replace casualties quickly and they have unlimited ammunition. They are in control.

We moved through the underlying brush uneventfully. We were nearing Hill 117. Lt. Theiss sent me to contact Charley. I found him lying behind a bush. He whispered that he had just passed a listening post. I looked around. All I could see was darkness.

"How do you know that?"

"Take a deep breath. Don't you smell garlic? It's Kim Chi! It's the Gooks! They're breathing heavy! They're shittin' like we are!"

I ran back to relay Charley's message to Lt. Theiss. He paused. I could see by his uncharacteristic smirk that he was as apprehensive as Charley and I.

"Tell him to move up about ten yards and we'll catch up to him."

I became one with the earth as I crawled towards Charley. The Chinese weren't going to see me! Charley was keyed up and anxious when I reached him.

"What did Theiss say? What did he say?" he asked.

This was not the Charley I knew. I had never seen him so intense. Of all the men in the platoon, he was usually the most composed. On every mission, he volunteered for this lonely and dangerous assignment.

"Theiss said to move forward ten yards, then stop. We'll catch up to you."

I ran back to Lt. Theiss. As soon as we reached Charley, a Chinese arsenal hit us. They were no more than twenty yards to our left. The arc of blue flashes from their weapons, told us we were within their crescent. We were surrounded; trapped. It was an ambush. Burp guns buzzed, concussion grenades and mortar rounds exploded. A burst from a concussion grenade lifted me off the ground. The force of the blast and the sour taste of gunpowder rushed down my throat, but I wasn't harmed. Creeping up alongside of me, our medic, Wayne showed me the handle of his .45 ripped apart by a piece of shrapnel. He left crawling, searching for the wounded. I hadn't as yet fired my carbine nor thrown a grenade. I was frozen, terrified, impotent. My hands were glued to my carbine.

"Will my carbine's flash reveal my position?"

"Will I have enough ammo when we withdraw?"

I threw a couple of grenades at the burp gun flashes.

"Why didn't I bring more grenades?"

On my far right, above the tumult of the bursts and blasts, I heard shouting .

"We're coming at you, you bastards!"

I could see a silhouette formed by the light of exploding rounds. It was Sid, our company commander shouting at the Chinese, directing the automatic weapons, moving among us calling us by name, giving us words of encouragement. Sid's aggressive behavior was infectious. My trigger finger relaxed.

"Fire in bursts! Fire in bursts!", Sid shouted.

The staccato from the weapons nearby told me the infection was spreading. We responded to the zip of the burp guns. Although we were handicapped by the lack of firepower from our semi-automatic M1s and carbines, Gus' and Truman's BAR and our machine gun teams responded with a deadly spray.

Sid called back to artillery for the pre-arranged concentrations. We waited. A short round plopped into the river behind us. That was it! Fortunately, there were no additional "supporting rounds".

We were running low on ammo. Casualties had to be evacuated. Lt. Sidney determined the safest return to the MLR (Main Line of Resistance) would be to move down the heights to our rear and wade back through the Imjin for about a mile, to The Bubble. This quick decision put a stop to the heavy casualties we were taking.

Some of the men, further off to our left, unable to hear Sid's order were led by their squad leaders on the same path that brought them there. Unfortunately, this choice increased our casualties as they ran past the Chinese positions that first hit us.

Sid stood by with Sgt. Benny Hoover as the men began their ascent down the cliff. Our men ran, skidded and tumbled down the forty yards towards the river. As I was about to descend, Poodles, a rifleman from the third platoon crept towards me picking up two abandoned rifles. He pointed to an area about ten yards to our forward right. He said Sgt. Massengale was lying there.

"He isn't moving! I didn't see him move!"

I told him to keep his rifle, drop the other two and follow me to Massengale. Poodles ran off towards the slope shouting,

"Supply Economy!"¹

The Chinese, apparently unaware of our withdrawal, continued their fusillade from burp guns, concussion grenades and mortars. Lt. Sidney and Benny Hoover covered me as I was moving over the brush. I managed to reach Massengale unharmed. He was lying face down, motionless. I grasped the back of his collar and dragged him to the heights above the river. Lt. Sidney had returned to our men who were wading towards The Bubble. He left Benny

¹ A movie shown in basic training stressing the need to maintain and safeguard your equipment.

Hoover to cover me as I returned with Massengale. I shouldered my carbine, freeing my hands while we moved down the slope. But, the combination of Massengale's dead weight, the dense underbrush and my carbine sliding towards my head whenever I bent over, made it difficult to drag him. I stopped. *Maybe he was alive?* I pinched him on the cheek. It was like pinching a canteen cover; soft, unresponsive. I removed my belt, tied it around his knees leaving my right hand free to grab a bush if I slipped. Pulling upward on the belt, I was able to slide his body over the underbrush. By now, Massengale was responding like a rag doll. Without any opposition, he followed me down the cliff.

As we approached the base of the slope near the river, burp gun fire came from the left, upstream. Benny Hoover stood up and emptied his M1 into the area. The gun was silenced.²

Benny, and I with Massengale reached the shore. Walking backwards, I floated Massengale close to the cliff to avoid burp gun bullets which, like raindrops were pockmarking the surface of the river. Fortunately, we were moving with the flow of the river. Its buoyancy relieved me of the cumbersome weight. By some miracle, we were not hit. *Did the 23 Psalm reach its target?*

This was not Massengale. It was not me. It could have been a robot floating a log down the river. I was totally without feeling. I felt benumbed from this hellish experience.

At last, The Bubble. One of our men who saw us coming held a jon boat. Benny and I placed Massengale into the boat then we crossed the river. We left him on shore hoping the medics could perform a miracle. Waiting to hear what we didn't want to hear, a medic told us to move on.

Trucks were waiting about a half mile to the rear to bring a soaked and stunned platoon to battalion headquarters.

During our debriefing, we learned that Camacho, Moen, and Massengale had been killed. One of the jon boats had overturned with Brown, weighted down by his armored vest and equipment, drowned. Lt. Edmunds suffered critical abdominal wounds. Sgt. Smith, who went through paratrooper school with Massengale was extremely agitated. Charley Nunns was machine gunned in his arm and rear left shoulder. Gerecke took some bullets to his bowels and kidneys. A piece of shrapnel cut across the back of Hollier. Fortunately it didn't penetrate the spinal cord. Ed Browne was also severely wounded from machine gun fire. Seventeen-year-old Dickson, who went to a summary court martial that afternoon for insubordination, returned in time to snap on his armored vest and accompany his machine gun squad on the patrol. It was a case of very bad timing. He received critical wounds which eventually led to a premature

² The following day, when one of our KIAs was recovered and returned by the Imjin, they spotted a bloated Chinese soldier floating at the shore. (Ray Flaherty's account who was part of the recovery team.)

death. Mette was critically wounded in the abdomen which hospitalized him for a year and a half.

His airborne training produced in Massengale the same type of valiant leadership we had from our company commander, "Sid" Sidney. Massengale's aggressiveness in combat, his walrus mustache, his helmet which appeared to engulf his head and glasses, his sense of humor left Company L without our own comic strip caricature of "Pete the Tramp".

Our heads were swarming from the evening's experience. When we returned, Wayne and I sat silently outside our bunker overlooking the tranquil Imjin until twilight.

Just after breakfast, the forward observer from artillery spotted Camacho's body through his BC scope. The Chinese would set a trap by exposing a KIA knowing that an attempt would be made to retrieve him. Lt. Sidney recruited Sgt. Flaherty, Ed Heister and Sgt. Keith Smith to accompany him to evacuate Camacho. After a brief daylight skirmish, they returned with Camacho's body.

"Should I write a letter? What was there to say? How could I describe this nightmare? Why should I describe this nightmare? What are we doing here? Was it worth the lives of, Moen, Massengale, Camacho, Brown and others? Could Charley Nunns, Gehreke, Hollier, Dickson, Konnerth, Flaherty, Ed Browne, Francis Mette, Charley Messiar and Lt. Edmunds say they were seriously wounded in defense of their country? Was it worth this bloodshed merely to make contact with the enemy while the peace talk beacons from Ponmujom were mocking us no more than twenty miles from the ambush?"

For my action on the night of August 8, I was cited by Lt. Sidney for the Silver Star. This was not a pre-meditated nor courageous attempt on my part. It was as involuntary as blinking an eye; instinctive, reflexive, unthinking. Three days after the ambush, two Jeeps, one carrying the paperwork for my award were demolished by Chinese mortar rounds.

Forty-six years later, at the first reunion of our company, Lt. Sidney (Lt. Col. ret.) discovered that I was not awarded the medal. He cited me again for the Silver Star. On August 1, 1998, I received the Bronze Star with a "V" for valor at the University of North Carolina.

I have tried my best to convey the horror of combat, but Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), a young poet, killed in WWI masterfully depicted the madness. In his poem, Dulce et Decorum est (It Is Sweet and Becoming), he vividly describes the tragedy before he was killed in action.

He ends:

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the corrupted lungs
Bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
*Pro patria mori.**

**Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori*: It is sweet and becoming to die for one's country.

ADDENDUM

Forty five years later at our company's first reunion, in 1997, Lt. Sidney, who retired as Col. Sidney related the story of the ambush.

The day following the ambush, a forward observer from artillery spotted Camacho's body with his BC scope. Upon hearing the news, Sid recruited Sgt. Ray Flaherty, Sgt. Keith Smith and Ed Heister to retrieve Camacho. They crossed the river, passed through the Noris and approached the area of the ambush. They retrieved Camacho after a brief firefight.

Tonight, September 10, 2002, I received a phone call from Ray Flaherty. We spoke of many things. I wanted more details on the retrieval of Camacho. Sid, who passed away three years ago was very casual about the incident.

Flaherty said when they passed through Co.I manning the Noris, he exchanged his M1 for a BAR. Sid was carrying his usual M1 as did Ed Heister and Sgt. Smith. They traveled about ten feet below the ridgeline to the point of the ambush. Sid told the men to cover him. He climbed up, over the lip of the ridge and found Camacho. A brief firefight followed. Sid returned with Camacho. They quickly withdrew, then scaled down the cliff and into the Imjin River.

The men left Camacho at the shore to be picked up by Graves Registration. Sid, Ray and Keith went on to the rear for coffee and doughnuts. Since he was Camacho's platoon sergeant, Ray was asked by a sergeant from Graves Registration to identify him. This completes the story of the retrieval.