

# **A Man is Not Dead Until He is Forgotten**

## **The Story of Cpl Fletcher Perry**

**By Ray Davidson**

The Kum River basin in Korea is far from Hilton, Ga. and the watershed of the Chattahoochee River. Yet on Saturday morning, July 15, 1950, as Corporal Fletcher Foy Perry looked at the low hanging fog over the Kum River it reminded him of his South Georgia home and his Chattahoochee River. He remembered when the fog would lay low over the Chattahoochee. A devoutly religious man his thoughts turned to his congregation at the Liberty Assembly of God Church in Cedar Springs; then bowing his head, he prayed for them and his deliverance from this war.

He was just bone tired on Saturday morning. The last hot meal he had was June 30<sup>th</sup> in Japan. He was on occupation duty in Japan with the 19th Infantry Regiment of the 24th Infantry Division. It was good duty. Post war Japan offered a contrast in life. Much of the country was destroyed and the people struggled to survive from day to day. Perry saw this but the people of Japan were building a new nation, they wanted peace and looked upon the Americans as friends. He truly felt welcomed by the people of Japan but that life was shattered on June 25<sup>th</sup> when the North Korea Peoples Army (NKPA) crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel.

The United Nations quickly responded to the NKPA invasion and authorized member nation intervention. The 24 Inf. Div was put on alert and an advance group known as Task Force Smith left Tachikawa and arrived in Korea on July 1st. The spirits were high as Task Force Smith gathered at Tachikawa. Perry and his fellow soldiers were joking about how the NKPA would run back across the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel when they saw the 24<sup>th</sup>. The soldiers felt invincible they had won the fight in the Pacific and stopped the Axis Powers in Europe. Korea would be a minor distraction. What Perry and the others did not know, they were about to face a modern Russian equipped Army of veterans of the war in China.

Arriving in Korea Task Forces Smith moved north and on the night of July 4 established defensive positions at Osan, across the Han River from Seoul. As day broke that morning 540

American soldiers were attacked by two regiments of NKPA supported by T34 Russian tanks. The T34 was a relative new tank and America had never faced them before.

Early that morning eight tanks approached Perry's position. He watched as artillery scored direct hits. The tanks, undeterred, kept on coming. The 75mm recoilless rifles held their fire until the tanks were within 700 yards and scored direct hits to no avail. Even the bazookas could not stop them. Finally two T34's were knocked out by a rocket launcher. The tank carcasses were pushed out of the way by other tanks and the



rest of the tank battalion, 31 tanks moved forward knocking out the American artillery positions.



In essence, Task Force Smith took on two regiments of the North Korean 4th Division and thirty-three T34 tanks. Badly outnumbered and without armor, effective antitank weapons, or air support, the Task Force was overrun.

The next day, Colonel Smith could assemble only 250 men, half his original force. He then decided to withdraw using a leapfrog method. With reinforcing elements of the 34<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Infantries the remainder of Task Force Smith employed delaying actions against the advance of the North Korean 3d and 4th Divisions along the corridor that ran south of Osan toward Taejon. They sought to delay the enemy's approach to the Kum River.

The second deployment out of Japan for the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division had arrived in Korea and set up defensive positions along the Kum River. On the morning of July 10 the rear guard of Task Force Smith, A and D Companies crossed the Kum. Orders came for L Company to counterattack. The first counterattack executed by American forces in Korea. As L Company head up the road they came across five men with hands tied behind their backs and shot in the head, a foreboding fate for American prisoners of war.

News quickly spread of the killing of Americans and a general fear of capture both motivated and struck fear along the troops at Kum River.

It was now Tuesday July 11<sup>th</sup>, a heavy fog lay over the Kum River valley. With the NKPA fast approaching, Wednesday and Thursday was spent blowing the bridges across the Kum and any boats found were burned or destroyed.

On July 14th the NKPA 4th and 3d Divisions penetrated the 34th and 19th Infantries' forward defensive positions on the south side of the Kum River and inflicted substantial casualties. On Saturday major gaps were breached in the 24<sup>th</sup> infantry division's lines. Then on the 16<sup>th</sup> at 3am a North Korean plane flew the length of Kum's defenses and dropped a flare, signaling an all out assault by the NKPA. As the 19<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 24<sup>th</sup> was overrun that day, Cpl Fletcher Foy Perry from Hilton, Georgia was taken prisoner.



Shorty Estabrook taken prisoner along with Perry and Everett Warren from Meigs, Georgia later summed up their emotions, "*Capture is such a horrible and terrifying event. You don't know what will happen to you. We had already seen men with their hands tied behind them and shot in the back of the head. You think that you, too, will be shot after being tortured.*"

Initially beaten by his captors, Perry was moved back through the North Korean front lines. The NKPA troops repeatedly made attempts to hit or stab him. Perry and his fellow prisoners were marched to Seoul where they were housed for several weeks and interrogated by both Russian and Korean soldiers. The North Koreans took delight in

reminding the POW's that they were not prisoners of war but bandits and could be shot at the pleasure of their North Korean captors. The earlier reports of Americans with their hands tied and shot gave credence to the threats.

They were moved from Seoul to Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea by train. Already exhaustion and starvation were begging to take their toll but the injured prisoners suffered the most. They were no medical supplies and their wounds became infected in the sweltering heat and attracted maggots and flies.

On the train to Pyongyang, the guards were brutal. Estabrook recounts receiving a heavy blow to the back of his head, which fractured his skull and knocked him unconscious. He states, "Even after a half century it still gives me a severe migraine headache from time to time." He later he received a Purple Heart Medal.

They arrived in Pyongyang on July 25<sup>th</sup> and were housed in an old school building. The housing was fairly adequate but they were given very little food and almost no water. Through the windows of the school building Perry watched U.S. planes dropping bombs around Pyongyang. "They hoped that their American colleagues would soon find and liberate them from the enemy, but at the same time, they knew what those bombs could do to them." They spent ten days in the old school building, the food was meager but the lack of water was becoming a problem.

On September 5th, Perry and the other prisoners boarded a train again, not knowing their destination at the time, but they were headed to the frontier town of Manp'o Jin. They traveled at night to avoid the American bombers, and during the day, the prisoners were forced to leave the train and hide mountains, while the severely wounded soldiers remained in the cars. They were accompanied by a group of civilian internees who were mostly missionaries, diplomats and other mixed families taken captive in South Korea, just after the war started. This group included the Catholic Bishop Byrne, Catholic Monsignor Quinlan, Salvation Army Commissioner Herbert Lord, and other distinguished priests, ministers, Methodist missionaries, Catholic nuns, and persons of the diplomatic corps including the British traitor George Blake.

Perry's journey was interspersed with hunger, abuse, death and summary executions. He was dehydrated by dysentery, lack of food and water took their toll. Cramped in the train cars, the smell of body odor and rotting flesh of the wounded compounded their misery. For Perry, Ernest Kelly, Emil Girona, Herman Driskell and Edgar Warren their torment was over. They never arrived in Manp'o Jin. Perry died on September 7<sup>th</sup> and his body was discarded along the railroad tracks.

Later, in October, the remaining prisoners were placed under a brutal Korean Major known only as the Tiger that would impose a 120 mile death march on the 758 remaining prisoners. When the armistice was signed in August 1953, 262 of the original 853 prisoners survived. Perry's group of prisoners would later become known as the Tiger Survivors.

But the fate of the war was about to change, on September 15 in one of the most successful amphibious operations ever conducted. U.S. Marines of the 1st Marine Division, following in the wake of a heavy naval bombardment, stormed ashore deep in enemy territory at Inchon.

U.N. forces drove north of the 38th Parallel in early October, penetrating North Korean territory above Kaesong on Oct. 9. Another amphibious landing at Wonsan resulted in the Eighth Army taking over across the entire peninsula. Advances during

October were so rapid that Pyongyang, the enemy capital, fell on Oct. 19. The day after Pyongyang fell, U.N. forces made the first paratroop attack of the war, when the 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team dropped at Sukchon and Sumchon, 25 miles north of Pyongyang.

During this time Perry's body was found by advancing American troops and he was interned at a temporary United Nations Military Cemetery outside of Pyongyang. Later when the Chinese entered the war and UN troops fell back the cemetery fell into Chinese and North Korean hands.

During Operation Glory, the exchange of war dead between North Korea and the Allies, Perry came home. His breath free from it restless tides of war, he lies under massive water oaks in Cedar Springs not far from his Chattahoochee.

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