

Virginians at War

Korean War: Hill Fights

Transcript

NARRATOR: Virginians have always stood at the crossroads of the fight for freedom. It is a battle in which we all reap the benefits.

After the close of World War II, Korea was divided at the 38th Parallel, with a communist government supported by China and the Soviet Union to the North, and a democratic government supported by the Western Allies to the South.

On June 25, 1950, less than five years later, the United States found itself again drawn into war. The Korean War, often called "The Forgotten War," was the first military action conducted by the United Nations. Twenty-two nations supported the UN Resolution, and moved to defend South Korea from an unprovoked invasion from the North. Spearheaded by US forces, in a country halfway around the world, the Korean War became a study in frustration, punctuated by weather extremes, geographic hardships, political influences, and fluctuating front lines. The result was 33,741 Americans killed in action, with the enemy being held at the 38th Parallel by the signing of an armistice. Today, over 50 years later, the United States still monitors that border.

Many of the deadliest conflicts of the Korean War were fought against the North Koreans and Chinese, taking and retaking the hills of Korea. Artillery barrages, night fighting, and hand to hand combat became the norm in an unforgiving landscape, pockmarked with the harsh realities of war.

THE HILL FIGHTS AT THE FRONT

BEAVER: I went in the service, I left home my 17th birthday, which was September the seventh, 1949. And the reason I came, went in the service...a young man in the coalfields, and no work. And, so, I went into the service, so I'd have a job. Landed in Korea August 19th, 1950 and the...place was as crowded with refugees from the North...terrible place. Unloaded there and went up to the lines, and first place that I went on the lines was Hill 409. And, my platoon sergeant went on patrol that night,

took a patrol out, and was killed the first night that we were there...and spent my 18th birthday there at Hill 409.

WAMPLER: Korea's not very wide, it's probably only about 300, 350 miles, one coast to the other coast, across it. We were on the hills all across that Cheorwon Valley. Some of the hills that we were on...I was at the Punchbowl, spent a lot of time in the Iron Triangle. The Iron Triangle was about three big hills in that area. White Horse Mountain which is another big one. Heartbreak Ridge was in that one, I was not on Heartbreak Ridge. Papasan Hill, and the number of that hill was 1062. 1062 means it's 1062 feet tall.

BURNLEY: The first day I think we went out and I acquired a weapon, being a medic you don't carry a gun. But I went out and picked up one anyway, and I had a shoulder holster and I had a .45 under my jacket there. But I had heard the Chinese didn't respect that red cross on my helmet and I took that off. My first night, of course we went into the line at night, we had to climb this huge hill which took some two hours, just about, it was so tall. And I remember the hill was called Whitehorse. But anyway, it was heavy snow, and while I was standing there the stumps in front of me started to look like they were moving, and I thought my gosh, and those tin cans got to rattling and the wind was blowing a little bit and I said well, the Chinese are coming through. So I reached over and touched the one heavy machine gun, it was frozen, it wouldn't fire. I reached back and got the carbine, it was frozen, wouldn't fire. So then I thought about all the grenades, I had a case of grenades laying right beside me, and I reached back and grabbed them grenades and started to throwing them. It was some night, but I was sure glad to see daylight the next morning. But the Chinese, they hit us one night and they say there were 70 shells a minute was coming into our outfit, and that's a night I thought I would surely die.

TINNELL: But we saw action the second night. We killed three or four of them. And, but I was scared to death, I can tell you that. I felt sure they could hear my heartbeat, I could hear it, so I guess they couldn't hear it too. But it was, this was an every night thing, this was never....the, like I said, someone wasn't shooting at somebody.

WILDER: We thought that we had all of Pork Chop Hill, come to think, then find out that we only had half of it. The Chinese had the other half, and there was also this Korean...he was with us. Unfortunately, as he ran across the aperture, he was shot, killed. So that left just the two of us, Wyatt and me. He was so instrumental in

going around behind the enemy bunker, pumping and putting his bayonet through the sandbags to put thermite grenades in so they would come out...I was covering the apertures so when they would come out, thinking maybe there were two or three, because we thought, this was Pork Chop Hill! We came down from the bottom of the hill with these 20 prisoners, I reported this to the officer in charge, I said first of all, you need to know the job that Wyatt performed, and what he did. Let me give you everything about it, and I would nominate him for the Silver Star, because he's done just a fantastic job. I thought, I heard no more about it until I got to Fort Meade, Maryland, discharged now, mustering out now. So they had a division review, 15,000 people, troops coming out, and I had been notified that I was getting this award. Well I didn't say anything to family, didn't call my mother, nobody, no friends, and red was given to me by...they did the Bronze Star.

HEADLY: The Chinese came into that war with so many people that they didn't even have weapons for them. And the Chinese are go into combat, the first troops had weapons and the troops behind them didn't. All they...they waited for the man in front of them to get killed so they could get his weapon. So they had so many people, you could fire all day long and not shoot them all. It was almost impossible to stop them. An outpost is really a first line of defense, so you are automatically almost a dead duck sitting there. And you could hear them talking all night, [], that's all you could hear. The noise, they had a trumpet or something that they blew, and the sound of that would send cold chills up your spine.

EVERYDAY HARDSHIPS

BURNLY: I saw the temperature go 37 below zero. I don't believe it to this day that I made it through it because I thought I would surely freeze to death. And what kept me warm, and most of us guys, we had a sleeping bag was made out of goose down. I pulled that sleeping bag up to my waist and sat in it in the trench or in the fox hole, and that's how it kept, kept me from freezing. But that cold, like I say, in some areas where we had our trucks, they said it got fifty below. In fact the trucks wouldn't start, they had to take fuel oil and put it into a pan and shove it up under the engine and light this to get warm, with the engine so we could start these hammer latches. They heavy machine gun that I was attached to guys with, it was water cooled, and it just froze up solid, and then the carbine which was the regular rifle you thought it would surely fire, but the trigger froze, and if you didn't have gloves on, your hands would freeze to those weapons. And you could spit, and before it would hit the ground it had frozen. Sometimes you could get a cup of

coffee, it froze before, you poured it into the cup but then it froze before you could take a drink. To this day, I don't believe, I don't understand how we lasted.

NEWKIRK: Set up some tents up there, and some of them, one of them had a stove in it, but most of them just had a little place where you hit candles, we lit five or six candles. You'd get in there, take your boots off you know, and just warm yourself by candles, like five people sitting around in a circle, you know, with all your feet towards that thing. And you're sitting right on ground, but you'd put cardboard under you from the ration boxes, and you're sitting there, then somebody say, well I'm going to be here two hours, I'm gonna go melt some snow. So he'd go get some, melt some snow, anyone want to wash their feet, well I get first because I'm melting the snow, I'm second, I'm third, and all this. So three or four people would wash their feet, and you have to go away from the camps for a water well, but that's how you washed. We left that night and it was 47 below zero.

TINNELL: You'd have to sleep with your rifle because it was cold. We had a lot of trouble, we had the M-1, we had a lot of trouble with them freezing up. You never really got to sleep though, you know, four or five hours. There's no water, we didn't have much trouble, there was plenty of snow, so we got water. But like I said those beans, man I tell you, they was terrible. And this was stuff that was leftover from probably World War II, and all of them had cigarettes. That was the only thing we had plenty of was cigarettes. But all in all, the food was pretty lousy. And we would actually borrow grenades from guys coming in off patrol, because we didn't have none. We had plenty of ammo but I don't know what it was about grenades.

GALLIMORE: Children in the wintertime didn't have no shoes on, and they, they each thought we threw it away. To see the children over there, what they had to go through...so the children back here don't know really how lucky they are.

ADVANCE RETREAT ADVANCE

JAMISON: The reason we were given the order to withdraw from Pork Chop, was our commanders said that Panmunjon has said that it had no more military value to the Chinese or to us. That we were to withdraw and give it to the Chinese. Mind you, we took it in March, we took it in April, they took it, now here it is in July, we took it, and we held it, and now we're giving it away. But I'm just a soldier, I'm just 18 years old, I do what I was told.

WAMPLER: That one hill, we took it six or eight times. We gave it up six or eight times, we'd get overrun, have to leave. All of us were nervous, anybody that's been over there in combat, that want to tell you they're never afraid, they weren't in combat. I was afraid, I was scared. All of a sudden, mortars started coming from everywhere. Mortars started dropping, I hit that ground, I would lay in a wide open space by myself, and I hit that ground, and if it had been, a snake couldn't get any closer to the ground than I was. I laid there, and I remember saying dear God, don't kill me now.

FLETCHER: They said that the armistice, it would be signed on midnight the 27th. And this boy that I went to school with, he got killed that night at like 10:00, 10:30, and the armistice was signed about two hours later. And he got killed, and I went to school with him.

WHY WE FOUGHT

BEAVER: Freedom, pleasures that we have in this country cost somebody a pretty heavy price. And enjoy the freedoms, but remember they didn't come cheap. Always remember somebody has to pay for the freedoms.

BURNLEY: It took me 40 years to talk about this thing. I couldn't tell my children, I couldn't tell my wife. We call it the Forgotten War, but we didn't gain anything. And right today, we're sitting on the 38th Parallel, that's where we started out. We didn't...we say that we stopped communists, but my, what a price we paid.

SALLEY: [] don't know what it is to have freedom. Well they know what it is to have it, but they don't know what the price was paid for it. A lot of American people suffered. A lot of them suffered to have freedom in this country. And we all should remember that and stick together and have one another.

BELBUSTI: The people of Korea deserved to be protected from the communists because they were good people. They are good people, they're good people today. And...I think we did the right thing to go into Korea. I think we went in there to protect the people from the North Koreans, and we did. And we did. And when we left somewhere, when we were coming out of the reservoir area, long lines of...even in North, that was in North Korea, there were long lines of refugees that came along with us. And they're North Koreans, and they're evacuating! They want to get out of there. So there must be something to it, you know. That's where the rubber meets the road, is when a person makes the decision to leave his home, his ancestral

home, take his whole family, put it on the back of a yak or an oxen and start down the road. That was very impressive to me, to see that. And they're very nice people, they're very good people, and I was...I was proud to be over there then, to keep them from being under communist rule. South Korea just blossomed economically...tremendous change under democracy.

JAMISON: On the 27th day of July, the war came to a ceasefire. Here it is, 50 years, this is the Korean War, is still at war with the United States. It's the longest running war that's ever took place in US history.

WILDER: War is terrible, there is no winner in war. More Americans were killed in a shorter span of time in Korea than anywhere. We've learned, I think, as a result of Korea, and Vietnam closely following it, that we are one world. There's no such thing as over there, or down there, or up there. It is all together and our participation has to be, if we are to be, as we like to think, and I like to think, leaders of the free world.

TWIFORD: I enjoy my freedom. And I earned it. I lost a lot of friends, good buddies.

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