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Fire and Maneuver: The 2nd Infantry Division's Assault on Korea's "Punchbowl,"

August–October 1951

Colonel Bryan R. Gibby

“Fire without movement is indecisive. Exposed movement without fire is disastrous. There must be effective fire combined with skillful movement.”¹ In war there may not be authoritative rules to follow, but there are nuggets of wisdom, and the lead sentences of this chapter comprise one of them—commanders disregard the synergy between fire and combined-arms maneuver at their (and their Soldiers’) peril.

An attacker advancing against a prepared enemy resorts to various expedients to dislocate or degrade defensive fires. Obfuscation by darkness, smoke, or fog is one effective method, as is the exploitation of surprise, or the utilization of covered and concealed avenues of approach. But sometimes the terrain or the nature of the defenders’ array precludes these methods. In these situations, fire must be fought with more effective fire, and the most effective fires are those that support aggressive maneuver.²

Army doctrine for large-unit operations during the Korean War was prescribed by *Field Manual (FM) 100-5, Operations*, published in August 1949. Its foundational experience was of course that gained from World War II, revealing the art of “leading troops in combat and the tactics of the combined arms.”³ The Foreword to this edition of *FM 100-5* noted that “while the fundamental doctrines of combat operations are neither numerous nor complex, their application sometimes is difficult.”⁴ This chapter examines the experience of the 2nd Infantry Division in the Korean War, during the so-called “stalemate” period (1951–1953), conducting offensive operations against a dug-in, motivated, and competent enemy. The division struggled to adapt doctrine to generate fire superiority that enabled decisive maneuver. The result was a poor

exchange of high casualties for little terrain. “Numbers cannot be used as a substitute for fire,” counsels the 1939 edition of *Infantry in Battle*. “If the attack lacks surprise or superior fire power, an increase in men will merely mean an increase in casualties” without a decision or appreciable effect on the enemy.⁵ This doctrinal prescription remains fundamental to offensive operations as described in *FM 3-0* (2017), where “fire superiority allows commanders to maneuver forces without prohibitive losses.”⁶ Achieving fire superiority to complement decisive maneuver is as essential in modern war—where excessive casualties can have strategic effects—as it was during larger conventional conflicts of the mid-20th Century.

Introduction

In the summer of 1951, the Eighth United States Army Korea (EUSAK) had performed a military miracle. Although heavily outnumbered and fighting in a theater considered secondary in strategic importance compared to Europe, EUSAK wrecked the Communist armies of North Korea and the People’s Republic of China in a series of battles following Chinese intervention in late 1950. The Communists’ last effort culminated in May, where American firepower completely dominated the battleground. It was clear that the Communists could not generate the military strength to throw EUSAK off the Korean peninsula. It was equally clear to the Americans that a decisive military victory was not in the cards. US President Harry S. Truman was willing to negotiate an armistice to end the fighting and set the conditions for a political conference to determine the final peace.

Military leaders such as General Matthew B. Ridgway (Commander, Far East Command and United Nations Command) and General James A. Van Fleet (Commander, EUSAK) translated this policy guidance into a new military strategy to apply air and ground military pressure while minimizing casualties. Van Fleet was ordered to hold the Kansas-Wyoming Line,

which was the terrain basis for an acceptable truce. When negotiations, which began on 10 July 1951, failed to produce a quick settlement, Van Fleet ordered EUSAK to commence limited objective attacks to keep US and allied troops sharp, inflict casualties on the Communists, and gain ground that would eliminate potential threats to the Kansas-Wyoming Line's security. One such operation occurred from July to October 1951 in a region known as the "Punchbowl," a circular volcanic valley located north of the 38th parallel and less than a dozen miles from the strategic Hwachon Reservoir.

The Punchbowl operation can be divided into three parts: a preliminary attack (26–30 July) to seize Hill 1179 and establish a forward patrol base, a hasty attack (18 August–5 September) to eliminate a North Korean (Korean People's Army or KPA) salient known as Bloody Ridge, and a follow-on exploitation attack (13 September–15 October) to seize an objective known as Heartbreak Ridge. Each of these battles featured heavy artillery concentrations to support infantry maneuver. However, the defending North Koreans learned to neutralize American firepower and extract a steep price in casualties. Enemy defenses exploited the forbidding terrain that defied straightforward application of doctrine, which complicated the Americans' efforts to generate offensive momentum. The division's first two commanders, Major General Clark L. Ruffner and Brigadier General Thomas E. DeShazo failed to appreciate the magnitude of the problem confronting the division, which resulted in poor tactical approaches costly in men, material, and time. The commander who successfully accomplished the division's assigned mission, Major General Robert N. Young, was cut from different cloth, and his imaginative and forceful application of Army doctrine produced dynamic results at a fraction of the cost of the previous efforts.

The Outpost Battle for Hill 1179

The 2nd Infantry Division assumed its place along Line Kansas in mid-July and immediately began to patrol its sector, attempting to dominate the land between it and the North Korean Main Line of Resistance (MLR). Prior to its arrival in the X Corps sector, the division had been reorganizing, refitting, and retraining for future combat operations. However, once negotiations began, the division's training emphasis transitioned to defense-oriented tasks. Its new mission was "the active defense of the Kansas Line and the preparation and organization of the secondary Wichita Defense Line."⁷

This mission suited Ruffner. Commissioned a cavalry officer in 1924, he served in a variety of staff positions before and during World War II. His military education consisted of the Cavalry School and the abbreviated Command and General Staff College course, completed in 1941. Ruffner served in the Far East as the X Corps Chief of Staff from August to December 1950. As the commanding general of the 2nd Infantry Division since January 1951, his experience had been entirely against the Chinese during their Fourth and Fifth Campaigns. The division's most recent successful encounters had been defensive battles where infantry forces fixed the enemy while artillery played the deciding role. His tactical "policy" was simple: "artillery rather than infantry would be used to secure positions . . . when the division stopped it would use artillery . . . slowly and steadily."⁸

Once on Line Kansas, Ruffner saw the opportunity to practice his slow and steady approach. He identified a fortified hilltop immediately to the west of the Punchbowl, Hill 1179 (Taeu-san), that gave the enemy excellent artillery observation of the division's MLR and served as an impediment to effective patrolling.⁹ Ruffner planned a two-regiment attack reinforced with engineers, artillery, and close air support to engage in a methodical battle to capture Hill 1179.

The attack began on 26 July and lasted until 30 July. The KPA defenders put up stiff resistance, but they could not hold against the infantry-artillery team that Ruffner employed. However, the lesson learned by the division was unfortunately exceedingly optimistic: “the volume and effectiveness of the supporting artillery and air” had won the day without excessive infantry casualties.¹⁰ It was, in the words of the division’s command report, “a job well done.”¹¹

Meanwhile, truce negotiations failed to make much progress. In an effort to apply military pressure, EUSAK ordered Major General Clovis E. Byers, commanding the X Corps, on 14 August 1951 to “capture Hill 983 at an early date utilizing ROK [South Korean] forces in [the] principle effort, supported by US fire power.”¹² Hill 983 was the dominating terrain feature of a ridgeline complex at the southwestern apex of the Punchbowl that included Hill 940 and Hill 773.

The Assault on Bloody Ridge

With the sanguine assessment of the Hill 1179 operation, the 2nd Infantry Division prepared to attack Hill 983. Korean troops (36th Regiment) from the ROK 5th Division were attached to the division and received orders on August 16 to seize the ridgeline. The division developed an elaborate fire support plan with two 105-mm artillery battalions (11th Marine Regiment and the Army’s 300th Field Artillery Battalion) in direct support, four additional divisional battalions (three 105-mm and one 155-mm) in general support controlled by the Division Artillery’s fire direction center, and two corps-level battalions (one 155-mm and one 8-inch) in a reinforcing role. Finally, the 937th Armored Field Artillery Battalion pulled the unique duty to provide support with direct fire to destroy bunkers. Over 200 point targets were pre-plotted on a 1:25,000 map of the area under attack. Two days prior to the assault, Air Force

fighter-bombers and medium bombers dropped 64,000 pounds of bombs in addition to napalm, rocket, and strafing attacks.¹³

Despite the tremendous fire support from nine organic and reinforcing artillery battalions applied to the target area, the division faced significant resistance. KPA efforts to strengthen the region, soon to be dubbed “Bloody Ridge” began in early July. The terrain sloped steeply southward, giving a significant advantage to the North Korean defenders, who devoted two regiments from two divisions to its defense. After nearly six weeks, the fortified works consisted not only of artillery dugouts and shelters, but also elaborate bunkers and protected assembly areas on the north (reverse slope) side of Bloody Ridge.¹⁴ Reserve forces were positioned behind Bloody Ridge to move forward and restore any penetrations to the line by counterattacking into captured strongpoints. The KPA defenders on Bloody Ridge did not surrender, even when surrounded. They continued to fight until completely destroyed by firepower or subdued by assaulting infantrymen.¹⁵

The Koreans began their attack in heavy rain on the morning of 18 August. By the afternoon, ROK soldiers had seized Hills 710 and 731, two intermediate points leading up to Hill 983. Resistance had been light, but it soon intensified as the ROKs hit mines and 82-mm mortar rounds fell on the tired Koreans, who stopped to dig in.¹⁶ The ROK troops pressed on until they had secured Hill 773 and Hill 940. The Korean troops had been on the move for over 60 hours, operating on terrain that made both maneuver and resupply difficult. On the fifth day of the assault (22 August), a ROK company infiltrated to the rear of Hill 983 and surprised its defenders. At this point, General Ruffner had a decision to make: whether to commit one of his American regiments to relieve the Koreans.¹⁷

It is unknown why Ruffner declined to commit a US regiment to battle, but he demonstrated high confidence in American firepower to substitute for infantry. Ruffner informed Major General Min Ki-shik, commanding the ROK 5th Division, there was “nothing to worry about that hill [Hill 983] because I will not let any enemy to come in there. I know I can keep the enemy from going up on that hill. *I got artillery fires he cannot get through. . . . I can put so much artillery up there and no one in the world would go up [emphasis added].*”¹⁸

Unfortunately, the enemy did get through to Hill 983, and they arrived in strength sufficient to eject the Koreans and then crush a disjointed counterattack by two companies from 2nd Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment, which Ruffner belatedly committed on 26 August. “Incensed” that the counterattack failed to recover the hill, Ruffner “ordered an immediate attack” by the 9th Infantry, whose only uncommitted unit was the 3rd Battalion, then holding positions along Line Kansas.¹⁹ The 3rd Battalion’s effort was equally fragmented and hindered by pelting rain. It met determined resistance and faltered when a small KPA element ambushed the battalion command post. Bowing finally to the reality of the situation, Ruffner committed the entire 9th Infantry Regiment on 30 August to a frontal attack against Hill 773 and Hill 940.²⁰ Assistant Division Commander Brigadier General Haydon L. Boatner—who joined the division on 18 August—was disgusted by the regiment’s failure to regain the lost ground. He recalled, “The 9th [Infantry] thought they could take Bloody Ridge easily. They underestimated the enemy and overestimated their own strength.”²¹ In his opinion, infantry tactics had been allowed to lapse into lackadaisical technique as “many extra casualties resulted in the final stages of assaults on enemy bunkers and pill boxes” due to inexperienced leadership, immature teamwork, and failure to adapt basic infantry doctrine to the terrain and enemy situation.²²

General Van Fleet ordered X Corps to loosen restrictions on artillery rates of fire, telling his gunners to expend shells liberally “to kill the enemy and to extricate United Nations (UN) forces or prevent their capture or destruction.”²³ Then General Byers drew a new control graphic, called Line Hays, to extend the corps attack to encompass all of the Punchbowl south of its northern rim and include additional objectives assigned to the ROK divisions and US Marines. More artillery was called in, and Ruffner’s other two American regiments, the 38th and 23rd Infantry, were also committed to attacks along the flanking ridges and hills to cut off KPA reinforcements and isolate the defenders on Hill 983. Slow progress was made against stubborn resistance as the defenders continued to pour fresh troops into the fight, despite having “suffered staggering losses.”²⁴ Eventually the full weight of three regiments shifted the contest in the Americans’ favor so that on 5 September, elements of the 9th Infantry advanced over Hill 983 “almost without a struggle.”²⁵ American soldiers relearned old lessons about attacking fortified positions: organizing platoons into assault, support, and reserve squads; calling close air support; employing flamethrowers, demolitions, and recoilless rifles to wipe out defensive works.²⁶

Boatner called Bloody Ridge “the poorest [battle] tactically of any I have ever participated in.”²⁷ In addition to poor tactics, the division was unprepared for the logistical demands for manpower and ammunition. Much time was lost attempting to integrate new leaders and troops into units still in contact, which was a violation of EUSAK directives to bring replacements forward only when a unit was withdrawn from battle. These replacements did not have time to acclimate, get oriented to the situation, or train for the complex task of assaulting a fortified position. The result was many unnecessary casualties in a slow attritional struggle.²⁸

The movement of ammunition and other supplies severely taxed the division logistics staff and the corps’s transportation resources. High artillery expenditure attracted the corps

commander's personal attention. He worried "that there is some wasteful shooting."²⁹

Unobserved fire contributed to the division's nearly insatiable ammunition appetite, which sheds light on the 15th Field Artillery Battalion's dubious effort to "set a new record for light [105-mm] battalions" by firing 14,425 shells in a single 24-hour period.³⁰ To feed the guns, the corps devoted 130 2½-ton trucks to haul an average of 32,000 shells a day (not to mention over 15 tons of other supplies and ammunition) over a road rated at 1,200 tons capacity.³¹

Despite the prodigious amount of fire support, the division had not set the conditions for the 9th Infantry to conduct successfully a deliberate attack. Firepower alone was insufficient; destruction missions rarely produced useful effects. The division's intelligence officer noted that enemy "positions are impervious to anything but a direct hit . . . extensive use of artillery will greatly lessen UN casualties, [but] the infantry soldier must become adept at overcoming the enemy bunker positions."³² Not until the X Corps's general advance to seize Line Hays began on 31 August did the division, by bringing effective fire and maneuver against both flanks of Bloody Ridge, gain sufficient traction to overcome the enemy in less time, with fewer overall casualties, and less ammunition expended.³³

Frontal attacks without proper fires supporting maneuver cost the 2nd Infantry Division and ROK 36th Regiment 326 killed, 2,032 wounded, and 414 missing.³⁴ North Korean losses were assessed as topping 15,000, surely an exaggeration, but the scale of casualties helps to define the brutality of the combat that was limited in scope, scale, and time. Attack on a fortified position is always difficult and Bloody Ridge was already a naturally strong position. The Communists had had two months to recover their equilibrium and build up their defenses organized around naturally strong terrain features. Their supporting artillery was dispersed and

well-camouflaged. It was going to take much more than bombs, shells, and bodies to pry the Communists out of their Punchbowl fortifications.³⁵

Heartbreak Ridge—the First Phase

Hoping to capitalize on the North Koreans' withdrawal from Bloody Ridge, Van Fleet then ordered X Corps to continue the limited objective attack northward to erase the salient and bring the corps's left flank on line with the US IX Corps and place American forces close to known KPA supply centers at Mundung-ni and Satae-ri, giving the Americans control over two north-south main supply routes supporting the KPA's defense lines. Despite these clear terrain objectives, a misappreciation of the enemy's intentions and an overreliance on past tactical methods emphasizing fires as the decisive effort clouded the mission's operational end-state, which resulted in another grinding attritional battle for terrain that reporters soon dubbed "Heartbreak Ridge."³⁶

Consisting of three main peaks connected by a razor-sharp ridgeline, Heartbreak Ridge was called "one of the most formidable positions on the entire battle front."³⁷ The southern terminus was Hill 894, which covered the approaches from Bloody Ridge. The ridge's highest peak was known as Hill 931, located a further 1,300 meters to the north from Hill 894, and 2,100 meters beyond Hill 931 was the needle-like peak, Hill 851. It was a rugged mountain mass, "as the spinal column of a fish, with hundreds of vertebrae"³⁸ and knife-edged finger ridges extending east and west. The division's command report observed that the contour lines on the map "bear poor witness to the actual ruggedness and complexity of the terrain."³⁹

Although the Americans used somewhat better tactics to coordinate artillery and infantry action, the North Korean defenders from Bloody Ridge had eight days respite, and they fell back on prepared bunkers, trench lines, and gun positions that completely dominated the ground

below.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the division underestimated the KPA's resolve. Brigadier General Thomas E. DeShazo (who assumed command from General Ruffner) determined that artillery, rather than infantry maneuver, would be used to secure the ridge. No coordinated attacks from the 9th or 38th Infantry Regiments were planned or even envisioned to support Colonel James Y. Adams's 23rd Infantry. The plan was for Adams's regiment to advance from the east and penetrate the KPA lines between Hills 851 and 931. A battalion would then peel off to the north to secure Hill 851, while a second veered south to strike Hill 931 and then Hill 894. (One battalion from the 9th Infantry was committed to attack Hill 894 from the south, but it was considered a secondary effort as opposed to being synchronized with the main effort against Hill 931.)⁴¹

General DeShazo arrived in Korea in September 1950, when he became the IX Corps artillery officer, a position he held until March 1951, when he assumed command of the US 2nd Division's artillery. His previous combat experience consisted of battalion and group commands in North Africa, Italy, and southern France. He was an expert gunner as demonstrated during the Battle of the Soyang River in May 1951, which broke the momentum of the Communists' final offensive campaign of the year, but he had little familiarity as a fire support officer supporting ground tactical maneuver. His experience fighting the Chinese in open battle may have clouded his judgment when it came to pry out fanatical KPA troops defending fixed fortifications and supported by a continuous stream of men, ammunition, and shells. Oliver Le Mire, the deputy commander of the French Battalion attached to the 23rd Infantry, observed, "The North Koreans only give up terrain foot by foot—they are decidedly tougher than the Chinese."⁴²

Because the division's scheme of maneuver called for only one infantry regiment, it appears DeShazo lined up an impressive array of firepower: one battalion of 105-mm howitzers in direct support to the 23rd Infantry with three more battalions (one 105-mm and two 155-mm)

in general support to the division (but in reality firing in support of the 23rd Infantry) and one corps battalion (96th Field Artillery) reinforcing. A battery of 8-inch howitzers provided heavy counterbattery and bunker-busting fire.⁴³ However, the entire corps was attempting to advance against the Punchbowl, which dispersed the corps artillery across four divisions and meant far less fire support for DeShazo's attack than the division enjoyed against Bloody Ridge.

Additionally, the terrain shaped the battlefield such that American units were scattered about, in some cases advancing along converging corridors. On more than one occasion, the division's guns could not fire missions due to fear of short or long rounds landing on friendly units. Belatedly DeShazo noted, "We have to get . . . the fire fight [going] in one direction,"⁴⁴ which was a paraphrase of *FM 100-5 (1949), Operations*: "The attack is characterized by the positive action of fire and maneuver . . . to create a preponderance of force in *the decisive direction*" (emphasis added).⁴⁵ Under these conditions, it was professionally negligent to expect a terrain feature as formidable as Heartbreak Ridge to fall to a two-battalion diverging attack that was unsupported by the remainder of the division's significant combat power.

The 23rd Infantry moved out with two battalions in column formation against Heartbreak Ridge after a short preparatory bombardment on 13 September, but once the soldiers hit the web of spurs extending eastward, their forward momentum ground to a halt. The doctrine to attack an organized defense required "Superiority of fire" and noted that "fire effect is increased by enfilade action. Flanking or oblique fire is especially effective when frontal fire is delivered simultaneously against the same objective."⁴⁶ However, most advances along the narrow ridgelines were possible in single file only, and the defenders, sheltered in their stout log and earth bunkers, remained mostly unfazed by American artillery. They continued to emerge from their bunkers to pour fire downslope and drive the attackers to ground. DeShazo's optimism

began to fade as early as 15 September, when it was clear the KPA had sufficient artillery ammunition to support their fixed defenses and enough manpower to sustain numerous counterattacks.⁴⁷ Corporal Benjamin Judd, a squad leader in F Company, remembered “shells [falling] over the entire company. There was no place they were not falling, and there was no place to take cover. We sat like ducks in a hailstorm of fire.”⁴⁸

Despite the hold the division had on the south end of the ridge, Adams’s infantry could make no substantial progress against Hills 931 and 851. Piecemealed company and platoon-size frontal assaults could not overcome the defenders with enough strength to establish a firm defense against counterattacks, and US counterbattery fire was too slow and imprecise to silence the enemy’s guns.

DeShazo’s reluctance to expand the zone of attack to maneuver friendly forces into a position of relative advantage defies simple explanation. The key to Hill 931 was in the disruption of KPA lines of communication extending west and north into the town of Mundungni, which was the corps’s ultimate objective. General Byers assigned the division the task to capture Hill 931, but he did not prescribe the method. DeShazo was responsible to influence “the course of subsequent action by his leadership, by the maneuver of subordinate elements to include reserves, by the concentration of artillery fires.”⁴⁹ He failed to employ his division’s combat power except for its artillery and one infantry regiment. The 23rd Infantry alone could not maintain the momentum of the attack, particularly at night, which gave the enemy time to reconstitute his defenses, rebuild his fortifications, resupply, and launch counterattacks. No reserve unit was ready to pass through and assume the attack, and no plans had been contemplated to attempt a nighttime approach. Not until after 23 September would this scheme of maneuver be developed.⁵⁰

Heartbreak Ridge—The Second Phase

On 20 September the division welcomed a new commander, Major General Robert N. Young. He had no previous combat command experience (although he served as 3rd Infantry Division's assistant division commander during the last six months of the war). A key difference between Young and his two predecessors was his professional development as a student and later instructor at the Infantry School (during George C. Marshall's tenure) and a full year at the Command and General Staff College. (Ruffner and DeShazo had graduated from the abbreviated General Staff Course at Fort Leavenworth.)⁵¹ It is highly likely that he recognized the tactical dilemma Adams faced. He had already lost nearly 950 Soldiers killed, wounded, and missing; the French Battalion added another 157 casualties to the division's ledger.⁵² The division G-2, Lieutenant Colonel Albert W. Aykroyd, informed the new commander that the ridge line dominated the two valleys to the west and the east, and that through these same valleys the KPA brought reinforcements and supplies to keep the battle going. On the ridge itself, the Koreans' bunkers resisted all bombardment. The enemy would have to be "blasted, burned, bayoneted and finally dragged out of his bunkers."⁵³

General Young respected and trusted his subordinate commanders' and staff officers' judgments and recognized the need to seize Mundung-ni and its connecting valley approach to Heartbreak Ridge. Mundung-ni was "a position of relative advantage . . . within [Young's] area of operations that provide[d] the commander with temporary freedom of action to enhance combat power over an enemy or influence the enemy to accept risk and move to a position of disadvantage."⁵⁴ Key to finding and seizing this position of relative advantage was Young's willingness to assume prudent risk relying on his subordinates' disciplined initiative within his overall tactical intent. A successful thrust at Mundung-ni promised to present the enemy with an

irresolvable dilemma: either withdraw under pressure and abandon good positions or die in place.

Young determined that nothing short of a division-level combined arms assault would secure the division's objective at an acceptable cost. With such a difficult tactical problem, he took a step back to reconstitute his infantry units and plan a division-level attack.⁵⁵

To solidify his plan, the commanding general spent the next few days flying over the division zone in a L-19 plane, studying the terrain from every angle. This effort was critical as he observed how the enemy's position was strengthened by virtually unmolested lines of communication and resupply. Although the surrounding terrain was not considered tank country, Young's personal reconnaissance, along with a briefing he received from the French Battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Monclar, and Colonel Adams, convinced him that the unlikely potential for an armored thrust combined with a general division level attack just might give his troops the crucial element of surprise needed to overthrow the defenders.⁵⁶ The division's engineer battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Love, investigated the trafficability of the Mundung-ni valley and reported back that although it would take a major effort, a passable route to support tanks could be carved from the valley floor.⁵⁷

On 1 October, following his daily staff briefing, General Young announced the division would attack on a broad front in four days. Dubbed Operation Touchdown, the plan was a combined arms attack against the terrain features that protected Heartbreak Ridge and facilitated the North Koreans' supply and reinforcing troop movement. Colonel John M. Lynch's 9th Infantry drew the task to seize the series of hills on the division's southwestern flank to tie down enemy reserves and draw away some of his artillery strength. The 38th Infantry, commanded by Colonel Frank T. Mildren, was to attack across and up the west side of Mundung-ni valley to

control the high ground overlooking the valley floor and to outflank the KPA's rear defense support area of Heartbreak Ridge. Adams's 23rd Infantry with the attached French Battalion would assault Heartbreak's two main peaks, but in a phased attack that kept roughly parallel to the 38th Infantry's advance. The decisive element of the operation was an engineer-armor-infantry thrust up the Mundung-ni valley to seize the hamlet and complete the isolation of Heartbreak Ridge. A division level ammunition supply point was established along with emergency Class I and III stockpiles to sustain the main effort. Young set the start time of the attack at 2100 hours on 5 October.⁵⁸

Colonel Love's engineers set to work, grading and smoothing one of the most heavily mined and cratered roads the Americans had seen in Korea. At the same time, the infantry battalion commanders were busy integrating replacements, developing detailed fire plans, reorganizing their companies, training with recoilless rifles and flame throwers, and practicing drills to assault bunkers. Each battalion submitted fire plans showing all weapons, including tanks, were in support of the maneuver elements. This planning was done to great detail and reflected at the lowest echelons. Sand table models and bunker mock-ups complemented the troops' preparation for a deliberate attack.⁵⁹

Heartbreak Ridge—The Decisive Phase

Operation Touchdown commenced the evening of 5 October with a controlled barrage of artillery high explosives and close air support. (No artillery was placed on Hill 931, however, to facilitate a surprise night approach.) Although the KPA continued to fight back, it was a different kind of battle. Both the 9th and 38th Infantry regiments moved out to pressure the North Koreans as the division's shift to a nighttime attack with greater fire support suppressed enemy mortars and tied up his reserves. By 0300 hours, American infantry were occupying Hill 931 in strength,

beating off several uncoordinated counterattacks. By daylight, Adams had his own 3rd battalion and the French battalion firmly holding the center of Heartbreak Ridge. American tanks and infantry patrols were also ranging up the Satae-ri valley to fire on Hill 851 from behind. Work continued on the Mundung-ni road, the infantry advance providing cover to the engineers.⁶⁰

By 10 October, Love's engineers were ready to open the eight-mile-long road to Mundung-ni. It was a fantastic and unprecedented achievement. The appearance of Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Jarvis's 68 Sherman tanks from the 72nd Armor Battalion loaded with high-explosive shells and carrying extra ammunition for a battalion of the 38th Infantry providing close-in defense and support against KPA antitank squads broke the KPA's will and ability to continue to resist.⁶¹ The tank-infantry force, shooting and grinding its way forward in places the KPA had not expected, gave an incredible boost to the 23rd Infantry's morale as they expanded their own grip north and south of Hill 931. The North Koreans abandoned Mundung-ni, sealing the fate of Heartbreak Ridge's remaining defenders.⁶² Boatner, enthused by the fine display of combined arms teamwork, called the maneuver "the best I have ever seen in combat units."⁶³

After more than a month of continuous fighting the Second Division, reinforced with the French Korea Battalion at last seized and cleared the remaining holdout ring of the Punchbowl. The salient had been erased, and at a cost of 1,740 total casualties—a figure well below the number anticipated.⁶⁴

If American infantrymen were relearning techniques not practiced by the US Army since Okinawa in 1945, the senior commanders and officers of the 2nd Infantry Division demonstrated severely ossified tactical methods.⁶⁵ Neither DeShazo nor his staff considered the tactical problem holistically. Heartbreak Ridge was simply an obstacle to be blasted apart and occupied. No reconnaissance (other than Young's) had been accomplished to determine the source of the

KPA's defensive strength, which lay behind and to the northwest of Hill 931. American artillery and air power were applied against fortified positions in an attempt to destroy the enemy.

Young's maneuver demonstrated that fire support was most effective to suppress and neutralize enemy observation, automatic weapons, mortars, and guns. The successful interdiction of the KPA's flow of reinforcements determined the outcome of the battle, and that could only be achieved by the deep envelopment maneuver against Mundung-ni.

Additionally, the series of frontal attacks against the Heartbreak Ridge's strong terrain played straight into the North Koreans' plan. An American assessment at the end of September revealed the Communists' fighting power in this kind of battle:

The enemy defended his fortified positions tenaciously . . . resist[ing] until his units . . . are no longer effective. It has been necessary to dig the enemy out of bunkers with flame throwers and grenades. Commanders who served in the Pacific during World War II report that the fighting in this sector for the past month has been as fierce as any observed during that war.⁶⁶

General Young characterized pre-Touchdown attacks "a failure" as the piecemeal commitment of troops on a narrow zone simply made them targets for North Korean machine guns, grenades, and mortars.⁶⁷

The Americans gained ground only after the entire division launched a coordinated and well-resourced attack beginning 6 October. The initial reliance on artillery and aerial firepower deforested the ridge but failed to reduce fortifications. Between 13 and 20 September, the division artillery shot so much ordnance that corps reserve stocks were nearly depleted without substantive gains on the ground. Tank guns were hastily employed in indirect harassing and interdiction missions to make up the shortfall.⁶⁸ The 250 tons of bombs dropped by 842 Close Air Support (CAS) sorties provided mostly moral support. Only a direct hit from a bomb or heavy caliber weapon could crush a bunker, and sometimes not even then, as the Americans

discovered most KPA bunkers were impervious to even medium artillery. Striking these “very formidable” bunkers, the “155’s [howitzers] just blew up some dust.”⁶⁹ Firepower alone would never suffice to clear or occupy the ridgetops.

Boatner was less flummoxed by the division’s poor showing. Proper techniques to overcome bunkers and fortifications were all spelled out in *FM 7-20 (1944) The Infantry Battalion*.⁷⁰ After nearly two weeks of fruitless bloodletting it took Young’s forceful leadership for the division to plan a division-level attack to exploit firepower *and* maneuver, exploiting armored mobility to carry powerful forces deep into the rear of the North Korean defensive system.

Boatner argued that the total casualties on Bloody and Heartbreak Ridges were excessive for the ground gained due to two overriding factors: personnel rotation policies sapped combat units of experience, effectiveness, and efficiency just as North Korean and Chinese units were recovering their strength and equilibrium following the significant reverse they suffered in the late spring of 1951. During the month of September, 41 officers and 1,321 enlisted men rotated out of the division. One infantry company had 32 successive commanders in a 10-month period. The turnover of personnel robbed the division of battlefield experience and necessary manpower for the intensive infantry actions against fortified positions. Additionally, the failure to make good combat losses ensured the infantry companies fought with emaciated platoons and squads. By 24 September when Young called off any further attacks, Colonel Adams reported some companies were down to less than 50 men, with losses most acutely felt among junior leaders: “We have no non-coms,” Adams lamented.⁷¹

Ironically, General Van Fleet on 20 August had instructed his three American corps commanders to integrate fires with maneuver, especially in positional battles. He directed tactical

training at platoon, company, and battalion levels “be initiated immediately. Fire and movement will be emphasized.”⁷² Only two days into the X Corps’s general attack on the Punchbowl the EUSAK commander saw the problem that units failed to integrate their own aggressive maneuver with “the tremendous firepower available from organizational weapons and supporting artillery.”⁷³ On 25 August 1951, Van Fleet instructed, “Artillery will be conserved. However, there are two occasions when artillery will be expended liberally: to kill Chinamen (sic) i.e. remunerative targets [handwritten addition]; to extricate friendly forces or prevent their capture or destruction.”⁷⁴ Van Fleet expected competent combined-arms fighting down to the lowest level. “Artillery will support the movement of even small patrols.”⁷⁵

Retrospect

It is tempting for the modern soldier to project into the past current ideas of doctrine and leadership, such as those articulated in *FM 3-0, Operations*, and *Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, Mission Command*. The danger is that we may find what we are looking for. Rather, sound doctrine is a product of understood and internalized experience. This case study underscores some of the enduring challenges American commanders have faced grappling with tactical principles that are “neither numerous nor complex, [but] their application sometimes is difficult.”⁷⁶ This kind of study should prepare future senior leaders for unforeseen problems requiring adaptive and imaginative application of tactical doctrine.

The battles over the Punchbowl involved some of the heaviest fighting the 2nd Infantry Division endured during the Korean War. At a time when EUSAK forces were supposed to be in an “active defense,” this division engaged in three battles of attrition over extremely difficult terrain and against an enemy determined to resist to the last. The American division commanders had no control over terrain, weather, or the enemy. The only variables they could influence were

how Army doctrine was applied and leadership. Of the three commanders involved, Robert Young clearly stood out as the most effective leader. He read the battlefield, adapted doctrine to synchronize fire and maneuver, and accomplished his mission in a fraction of the time and casualties when compared to his predecessors.

Young assumed command of the division on 20 September, but he did not begin to exercise control until three days later. He spent this time observing the situation and consulting with his subordinates, namely Colonel Adams, the regimental commander responsible for the attack against Heartbreak Ridge, and Brigadier General Boatner, the assistant division commander. Both officers gave similar reports and counsel on the best way to accomplish the mission of seizing the ridge and neutralizing the KPA's supporting zone.

In this drama, General Boatner stands out. He exercised real leadership throughout the engagements for Bloody and Heartbreak Ridges. Unlike Ruffner or DeShazo who rarely left their division command posts (Ruffner spent one day with the 36th ROK Regiment), Boatner co-located with the 9th Infantry and the 23rd Infantry's forward posts. He spoke face to face with the regimental commanders. He could read their expressions and sense their confidence and fears—emotions that a field phone could never capture. He dissuaded Ruffner from relieving Colonel Lynch when the former was dissatisfied with the 9th Infantry's progress in late August. At Heartbreak Ridge, Boatner set the conditions for a successful commander-to-commander conversation. When Young had his personal engagement with Adams, he knew that his commander was giving the unvarnished picture. Young would not have used the term "Mission Command," but that is what he was practicing.⁷⁷

Boatner clearly respected and admired his division commander. Operation Touchdown bears his handiwork, but the plan was Young's. The division commander's personal

reconnaissance and attention to his intelligence apparatus was crucial to his adaptation of offensive doctrine. Korea was not considered tank country, but Young recognized the potential of armored forces if given the appropriate engineer, infantry, and artillery support. The formation of a tank-infantry task force by itself would not have been effective without the efforts of the division's engineer battalion. Again, Young's talent for command stands out as he gave the engineers the mission and then stayed out of the way to let his soldiers do it. The result was a spectacular success. The armored thrust literally unhinged the KPA defenses from behind.

This action was not the only surprise Young sprang on the KPA. Appalled at the large butcher's bill (and perhaps reflecting on his experience teaching infantry tactics at Fort Benning), Young directed Adams to attack at night. Darkness provided concealment and enhanced deception. Until Operation Touchdown the North Koreans owned the night, reinforcing their defenses, resupplying ammunition and food, bringing up additional artillery, and launching counterattacks. The 23rd Infantry's night attack against Hill 931 placed the North Koreans in two contemporaneous positions of relative disadvantage. They were being overrun from the front by an aggressive assault while their rear support area and lines of communication were occupied or interdicted by tank-infantry teams.⁷⁸

Both Ruffner and DeShazo fell short conducting these battles. Neither commander fully appreciated his subordinates' struggle to overcome both terrain and the enemy. During the Bloody Ridge operation Ruffner was so out of touch that he resorted to directing Colonel Lynch to move individual companies to locations that Ruffner had not seen or understood for himself. Ruffner was an aggressive leader, and he was proud of his division's accomplishments, but in the last days of his command he showed curious apathy for his units' tactical well-being. It is possible that he did not understand infantry offensive battle, having never been exposed to it

either in Army education or by experience. He saw brief combat action in the Pacific theater, but never as a commander and never in a tactical environment like the Punchbowl.

DeShazo faced similar challenges, but his failures were in adapting doctrine to the situation. As a combat-experienced artillery commander, he understood the imperative to gain fire superiority. However, he thought that artillery fire power alone could destroy enemy defenses. This was an attitude he observed from Ruffner and had reinforced during Bloody Ridge. Unfortunately, his fires (and confidence) were misplaced. Too much emphasis was given to destruction missions and too little was devoted to counterbattery, interdiction, and suppression. Consequently, American forces still faced formidable defenses on the objective and the KPA defenders still possessed substantial mortar and artillery assets to make final assaults expensive and to support nightly counterattacks. Finally, DeShazo did not achieve fire superiority because he failed to support maneuver that would give him the position of relative advantage to bring about the enemy's decisive defeat.⁷⁹

The 1939 edition of *Infantry in Battle* contains the Introduction to the original 1934 edition, penned by then Colonel George C. Marshall, deputy commandant of the Infantry School. (Robert Young was then an instructor under Marshall's supervision.) Marshall wrote, "There is much evidence to show that officers who have received the best peacetime training available find themselves surprised and confused by the difference between conditions as pictured in map problems and those they encounter in campaign."⁸⁰ Marshall continued that the veteran knows these differences exist and although he cannot account for them all, he knows how to carry on and not be paralyzed by them. Because every situation encountered in war is likely to be exceptional the proficient leader will avoid templated tactics, and he or she will consciously

engage the intellect and imagination to lead and adapt doctrine, what Marshall called “the art of clear, logical thinking.”⁸¹ Success in battle hinges on it.

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