

A Man is Not Dead Until He is Forgotten

The Story of Cpl Everett Warren

*"You can live 40 days without food and
days without water, but you can't live seconds without hope."*

CSM. Tony Rose

Over half a century, 59 years, separates us from the Korean War. The interspaced years dominated by Vietnam, Central America, Iraq, transnational terrorism and slow march of time have dimmed our collective memories of what has been called "The Forgotten War". Yet, for the families of those that never returned, time is a constant, never quite healing the pain or extinguishing the ember. Nor shall we forget Korea's Prisoners of War that endured months of subjugation and abuse, or the Tiger Death March, and the psychological indoctrination that challenged their fundamental beliefs endowed by a great nation and a benevolent God.

Korea is a mountainous peninsula with a population of just over 30 million in 1950. Despite saber rattling between North and South Korea, senior American observers in early summer 1950 discounted the likelihood of a North Korean invasion. This assessment was given even after the May 1949 North Korean Peoples Army (NKPA) open attack across the 38th Parallel in the vicinity of Kaesong that was repulsed by the South Korean Army. Those same senior observers did not change their assessment when hundreds of small-scale assaults occurred across the parallel during the first half of 1950 inflicting heavy casualties on both sides.

Again, in June 1950, America was slow to react as the North Korean High Command assembled some 90,000 men; 7 infantry divisions, 1 armored brigade, 1 separate infantry regiment, 1 motorcycle regiment, and 1 Border Constabulary brigade-supported by 150 Soviet T34 tanks near the 38th Parallel. Then at 0400 on 25 June the North Koreans launched a coordinated attack on South Korea that ran from coast to coast.

Cpl Everett Warren was with the 24th Division serving Occupation Duty in Southern Japan when North Korea crossed the 38th Parallel. The Army quickly formed Task Force Smith to deploy against the NKPA juggernaut sweeping south down the peninsula. The first troops committed to Task Force Smith flew out of Tachikawa AFB and arrived in Korea on July 1st. .

Unable to fly out, Warren's deployment was not on aircraft but aboard three rusty Japanese freighters and a couple of war surplus Landing Ship Tankers, prompting one of Warren's buddies to state, "It was a hell of a way to go to war." Landing in Pusan, Korea Task Force Smith faced transportation problems when Korean train crews refused to take their trains north to Taejon.

On the night of July 4, Task Force Smith, the initial deployment, set up defensive positions around Osan, South of Seoul. At dawn, 540 American soldiers were attacked by two divisions of the NKPA, supported by T34 Russian tanks. Leaving Osan, Task Force Smith fought delaying actions as they retreated Southward along the Seoul, Taejon, Taegu, Pusan axis.

Taken unprepared America committed their forces piecemeal against a highly motivated and capable NKPA that was Russian-trained and Russian equipped. Task Force Smith repeatedly found itself outnumbered, outgunned, and outflanked by this North Korean Army. One-third of NKPA forces were veterans who had fought with the Chinese Communists. These same forces had defeated the Nationalist Chinese, who fled to Formosa in October 1949 and made China a Communist country.

“The greatest nation on the face of the earth had committed its youth to battle, under-strength, under-trained, ill-equipped, and ill-supplied.”

PFC Sheffield Clark remembers well those early days, "It was the frantic hit-and-run tactics . . . [as they ran South]. We were short on ammo and supplies. Tiger tanks (Russian T-34s) were our nightmare and we had no ammo for our rocket launchers (anti-tank weapons). At one time, our field artillery unit was 2,000 yards ahead of the 3rd Infantry we were supposed to be supporting. Infiltrators were picking us off—dressed up like old Korean women—with pistols held at real old Korean women to get past our outposts, posed as refugees moving south away from the fighting. Our position was overrun by infiltrators who came in behind us. The attack was so swift that our machine gunners were killed and our own machine guns were turned against us. They captured our 105s, then captured a trainload of ammo for them. There were only twelve of us left out of my battery by the time we got back to Taejon."

Military planners, following the line of advance, quickly realized that North Korea was advancing along the Seoul, Taejon, Taegu, Pusan axis. Knowing that the advance had to be stopped, the US staked their defense on the natural boundary of the Kum River. The river had many sand bars, was at times 300 yards wide and 15 feet deep. The Kum acted as a moat for the city of Taejon.

Waking up in his foxhole on July 11th, Warren looked out over a heavy fog hanging over the Kum valley. On July 12 and 13th bridges were blown and all boats that could be found were burned along the 30 miles of defensive positions. On July 14th the North Korean 4th and 3d Divisions, operating west to east, penetrated the 34th and 19th Infantries' forward defensive positions on the south side of the Kum River and inflicted substantial casualties. They had used small boats that had been overlooked during the searches on the 12th and 13th. More crossing on the 15th punched major gaps in the 24th infantry division's lines. These assaults were by NKPA infantry as the tanks and heavy weapons remained on the north side of the Kum. Then on the 16th 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 19th Infantry Regiment of the 24th was overrun that day, Cpl Everett Warren from Meigs, Georgia was taken prisoner.

“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. All of us were beaten soundly. And, as we moved back through their front lines, attempts were made by the front line troops to hit or stab you.”

Shorty Estabrook American POW in Korea

Warren, along with other POW's and civilians were moved to Seoul. Seoul was the first stop on a journey to North Korean and Chinese prisoner of war camps. A journey interspersed with hunger, abuse, death and summary executions. Later, in October, a brutal Korean Major known only as the Tiger would impose a 120 mile death march on the 758 remaining prisoners. Warning the prisoners of severe penalties for breaking formation, he formed 54 men groups, four abreast, and began a journey over steep, snowy mountainous terrain toward the Siberian border. "You are now under strict military discipline. We are going to march to Chunggang-jin. No one is to fall out without my permission. If anyone does, I will deal severely with him!" Thirty minutes into the march, the Tiger made good on his warning. Lt. Cordus Thornton was singled out by the Tiger. The Tiger himself carried out the execution, Thornton refused a blindfold. Tipping his head over his eyes, he was executed.

Transportation was not available and the POW's were marched to Seoul where they were housed for several weeks and interrogated. Interrogations were conducted by both Russian and Korean interrogators. 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.

When not being interrogated Warren and the other POW's had their hands tied by telephone wire behind their backs and daisy chained by wire to five other prisoners. They were kept in this position for six days. Also during their stay in Seoul they were forced to attend political rallies.

Departing Seoul by train Warren arrived in Pyongyang on the 25th of July. He, and the other POW's, received very little food and water. Fearing US air strikes, the train traveled by night and was hidden in tunnels by day.

On September 5, Warren left Pyongyang by train and traveled to Manp'o. On the same train were a group of civilian internees who were mostly missionaries and diplomats. The train reached Manp'o on September 11. While in Manp'o, Warren and the other prisoners were forced to work on excavations. Food was inadequate consisting of small amounts of millet or corn. During this time thirty of Warren's fellow prisoners died of starvation and exposure. They were housed in unheated building and, once, were permitted to bathe in the Yalu River.

As the allied Armies advanced toward the Yalu River; the prisoners were forced marched to Kosan. Then on October 21 the prisoners were moved over a mountain to a small village and then on October 25th back to Kosan.

Arriving back in Kosan, they found the village deserted. Chinese soldiers occupied the building in their old camp. The next day, on October 26th, they were moved into a cornfield near Manp'o. Seven men who were critically ill were taken to the Kosan Police Station where they were executed. On the march to the cornfield two men were shot.

Warren, by then, was sick himself. He wore only the light summer issue clothes he had on at the time of his capture in July. Growing up in South Georgia he was ill prepared to handle the blistering cold of Korea. The cold, lack of food and sanitary conditions were taking their toll.

As he struggled onward to the cornfield, he and the other prisoners could feel the ground vibrate under their feet and a growing sound of metal hitting against metal. As they moved along the sounds became apparent as tens of thousands of Chinese soldiers passed on a dead run to the South, their mess kits swinging from their belts causing the thunderous metal against metal sound.

In the cornfield the prisoners were exposed to the frigid winds blowing south, out of Siberia. Their captors did not allow any fires and ten men froze to death over the five day stay in the cornfield. As for Warren, sick with dysentery, malnourished and suffering from pneumonia he could go no further; he lay down there in the cornfield one night; he no longer had the strength or the will or *hope*; Georgia was just too far away. First came an exhausted sleep; he slowly froze to death in that cornfield a world away from his beloved South Georgia home.

Two days later began the infamous Tiger Death March.

When the armistice was signed in August 1953, 262 of the original 853 prisoners survived. ***“The soldier, above all others, prays for peace, for it is the soldier who must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war,”*** General Douglas MacArthur.

Ray Davidson is a syndicated columnist. He can be reached at rayd45@aol.com.

Post script: The Tiger prisoners, in addition to U.S. soldiers, included 81 multi national civilians; missionaries and priests including Bishop Pat Byrnes of the USA; the British and French Legation; Tatars; White Russians; nuns; 5 South Korean politicians; and one lone British Marine.