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U.S. Marines in the
Recapture of Seoul

*by Colonel Joseph H. Alexander,
U.S. Marine Corps, Retired*

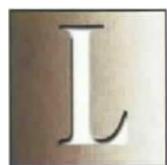
Marines in the Korean War Commemorative Series



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by Colonel Joseph H. Alexander, USMC (Ret)



ate on the afternoon of 24 September 1950, Captain Robert H. Barrow's Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, secured the military crest of Hill 79 in the southwest corner of Seoul, the enemy-occupied capital of the Republic of South Korea.

This momentous day for Barrow and his men began with a nerve-racking crossing of the Han River in open-hatched DUKWs, the ubiquitous amphibious trucks of World War II. Debarkation on the north shore had been followed by an unorthodox passage of lines "on the fly" of the regiment's lead battalion and the subsequent high-tempo attack on Hill 79. Now the rifle company assumed defensive positions on the objective, the men gazing in awe at the capital city arrayed to their north and east, sprawling virtually to the horizon. Thousands of North Korean Peoples' Army (NKPA) troops lay waiting for them behind barricades or among countless courtyards and rooftops. Tens of thousands of civilians still clung to life in the battered city. The Marines were a very long way from the barren

ON THE COVER: *Bitter fighting, house-to-house, with every alleyway, every storefront window being a deadly hazard to the Marines recapturing Seoul.* Photo by David Douglas Duncan

AT LEFT: *Lead elements of a Marine rifle squad pause by a captured North Korean barricade in Seoul to assign the next objective.* Photo by David Douglas Duncan

beaches of Tarawa or Peleliu. Even smoking Inchon, their amphibious objective 10 days earlier seemed far distant. Seoul would represent the largest objective the Marines ever assailed.

Earlier that day Colonel Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller, commanding the 1st Marines, issued a folded American flag to be raised on the regiment's first objective within the city limits. Barrow's battalion commander gave him the honor as the point company in the assault. The time was right. Barrow's men attached the national colors to a pole and raised them proudly on a rooftop on Hill 79. *Life* magazine photographer David Douglas Duncan, himself a Marine combat veteran, captured the moment on film. The photograph proved unremarkable—Hill 79 was no Mount Suribachi—but it reflected an indelible moment in Marine Corps history. Seven weeks earlier the 1st Marine Division was a division in name only. This afternoon a rifle company from that hastily reconstituted division had seized the first hill within occupied Seoul while all three regiments converged inexorably on the capital's rambling perimeter.

Barrow's flag-raising initiative enraged the neighboring 5th Marines, still slugging its way through the last of the bitterly defended ridges protecting the city's northwest approaches. Chang Dok Palace, the Republic of Korea's government center, lay within the 5th Marines' assigned zone. There, the 5th Marines

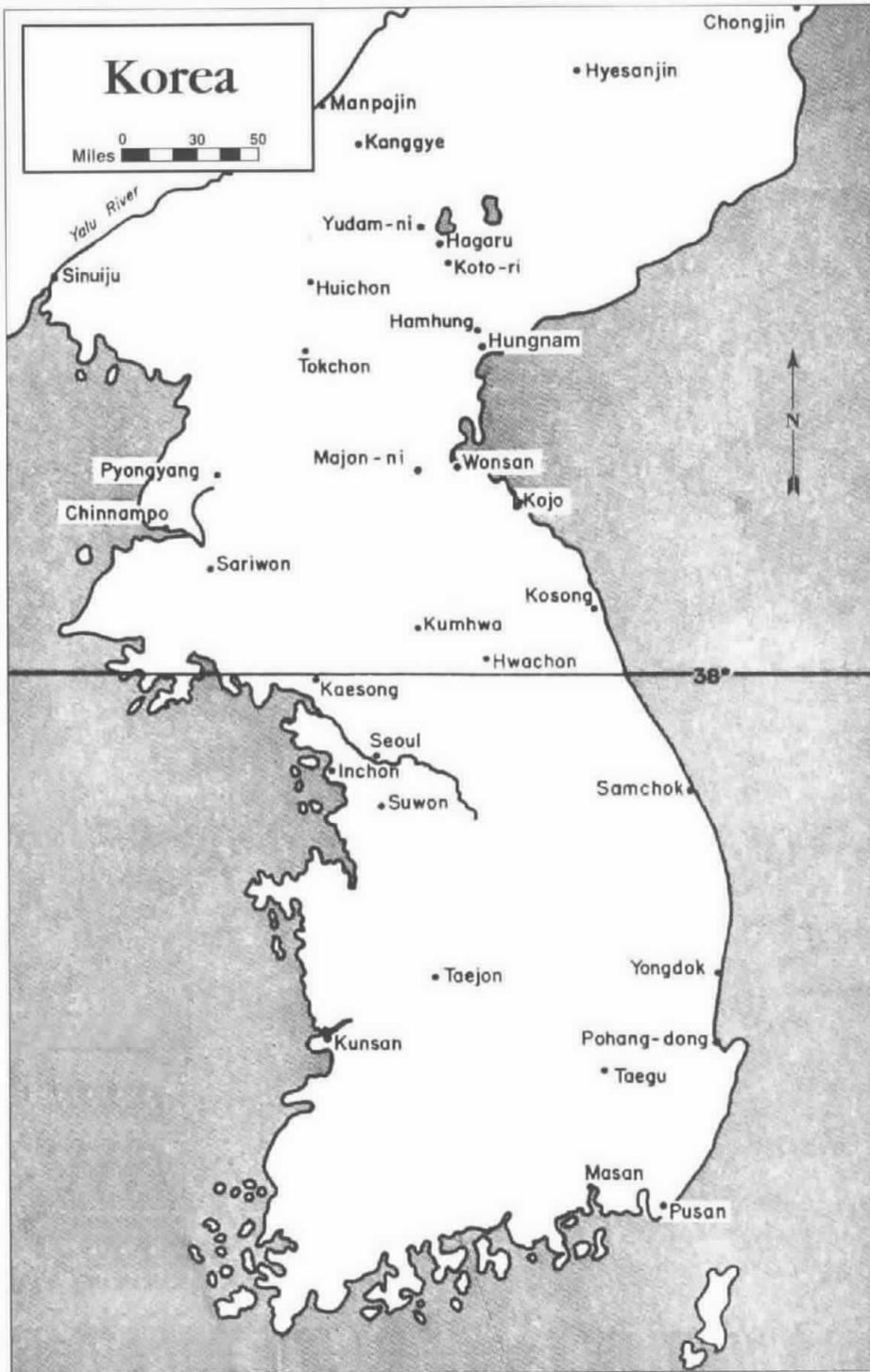
insisted, should be the rightful place for the triumphant flag-raising. Barrow brushed aside the complaints. "Putting the flag on a bamboo pole over a peasant's house on the edge of Seoul does not constitute retaking the city," he said. Whether premature or appropriate, the flag raising on Hill 79 was an exuberant boost to morale at a good time. Chang Dok Palace lay just two miles north of Barrow's current position, but getting there in force would take the Marines three more days of extremely hard fighting.

By the night of 19 September Major General Oliver P. Smith, commanding the 1st Marine Division, had grounds for caution.

Capt Robert H. Barrow, commanding Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, pauses to raise the first American flag within the city limits of Seoul on Hill 79.

Photo by David Douglas Duncan





National Archives Photo (USA) 111-SC348519

MajGen Oliver P. Smith, a veteran of the Cape Gloucester, Peleliu, and Okinawa campaigns in the Pacific during World War II, commanded the 1st Marine Division throughout the Inchon-Seoul-Chosin campaigns.

landed at Inchon and moved rapidly to cover the exposed right flank of Smith's approach to Seoul, south of Chesty Puller's 1st Marines. The 7th Marines' long, global journey to Inchon was about to end. Meanwhile, General Almond had strengthened Smith's light division by attaching two battalions of the 1st Republic of Korea (ROK) Marine Regiment, green but spirited sea soldiers.

Against these positive developments, O. P. Smith worried about his lack of a significant reserve, the absence of bridging material throughout X Corps, the morning's requirement to split his division on both sides of a tidal river, and the realization that the landing force would henceforth pass beyond the effective range of the guns of the fleet. He could also sense that North Korean resistance was stiffening and the quality of the opposition was improving. All signs pointed to a major clash in the week ahead.

Intelligence analysts on both division and corps staffs had diffi-

Despite the impatient insistence on speed of advance by the X Corps commander, Major General Edward S. "Ned" Almond, USA, Smith knew he led a two-regiment division against an unknown enemy defending an enormous urban center.

On one hand, the pace of the allied build-up encouraged Smith.

Two new Marine fighter squadrons had commenced flying into Kimpo Airfield since the 5th Marines captured it intact on the 18th, and they would launch their first Vought F4U Corsair strikes in support of the X Corps advance the morning of the 20th. The 32d Infantry Regiment of Major General David G. Barr's 7th Infantry Division had

Principal Commanders, 1st Marine Division, Seoul

1st Marine Division

Commanding General: Major General Oliver P. Smith
Assistant Division Commander: Brigadier General Edward A. Craig
G-3: Colonel Alpha L. Bowser, Jr.

1st Marines

Commanding Officer: Colonel Lewis B. Puller
1st Battalion: Lieutenant Colonel Jack Hawkins
2d Battalion: Lieutenant Colonel Alan Sutter
3d Battalion: Lieutenant Colonel Thomas L. Ridge

5th Marines

Commanding Officer: Lieutenant Colonel Raymond L. Murray
1st Battalion: Lieutenant Colonel George R. Newton
2d Battalion: Lieutenant Colonel Harold S. Roise
3d Battalion: Lieutenant Colonel Robert D. Taplett

7th Marines

Commanding Officer: Colonel Homer L. Litzenberg, Jr.
1st Battalion: Lieutenant Colonel Raymond G. Davis
2d Battalion: Lieutenant Colonel Thornton M. Hinkle (Wounded in Action-
Evacuated, September 28)
Major Webb D. Sawyer (from September 28)
3d Battalion: Major Maurice E. Roach

11th Marines

Commanding Officer: Colonel James H. Brower
1st Battalion: Lieutenant Colonel Ransom M. Wood
2d Battalion: Lieutenant Colonel Merritt Adelman
3d Battalion: Major Francis F. Parry
4th Battalion: Major William McReynolds

Other Division Units

Commanding Officer, 1st Shore Party Battalion: Lieutenant Colonel Henry P. Crowe
Commanding Officer, 1st Engineer Battalion: Lieutenant Colonel John H. Partridge
Commanding Officer, 1st Tank Battalion: Lieutenant Colonel Harry T. Milne
Commanding Officer, 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion: Lieutenant Colonel Erwin F. Wann, Jr.
Commanding Officer, VMO-6: Major Vincent J. Gottschalk
Commanding Officer, 1st Service Battalion: Lieutenant Colonel Charles L. Banks
Commanding Officer, 1st Ordnance Battalion: Major Lloyd O. Williams
Commanding Officer, 1st Motor Transport Battalion: Lieutenant Colonel Olin L. Beall
Commanding Officer, 1st Medical Battalion: Commander H. B. Johnson, Jr., USN
Commanding Officer, 1st Signal Battalion: Major Robert L. Schreier
Commanding Officer, Reconnaissance Company: Captain Kenneth J. Houghton

culty defining an enemy order of battle after the Inchon landing because of the chaos the landing created in the headquarters of the NKPA in Pyongyang, the North Korean capital. Ignoring dozens of telltale indicators, the NKPA seemed astonished that the Commander in Chief, Far East, General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, could have landed such a large force amid Inchon's narrow channels and formidable mudflats. The Marines' quick seizure of the port, Ascom City, and Kimpo Airfield further disoriented the North Koreans.

By the night of the 19th-20th, however, the North Korean high command finally had major troop units on the move to defend the South Korean capital. They turned around the untested *18th NKPA Division*, bound from Seoul to the Pusan Perimeter, and recalled a veteran regiment of the *9th NKPA Division* from the southwest corner of the Naktong River. Most of these troops would defend the industrial suburb of Yongdungpo, directly south of the Han from central Seoul, against the 1st Marines.

On 20 September, while Lieutenant Colonel Raymond L. Murray led his 5th Marines across the Han River, two significant enemy units reached Seoul from assembly areas in North Korea to man the northwest defenses against this new American threat above the Han. From Sariwon came Colonel Pak Han Lin at the head of his *78th Independent Infantry Regiment*, some 1,500-2,000 untested troops in three infantry battalions. From nearby Chorwon came Colonel Wol Ki Chan's *25th NKPA Brigade*, more than 4,000 strong. Colonel Wol had received "postgraduate" tactical training in the Soviet Union and had trained his green troops well. His newly formed brigade con-

tained an unusual concentration of crew-served weapons, including four heavy weapons battalions providing a proliferation of anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, plus heavy machine guns. Wol led the two units west of town to prepare last-ditch defenses along the same jumbled ridges where the Japanese had formerly conducted infantry-training exercises. General Smith's intuition had been correct. His North Korean enemy would shortly change from delaying tactics to hard-nosed, stand-and-deliver defense to the death.

Two Rough Roads To Seoul

Few things could faze Lieutenant Colonel Murray, the 5th Marines' commander, after his month-long experience as the Eighth Army's "Fire Brigade" in the Pusan Perimeter, but preparing his veteran regiment for an opposed crossing of the Han River on 20 September proved a daunting task. To begin with, Murray found his

LtCol Raymond L. Murray, a tall Texan who had earned a Silver Star on Guadalcanal, a second Silver Star on Tawara, and a Navy Cross on Saipan, commanded the 5th Marines.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A5850



North Korean Order Of Battle: Seoul/Wonsan Campaign

Defending the Northwest Approaches (Hill 296 Complex and beyond):

25th Brigade: Colonel Wol Ki Chan

78th Independent Infantry Regiment: Colonel Pak Han Lin

Seoul City Regiment

Defending Yongdungpo:

Elements of *3d Regiment, 9th Division*

Elements of *18th and 87th Divisions*

Defending Seoul:

Surviving components of the above forces

17th Rifle Division

43d Tank Regiment

19th Antiaircraft Regiment

513th Artillery Regiment

10th Railroad Regiment

Defending Uijongbu:

31st Regiment, 31st Division

75th Independent Regiment

Opposing 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, at Kojo:

10th Regiment, 5th Division: Colonel Cho Il Kwon

Opposing 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, at Majon-ni:

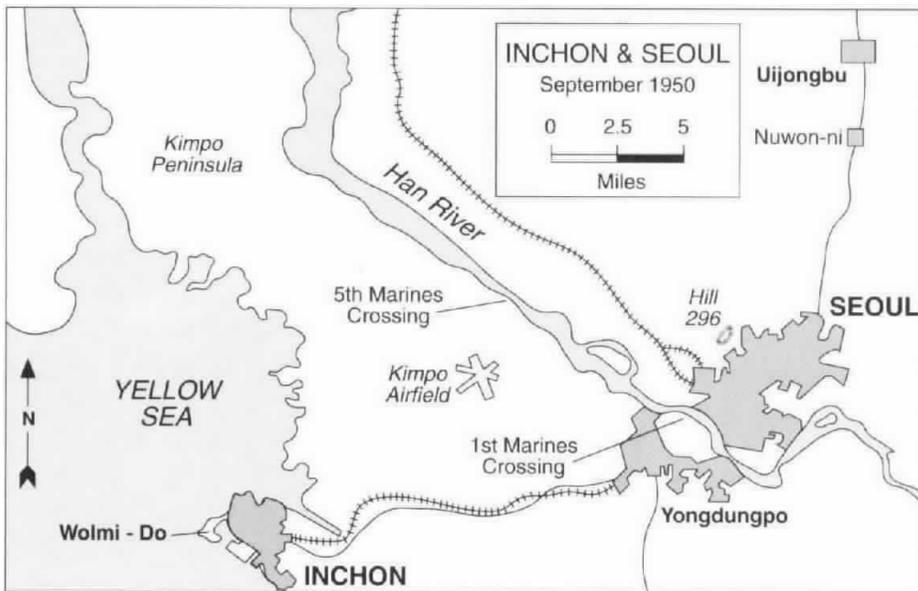
Elements of *15th Division:* Major General Pak Sun Chol

command post crowded with high-ranking observers and correspondents. Each wondered how Murray would execute a crossing of such a broad river without heavy bridging material; all offered free advice. Murray abided these kibitzers for awhile, then cast them out.

A second situation proved more troublesome. While Murray felt confident the 2d Amphibian Tractor Battalion could shuttle his riflemen across in their tracked landing vehicles (LVTs then, AAVs now), and while he was reasonably sure Lieutenant Colonel John H. Partridge, the division engineer, could ferry his attached tanks across by using 50-foot pontoon

sections, he still knew nothing of the river—its current, shoreline gradients, exit points. Nor did Murray know anything of the enemy's strength and capabilities in the vicinity of the abandoned ferry site at Haengju. Mile-long Hill 125 on the north bank dominated the crossing. Six years earlier Murray had led his 2d Battalion, 6th Marines, ashore at Saipan under direct fire from Japanese guns occupying the coastal hills, and he had no intention of repeating that experience here.

Murray asked General Smith to assign Captain Kenneth R. Houghton's division Reconnaissance Company to the crossing operation. Murray wanted an



Mary Craddock Hoffman

advance party of reconnaissance Marines to swim the Han after dark on 19 September, stealthily determine any enemy presence, and then signal the remainder of the company to cross in LVTs. Murray then expected the company to

man a defensive perimeter to cover the predawn crossing of Lieutenant Colonel Robert D. Taplett's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines.

Taplett considered the plan too ambitious. The Reconnaissance Company had the heart, he

believed, but not the numbers (127 strong) to cover the sprawling high ground along the river. No one knew anything in advance about the possibility of enemy presence in strength along the far bank. Taplett quietly ordered his staff to draw up contingency plans for the crossing.

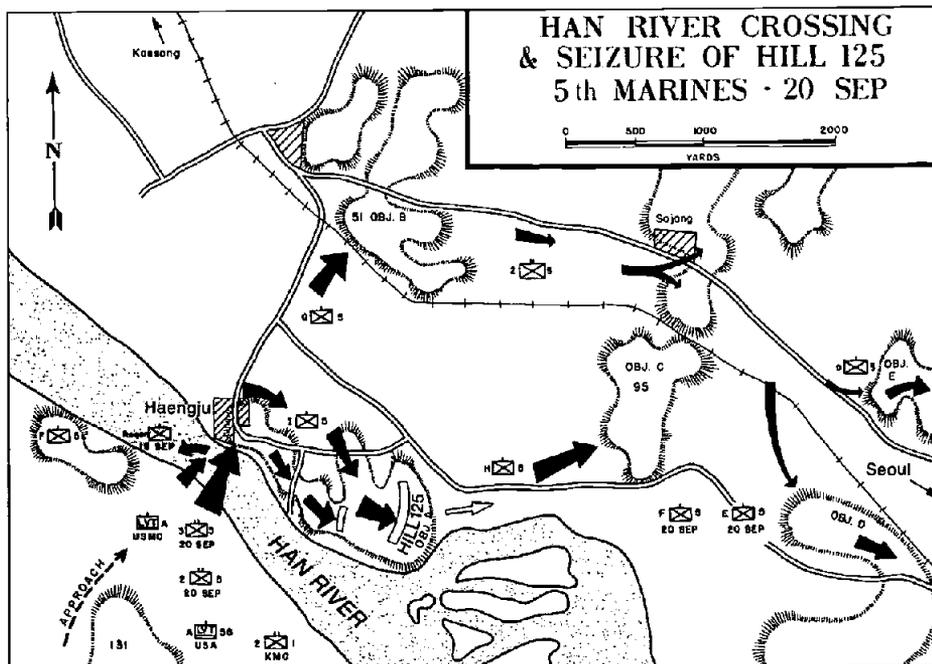
The North Koreans had not ignored the former ferry site. Aware that the Marines would likely cross the Han soon, the NKPA deployed an infantry battalion in the underbrush along Hill 125. Their camouflage discipline proved excellent. The Marines did not detect their presence throughout the afternoon and evening of the 19th.

After dark, Captain Houghton led 14 swimmers across the 400-yard-wide river. An ill-timed artillery mission set fire to a house in Haengju village, exposing the

Marine Corps amphibian tractors and DUKWs ferry troops across the Han River after the assault waves.

Photo by Frank Noel, Associated Press





experience, he later recounted. "Amphibian tractors were hardly stealthy vehicles," Shutler recalled. "We received enemy fire as soon as the vehicles entered the water. You could hear machine gun rounds plinking against the armored cab. Mortar rounds, possibly from our own 'four-deuce' tubes, were exploding in the river."

In the chaos some LVTs became stuck in the mud near the far shore, others veered away. Captain Houghton sprang into the river to rally the vehicles toward the landing site. Mortar rounds landed in the water near him; the concussion from one near miss knocked him out.

Lieutenant Shutler could see none of this from the crowded troop compartment of his lurching LVT. He scrambled topside, discovered to his horror that the vehicle had turned upstream, broadside to the NKPA gunners on Hill 125. He whacked the driver,

men in their final approach to the north bank. Technical Sergeant Ernest L. Defazio complained the blaze "lit up the place like a Christmas tree," but nothing stirred. Houghton dispatched four men to check for signs of the enemy on Hill 125, then sent an exultant but premature message to Murray: "The Marines have landed and the situation is well in hand." Houghton also radioed his executive officer to launch the balance of the company in its nine LVTs.

So far, so good. But few sounds attract more attention on a quiet night than the sudden revving up of nine pairs of Cadillac V-8 Amtrac engines. The noise seemed enough to wake the dead, and abruptly the NKPA battalion on Hill 125 opened a vicious fire against the approaching LVTs and Houghton's small group, now dangerously backlit by the burning building.

Second Lieutenant Philip D. Shutler commanded the second platoon of the Reconnaissance Company, his men divided between two LVTs that nosed into the river in column. Young as he was, Shutler had already been in

tight spots. He had spent the month of August making night raids from USS *Horace A. Bass* (APD 124) in the Sea of Japan against the North Korean coastline, his Marines teamed with Underwater Demolition Team 1. Crossing the Han was a dissimilar

An LVT-3C of the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion takes off from the south bank of the Han with a load of American and Korean Marines, while Marine engineers prepare a pontoon bridge to carry equipment.

Photo by Frank Noel, Associated Press



jumped into the waist-deep water, and attempted to guide the vehicle directly ashore. He saw no sign of the advance swimmers.

At this point someone passed the word to abort the mission and return to the south bank. Five LVTs returned, leaving four stuck in the mud along the far shore. One of these contained Captain Houghton's unconscious body. Other Marines were missing. Shutler found one of his troops had died of wounds in the confused melee. The crossing had failed.

When Technical Sergeant Ernie DeFazio discovered his captain missing he promptly led a swimmer team back across the river. They rescued Houghton and his radio operator, retrieved two of the stuck vehicles and restored more than a bit of the company's honor.

But the night was nearly spent, the enemy occupied the crossing site in considerable strength, and every VIP in the theater—including General Douglas MacArthur—had announced their intentions of observing the morning crossing. As assistant division commander, Brigadier General Edward A. Craig frankly observed: "The eyes of the world were upon us. It would have looked bad for the Marines, of all people, to reach a river and not be able to cross."

The 5th Marines calmly decided to approach the crossing as an amphibious assault mission—tightly coordinated preliminary fires on the objective, an intermediate and final objective assigned, and troops organized into boat teams configured to each LVT. Taplett's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, would lead the landing in assault waves, followed by Lieutenant Colonel Harold S. Roise's 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, to expand the beachhead; the entire regiment with its attached tank company to cross

before dark. Marine Corsairs would arrive soon after sunrise to pound Hill 125 and scorch the Seoul-Kaesong highway to discourage any NKPA reinforcements.

Only a veteran force like the 5th Marines could have made such last-minute adaptations and passed the word to all hands in the remaining minutes before dawn. Taplett's original skepticism about the Reconnaissance Company's ability to hold an opposed bridgehead had served 3d Battalion, 5th Marines well; the battalion had already prepared worst-case alternative plans. By the time General Almond, Vice Admiral Arthur D. Struble, USN (Commander, Seventh Fleet), and Lieutenant General Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr., USMC (Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific) arrived they found Lieutenant Colonel Murray as unflappable as ever and the crossing well underway. Lieutenant Colonel Ransom M. Wood's 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, pounded the far bank with 105mm howitzers; Murray's own 81mm and 4.2-inch mortars joined the chorus. Taplett's first wave of six LVTs chugged resolutely on line towards the far bank.

At this point the NKPA battalion on Hill 125 opened a disciplined fire on the LVTs, scoring more than 200 hits on the vehicles as they trundled ashore. Fortunately their one antitank gun proved less accurate than their small arms fire. Taplett pressed on. His LVTs discharged Captain Robert A. McMullen's Company I, then pulled away for the return transit. McMullen quickly deployed his platoons up the open slopes of Hill 125 in a double envelopment. The fighting became point-blank and deadly.

With most NKPA gunners now taking aim at McMullen's Marines, the remaining companies of 3d

Battalion, 5th Marines, crossed the river with relative ease. Corporal Larry V. Brom, a Company H squad leader, worried more about the claustrophobia his men experienced in their LVT's cramped troop compartment than "the occasional splat of bullets against the armor plate." Company H's LVTs lurched out of the river and continued rolling north, crossing the railroad and highway to secure distant Hill 51. Corporal Brom led his men in a mad dash up the rise as soon as the rear ramp dropped, vastly relieved to discover the crest undefended.

By contrast, Company I had its hands full taking Hill 125. The lower approaches contained scant cover. Well-sited NKPA gunners scythed down Captain McMullen's exposed 60mm mortar section and two sections of light machine guns.

The situation improved dramatically with the appearance overhead of four Corsairs from Lieutenant Colonel Walter E. Lischeid's Marine Fighter Squadron 214 (VMF-214). The Black Sheep pilots launched at 0551 from the escort carrier USS *Sicily* (CVE 118) in the Yellow Sea, southwest of Inchon, arriving over the river just in time to even the odds against Company I's arduous assault with a series of ear-splitting rocket and napalm attacks against the North Koreans defending the high ground. McMullen spurred his men forward, upward amid the bedlam. Their difficult double envelopment converged on the crest, culminating in a vicious flurry of hand-to-hand combat. An abrupt silence followed, broken only by the Marines gasping for breath.

Taking Hill 125 cost Company I 43 casualties; it inflicted at least 200 upon the enemy. It had been a beautifully executed tactical assault, highlighted by the high-



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A409336

Advancing Marines examine the smoking ruin of a North Korean T-34 tank recently destroyed in an ambush.

speed, low-level strikes of the Corsairs. General Almond, observing this conflict from barely 500 yards away, admitted it was “one of the finest small-unit actions I’ve ever witnessed.”

The forcible taking of Hill 125 meant the remainder of the 5th Marines could cross the river unimpeded. By the time General MacArthur arrived the crossing seemed routine. “You’ve done a perfect job,” he told Lieutenant Colonel Murray, unaware of the all-night flail that preceded the perfection. Murray by then had his eye on the main objective, and he pointed upstream to the convoluted ridges that protected the approaches to Seoul from the northwest, the regimental route of advance. “They’ll all evaporate very shortly,” MacArthur assured Murray.

At a glance from long distance it seemed that the Supreme Allied Commander might have been right. Only eight miles separated Hill 125 at the Haengju crossing site from downtown Seoul. Murray’s advance elements covered half that distance on the afternoon of the 20th, raising false

hopes. Then NKPA resistance stiffened abruptly. It would take the 5th Marines a full week of desperate fighting to advance the final four miles into Seoul.

The 20th of September also began very early for Chesty Puller’s 1st Marines on their final approach to Yongdungpo. The *87th NKPA Regiment* launched two predawn spoiling attacks against both flanks. The southern attack, led by five T-34 tanks, posed the greatest threat. The veteran NKPA troops endeavored to repeat their high-speed, straight-down-the-highway armored tactics that had proven wildly successful in the initial invasion, but their tanks had now lost their invulnerability. The armored column barreled blindly into a lethal L-shaped ambush set by Lieutenant Colonel Alan Sutter’s 2d Battalion, 1st Marines. Short-range fire from Marine 3.5-inch bazookas knocked out the first two enemy tanks; a storm of direct and indirect fire cut down the supporting infantry, killing 300 men. The surviving North Koreans withdrew to their prepared defenses within Yongdungpo.

Puller pressed the advance, his

2d Battalion still astride the Inchon-Seoul highway, the 1st Battalion attacking through the hilly countryside below the Han. Sutter’s lop-sided success in thwarting the NKPA tank attack pleased Puller, but the initial view of sprawling Yongdungpo from his observation post brought forth Puller’s trademark scowl. The prospect of forcing a crossing of the high-banked Kalchon Canal, then fighting door-to-door through this large industrial suburb did not appeal to the veteran jungle fighter. When General Almond appeared from observing Murray’s river crossing, Puller asked him for authorization to employ unrestricted firepower in taking the city. The corps commander agreed. Puller unleashed two battalions of supporting artillery (Lieutenant Colonel Merritt Adelman’s 2d Battalion, 11th Marines, in direct support, and Major William McReynolds’ 4th Battalion, 11th Marines, in general support) plus air strikes by Marine Corsairs. The Sicily-based Black Sheep followed their early-morning assistance to the 5th Marines with two dozen sorties against Yongdungpo, dropping 500-pound bombs and strafing with 20mm cannon and rockets. The city began to burn.

The 1st Marines commenced its main assault on Yongdungpo at 0630 the next morning. Neither Sutter’s 2d Battalion or Lieutenant Colonel Jack Hawkins’ 1st Battalion could sustain much headway. Crossing the Kalchon was like crossing a medieval castle moat; clambering over the dikes was akin to “going over the top” in the trenches of World War I. Sutter’s outfit in particular took heavy casualties. The division’s Special Action Report recorded the loss of 17 officers and 200 men by the 2d Battalion along the canal-like river by 21 September.

Puller committed elements of Lieutenant Colonel Thomas L. Ridge's 3d Battalion in the center, but a half dozen NKPA Maxim heavy machine guns took a grim toll of every attempt to cross the water gate sector of the Kalchon.

Ridge ordered Major Edwin H. Simmons, his Weapons Company commander, to suppress the fire. With his 81mm mortars temporarily out of ammunition and no

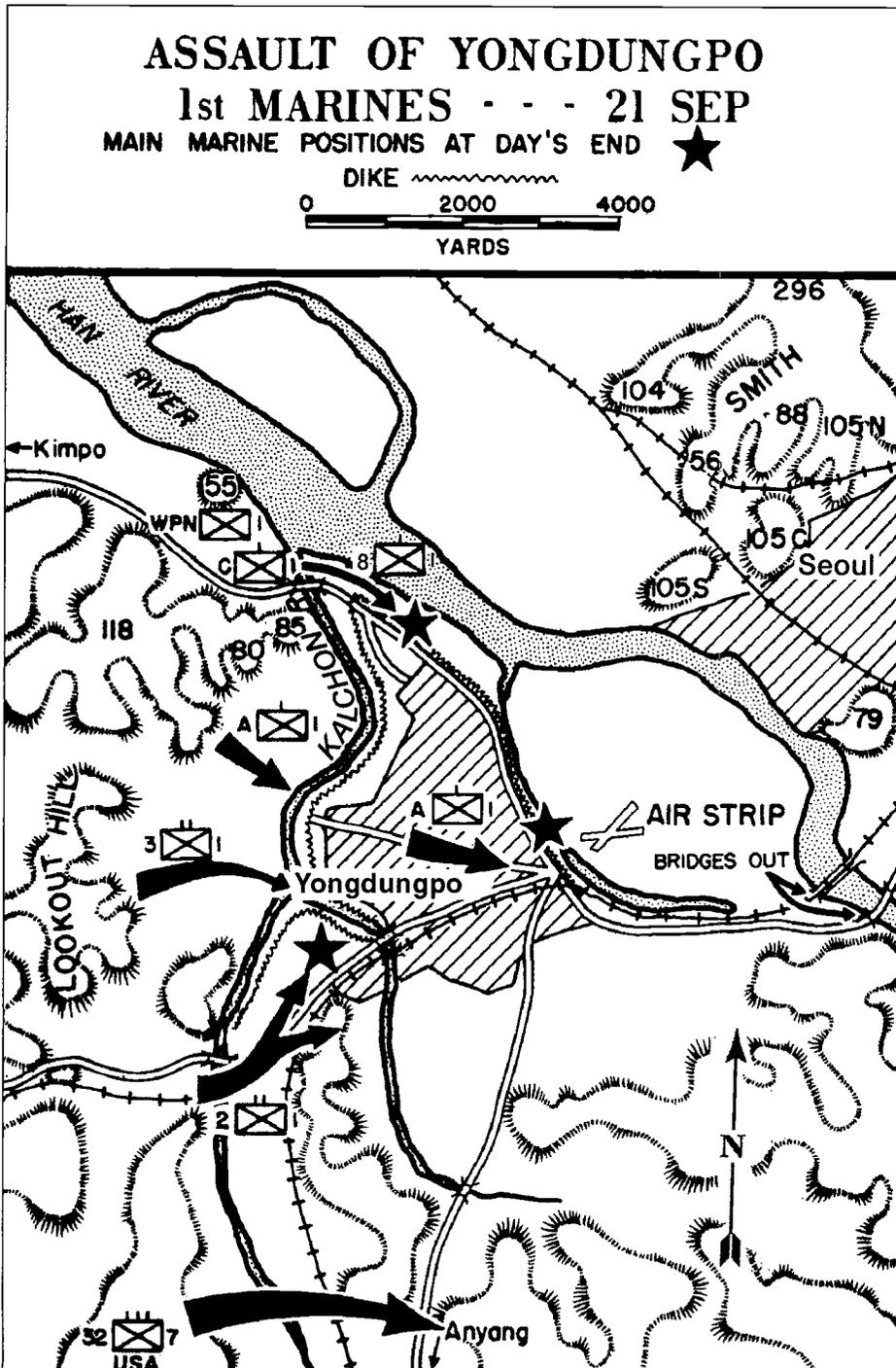
artillery support immediately available, Simmons chose his Browning M1917A1 watercooled .30-caliber heavy machine guns for the mission. Proven veterans of the World War, the heavy Brownings were unsurpassed in providing rock-steady, sustained fire at a rate of 450-600 rounds per minute. Simmons massed these weapons with their barrels "just clearing the top of the dike." A fierce duel

ensued—"heavies against heavies"—at an interval no greater than half a football field. The exchange was deafening, but Simmons' sturdy Brownings prevailed, allowing 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, to cross the Kalchon intact.

The Kalchon proved a barrier to the entire regiment on 21 September—with one memorable exception. While the battle raged on both sides—and shortly before Major Simmons' machine gun duel—Captain Robert H. Barrow, the future 27th Commandant, led his Company A, 1st Marines, through a rice field towards an uncommonly quiet sector of the Yongdungpo defenses. The North Koreans may have vacated this sector in order to more effectively contest the adjacent water gate fronting the 3d Battalion, an obvious crossing site. Barrow, however, expected to be hit at any moment. Simmons watched approvingly as Company A, 1st Marines, advanced past his immediate left flank, each platoon on line. "They were beautifully deployed," said Simmons. "As they came through the dry rice paddy I thought of the Marines coming through the wheat fields at Belleau Wood in 1918."

Private First Class Morgan Brainard of Barrow's company, though apprehensive about the spooky quiet, experienced similar thoughts as he crossed through the waist-high rice stalks. As he later described the advance:

Somewhere off to our left, beyond the road and out of sight, beyond a line of trees we could hear the rattle of rifle and machine gun fire where Baker Company was going in To our immediate front, however, there was nothing but silence, as we continued to move forward





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A3200

A column of M-26 Pershings and a bulldozer-configured M-4 Sherman advance towards Yongdungpo. The threat comes from the right flank, and firing has already been vigorous, judging from the spent 90mm shell casings alongside the road.

through the field in perfect order. It was a classic-type infantry advance . . . but my mind kept racing back toward the stories I had read as a boy of the Marines attacking through the wheat fields of

Belleau Wood . . . and I expected our peaceful scene would be shattered in a similar manner at any moment.

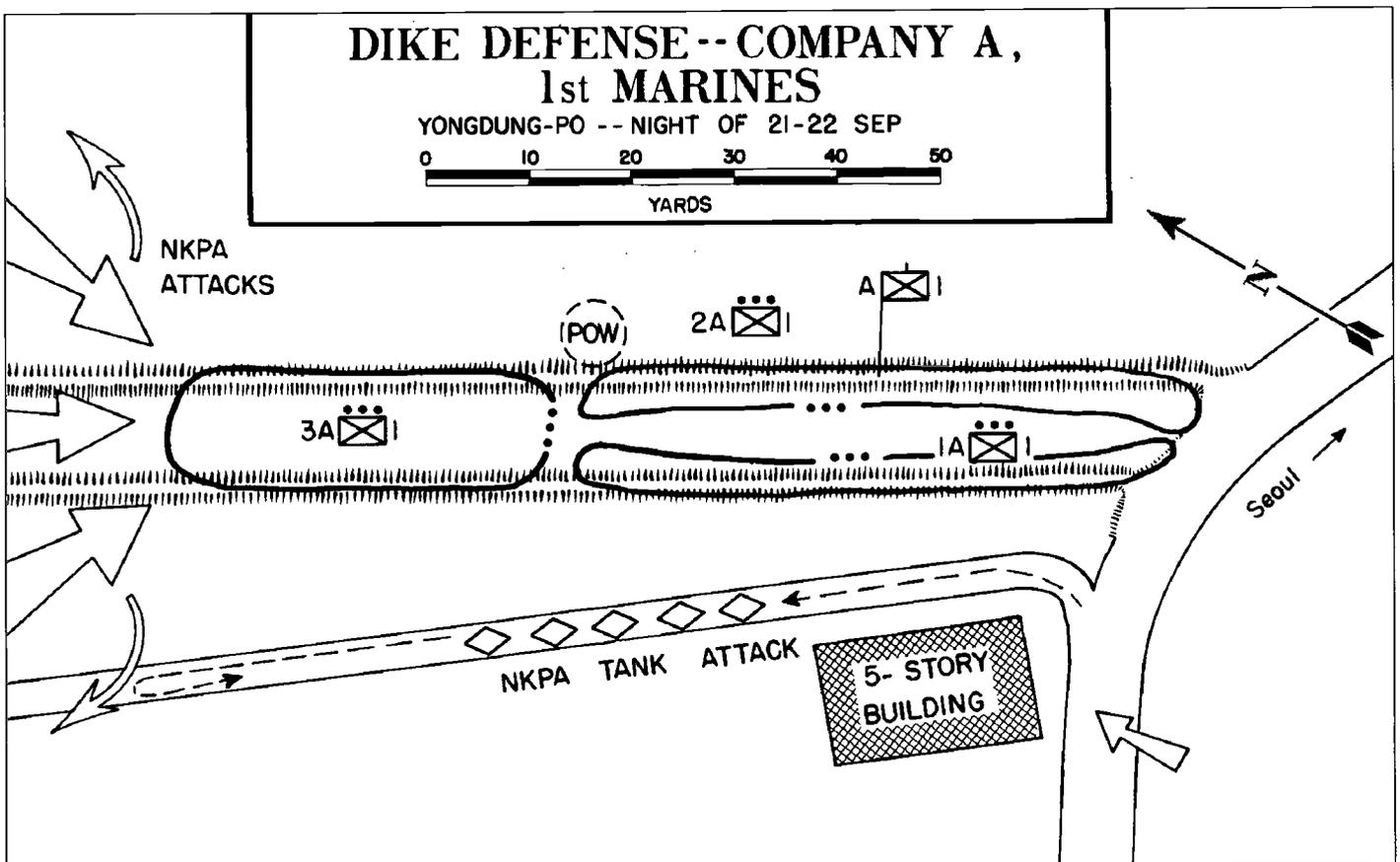
Captain Barrow acknowledged his serendipity. "We just happened

to experience one of those rare fortunes of war . . . a momentary opportunity."

"We passed over the top of the dike quickly, slithered down the other side," recalled Brainard, "then inexplicably and stupidly stopped facing a stream [the Kalchon]. I mean the whole line stopped." The company gunnery sergeant quickly ended their hesitation: "Get in that goddamned water!"

Company A found itself entering the main street of Yongdungpo totally unopposed. "It was eerie," said Barrow. "We simply slithered into town undetected."

The 87th NKPA Regiment, desperately attempting to patch together a defense in depth, had accidentally left this critical approach unguarded, and Barrow took full advantage of the opening. His 200-man company flowed rapidly into the heart of the city, sweeping up surprised bands of



the enemy in the process.

Before dark they had cut the city in two. Barrow selected a sausage-shaped dike, 30 feet high and 150 yards long, as the place to make a stand for the night. "We immediately recognized that we had a valuable piece of real estate," he said. From the dike his Marines could interdict the intersection of the highways from Inchon and Kimpo.

Through this intersection at one point marched a large formation of unsuspecting NKPA infantry, singing political songs as they hurried to reinforce Yongdungpo's

northwestern defenses. Barrow's interlocking machine guns and 60mm mortars cut down many and scattered the rest.

As darkness fell, Lieutenant Colonel Hawkins knew Barrow had executed a major penetration, but he could not reinforce this unexpected success. Barrow and Company A would be on their own—which was fine with Barrow. "We felt strong," he said. "We were not 'The Lost Company.'" "What followed," observed historian Jon T. Hoffman, "would become one of the great small-unit epics in the history of the Corps, to

rank with Hunt's Point and Pope's Ridge [at Peleliu]."

The NKPA attacked Company A shortly after dark with five Soviet-built T-34 tanks. The rattle and roar of their tracks as they approached almost unnerved Private First Class Morgan Brainard. "The squeaking and engine humming was drawing much closer, and as I crouched in my hole, I felt the ice-like shiver of pure fear." The tanks reached the intersection, then proceeded in column along a road parallel and extremely close to the Marines' positions dug into the side of the dike. The lead vehicle appeared enormous to Brainard: "In the moonlight I could see its turret with the long gun on it slowly circling back and forth, like some prehistoric, steel-backed monster sniffing for prey. I pressed tightly against the side of my hole, and waited for the flash and fire of its gun."

The tanks made five deliberate passes along that parallel track, firing their 85mm guns directly into the crowded dike from an ungodly short range of 25 yards. This was a terrifying experience for the Marines on the receiving end, but the dike's soft sand absorbed the base-detonated, armor-piercing shells, and there were few casualties. Meanwhile, Barrow's 3.5-inch rocket launcher teams stung the tanks repeatedly. "One of the most courageous acts that I ever witnessed was those brave young Marines with the 3.5s," he said. The first bazooka round Corporal Francis Devine ever fired in anger blasted a T-34 turret off its ring. Other gunners knocked out a second tank and damaged two more. The attached heavy machine gun section kept the vehicles buttoned up and peppered their vision blocks and periscopes. The surviving vehicles withdrew in disarray.

Navy surgeon and corpsmen attached to the 1st Marine Division treat a badly injured two-year-old boy on the outskirts of Seoul.

Photo by Frank Noel, Associated Press





Department of Defense Photo (USA) SC348715

Elements of the 5th Marines advance through a burning village after crossing the Han River. The days of high mobility ended as the Marines reached the enemy main line of resistance in the high ridges on the outskirts of Seoul.

The enemy tanks may have been more successful had infantry accompanied them, but the NKPA riflemen did not appear until 0100. Four separate ground assaults followed, each beaten back by disciplined fire. "I expected to have a lot of promiscuous firing," said Barrow, but "my people didn't lose their fire discipline and go bananas and shoot randomly."

The enemy assembly area was so close to the Marines' defensive position that they could hear the voice of the local commander, unmistakably haranguing his troops into launching another attack. Corporal Billy D. Webb, an Oklahoma reservist "with fire in his eye," decided to even the odds. Slipping out of his foxhole—"for God's sake don't shoot me when I come back!"—Webb dashed through the adjoining maze of buildings, spotted an extremely animated officer trying to rally his troops for yet another attack, took careful aim, and shot him dead. Webb escaped in the resultant confusion, and the night assaults

ceased before the Marines ran out of ammunition.

At dawn, Barrow counted 210 dead North Koreans around his beleaguered dike. "Yongdungpo did for A Company," said Barrow, "what no other thing could have done in terms of unifying it and giving it its own spirit, a spirit that said 'We can do anything.'"

If Barrow's company had "slithered" into Yongdungpo on the 21st, it was now the turn of the *87th NKPA Regiment*, having failed to oust the Marines throughout the night, to slither out of town the next morning. Barrow had skinned the cat, helping Puller capture a very difficult intermediate objective in two days of fighting. The road to Seoul for the 1st Marines now lay open, once the 5th Marines could advance eastward enough to cover their tactical crossing of the Han.

Back at Inchon, now well to the west of Puller's regiment at Yongdungpo, the offloading of fresh troops and combat cargo continued around the clock. By

D+6, 21 September, 50,000 troops had landed, including Colonel Homer L. Litzenberg, Jr.'s 7th Marines, supported by Lieutenant Colonel Francis F. Parry's 3d Battalion, 11th Marines, a 105mm howitzer outfit.

The 7th Marines initially assumed security duties in the Inchon vicinity. General O. P. Smith critically needed them for the recapture of Seoul, but the newly formed outfit first required a day or two to shake itself down from the long deployment by sea. This did not take long. Lieutenant Colonel Raymond G. Davis' 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, for example, had conducted field firing from the fantail of their attack transport each day enroute. "We fired machine guns, rifles, mortars, and bullets, rocket launchers, and threw hand grenades at every piece of trash, orange crates, or whatever the ship's crew would toss overboard for us," said Davis. Within 48 hours the regiment moved out tactically, crossed the Han River, and began its own path towards Seoul's northern suburbs, somewhat northwest of the route of the 5th Marines. On the third day Parry's gunners fired their first rounds down range.

By the fortunes of war, the 5th Marines would pay the stiffest price of admission to enter Seoul. General MacArthur's beguiling assurance to Lieutenant Colonel Murray that the hills guarding the northwestern approaches to the capital "would all evaporate" proved famously false. The regiment would suffer a casualty rate more reflective of its recent history at Peleliu and Okinawa than the Korean peninsula.

Part of the difficulty came from the convoluted terrain, a sprawling series of hill masses, ridges, and draws extending from the Kaesong-Seoul highway in the

north to the Han River in the south. "As an exercise in map reading," observed Marine historian Colonel Robert D. Heintz, Jr., "this ground is confusing and deceptive; for the tactician, it is a nightmare." Massive Hill 296 dominated the landscape; indeed, many of the other numbered peaks and knobs were in reality only protuberances of the hill's bony fingers extending to the Han and eastward into downtown Seoul itself. Confusingly, there were three Hill 105s in this complex (just as there had been three Hill 362s at Iwo Jima). Regimental planners nicknamed them for their linear sequence—Hills 105 North, Center, and South. All three would prove prickly objectives to seize and hold.

The North Koreans found the jumbled terrain around the Hill 296 complex to be ideal defensive

ground. The fact that the Japanese had long used the same ridges for tactical training meant the preexisting availability of firing positions, command posts, and observation sites. Colonel Wol Ki Chan reached this preferred ground with his *25th NKPA Brigade* and Colonel Pak Han Lin's *78th Independent Infantry Regiment* just in time. Had the North Koreans been held up one more day passing through Seoul, the Marines might have seized Hill 296 and all of its deadly fingers with hardly a fight.

Colonels Wol and Pak deployed at least 6,000 troops into the hill complex. While yet to be tested in battle, the combined force was both well-led and well-trained. Wol's brigade also contained an abundance of heavy weapons units. Their crews spent the 20th and 21st digging in their weapons

and registering their fire along the Marines' likely avenues of approach. Additional troops in odd-lot specialty organizations reinforced Wol during the battle for the hills, increasing his total force to nearly 10,000 men. The 5th Marines, even reinforced by their attachments and the ROK Marine battalion, could not match those numbers.

The 5th Marines had fought against highly experienced NKPA regiments in the Pusan Perimeter, units whose officers and non-commissioned officers had years of combat experience in China. The North Koreans they now faced lacked that background but made up for it with tenacity and firepower, including well-served high-velocity 76mm guns and 120mm heavy mortars. "Their mortar fire was very accurate," said veteran company commander Captain

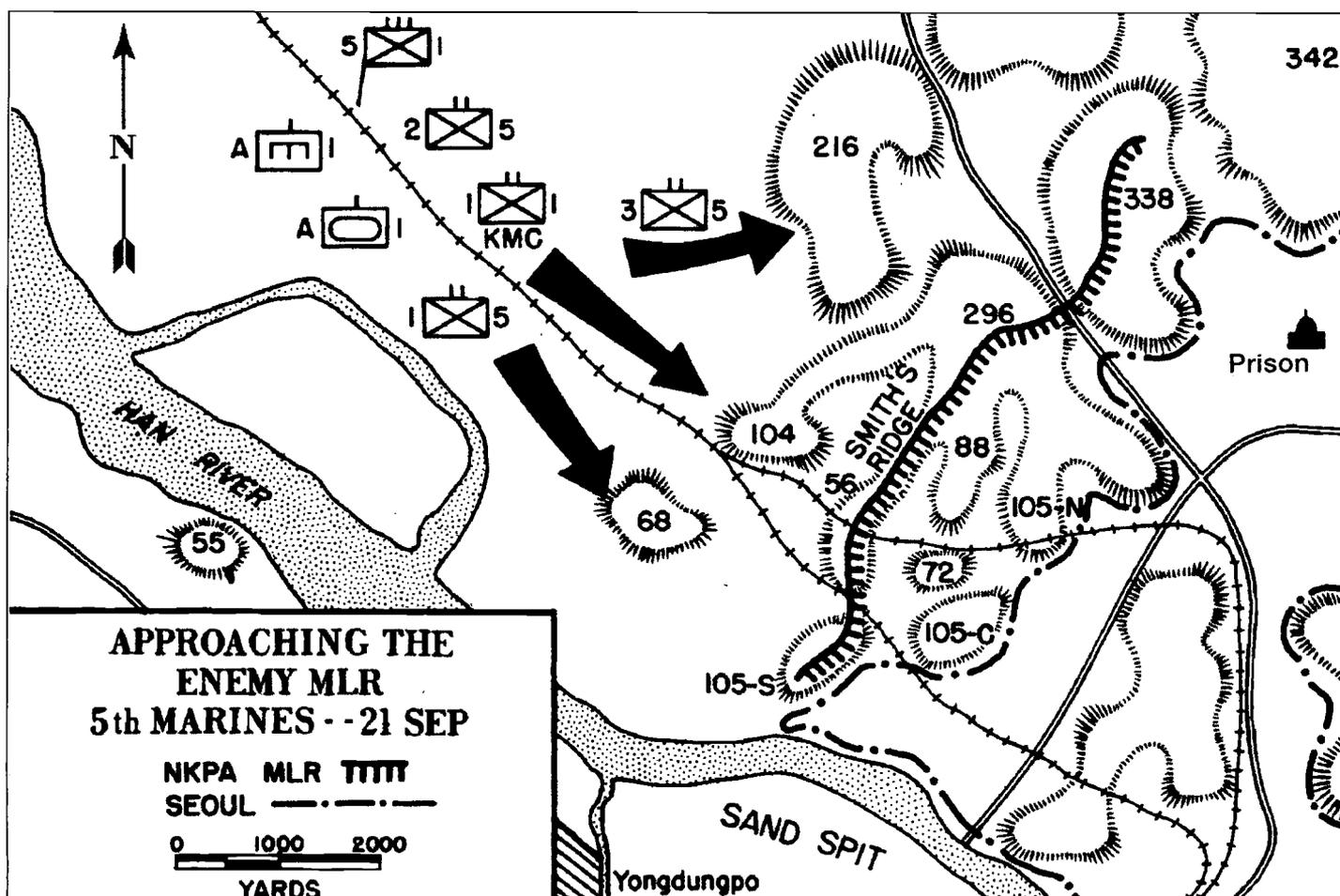




Photo by David Douglas Duncan

Capt Francis I. "Ike" Fenton, Jr., commanding Company B, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, experienced unremitting fire taking and holding Hill 105-South just outside the city limits.

Francis I. "Ike" Fenton, Jr. "They could really drop it in your lap."

Lieutenant Colonel Raymond Murray began the 22d of September with three of his four battalions on line: Taplett's 3d Battalion on the left, facing the main crest of Hill 296; Major Ko's 1st ROK Marine Battalion in the center, facing an exposed slope towards its objective, Hill 56; and Lieutenant Colonel George R. Newton's 1st Battalion on the right, aimed towards Hill 105-South. Lieutenant Colonel Harold S. Roise's 2d Battalion remained in reserve.

The battle for the hills got off to a bad start for Murray. During the night a North Korean shell exploded in his command post, causing many casualties. Murray survived

with a small cut, but Lieutenant Colonel Lawrence C. Hays, his executive officer and fellow Tarawa veteran (1st Battalion, 8th Marines commanding officer at Red Beach Two), was badly hit and required emergency evacuation.

Murray nevertheless kicked off his regimental attack at 0700 on the 22d as planned. Taplett's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, clawed its way steadily towards the steep crest of Hill 296, shaking off plunging fire from Communist positions north of the Kaesong Highway (the 7th Marines would not draw abreast to clear these positions along the left flank for another three days). Taplett's Marines maintained a steady rate of advance, the most promising of the

week, halting only to resist company-sized counterattacks that boiled out of the draws and defiles along the shoulders of the hill mass.

Company H, 5th Marines, reached the hill's geographic crest by the end of the day. Corporal Larry Brom's platoon commander directed him to deploy his squad in a defensive sector along a grove of pine trees, and Brom supervised his men as they dug night positions and selected interlocking fields of fire. Satisfied with their preparations, he took off his pack and unfolded his e-tool (entrenching tool) to dig his own hole for the night. The squad had been uncommonly fortunate, Brom reflected, having lost only one man to enemy fire throughout the fighting along the Naktong, at Wolmi-

do Island, and the advance east of Inchon. Here on Hill 296 their luck abruptly soured. A North Korean sniper shot Brom through the foot just after he knelt to unslung his pack. More fire sprayed the ridge crest. A gray-headed Korean "papa-san" scurried to Brom's side, scooped him up, and carried him piggyback down the reverse slope under intermittent fire to the battalion aid station. Brom gave him a fresh pack of cigarettes, all he possessed at the time. The old man bowed in gratitude, then returned back up the hill. For Corporal Brom, a two-year veteran of the 5th Marines, the war was over.

The incident of a Marine squad leader being picked off from long range at dusk by a North Korean sniper signified two developments. The NKPA had deployed front-line troops west of Seoul. Secondly, although the Marines had seized the crest of Hill 296, the North Koreans occupied defenses in depth throughout its massive fingers descending to the east and south.

The situation south of 3d Battalion, 5th Marines' advance validated these serious developments. On the 22d, the Korean Marine battalion encountered a furious fire from masked guns in every adjoining declivity each time it mounted an attack. Its objective was deceptive. Captain Fenton, operating on the Koreans' right flank, described Hill 56 as "a very insignificant looking low ridge that extended from 296 to 105-South." But the Koreans were advancing from low ground, through rice fields, exposed every step of the way to unrelenting artillery and mortar fire.

Murray directed Lieutenant Colonel Ransom M. Wood's supporting 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, to give the Koreans priority of

fires. He also asked General Smith for more air support. This was forthcoming—the 1st Marines were mopping up Yongdungpo and the 7th Marines were not yet engaged. Major Arnold A. Lund led his Death Rattlers of VMF-323 off the escort carrier *Badoeng Strait* (CVE 116), which the aviators lovingly nicknamed "The Bing-Ding," in 42 sorties in support of the 5th Marines, the heaviest operational rate since D-Day at Inchon. Lieutenant Colonel Norman J. Anderson, the airborne tactical air controller for Marine Aircraft Group 33 (MAG-33), directed the strikes, then led one himself, a spectacular direct hit on Hill 72 (by now "Nellie's Tit" to the 5th Marines) that knocked out one of Colonel Wol's few tanks. Additional air strikes came from the newly arrived, Kimpo-based Lancers of VMF-212, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Richard W. Wyczawski and Lieutenant Colonel Max J. Volcansek, Jr.'s night-fighting Tigers of VMF(N)-542.

This was spectacular close air support—unerringly directed and delivered—and many North Koreans met their deaths from the skies, but their withering crossfire never ceased. The Korean Marines were literally stopped in their tracks. The advance of Newton's 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, on the right flank fared better, but only in relative terms. Attacking across 2,000 yards of open terrain cost Companies A and C dearly. The Marines found that one particularly deadly NKPA outpost contained a U.S. Browning .50-caliber heavy machine gun, captured during the first week of the war. Company A lost its last two officer platoon commanders in the assault. The cost was endemic with the 5th Marines. Seventeen of the regiment's original 18 platoon commanders had been killed or

wounded in the first 50 days of combat in Korea, along with five of the six company commanders. Experienced non-commissioned officers took command of the platoons in Company A and continued the attack on Hill 105-South.

Captain "Ike" Fenton led Company B through Company A late in the day, then, leaning into a furious barrage from 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, joined Company C's dash for the crest of 105-South. It was a hollow victory. The battalion had suffered more than 40 casualties, and the enemy had mysteriously disappeared—"there were no bodies, not even any cartridge cases lying around," reported Fenton. Only later would the Marines discover the existence of a large cave on the hill's reverse slope, now a sanctuary for the former defenders, living and dead. In the meantime, punishing fire from the hills to the northeast began to rake the Marines exposed on the crest. As Heintz described Hill 105-South:

[The hill] was no vacation spot. Before the sun set, enemy heavy machine guns began to scythe back and forth over the hilltop, while antitank guns, accurate as a sniper's rifle and a lot deadlier, flash-banged in with high-velocity rounds that left no time for a man to duck.

This was an unwelcome development to Fenton, who had lost only one killed and six wounded in his assault on the hill. Now, despite digging new foxholes along the military crest, his men would suffer stiff casualties from their hostile neighbors. "We were pinned down by day and counter-attacked by night," he said. To make matters worse, the Korean Marines' lack of progress left 1st

Marine Close Air Support in the Recapture Of Seoul

“I believe the modern ‘Marine Air-Ground Team’ truly takes its departure from the crucible of the Korean War,” reflected retired Lieutenant General Robert P. Keller, USMC, in a recent interview. Keller took command of the VMF-214 Black Sheep after North Korean anti-aircraft gunners shot down Lieutenant Colonel Walter E. Lischeid over Seoul on 25 September 1950. Comparing this experience with his World War II service as a fighter pilot and squadron commander in the northern Solomons, Keller pointed to the emergence of close air support in the Korean War—“by Marines, for Marines”—as the principal difference. While ground Marines had enjoyed Marine air support at Peleliu, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa, it was never delivered more closely, nor more responsively than that provided by the F4U Corsairs of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing throughout the final four months of 1950, from the Pusan Perimeter through Inchon-Seoul to the Chosin Reservoir.

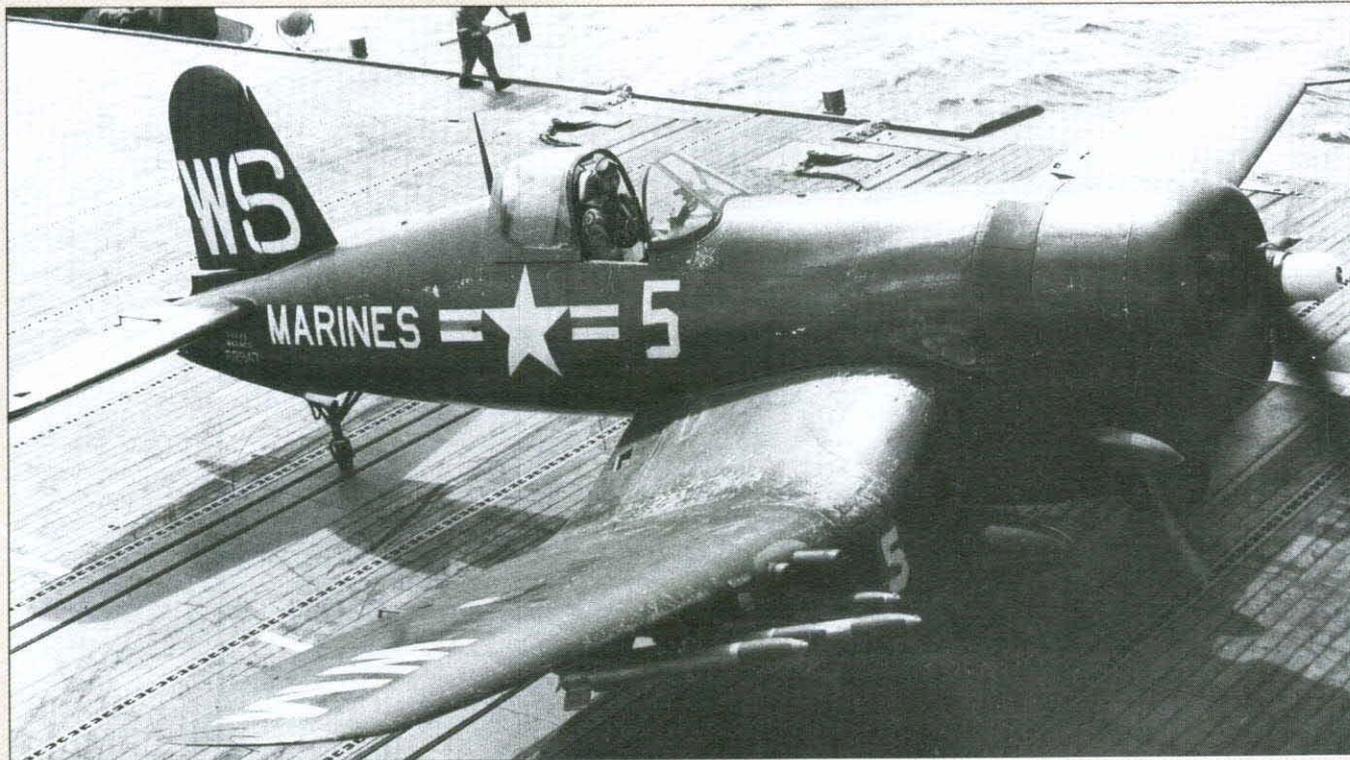
Major General Norman J. Anderson credited the success of this air support coordination to the hard work performed by Marine air and ground officers in the short interwar period. “The Marine Corps, having learned valuable lessons late in World War II, went to extremes in the late ‘40s to school its air and ground officers together and to structure its deployments as air-ground teams under a single command,” he said. “This new

structure served us well, then and ever since, beginning with the air-ground composition of the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade.”

Of the four Marine fighter squadrons and two night fighter squadrons supporting the 1st Marine Division during the 33-day period from 7 September to 9 October, the Death Rattlers of VMF-323, commanded by Major Arnold A. Lund, saw more days in action and flew the most combat sorties (784, according to the official Marine Corps history of the Seoul campaign). The record comes with a bittersweet irony. The squadron had been in the process of a mandated deactivation when the war erupted, its pilots reassigned, its planes transferred for preservation. Saved at the last moment from the draconian cutbacks of the Truman Administration, the Death Rattlers reassembled in record time. During the Seoul campaign they launched from the escort carrier *Badoeng Strait* (CVE 116) in the Sea of Japan on missions ranging from reconnaissance to propaganda leaflet drops, but their most frequent mission by an order of magnitude was close air support.

The Black Sheep pilots of VMF-214 flew off the escort carrier *Sicily* (CVE 118), commanded by the legendary naval aviator Captain John S. Thach, USN, a World War II ace who in 1941 invented the “Thach Weave” to counter the Japanese Zero’s technical superiority over

Photo Courtesy of LtCol Leo J. Ihli, USMC (Ret)



the F4F Wildcats. Thach became an enthusiastic advocate of Marine close air support. "It's like having artillery right over your shoulder!" he said. During the Seoul Campaign, Thach would often leave the bridge to attend the Black Sheep post-mission debriefings. "They took their work seriously. They really were the top pros in the business, I think, in the whole world. I had tremendous admiration for them."

So did the commanding general of the 1st Marine Division. "The effectiveness of the Marine air-ground team and close air support doctrine were reaffirmed with outstanding success," wrote Major General Oliver P. Smith after the liberation of Seoul.

For the troops on the ground, struggling to prevail against a well-armed enemy they could rarely see in the open, the firepower delivered by their fellow Marines overhead seemed awesome. Lieutenant Joseph R. Owen, the mortar platoon commander in Company B, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, described his first experience with a close air strike during the battalion's battle for a ridge south of Uijongbu:

The first of the gull-winged, dark blue Corsairs peeled from the circle and dove at the white smoke. Red tracers from its guns poured from the forward edges of the wings. The plane leveled off only yards above the ridgeline. We could see the pilot in the cockpit and the big, white Marine Corps emblem on the fuselage. . . . Then the [next] plane came in, this one dropping a pod of napalm. The black, coffin-shaped canister hit the ground, skipped a few feet above the surface, and exploded into a wall of flame that extended the length of the North Koreans' position. Two hundred yards below, we felt the shock of its explosion and a wave of searing heat.

While equally appreciative of the aviators' precision and valor, veteran infantry officer Captain Francis I. "Ike" Fenton, Jr., commanding Company B, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, suggested even deadlier aerial firepower that could uproot North Koreans who took shelter in caves or railroad tunnels, as the 5th Marines experienced in the extended battle for Hill 105-South. "The close air support in Korea by the Marine Corps was outstanding," Fenton said. "However, I would like to see Marine aviation come up with a rocket with a napalm head. This rocket would be great for getting into tunnels, or into caves....The Koreans showed great fear for fire bombs....I believe a big rocket, maybe a Tiny Tim, that could carry a fairly good quantity of napalm, would be an excellent weapon."

Major General Field Harris' 1st Marine Aircraft Wing also provided close air support to the 7th Infantry Division, the other major component in X Corps during

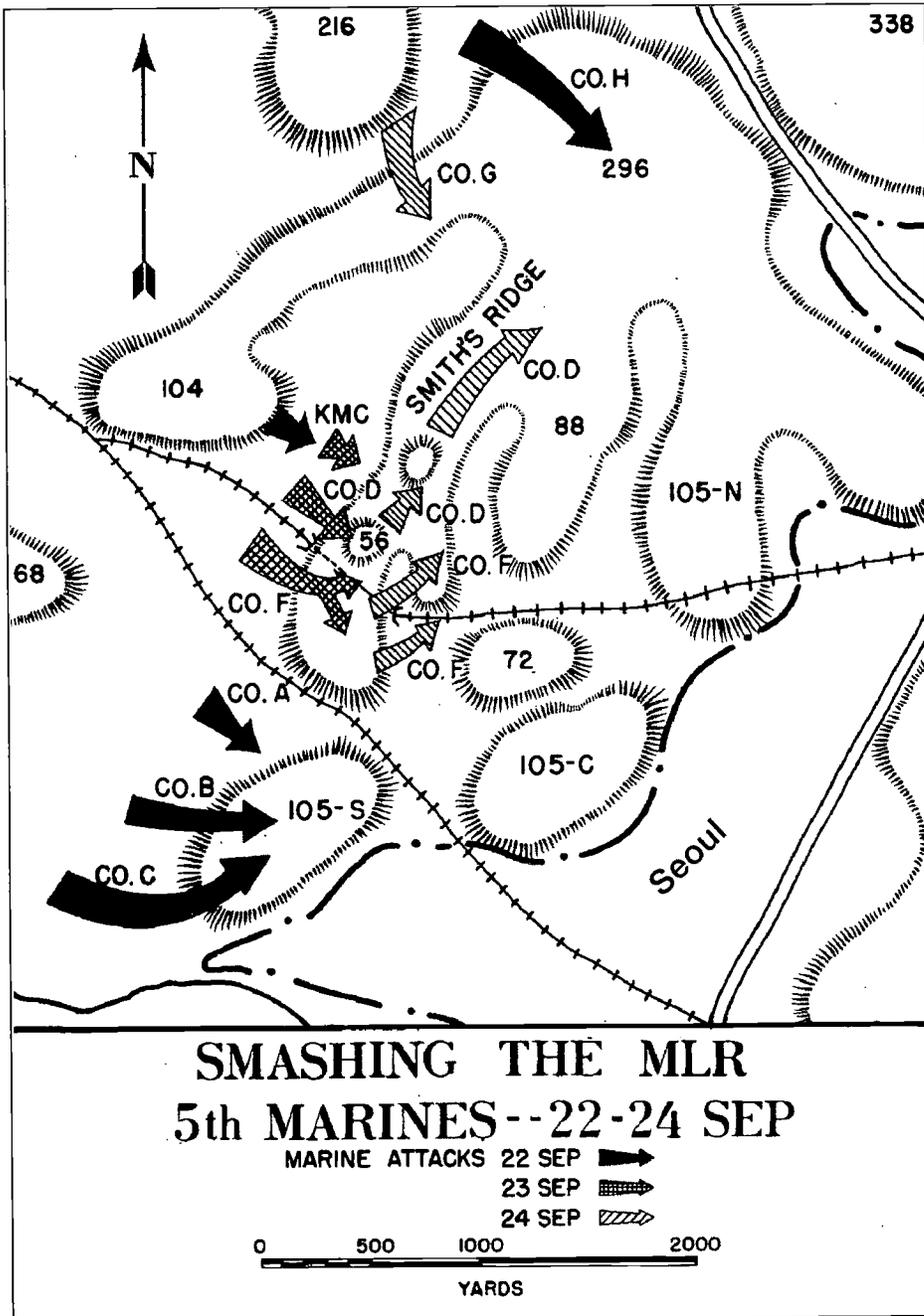
the Seoul campaign. Superbly assisted by Marine Captain Charles E. Crew's Far East Detachment, Air and Naval Gunfire Liaison Company, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing flew 1,024 sorties in support of the Army division in 57 days without a single casualty to front-line friendly troops, despite bombing and strafing runs as close as 200 yards. Brigadier General Homer W. Kiefer, USA, commanding the 7th Division's artillery, wrote an appreciative letter to the Commandant, stating: "The Marine system of control, in my estimation, approaches the ideal, and I firmly believe that a similar system should be adopted as standard for Army Divisions."

The Korean War as a whole would advance military aviation fully into the Jet Age, and soon the U.S. Air Force would wage epic air-to-air battles between its F-86 Sabers and the Soviet-built (and often Soviet-flown) MIG-15 fighters. Eventually the Marines would introduce in the skies over Korea their own jet fighter, the Grumman F9F-2 Panther, well armed for both air-to-air and air-to-ground missions. It was also the dawn of the Helicopter Age, and VMO-6 made military aviation history when it deployed to Pusan with the 1st Marine Brigade in August 1950 with four Sikorsky HO3S-1 helicopters.

By contrast the propeller-driven Corsair was now considered old and slow, hampered by a light payload capacity and too small a fuel tank. Landing the high-rise "U-birds" on the pitching deck of an escort carrier remained "adventurous," especially with the ship steaming westerly into a setting sun. "That bright red ball seemed to be sitting right on the fan-tail," General Keller recalled, "and it was difficult to make out the Landing Signal Officer, his signals, or even the deck." General Anderson cited another common hazard when trying to land an F4U into a setting sun: "The Corsair frequently managed to splatter the windshield with oil!"

Yet the Corsair in good hands proved highly reliable and durable for its age and the operating conditions. The hard-working maintenance crews of VMF-214 somehow averaged 95 percent availability of the Black Sheep Corsairs throughout the Pusan-Inchon-Seoul campaigns. And in the absence of a jet-propelled enemy air threat during those two months, the Corsair proved an invaluable contributor to the allied victories.

Certainly the ground Marines fighting towards Seoul or Uijongbu in the autumn of 1950 were very comfortable with the presence overhead of their protective Corsair, their familiar old "bent-wing widow-maker," the attack aircraft the Japanese in the previous war allegedly nicknamed "The Whistling Death." There is no record of what nickname the North Koreans may have used, but judging from the ever-increasing intensity of their ground fire the moment the F4Us swept into view, it was probable the Corsairs held their highest respect, as well.



Battalion, 5th Marines' left flank fully exposed. Newton had to peel a company back to the starting position, and the day ended on that sour note.

Lieutenant Colonel Murray ordered the Korean Marines to resume their assault on Hill 56 the morning of 23 September, but try as they might the ROK troops were stopped cold by heavy fire. No one then realized that Colonel Wol had established his main line of resistance along the low ridge that

passed through Hill 56. The insignificant-looking rise would become known as Smith's Ridge the following day.

Murray committed his reserve, ordering Lieutenant Colonel Roise to pass through the Koreans with 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, and continue the attack. Roise deployed Captain Uel D. Peters' Company F on the right and First Lieutenant H. J. "Hog Jaw" Smith's Company D on the left. Hugging the terrain and advancing by squad rushes,

both companies were able in time to approach the higher ground with acceptable casualties, yet both suffered heavily in the close-in fighting that followed. This took the balance of the afternoon.

George Newton's 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, had all it could handle that day and night just maintaining its exposed forward position on Hill 105-South. In two days spent clinging to the hill's fire-swept crest, Companies B and C suffered 24 casualties. "All these men were hit in their foxholes," said Captain Fenton. "There was no way to keep the enemy from delivering plunging fire right in on top of us."

Robert Taplett's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, also had its hands full throughout the 23d in repelling NKPA counterattacks against the crest of Hill 296 and trying to establish fire superiority against the enemy on a half-dozen circling hills. Clearly visible at one of these Communist strongpoints was a tall, fair-skinned officer with a charmed life, "Fireproof Phil." He may have been a Soviet military advisor, but whoever he was, Fireproof Phil exhibited unflinching disdain for Marine marksmanship. When riflemen, mortarmen, and artillerymen failed to knock him down, Taplett ordered up an M-26 Pershing tank. Sniping at Phil with a 90mm gun proved equally futile. The man dodged every round and kept exhorting his gunners to return fire until darkness shrouded the scene. The Marines never saw him again.

The 2d Battalion held Hill 56 throughout the night, but only by its collective fingernails. The assault companies were scattered and vulnerable. Lieutenant Colonel Max Volcansek's faithful night fighters circling overhead helped even the odds, but Marine artillery provided the greatest assistance. Wood's 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, fired all night long, illuminating the

scorched battlefield and interdicting potential NKPA assembly areas. "I can't say enough about the artillery support we received that night," said Second Lieutenant Tilton A. Anderson, whose platoon had been reduced to seven men in the afternoon's fighting. "It was magnificent."

Major General Almond, the X Corps commander, grew impatient with the 1st Marine Division's slow progress north of the Han. Pressured by MacArthur to recapture Seoul by the third-month anniversary of the invasion, and mindful that the North Koreans would be fortifying the capital to a greater extent each day, Almond urged O. P. Smith to deploy the 1st Marines well beyond Yongdungpo to attack Seoul from the southeast. Almond's operations officer reflected his commander's impatience, saying: "The Marines were exasperatingly deliberate at a time when rapid maneuver was imperative."

Smith disagreed. Seizing Inchon against rear-echelon troops had been a relative cakewalk. Things had changed. The tenacity and firepower of the North Koreans battling the 5th Marines reminded Smith more of the Japanese at Peleliu or Okinawa. Seizing Seoul would therefore not be quick and easy, Smith argued, and the last thing he wanted was to wage that battle with his major components divided by the Han and attacking towards each other. Almond acquiesced to this logic, but he also decided to bring in Colonel Charles E. Beauchamp's 32d Infantry of the Army's 7th Infantry Division to attack the city from the southeast. Seoul would no longer be the sole province of the 1st Marine Division. Smith agreed to move Puller's 1st Marines across the Han the next morning, then loan the 1st Amphibian Tractor



Sketch by John DeGrasse

The 5th Marines learned tank-infantry coordination under intense pressure in the Pusan Perimeter. Here, attacking North Korean positions along the ridges outside Seoul, a fire team keeps up with its assigned Pershing tank.

Battalion to X Corps to transport the 32d Infantry and the 17th ROK Regiment across the tidal river the following day.

Smith knew that Almond on his daily visits to the front-line regiments had taken to giving operational orders directly to Murray and Chesty Puller. In a heated private session, Smith asked Almond to knock it off. "If you'll give your orders to me," Smith said icily, "I'll see that they are carried out." Neither of Almond's division commanders, however, would successfully cure the commanding general of his impetuosity.

General Smith directed Puller to make his crossing slightly west of Yongdungpo, turn right, enter the city along the north bank, then execute a difficult pivot movement, wheeling the regiment north. Smith planned for Murray's 5th Marines to fight their way into the northwest sector of the city

while Litzenberg's 7th Marines sealed off the NKPA access routes along the entire northern boundary. It was an ambitious and complicated plan. But the first order of business remained the destruction of the *25th NKPA Brigade* in the fortified barrier ridges to the northwest.

The battle for these ridges reached its climax on 24 September. The day broke with a low-lying mist, as Companies D and F arrayed themselves for the assault. Artillery preparations began at 0610. Company F jumped off 20 minutes later, seized the eastern end of the troublesome railroad tunnel, paused to allow a Corsair strike by the Lancers of VMF-212 (who would establish a 1st Marine Aircraft Wing record of 46 sorties this date), then dashed across the low ground to capture the heavily fortified eastern finger. This represented an encouraging

start, but Company F was spent, having suffered more than a hundred casualties around the south edge of Hill 56 in the past 24 hours. Among the dead was Corporal Welden D. Harris, who had killed three North Korean soldiers in hand-to-hand fighting and been twice wounded the day before. Company F had given its all. Now it was all up to "Hog Jaw" Smith and Company D.

The recapture of Seoul would obviously require a team effort—Marines and Army, ground forces and air squadrons. But the keys to Seoul's access really came from two Marine rifle companies, Captain Robert Barrow's Company A, 1st Marines, at Yongdungpo during 21-22 September, and Captain H. J. Smith's Company D, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, during the 23d-24th.

Company D faced the greater challenge. Captain Smith had to attack about 750 yards to the

northeast across an open saddle, seize an extremely well-defended knoll, and continue beyond along an increasingly wooded ridge. This contested real estate became Smith's Ridge. Easily a thousand NKPA troops defended this terrain, well covered by the same sharp-shooting gunners who had been making life so miserable for the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, on Hill 105-South.

Smith began the day with a good-sized rifle company, but the mission required a battalion. Lieutenant Colonel Roise—who would join the ranks of the wounded this day but refuse evacuation—withheld Captain Samuel Jaskilka's Company E to exploit Smith's expected breakthrough and roll up the last hills to the east.

Captain Smith sensed what he faced and relied heavily on supporting arms, adding to the artillery fire missions and air strikes his own machine guns, mortars,

and rocket launchers. Twice he punched ahead; twice he had to withdraw with heavy casualties. Nor did a flank attack succeed. An 11-man squad worked east then attacked north. The North Koreans shot them down to a man. Abruptly Smith's company was down to 44 Marines, including the 60mm mortar section, now out of ammunition and doubling as riflemen.

By this time, the 11th Marines had been bombarding the ridgelines and reverse slopes of the objective for more than 24 hours. Ten Marine Corsairs from the Death Rattlers had rotated on station since sunrise, bombing, strafing, and dropping napalm canisters along the objective. Yet Colonel Wol's antiaircraft gunners had taken a toll: five of the Corsairs received extensive damage. Smith knew he was down to his final opportunity.

Smith called for a four-plane firing run, asking that the fourth Corsair execute a low but dummy pass to keep the enemy in their holes until the last possible moment. Major Lund's Corsair pilots flew this mission beautifully. As the third plane roared overhead Smith leapt to his feet screaming "follow me!" His Marines swept forward just beneath the last Corsair's low-level, ear-splitting run.

"Over they went," described Captain Nicholas A. Canzona of the engineer battalion in a 1956 *Marine Corps Gazette* account, "yelling wildly and firing their rifles, carbines, and BARs [Browning automatic rifles]. They entered upon a scene of carnage stretching out in every direction. Driving forward through the human wreckage, they shot and bayoneted anything that moved."

"Hog Jaw" Smith died at the bitter end, becoming Company D's

All it took was one North Korean prisoner of war to whip a pistol or grenade from under his loose clothing and attack his captor. Thereafter the Marines took no chances. Naked prisoners proceed under armed guard past a destroyed T-34 tank to a prison camp.

National Archives Photo (USA) 111-SC349027



36th fatality of the assault. Seizing Smith's Ridge in fact cost the company 178 casualties of the 206 men who had advanced across the valley the previous day. But the reverse slopes of the complex looked like a charnel house. The surviving Marines began to count the windrows of NKPA bodies, most blasted hideously by Marine 105mm howitzers, Corsairs, and mortars. They reached 1,500 and had to stop counting; the task was too gruesome.

Company D had knocked down the center door to the *25th NKPA Brigade's* defenses, but more savage fighting remained to clear the final path to Seoul. Captain Jaskilka's fresh Company E moved through the gap between the remnants of Companies D and F, but encountered an extensive minefield and stubborn resistance on Nelly's Tit and Hill 105-Central beyond. The division engineers cleared the mines, but ridding the last hills of their die-hard defenders took Jaskilka another 24 hours. Lieutenant Colonel Taplett's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, had a correspondingly difficult time snuffing out Hill 105-North. In close combat reminiscent of the Central Pacific in World War II, most of the enemy chose to die in place. Colonel Wol's fate remained unknown, presumed dead.

The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, managed to maintain its precarious hold on the crest of 105-South while at the same time dispatching a large combat patrol down to the river to cover the crossing of Puller's 1st Marines. The nefarious hill would still represent a hornet's nest to all would-be occupants. It would take a combined assault by the 1st and 5th Marines and an armored column to close the cave and cut down the final defenders later that day.

The 5th Marines' three-day bat-



National Archives Photo (USA) 111-SC349090

A wounded Marine is carried down from the front lines on the ridges northwest of Seoul. The 5th Marines' three-day battle for the ridges made the uneventful crossing of the Han by the 1st Marines possible.

tle for the northwestern ridges made possible a surprisingly uneventful tactical crossing of the Han by the 1st Marines. The 2d and 3d Battalions crossed by LVTs; the 1st Battalion and Puller's command group made the crossing in DUKW amphibious trucks. NKPA opposition proved negligible. Lieutenant Colonel Henry P. "Jim" Crowe, who had created order out of chaos seven years earlier on Tarawa's Red Beach Three, swiftly deployed his 1st Shore Party Battalion along the landing site to keep troops and cargo moving inland, avoiding a dangerous bottleneck. Puller hustled his battal-

ions eastward into the city, growling at the long time it would take his Pershing tanks to cross at the Haengju ferry further downstream and work their way back along the north bank.

General Smith finally had all three of his infantry regiments north of the Han and roughly in line. This same day, Lieutenant Colonel Litzenberg's 7th Marines experienced its first significant combat against an NKPA outpost to the northwest of Seoul. For Second Lieutenant Joseph R. Owen, commanding the 60mm mortar section in Company B, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, the moment

Marine Combat Vehicles in the Seoul Campaign

The Marines mostly fought the first months of the Korean War with hand-me-down weapons and equipment from World War II stockpiles. In the case of combat vehicles, however, the Corps invested in two critical upgrades that provided a tactical edge in the recapture of Seoul: the M-26 Pershing medium tank and the LVT-3C amphibian tractor.

The sturdy M-4 Sherman tank had served the Marines well in the Pacific War from Tarawa through Okinawa, and by 1950 the tank battalions in the Fleet Marine Force were still equipped with the M-4A3-E8 "Easy Eight" version, featuring a 105mm gun. Yet the Sherman's success in the Pacific War was deceptive. Japanese tanks had provided no particular threat, the vehicle's narrow track width and high ground pressure had posed mobility problems in marginal terrain, and the Sherman's notoriously thin side and rear armor protection had proven inadequate against the enemy's 47mm antitank guns. The Sherman's prospects did not look favorable against the battle-proven T-34 medium tanks that the Soviet Union exported to client states like North Korea at the onset of the Cold War.

The Marines had foresightedly invested in the Army's acquisition of the M-26 Pershing 90mm-gun tank late in World War II. Their vehicles did not arrive in time for combat validation in Okinawa; nor could the postwar Corps afford to place them into operation, so the Pershings sat for several years in contingency reserve at the Marine supply base in Barstow, California.

When the Korean War erupted, the Commandant

ordered the 1st Tank Battalion to deploy with the new Pershings in lieu of its Sherman "Easy Eights." The hasty transition was not pretty, especially in the case of the reinforced company assigned to the 1st Brigade for its early-July deployment. Few tankers had the opportunity for hands-on operation and maintenance training. The gunners were lucky to be able to fire two rounds each—and they had to use the more abundantly available 90mm antiaircraft rounds instead of the new but scarce high-velocity armor-piercing munitions. And since none of the new Marine Pershings were configured as flamethrowers or dozer-blade variants, the battalion sailed with an awkward mixture of old Shermans along with the M-26s, the making of a logistical nightmare.

The ragged transition made for an inauspicious combat debut for the Marine M-26s in Korea. Operating in the Pusan Perimeter southwest corner, one Pershing broke through the planking of a critical bridge, heightening fears that its 46-ton weight would prove too heavy for Korea's road network. A second vehicle threw a track while fording a stream, blocking the crossing. Things improved. The Marine Pershings established their dominance in a head-to-head engagement against T-34s in the first battle of the Naktong Bulge, then continued to sweep the field as the 1st Marine Division advanced on Seoul. The Sherman blade and flame variants also contributed materially, especially in the close engagement waged by Baker Company's tanks against cave-infested Hill 105-South on 25 September.

A Marine LVT-3C Bushmaster from the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion transfers troops to an LCVP.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A162956





National Archives Photo (USA) 111-SC348713

In the battle of downtown Seoul, the Pershings of Lieutenant Colonel Harry T. Milne's 1st Tank Battalion provided the crucial edge, time and again crashing through the North Korean barricades despite intense fire from the enemy's ubiquitous 45mm antitank guns. The battalion's War Diary for September reported the destruction of 13 NKPA tanks (which may have included several 76mm self-propelled guns) and 56 antitank guns or anti-aircraft guns being fired horizontally at the approaching Pershings. The battalion lost five Pershings and one each of the flame and dozer Shermans in the recapture of Seoul.

The LVT-3C Bushmaster proved to be another smart investment for the Marines. Borg Warner's original LVT-3 had developed slowly during World War II, reaching the Fleet Marine Force out of numerical sequence and more than a year behind rival Ford Motor Company's LVT-4. Borg Warner built nearly 3,000 Bushmasters for the Marine Corps. The first vehicles arrived in time for the Okinawa invasion in the spring of 1945.

The Bushmaster was a welcome addition to the Marines' ship-to-shore team. Like its FMC predecessor, the Bushmaster came with a hinged rear ramp and sufficient cargo space to accommodate either a jeep or a 105mm howitzer. By mounting its twin Cadillac V-8 engines along the sides of both hulls, the Borg Warner engineers provided the Bushmaster with a cargo capacity that exceeded the LVT-4's by 3,000 pounds.

Faced with the need to upgrade their amphibian tractor fleet during the austere late 1940s, the Marines opted to modernize 1,200 low-mileage LVT-3s by raising the sides, installing aluminum covers over the troop/cargo compartment, and installing a small machine gun turret atop the cab. The Marines designated their newly mod-

ified vehicle the LVT-3C, and it proved remarkably well suited for both salt-water and fresh-water operations throughout the Korean peninsula. (The Republic of China Marine Corps employed American-built LVT-3Cs on Taiwan for a quarter of a century after the Korean War).

The Bushmasters of Lieutenant Colonel Erwin F. Wann, Jr.'s 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion delivered Marines ashore at Inchon, transported each regiment plus the Army and ROK regiments across the Han under fire, and served as armored personnel carriers and cargo vehicles overland.

The 1st Marine Division was similarly well-supported by the versatile DUKWs of the 1st Amphibian Truck Company, an element of Lieutenant Colonel Olin L. Beall's 1st Motor Transport Battalion. (DUKW is not an acronym but an arcane industrial code used in World War II meaning an all-wheel-drive utility vehicle with twin rear wheel axles manufactured in 1942—"DUCKS" to Marines!)

Unfortunately the Marines fought the Inchon-Seoul campaign without the 1st Armored Amphibian Battalion. General Smith left the battalion with the division's rear echelon in Kobe as a temporary repository for the 500-plus, 17-year-olds ruled ineligible for combat by the Secretary of the Navy on the eve of the Inchon landing. The X Corps commander partially offset this lost capability by attaching the Army's Company A, 56th Amphibian Tractor Battalion, to the Marines. The Army company's 18 LVTA-5s equipped with snub-nosed 75mm howitzers spearheaded each river crossing, thereby proving themselves worthy recipients of the Presidential Unit Citation subsequently awarded the 1st Marine Division.



Painting by Col Charles H. Waterhouse, USMCR (Ret)

"First Firefight Above Seoul, B/1/7" portrays the intensity of night action that greeted the 7th Marines as they advanced to cut the roads leading north from Seoul.

was unforgettable:

The North Korean mortars came. Spouts of earth and black smoke leaped about us, laced with flame and screaming shrapnel. The leaves from the bean plants spun in flurries, and the ground shook. I was suddenly in the midst of a frenzied storm of noise.

By the nature of their northern mission the 7th Marines would have scant contact with the other elements of the 1st Marine Division in the fight for Seoul. The other two regiments, however, would experience a dangerous interface, the 1st Marines attacking north through the heart of the city, the 5th Marines coming in from the northwest.

Concerned with the inherent risks facing these converging forces, Lieutenant Colonel Raymond Murray boarded a helicopter late in the afternoon of 24

September and flew to Chesty Puller's command post to coordinate the final assault. It was the first time the two commanders had ever met. Characteristically, Puller inquired of Murray the extent of the casualties he had sustained fighting for the northwest ridges. "He determined how good a fighter you were by how many casualties you had," Murray recalled. Murray's grim accounting of the 5th Marines' losses during the preceding three days made even Chesty Puller blink. The men then got down to work.

This was the time and setting when Captain Robert Barrow's Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, seized Hill 79 and raised the first flag in Seoul proper. The 1st Marine Division had entered the capital.

The Fight for Seoul

Seoul in 1950 was home to more than a million people, the fifth largest city in the Orient. While

several hundred thousand civilian residents had fled the capital at the outbreak of the North Korean invasion, tens of thousands remained. Chesty Puller had ruefully predicted to a news correspondent that the North Koreans would defend the city in such a manner as to force the attacking Marines to destroy it. The ensuing three days would validate Puller's prediction. British correspondent Reginald Thompson would write despairingly: "Few people can have suffered so terrible a liberation."

X Corps launched its assault on Seoul proper the morning of 25 September. Lieutenant Colonel Erwin F. Wann, Jr.'s 2d Amphibian Tractor Battalion displaced during the night to Sansa-ri, a former ferry crossing 5,000 yards east of Yongdungpo. There, reinforced by Army LVTs of Company A, 56th Amphibian Tractor Battalion, the Marines embarked the 2d Battalion, 32d Infantry. Following a brief artillery and mortar barrage, the Amtracs plunged into the Han, shook off a few 76mm rounds, and at 0630 disembarked the soldiers on the far bank. Four Corsairs from Lieutenant Colonel Lischeid's VMF-214 Black Sheep squadron off the *Sicily* worked just ahead of the beachhead, coordinated by Marine tactical air control parties provided the 7th Division for the occasion.

The Army regiment completed the crossing by mid-afternoon and seized South Mountain, the 900-foot eminence (the Koreans call Nam-san) dominating southeastern Seoul. Late in the day, the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion delivered the 17th ROK Infantry across in trace, an exposed crossing that attracted considerably more NKPA long-range fires. Yet by nightfall all of General Almond's maneuver elements were in place north of the river.

General O. P. Smith worried that

the presence of the two additional regiments on his right flank would create dangerous crossfires and accidental meeting engagements, but the Army units maintained their positions on and around Nam-san, defending against major counterattacks, and later assaulted towards the east, well clear of the Marines' zone of action. No significant control problems developed.

At 0700 on the 25th, the 1st Marine Division kicked off its assault on Seoul. The plan of attack developed by Smith and his operations officer, Colonel Alpha L. Bowser, Jr., placed the biggest burden on the 1st Marines. Puller's regiment would attack to the north through the heart of the city on a mile-and-a-half front, bordered by Nam-san on the right and the Duk

Soo Palace of the ancient rulers of Korea, on the left. Smith assigned the 1st Marines Objective Able, the high ground just beyond the city's northeastern limit, about six miles from Captain Barrow's forward position on Hill 79. Murray's 5th Marines would attack the northwest section of the capital, likewise on a mile-and-a-half front, seize Government House and Objective Baker, the high ground overlooking the Seoul-Uijongbu road from their dearly won positions along the Hill 296 complex. Litzenberg's 7th Marines would seize Objective Charlie, the high ground along the Seoul-Kaesong road six miles outside the city center. Smith continued his reinforcement of the 1st and 5th Marines with one battalion each of Korean

Marines and assigned the balance of the Korean regiment as division reserve. Smith also attached the division Reconnaissance Company to the 5th Marines to screen the high ground along its left flank. The 3d Battalion, 187th Airborne, under the operational control of the 1st Marine Division, would protect the Marines' western flank below the Han.

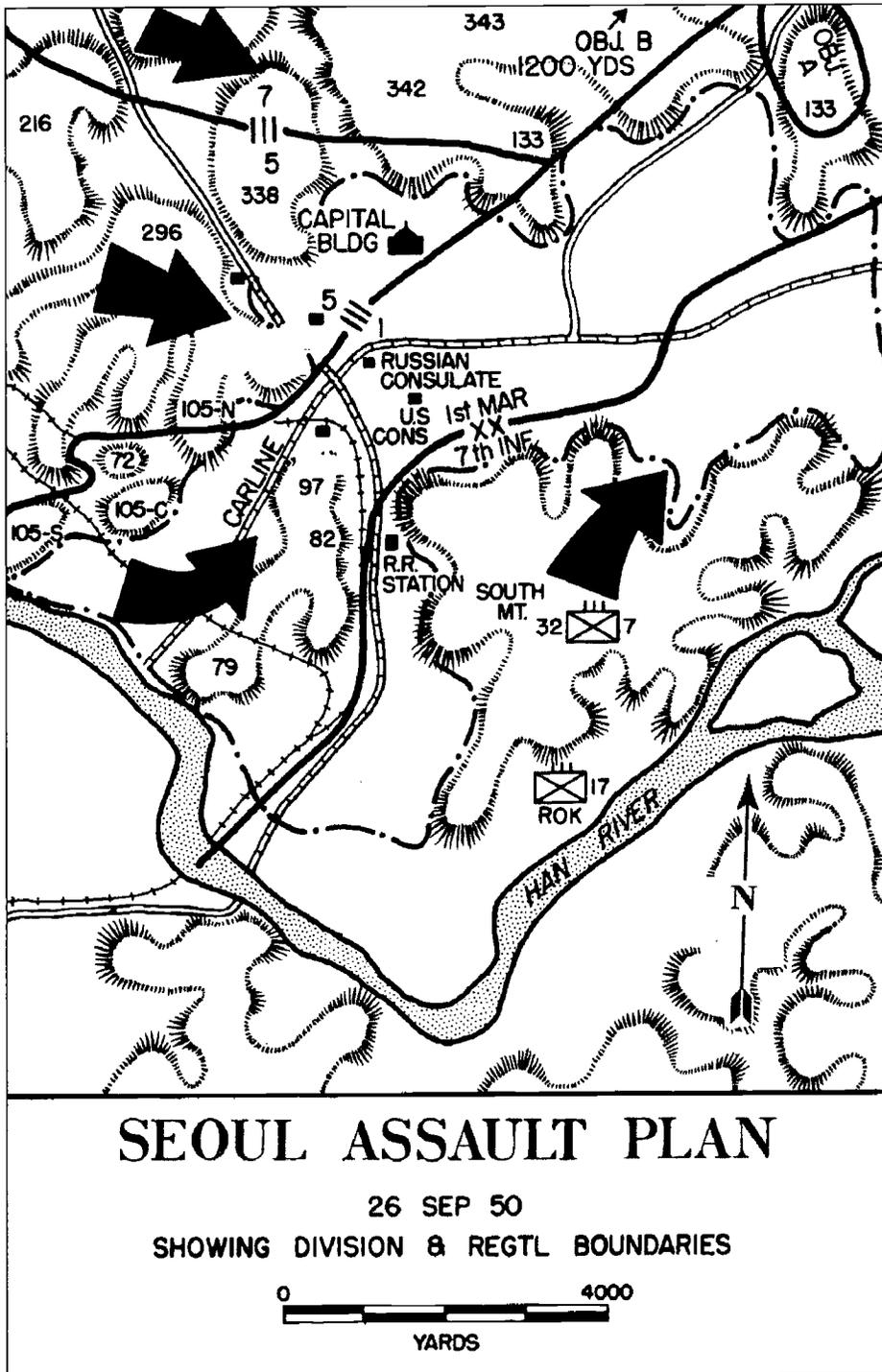
Colonel James H. Brower concentrated most of the howitzers of his 11th Marines in firing positions on the south bank of the Han near Yongdungpo. The big 155mm howitzers of the Army's 96th Field Artillery deployed nearby, ready to support either the Marines or the Army, as needed.

The action for the 5th Marines on 25 September was largely *deja*

The Marines fought two enemies in downtown Seoul—those who defended behind the barricades and the snipers seemingly hidden in every other window.

Photo by Frank Noel, Associated Press





vu, the unfinished and still costly business of eliminating the residual positions of the 25th NKPA Brigade along the eastern fingers of Hill 296 as described earlier. Here on two adjoining knobs, Company E, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, and Companies H and I of 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, engaged the North Koreans in bloody close combat, again most

ably supported by Marine Corsairs. By now the 19th NKPA Antiaircraft Artillery Regiment had learned how to deal with the terrifying strafing runs by Marine Corsairs. Increasingly, those anti-aircraft gunners who survived the northwest ridge battles would turn Seoul into a "flak trap." September 25th reflected this new lethality, a particularly costly day for Marine

Corsair squadron commanders. With the escort carrier *Sicily* and its embarked VMF-214 Black Sheep scheduled to rotate back to Inchon for repairs and resupply that afternoon, Lieutenant Colonel Walter Lischeid led the final sorties in support of the Army's river crossings. A North Korean gunner hit his Corsair over Seoul. Lischeid tried to nurse his crippled plane to Kimpo field but crashed in flames two miles shy of the airstrip.

In other aerial action on the 25th, Lieutenant Colonel Richard Wyczawski, commanding the Lancers of VMF-212, was wounded and shot down by hostile fire. So was Lieutenant Colonel Max Volcansek, commanding the night-fighting Tigers of VMF(N)-542, who barely bailed out before his plane crashed near Kimpo. Marines flying Sikorsky HO3S-1 helicopters from Marine Observation Squadron 6 (VMO-6) rescued both officers—Volcansek's rescue helicopter pulled him out of a rice paddy in a record six minutes elapsed time following notification—but all hands regretted the death of Lieutenant Colonel Lischeid.

Major Robert P. Keller, who had commanded three squadrons in the Pacific War, took over the Black Sheep. When a fellow aviator remarked, "Now you are the acting commanding officer," Keller retorted, "Acting, hell—I'm serious." Keller maintained the VMF-214 commitment to launching five-plane strikes every two hours. The Black Sheep pilots first plastered the ridge from which the anti-aircraft battery had fired on Lischeid, then spent the remainder of the day delivering ordnance against targets ranging from railroad yards in the North Korean capital of Pyongyang to enemy troop concentrations in downtown Seoul, the other capital.

The nature of Marine close air support changed as the campaign entered the streets of Seoul. As Lieutenant Colonel Norman Anderson subsequently noted: "Bombing by its very nature gave way to the more easily accurate techniques of rocketing and strafing. . . . I feel we became increasingly aware of the need to avoid what we now call collateral damage." The Corsair's 20mm cannon could deliver a hellacious strafing run, but the "bent-wing U-Birds" could only carry 800 rounds, limiting the extent of this application. Anderson wistfully recalled his days of flying Marine Corps B-25s in the Philippines late in World War II, "a memorable strafing with 14 forward-firing, .50-caliber machine guns. Many's the time we might have put them to good use supporting Marines in the streets of Yongdungpo and Seoul. Alas, they were not carrier suitable."

On the ground in Seoul on 25 September progress came grudgingly to the 1st Marines despite its

A Corsair flight on a close air support mission against targets in North Korea and around the South Korean capital.

early start. Puller passed Ridge's 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, through Sutter's 2d Battalion, while, to Ridge's right, Hawkins adjusted the 1st Battalion's positions along Hill 79 to accommodate the 90-degree pivot to the northeast. This done, the regiment advanced methodically, Ridge and Hawkins abreast, Sutter in close reserve. The North Koreans resisted savagely, and Puller looked often for his missing tanks, still completing their long run east from the Haengju ferry crossing the previous afternoon.

Fresh minefields and sudden ambushes slowed Captain Bruce F. Williams' tank company, reinforced by a platoon each of infantry and combat engineers, once they crossed the river. As the armored column approached Seoul they drew fire from the southeast corner of Hill 105-South, still unconquered despite Captain Fenton's seizure of the crest three days earlier. This time, finally, the Marines had a force on the ground with the firepower, mobility, and

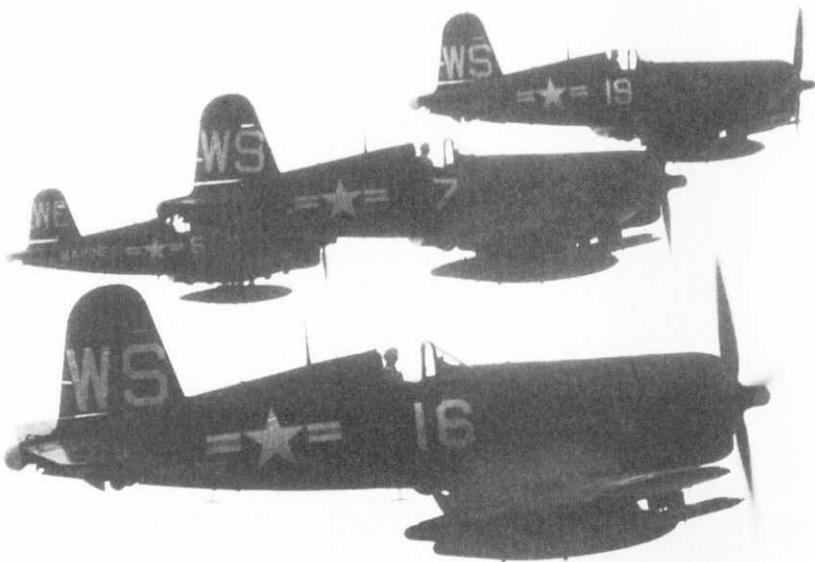
shock action to finish the job. The tankers and engineers blew away a line of shacks blocking the base of the hill, thereby discovering the hidden cave mouth, and moved a flame tank up to the opening. Sensibly, the North Koreans began to surrender, one or two at first, then more than 100, outnumbering their captors.

The Marines to this point routinely made each prisoner of war strip buck naked, but they were shocked to find two women among this crew. Someone helpfully provided two pairs of long johns for the occasion, but the American press had a field day with the matter later, once the women got to the rear and complained. But it was a no-win situation for the Marines. The NKPA occupants of that cave had killed Marines from five different battalions; they were quite fortunate to escape the flame tank's horrors. As it was, other NKPA troops nearby had no intention of surrendering to the Marines. As Staff Sergeant Arthur Farrington reported:

The enemy wounded were hoisted on board the tanks, 129 bare asses were lined up three abreast [between the vehicles] . . . when about 40-50 [North] Koreans jumped up to the left of the railroad tracks. They had been lying their doggo behind us all the time. We killed them with rifle, machine gun, and 90mm fire as they went across the paddies.

Captain Williams was understandably exultant as he led his column with its rich prizes into Seoul, but when he tried to recount the unit's success at 105-South to Chesty Puller, the colonel cut him short, saying, "I'm not

Photo courtesy of LtCol Leo J. Ihli, USMC (Ret)





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A3380

Marine riflemen and tanks advance north under fire along Seoul's principal boulevard.

interested in your sea stories young man. You're late. We've got fish to fry."

Puller sorely needed the tanks. The North Koreans defending Seoul lacked the numbers to occupy every building or side street, so they concentrated instead on the major avenues and thoroughfares. By now each significant intersection in the city featured an improvised barricade, typically protected by rice bags filled with sand or rubble, piled eight feet high by five feet wide, and defended by anti-tank guns, heavy machine guns, and mines. Marine historian Colonel Robert D. Heinl, Jr., likened the scene to 19th century France: "Every intersection was barricaded after the fashion of the Paris Commune: carts, earth-filled rice bags . . . furniture, and rubble." The Soviet Union's official newspaper *Pravda* compared the situation in Seoul to the Russian defense of

Stalingrad in World War II: "There is firing behind every stone."

The axis of advance of Lieutenant Colonel Ridge's 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, was directly up Ma Po Boulevard towards the embassies and principal government buildings. Major Edwin Simmons later compared his company's advance to "attacking up Pennsylvania Avenue towards the Capitol in Washington, D.C." The boulevard was straight and wide—"once a busy, pleasant avenue lined with sycamores, groceries, wine and tea shops," according to Heinl. Trolley car tracks ran down the middle. Now NKPA barricades mushroomed at each intersection. Enemy snipers fired from blown out windows. Other NKPA troops lobbed Molotov cocktails from the rooftops onto the Marine tanks in the street below. And throughout all this mayhem fled thousands and thousands of terrified Korean

refugees. Mines accounted for appalling casualties among them.

At one point Captain Robert Barrow halted his company along a particularly advantageous rise of ground overlooking the railroad yards and passenger station. For once he could clearly see the enemy troops moving into new positions, building fresh barricades, and preparing future ambushes. He called in artillery and mortar fire, employed his machine guns and rocket launchers, enjoying his dominant position. Strangely, he said, Lieutenant Colonel Hawkins kept urging him to advance. "We thought we were having a turkey shoot," Barrow recalled. "Nobody getting hurt and [us] knocking the hell out of them," but Hawkins said, "What's holding you up—move out!" When Barrow tried to explain his favorable position, Hawkins replied bluntly: "Unless you want a new

Street Fighting, 1950

Marines battling their way through the contested boulevards and back alleys of Seoul in September 1950 did so without benefit of the modern-day doctrine and training for “military operations in urban terrain.” Street fighting at that time was an uncommon Marine experience. There had been a bloody two-day fight in downtown Vera Cruz, Mexico, in 1914, where Major Smedley D. Butler and Lieutenant Colonel Wendell C. “Whispering Buck” Neville led their men with axes and bayonets in attacking through the walls of the row-houses. Thirty years later, a different generation of Marines fought the Japanese through the burning streets of Garapan, Saipan, and again on a larger scale in the spring of 1945 amid the rubble of Naha, Okinawa.

But Seoul dwarfed Vera Cruz, Garapan, and Naha combined. An enormous, sprawling city dominated by steep hills, awash with terrified refugees, and stoutly defended by more than 20,000 North Koreans, Seoul constituted the largest, single objective ever assigned the

National Archives Photo (USA) 111-SC-351392



Marines. Hue City in 1968 would take the Marines longer to recapture, but the casualties incurred at Hue, bad as they were, would not total half those sustained by the 1st Marine Division at Seoul.

Street fighting in Seoul involved forcibly uprooting the NKPA troops from either their roadblock barricades or their isolated strongpoints within or atop the buildings. Both required teamwork: engineers, tanks, and infantry for the barricades (often supported by artillery or Corsair strikes), and rifle squads supported by rocket launchers and scout-sniper teams against the strongpoints.

Door-to-door fighting proved to be as tense and exhausting in 1950 as it had been in Vera Cruz in 1914. As Private First Class Morgan Brainard of the 1st Marines recalled the action: “The tension from these little forays whittled us pretty keen . . . I think if one’s own mother had suddenly leapt out in front of us she would have been cut down immediately, and we all would probably have cheered with the break in tension.” Brainard’s company commander, Captain Robert H. Barrow, told a Headquarters Marine Corps tactics review board in 1951 that he quickly came to value the 3.5-inch rocket launcher in applications other than antitank defense. “We employed it in a very effective manner in Yongdungpo and in Seoul in the destruction of houses that had enemy in them. In many instances [our] 3.5 [gunners] simply shot at some of these fragile houses killing all the occupants.”

The presence of so many civilian refugees in the streets and rubble vastly complicated the battle and necessitated extraordinary measures to ensure target identification and limit indiscriminate firing. Whenever troops stopped to reorganize “children appeared among them,” observed the *Life* magazine photographer David Douglas Duncan. “Children gentle and tiny and wide-eyed as they fastened themselves to the men who first ignored them . . . then dug them their own little foxholes and expertly adapted helmets to fit their baby heads.” Enemy snipers, mines, and long-range, heavy caliber antitank rifles took a toll among Marines and civilians alike. The ancient city became a ghastly killing ground.

battalion commander, you will attack at once.” Barrow managed to convince Hawkins to come and see the situation for himself. Hawkins marveled at the abundance of targets under direct observation: “Get more mortars in there—get more artillery.”

Yet Hawkins remained agitated,

and Barrow soon saddled up his gunners and forward observers and plunged forward downhill into the maze of streets and railroad tracks (3d Battalion, 1st Marines, had Ma Po Boulevard; 1st Battalion, 1st Marines’ axis of advance was less straightforward).

Barrow and other junior officers in

the 1st Marines later concluded that the pressure to advance had come down several echelons, possibly from the Tokyo headquarters of General MacArthur in his desire to recapture the capital by the symbolic third-month anniversary of its loss. “Who knows?” Barrow asked rhetorically. “Puller was



Photo by Frank Noel, Associated Press

The North Koreans built their barricades with burlap bags filled with dirt, rubble, or rice. Each position took the Marines an average of 45 to 60 minutes to overcome. Here a Marine rifleman scampers through a recently abandoned barricade during heavy fighting in Seoul's downtown business district.

being pushed by somebody in division. The division was being pushed by someone in Tenth Corps, and the corps was being pushed by the man himself, or someone speaking for him, back in Tokyo."

Top-level pressure notwithstanding, the two lead battalions of the 1st Marines could advance only 2,000 yards on the 25th. "Our advance this day was a foot-by-foot basis," said Lieutenant Colonel Ridge. North Korean mines knocked out two of Captain Williams' Pershing tanks; other vehicles sustained multiple hits from direct fire weapons. Ridge hunkered in for the night along Hill 97; Hawkins occupied Hill 82 to Ridge's immediate right rear. Company G and Weapons Company of 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, occupied the forward position, a roadblock protecting a key bridge on Ma Po Boulevard.

The front lines were jagged; the North Koreans occupied several worrisome salients in close proximity.

Ridge directed Major Edwin H. Simmons, commanding Weapons Company, to coordinate the battalion's forward defenses. Simmons fortified the roadblock with two rifle squads, a section of his Browning heavy machine guns, a rocket squad, and a 75mm recoilless rifle section borrowed from the regimental antitank company. After supervising his attached engineers as they laid a series of anti-tank mines on the bridge, Simmons established his observation post (OP) in the cellar of an abandoned house on a rise to the left rear of the roadblock, protected by four additional heavy machine guns. His 81mm mortar platoon occupied uncommonly close firing positions 150 yards rearward, connected by phone

Under the watchful gaze of Joseph Stalin and Kim Il Sung, Marines crouch behind a barricade as enemy snipers resist their advance.

Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine



wire to the OP. These were reasonable precautions given the volatile nature of the street fighting during the day and the nearby reentrants occupied by the North Koreans. Parts of the city still burned from the day's fighting, but the streets seemed quiet.

Then, shortly after 2000, a flash message from X Corps arrived in the division command post. Aerial observers had just reported

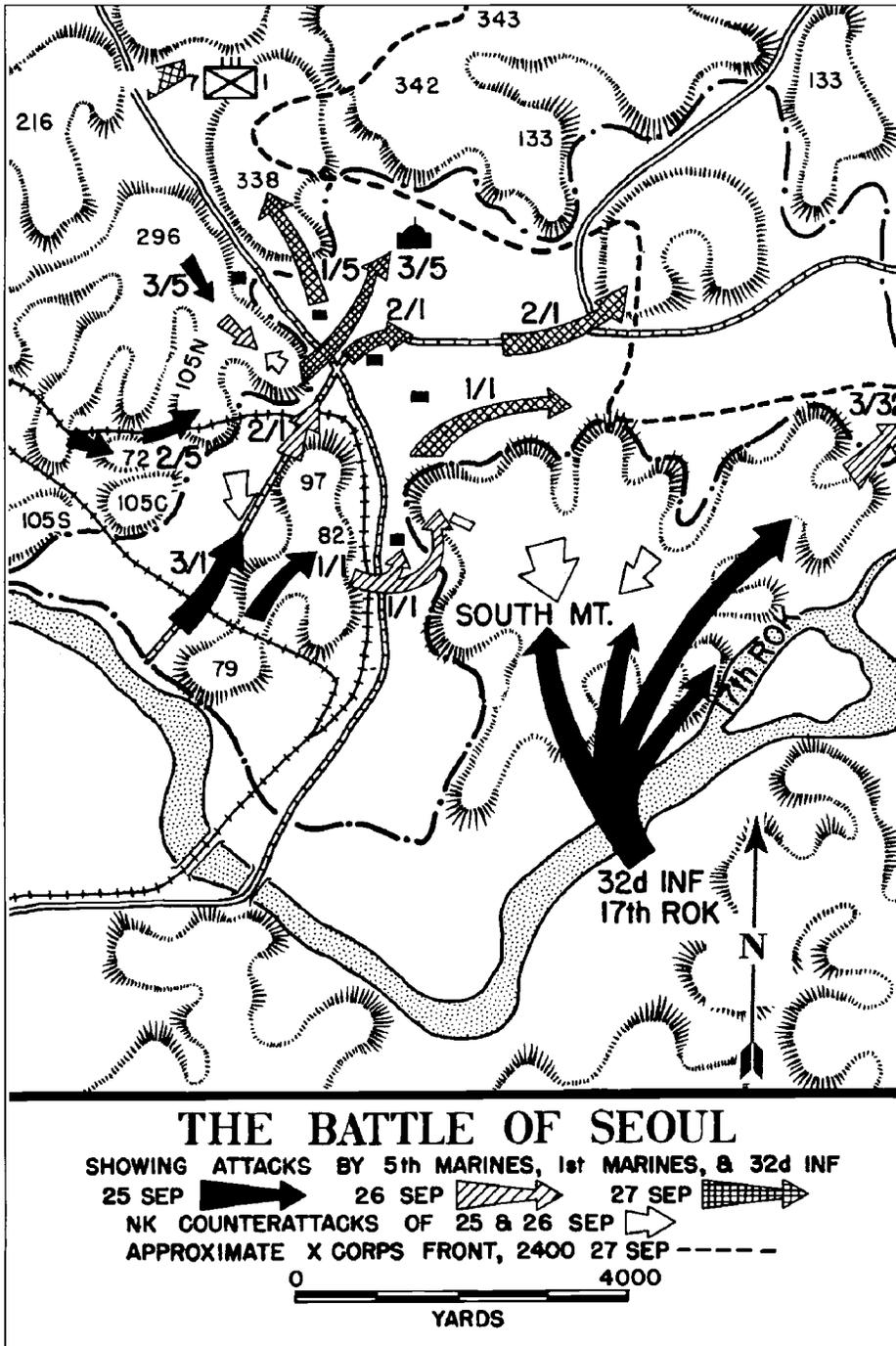
“enemy fleeing city of Seoul on road north of Uijongbu.” General Almond, sensing a great opportunity to crush the North Koreans, ordered an immediate advance by the 1st Marine Division, stating: “You will push attack now to the limit of your objectives in order to insure maximum destruction of enemy forces. Signed Almond.”

The flash message stunned Colonel Bowser. The order was

rife with unanswered questions—did Almond envision a five-mile night attack through the heart of the city by converging regiments out of direct contact with each other? And, by the way, how could an aerial observer distinguish at night between a column of retreating troops and a column of fleeing refugees? Bowser called his counterpart at X Corps with these questions but got nowhere. Neither did General Smith a moment later in a call to Almond's chief of staff. Smith shook his head and ordered his regimental commanders to comply—carefully. Throughout their smoking third of the city, the 1st Marine Division stirred and bitched. As one company commander queried: “A night attack without a reconnaissance or rehearsal? What are our objectives?” Private First Class Morgan Brainard recalled the grousing in the ranks that night: “We were all roused out and mustered down on the darkened street by platoons. Scuttlebutt said we were going into the heart of Seoul in a surprise night attack.”

After allowing his regimental commanders plenty of time to coordinate their plans, General Smith ordered the advance to kick off at 0145 following a 15-minute artillery preparation. The enemy moved first. Before midnight a sizable NKPA force hit Lieutenant Colonel Taplett's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, on Hill 105-North. Lieutenant Colonel Murray and his executive officer attempted to make sense of the situation: “I'm afraid we'll have to delay pursuit of the 'fleeing enemy' until we see if Tap can beat off the counterattack.”

As Major Simmons listened uneasily to the sounds of Taplett's firefight, less than 1,000 yards west, he received a call from Lieutenant Colonel Ridge ordering





Sketch by Col Charles H. Waterhouse, USMC (ret)

A Marine artillery forward observer team adjusts supporting fires on enemy barricades in downtown Seoul. The firing batteries were south of the Han River. Forward observer teams had to adjust their fire with utmost precision in the crowded city.

him to dispatch a patrol to link with a similar patrol from the 5th Marines to facilitate the forthcoming night attack. Simmons protested the order. From the volume of fire to the west, a considerable NKPA force had moved between the two regiments. "I doubted a patrol could get through," said Simmons. Ridge repeated the order. Simmons assembled a patrol of Company G riflemen, led by Corporal Charles E. Collins. They departed about 1245. "I felt like I was kissing them goodbye,"

Simmons admitted.

The onset of the artillery preparatory fires heightened Simmons' concern for his patrol. Colonel Puller worried that the fire was inadequate for a general assault. At 0138, he asked Smith for a second fire mission, delaying the jump-off time to 0200. Fifteen minutes later the whole issue became moot.

Major Simmons first heard sounds of a nearby fire and realized Collins' patrol had been intercepted. A moment later, at

0153, he heard the unmistakable sounds of tracked vehicles approaching the roadblock from the north, along with an almost instantaneous *crack!* of a Soviet T-34 85mm tank gun. The shell missed Simmons by inches and killed his radio operator at his side. Shaken, Simmons sounded the alarm. Far from fleeing the city, the enemy—at least this particular battalion of the *25th NKPA Brigade*—was charging due south down Ma Po Boulevard with six to 12 tanks and self-propelled guns, accompanied by infantry. As his roadblock defenders cut loose on the enemy tanks, Simmons called for artillery and 81mm mortar concentrations along the bridge, and the battle raged. General Smith, sobered by the ferocity of the NKPA assaults, postponed the division's night attack indefinitely.

The Marines would soon call the northwestern nose of Hill 97 "Slaughterhouse Hill," and from its slopes this night they inflicted a killing zone of epic proportions against the attacking armored column. Three battalions of the 11th Marines fired incessantly the next 90 minutes. At that point the tubes became so hot the howitzers had to ceasefire until they could cool down. In the lull, the NKPA tanks surged forward again. Simmons unleashed his beloved heavy Browning machine guns. "In the light of the burning buildings," he said, "I could see three [tanks] clearly, rolling forward on [the] boulevard about 500 yards to my front." Simmons saw the tracers from the Brownings whanging off the faceplates of the tanks. He asked for 155mm howitzer fire from the Army. The 31st Field Artillery Battalion responded with awesome firepower—360 rounds along 3d Battalion, 1st Marines' direct front.

Chesty Puller did not recognize

the radio call sign of the Army artillery liaison officer coordinating the 155mm howitzer missions that night, but he knew first-class fire support when he saw it. "This is Blade," he growled into his handset, "I don't know who in the hell you are, but thank God! Out."

The Army fire mission destroyed or disabled the last of the NKPA tanks threatening the 3d Battalion's roadblock, but several immobilized vehicles maintained a stubborn fire. One self-propelled gun continued to fire at Simmons' observation post, each shell screeching overhead barely a degree in elevation too high. Simmons feared the coming dawn would make his position terribly exposed, so he moved one of the 75mm recoilless rifles from the roadblock to the rubble-strewn front yard of the abandoned house. The crew stared anxiously into the darkness just north of the bridge, hoping to get off the first shot at dawn. Finally, in the gray half-light, the gunner spotted the enemy vehicle and squeezed his trigger. The round was a pin-

wheel hit—the self-propelled gun burst into flames. But the Marines had forgotten to consider the back blast of the recoilless rifle. "It bounced off the mud-and-wattle side of the house behind us and knocked us head-over-heels," Simmons said, adding "we thought it very funny at the time."

Sunrise brought Simmons more welcome news. Corporal Collins, having ordered the rest of his patrol back to the roadblock at their first encounter with the approaching NKPA armored column, covered its retreat with rifle fire, and then took refuge for the night in a cellar. Somehow he found a set of white robes commonly worn by the Korean civilians. Thus attired, he made his way through the still-dangerous streets to the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines' lines and safety.

The North Koreans executed a third major spoiling attack at 0500, launching a reinforced battalion against the 32d Infantry's positions on Nam-san. The Army regiment stood its ground and did not get rattled when one company was

overrun. Making good use of his supporting arms, Colonel Charles Beauchamp organized a counterattack that drove the enemy out of the position and inflicted several hundred casualties.

At daybreak, Colonel Puller arrived at Lieutenant Colonel Ridge's position. "You had better show me some results of this alleged battle you had last night," he warned. Ridge was unperturbed. He showed Puller the wreckage of the NKPA vehicles north of the bridge, the ruins of seven tanks, two self-propelled guns, and eight 45mm antitank guns. At least 250 dead North Koreans lay in clots along the boulevard (the official figure of 475 may have included those slain by Lieutenant Colonel Taplett's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, that same night), and there were more than 80 prisoners in hand. The Marines' side of the battlefield seemed covered with a river of spent brass shell casings. Major Simmons' 10 Browning heavy machine guns had fired a phenomenal 120 boxes of ammunition during the night—30,000 rounds, a feat that even surpassed the volume fired by the legendary Sergeant "Manila John" Basilone at Guadalcanal in 1942 in Puller's old battalion. Colonel Puller flashed a rare grin.

Time magazine's combat correspondent Dwight Martin described the battlefield the morning of the 26th, as Sutter's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, passed through Ridge's 1st Battalion:

This morning Ma-Po wore a different look. The burned and blackened remains of the boulevard's shops and homes sent clouds of acrid smoke billowing over the city. Buildings still ablaze showered sparks and ashes high into the air to cascade down

Marine riflemen evacuate their wounded buddy under heavy enemy fire.

Department of Defense Photo (USA) SC351385

