

# *The Korean War*

Martin Russ



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## **OVERVIEW**

At the end of World War II, Korea was divided into two zones at the 38th parallel. Communist-led North Korean forces invaded South Korea in 1950. Aided by United States and United Nations troops, South Korea fought back in a bitter and costly war. A United States marine kept a journal during the war, and his description of memorial services during the conflict is followed by excerpts from his account of the end of the three-year war.

**GUIDED READING** As you read, consider the following questions:

- Does the author seem relieved that the war is ending?
  - What was the final gesture of the Chinese troops toward the United States forces?
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May 8th, CAMP GUYOL

Memorial services were held yesterday at the regimental parade ground. There were thirteen companies of marines present. A four-mile walk. General Ballard made a speech, a typical droning, platitudinous, meaningless speech. I doubt that anyone listened. A chaplain and a rabbi spoke. Isolated phrases that I remember. ". . . in glory . . . that they will not have died in vain . . . not forgotten," etc. None of those men died gloriously. Only the ones that died while saving the lives of others did not die in vain. The most disturbing thing of all is that not one of them knew why they were dying. I still have a book called *The Greek Way* by Edith Hamilton. I have underlined a sentence or two. "Why is the death of an ordinary man a wretched, chilling thing, which we turn from, while the death of a hero, always tragic, warms us with the sense of quickened life?" I don't know, Miss Hamilton. You tell me. You're the one who felt that sense of quickened life. I never felt it.

The roll of the dead was read off. Many, many names, some familiar. Edward Guyol. John Riley. Willy Mayfield. Waldron, Carlough. All ordinary men, no heroes.

July 1st, 1953

We are occupying a hill not far behind the lines. The———squad, accompanied by a machine-gun crew, are responsible for it, although we have no grenades and little ammunition. But it makes little difference. The Korean war is over. No one will bother us up here.

Last night we sat around a couple of Coleman stoves and drank coffee. In the distance far to the north we could see numerous small fires like ours, in the Chinese sector. No Man's Land is deserted. New Bunker, Old Bunker, Hedy,

East Berlin, Little Rock, the Pentagon, the Fan—all deserted and quiet except for the rats.

The truce was signed at ten in the morning, on June 27th, 1953. The news was relayed at once to all unit commanders. After 10 P.M. no one was to fire his weapon. Even an accidental discharge, we were told, would mean a court-martial. Throughout the hot sunny afternoon the Chinese sent over barrage after barrage of propaganda pamphlets. The projectiles exploded hundreds of feet in the air; the cannisters would open and the papers would flutter down to earth like snow. . . . No one was interested in chasing around the paddies looking for pamphlets. It seemed as though the Chinese were merely trying to expend all of their heavy ammunition and pamphlets before the cease-fire went into effect.

The tank road, a segment of which was under direct enemy observation, was bombarded continually through the day. Troops were forced to use this road, however, in order to carry equipment back to the supply point for withdrawal. . . . Fortunately there were many old bunkers along the tank road to provide cover during the sudden barrages. Van Horn and I, working together, were nearly annihilated by incoming shells that seemed to walk back and forth along the road. Some of them were 76mm. recoilless rifle projectiles. By nightfall the exposed segment of the tank road was pockmarked with small craters. . . .

UN spotter planes droned above No Man's Land and the Chinese hills during the day, checking enemy activity. Enemy antiaircraft crews sent up intensive but inaccurate fire. The gunners might have knocked down several of our planes had they put a little more range on their fields of fire. In most cases, the little white puffs of smoke following each flash red explosion—barely discernible—seemed to follow the Piper Cub in a neat, harmless line. Twice a shell exploded near a plane; one under the belly, the other beside the tail section.

One large patrol was scheduled to go out after dark, returning before 10 P.M. Van Horn and I volunteered for it, but they had room for only one extra man; we threw fingers and Van Horn won. So I asked the lieutenant (7th Marines) if I could go out on listening post, and was turned down. By 8:30 it was fully dark and the patrol members were lined up behind Green gate, ready to move out. . . . Several rounds of 60mm. exploded nearby and everyone scurried for cover. The light barrage continued and gradually increased in intensity; 82mm. projectiles and occasional rounds of 120mm. Our reverse slopes were then under continual bombardment until 10 o'clock. The patrol leader, the 7th Marine lieutenant, had seen that everyone was inside a bunker. Van Horn and I had found a deserted ammo bunker and we sat in it. This would have been a hell of a time to get hit, an hour before the long-awaited cease-fire. Five men, including the 7th Marine lieutenant were caught by shrapnel in the——Platoon sector. Two men on outpost Ava—in front of Green gate—were wounded. As far as we know, none died. . . .

At 10 P.M. the hills were illuminated by the light of many flares; white star clusters, red flares, yellow flares and other pyrotechnics signifying the end of a thirty-seven-month battle that nobody won and which both sides lost. The brilliant descending lights were probably visible all along the 150-mile front, from the Yellow Sea to the Sea of Japan. The last group of shells exploded in the distance, an 82mm. landed nearby, the echoes rumbled back and forth along the Changdan Valley and died out.

A beautiful full moon hung low in the sky like a Chinese lantern. Men appeared along the trench, some of them had shed their helmets and flak jackets. The first sound that we heard was a shrill group of voices, calling from the Chinese positions behind the cemetery on Chogum-ni. The Chinese were singing. A hundred yards or so down the trench, someone began shouting the Marine Corps hymn at the top of his lungs. Others joined in, bellowing the words. Everyone was singing in a different key, and phrases apart. . . . The men from outpost Ava began to straggle back, carrying heavy loads. Later in the night a group of Chinese strolled over to the base of Ava and left candy and handkerchiefs as gifts. The men that were still on Ava stared, nothing more. So ends the Korean conflict, after some 140,000 American casualties—25,000 dead, 13,000 missing or captured.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> According to the figures of the U.S. Department of Defense: 33,629 battle deaths; 20,617 other deaths; 103,284 wounds not mortal.

Source: Russ, Martin. *The Last Parallel: A Marine's War Journal*. New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1957.