

## A COMPANY COUNTER ATTACK.

### MAJOR (later COLONEL) CHARLES MITCHELL D.S.O.

The scene is set on the HAN river on the morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> January, 1951 – a Tuesday. My Company, W Company the Fifth Fusiliers, was engaged in the task of guarding the two main position bridges over the river into SEOUL CITY. Of these two bridges, one was on that Tuesday in the course of removal by U.S. Engineers in case of a sudden withdrawal by United Nations forces SOUTH of the river. The second bridge, together with a road and rail bridge was to remain in position for the time being.

The Regiment together with the remainder of 29 Brigade was holding a “stop” position some 15-20 miles N.E. of the CITY covering the withdrawal of 25 U.S. Division and 1R.O.K (Republic of Korea) Division from the IMJIN river further NORTH.

Information, as usual on these occasions, was vague, alarming, and totally untrustworthy. It was known that the Chinese and NORTH KOREAN PEOPLES Armies had forced a crossing of the IMJIN on NEW YEAR’S EVE, and had effected, to use the military phraseology, “some considerable penetration”.

Nothing concrete had reached us since then and we celebrated the advent of 1951 by witnessing a volley of fire from our allies who decided to “have a go” precisely at midnight across the river to see whom they could shoot on the

other side. As we were exactly between the two parties, being mainly in borrowed tents, we did not relish the position.

However, in the late afternoon of this Tuesday there arrived a Company of R.O.K Troops together with an American Liaison Officer, who stated that his orders were to relieve us. As I had had no information to this effect, and the 19 set was happily buzzing with Korean interference so that no news of or from B.N., H.Q. was possible, it was decided to leave the situation until the following morning.

Nevertheless I gave orders for the probable handing over of the bridges at 0900 hours on Wednesday and prepared to go up myself and find out the form. I also arranged for the negro driven trucks which had brought the R.O.K.'s to return for us the next day.

### THE SOUND OF THE GUNS.

At 0900 hours on Wednesday, 3<sup>rd</sup> January, I left for B.N., H.Q. Although I had still no confirmation of the hand over from the Regiment or Brigade I had seen the Chief of Staff 1 (American) Corps who told me that orders regarding the relief should arrive any moment.

I therefore proceeded NORTH along the M.S.R, before striking N.E. from this some eight miles further on. I had become aware of gunfire shortly before leaving the main road and not long after I came upon Brigade H.Q., in close proximity to which were the gun lines of 45 Field Regiment. The Regiment was in action and I stopped for a moment to be

told that we had been attacked shortly before dawn and were still engaging the enemy.

I pushed on and passed through 1 GLOS., the reserve Battalion and came upon the Regiment about 1000 hours.

The Commanding Officer at once told me the Company would have to counter attack on arrival in order to pinch out an enemy penetration, estimated about 100 strong.

### THE BACKGROUND.

In order to give a clear picture of the plan for winking out John Chinaman it will be necessary to explain the situation on the morning of 3<sup>rd</sup> January.

First of all the Brigade was deployed two up, LEFT 1 R.U.R., RIGHT 1 R.N.F., in reserve, 1 GLOS. The frontage was enormous and our commander was already depleted due to W Company being given the HAN Bridge guard. By studying the sketch map it will be seen that it was about nine hundred yards from Y Company on point 280 (the dominating feature) to S Company. The latter held the “main road” – in truth a Jeep track – leading directly into the M.S.R. Close to S Company was X and from X to Z Company on the right there was another gap of about seven hundred yards. There was a gap of two miles between Z Company and the American unit on the right and about half that between the left forward Company and the next formation. On the LEFT, B.N. H.Q., was situated about a thousand yards back in the valley.

## THE GROUND.

This particular area was, as already mentioned, dominated by the feature occupied by Y Company (Point 280). A steep hill covered with stunted trees and small bushes, giving ideal concealment to defenders, but also, naturally, assisting a wily, silent foe to creep close unheard and unseen. The X Company feature was a lower spur, rather more open in places, but with considerable bush and tree growth.

The valley running south from X Company to B.N. H.Q., was open paddy with a track running along a bund through it.

In the School, were both S and X Company H.Q., (initially) with the Assault Pioneer Platoon astride the road backed up by the A/Tk Platoon (used as Infantry). The 3 inch Mortar Platoon was situated in the re-entrant in rear of X Company. The M.M.G. Platoon, or part of it, was sited somewhere in X Company area to cover the road. Memory unfortunately fails as to its exact location.

## THE CHINESE ADVANCE.

Information regarding even the approximate whereabouts of the enemy was nil. Own troops, mostly R.O.K. were known to be out in front and were expected to withdraw eventually through the Regiment. Our own patrols NORTH produced no positive information on night 2/3 January, otherwise considerable alteration in dispositions might have occurred. On 2<sup>nd</sup> January the Commanding Officer was told to expect

R.O.K. Troops to withdraw through us that night and another R.O.K. Battalion arrived in the Regimental area that same night with orders to relieve us the following morning.

At approximately 0500 hours on 3<sup>rd</sup> January a body of men was seen to be more or less marching straight down the road towards the SCHOOL. As this body was expected to be R.O.K. troops no action was at first taken. However on arrival it transpired that they were Chinese, and in the resulting confusion S Company Commander together with the Assault Pioneer Platoon Commander and several of the Assault Pioneer Platoon were killed. The School and surrounding houses were occupied by the enemy. X Company H.Q. removed itself smartly and escaped in the nick of time.

The Chinese also infiltrated a Company along the river bed, which had little water, and that frozen, and were enabled to shoot SOUTH down the valley towards B.N. H.Q. and also up the back of X Company. Other parties of Chinese attacked X, Y and Z Companies without however effecting any penetration.

This was the picture on my arrival, though it appeared that those of the enemy who had been in the school had moved either to join the party in the river bed or onto the forward (NORTHERN) slope of X Company's hill.

#### C.O's. ORDERS.

The Commanding Officer gave me orders to carry out the following tasks:-

(a) To winkle out those Chinese in the river bed below Hill 280.

(b) To clear the village and school, where a Company H.Q. plus the Assault Pioneer Platoon had been sited.

He told me there might well be some of our own men in and around the school. He also pointed out a small village at the foot of hill 280 in which Y Company "F" echelon had been located. This it seemed probable had been overrun also by more of the enemy who had infiltrated along the river bed.

1 Troop and a half of C Squadron 7 R.T.R. were placed under command. This was part of the Brigade flame throwing Squadron which had however been divorced from its flame throwing equipment and the Churchills were being used as gun tanks. The troop consisted of 4 tanks under LT CLARKE together with two close support tanks (Captain STAPLES).

### RECONNAISSANCE.

At about 1030 hours pending the arrival of the tanks I took the I.O. up to point 217 and thence some distance N.W. towards X Company from whence a good view of the ground could be obtained. The I.O. (LT A.R. PERRINS missing since April 51) pointed out the Battalion lay out though the School could not be seen. It became obvious that the covered line of approach for infantry was along the foothills on the WEST side of the valley.

It was not possible to say how tanks could advance for though the ground was hard it was also icy and it might be that the track running NORTH and SOUTH through the

valley would be the only possible route. This was confirmed by CLARKE on his arrival. We once again repaired to point 217 after a preliminary reconnaissance of the track and surrounding paddy in the valley.

Clarke was quite definite that he could only move along the track itself so it was decided that he would use the track whilst we made use of the cover afforded by the foothills. No signs of enemy tanks or A/Tk weapons had so far been apparent.

### THE PLAN.

The plan was as follows:-

- (a) Phase 1. The destruction of the enemy in the river bed. Company to proceed two platoons up along foothills to WEST of track whilst tanks proceeded along the track. Tanks to shoot up river bed and houses in area. On signal from the 88 set or Verey Light (if former not working) tanks to switch to opportunity targets in foothills of hill 280 whilst assault went in.
- (b) Phase 2. On completion of re-organization the Company would swing right and the same two Platoons (unless anything untoward occurred) would make for the village and school, covered by the reserve platoon and Troops C Squadron, 7 R.T.R.

Other Points. (a) The start line for Phase 1 was the track junction WEST of B.N. H.Q. and the F.U.P. [forming up point] the spur 200 yards short of First objective. For

Phase 2 the S.L. and F.U.P. were close together just EAST of the Phase 1 objective.

(b) Phase 2 was over open country and Platoons were ordered to make use of their 2" mortars' smoke to cover the advance.

(c) Casualties. 1 R.A.M.C Corporal and four Company stretcher bearers available. They moved with the reserve platoon.

(d) P.o.W. Reserve Platoon made responsible for evacuation of P.o.W.

### THE BATTLE.

At 1310 hours the Company arrived at the debussing point (about a mile in rear of Battalion H.Q.)

At

1330 hours the Company arrived at its assembly area (just in rear of Battalion H.Q.)

Whilst my second-in-command (Captain Scott) was preparing the platoons for battle I once again ascended point 217 together with the Tank Troop Commander and the three platoon Commanders. After briefing we all returned and at 1445 hours the Company crossed the Start Line.

Fortune had smiled upon us in as much as Clarke's Troop had taken part in a wireless exercise only a few weeks before, and the 88 set net worked admirably throughout. At the start we and the armour were two

hundred yards apart, by the end of Phase 1 this had increased to about 500 yards.

The Company moved off with No.1 Platoon (Lt. COOPER) LEFT and No.3 Platoon (Lt. BEAVIS) RIGHT. Next came an abbreviated Company H.Q. consisting of myself, my runner, my personal gun man and the 88 and 31 set operators. Finally reserve platoon, No. 2 (Lt YEO) together with the stretcher-bearers. The 2i/c, Catpain SCOTT, the Company Sergeant Major, C.S.M TONG, with ammunition carrier were to join us on the conclusion of Phase 2.

The distance from the Start Line to the F.U.P. was in the neighbourhood of seven hundred yards, and from the F.U.P. to the first objective another two hundred yards.

As we moved through the scrub-covered foothills, which afforded us perfect cover, we could see the Churchills ploughing slowly forward down the icy track. After a few minutes the tanks came into view of the river bed and some small arms fire greeted them. They returned fire with their 75's and Besas and very soon the village, close to the river, was aflame.

We meanwhile pressed on, passing through some R.O.K troops who had been thrown hastily forward under one of our own officers to prevent further infiltration SOUTH. Shortly afterwards we approached the spur which was to form our F.U.P. I then became aware that the two leading platoons had spotted the enemy. One could tell by the way they moved, by the

quickenning of the stride, together with the hasty positioning of Bren guns.

I went forward onto the spur itself and there only a few hundred yards away in the river bed itself could be seen numerous little kapok-covered figures. Fortunately we had complete superiority as far as ground was concerned. We were completely overlooking them, and then what I supposed should be termed the “fire fight” started.

Every man in those two leading platoons decided he wished to fire his piece. The reserve sections came forward and took up fire positions and each and every weapon that could be brought to bear went off with one loud bang.

All the careful instruction about fire control and conservation of ammunition etc. etc went to the four winds. All the doctrine about short bursts and single shots where possible from Brens was forgotten. At least one Bren at my very feet, emptied its magazine in one glorious burst, whereupon the No.1 turned to his No.2 and said “For --- sake put another --- mag on and be --- quick about it”!!

Did Section Commander control the fire of their Sections? No of course they didn't. They fired off their Stens and generally thoroughly enjoyed themselves. At least one Section Commander brutally seized his Section Bren from out of the hands of the wretched man who had been carrying it and proceeded to shoot himself a Chinaman. His Brengunner made a personal appeal to

me for the return of his weapon which was speedily granted.

Meanwhile C Squadron, 7 R.T.R had been enjoying themselves and Y Company, on point 280 sent one or two L.M.G.s part of the way down the hill to cut off fleeing Chinamen. By this time I had become parted from my wireless sets and had attached myself to the right forward platoon (No.3), to the obvious disapproval of the unfortunate platoon commander. By means of his 88 set I was able

(a) To tell C Squadron to stop firing and

(b) Tell Nos.1 and 2 Platoons to prepare to assault.

Bill Cooper (No.1 Platoon) was directed to clear the river bed itself, James Yeo (No. 2 Platoon) was to cover the advance from the F.U.P.

Off we went and soon found ourselves amongst a thoroughly cowed enemy. One or two made a halfhearted effort to engage and were briefly dispatched. One or two ran off and were shot. The remainder surrendered, mostly to No.1 platoon. In the flaming village we discovered what was left of Y Company's "F" Echelon, and liberated the drivers, together with a mass of Korean refugees. The prisoners totalled in the neighbourhood of twenty-five.

Naturally, there was some confusion on the objective, which was finally consolidated about 1445 hours, and it was fully another fifteen minutes before we were ready to pass to Phase 2. This looked even more

unattractive at close quarters. Information about enemy in the area of the SCHOOL and village was uncertain. The approach was absolutely open and mortaring and small arms fire could be seen whipping down on the frozen paddy.

I rang up CLARKE and asked if he could see any movement in the SCHOOL area, and having obtained a negative reply gave the order to advance. The two leading platoons had been switched over as No. 1 Platoon had, in the general melee during the consolidation movements, turned up on the right flank. The order was therefore altered leaving No.3 Platoon on the left, No. 1 Platoon remaining on the right and the reserve platoon coming forward to cover our advance.

This Platoon put down smoke to help us over, but there was little or no wind and the smoke itself was not very accurately placed. Consequently, the enemy, now overlooking us from the lower slopes of hill 280 were able to get a bit of their own back. The forward movement nearly petered out.

I thought I had better try and direct the tanks onto the enemy, so I ran across and, *mirabile dictu*, found the telephone on the Troop Commander's Monster in perfect working order. This Troop were now only some two hundred yards short of the school and he still reported no sign of enemy movement in that area. I asked him to neutralise the Chinamen on the lower slopes of hill 280, whilst we were crossing to join up with the tanks for a final attack on the VILLAGE and SCHOOL. I also told

him not to fire at the SCHOOL itself unless there was unmistakable evidence of Chinese occupation, as the presence of some of our own men was believed possible.

Meanwhile No.1 Platoon was working its way across gradually, and about this time word arrived that the Platoon Commander of No.3 Platoon had been wounded, in point of fact he was our sole casualty. This appeared to have resulted in the complete stoppage of any forward movement on the part of the Platoon. I therefore ordered the reserve Platoon to come forward, and again studied the objective carefully for any sign of enemy movement. A figure darted across the road from right to left and vanished into some buildings.

Neither I, nor the tank Troop Sergeant, Sergeant DOWDING, could make out what nationality it was. At the same time one of 1 Platoon's Section Commanders reported movement from some straw stacks on the left corner of the village, well away from the School. I decided to allow the tanks to fire, which they did with both main and subsidiary armaments. Afterwards it was discovered that in point of fact this movement had been some of the Assault Pioneer Platoon, and I believe one man was killed and know that three were wounded.

By this time 1 Platoon had arrived astride the road into the village. They were directed to clear the SCHOOL on the right of the road. 2 Platoon now coming forward were directed to clear the buildings on the LEFT of the road.

Sergeant DOWDING, with three tanks, Lt CLARKE'S having developed some mechanical defect I believe, were to move with us and take on anything that shewed itself during the clearing up process. I moved with his tank on foot.

Bill Cooper's platoon cleared the SCHOOL without meeting anybody, though there was considerable sniping from the NORTH slope of X Company's hill.

James YEO cleared the buildings LEFT of the road in fine style and flushed a few chaps who were quickly dispatched. Sergeant DOWDING engaged Chinese who were seen to be slipping off from the slopes of hill 280. Apparently a whole cloud of chaps took off from the NORTH slopes of X Company's hill. These were not engaged as they were out of sight of us in the village. However F.O.O.s with Y and Z Companies took them on with guns and 4.2 mortar fire and sorted them out.

By 1600 hours I was able to report the operation as completed. However turning round I discovered the Commanding Officer had already arrived on foot, and was able to report to him personally. About this time too Captain SCOTT and the Company Sergeant Major arrived with that most precious gift, ammunition.

A number of F echelon vehicles, mostly MMG platoon carriers, were recovered, also all the dead of S Company. The Assault Pioneer Platoon were released, those who were still alive of course, and enemy casualties estimated about seventy killed and 25 prisoners. Our total casualties were one officer wounded.

Shortly afterwards the Battalion received orders to withdraw about last light, which was in the neighbourhood of 1700 hours. All companies slipped away without opposition and we finally withdrew about 1945 hours, in a clear, rather too light atmosphere for this type of operation.

The going was slow when once we had bumped the columns in front together with tanks, carriers, jeeps etc. moving along a small track without lights.

However eventually an alternative route for vehicles was found and the Company reached the main road at 2200 hours to find a hot meal awaiting. Another hours march and we came to the embussing point, a few miles NORTH of the capital city.

We piled in and shortly recrossed the HAN river over the bridge which we had been guarding only 15 hours before. Our destination SUWON, which we finally reached about 0200 a.m. after a memorable days work.

### CONCLUSION.

This action was the first major battle taken part in by the Company. The men, though mostly regular reservists, had been out of the army for three to four years. A number of them did not even come from within the Regimental Group.

Their training had been sketchy and of short duration followed by a long sea voyage and a period of

static defence, which allowed of little training, or even physical fitness.

It was therefore most satisfactory to find that when necessity did arise their actions though certainly not of the type approved by the School of Infantry pundits proved effective in defeating a stubborn enemy. This I must attribute to competent platoon and section leading, without which undoubtedly the battle would have been lost.

### LESSONS.

There were many lessons from this action but for my part, and discussing it afterwards with Officers and N.C.O.s, three of the most important were certainly:-

- (a) Careful planning and reconnaissance prior to a counter-attack essential. This was possible, the R.T.R Commander available and a combined reconnaissance carried out.
- (b) Communications between Infantry and Tanks.

This was by normal means, i.e. 88 set to 88 set and/or telephone on back of the Churchills. This worked perfectly, but of course infantry and tanks were never far apart during the action. It also happily happened that there had been a little training with the Troop supporting the attack. This might well not have been the case in view of the roles undertaken in the short period of action since the Battalion's advent to the battle theatre.

It is of course obviously vital that, time permitting, the closest co-operation is effected with all supporting arms.

(c) Fire Discipline and Fire Control.

This, as can be seen from the account, was far and away the weakest factor in the battle. It might indeed have proved fatal in the event of a really determined enemy counter-attack. For a long time there was a general weakness in this respect, fortunately largely rectified before the next main action in April [Imjin River]. The value of good, sound, weapon training, control of fire within Sections and picking out of and engaging targets simply cannot be over estimated. This is of paramount importance against troops trained on Russian lines who are both determined and very numerous.

END.