

Burp Gun Incident

Somewhere in North Korea – fall 1950

We had marched several hours when about sundown we passed through a town where there was evidence of fighting, destroyed and damaged buildings. As the road ran east we passed two of our tanks, burning along the north edge of the road as it traversed the town. It was the only place I ever saw our tanks in trouble. Shortly after passing the tanks the road again turned north and in the twilight we left the town. As darkness fell there was some firing from the west side of the road and the column halted. Someone carrying an M-1 thought he had seen the source of the fire we had received and attempted to show the location by loading tracer ammo into his rifle and firing it. As I remember I was not able to see the tracer path and cannot recall clearly the outcome of these moments.

Shortly we were told to fall off the road, that another outfit would move through us and take up the point of the advance. At about the same time we began not to receive fire but to see hostile fire passing overhead. As I looked north up the road I saw a white dot materialize some distance away. I've never been able to identify this weapon. It had an extremely flat trajectory and in hindsight almost had to be a rocket of some type. It appeared to stay about 12 feet above the road and had a sound I've never heard before or since as it screamed by to land and explode in the town now some distance behind us.

I went through a low ditch on the east side of the road and climbed a small embankment that seemed like shale in the dark. I found a small wash in this bank and tried to get comfortable for the night. The weird weapon was fired several more times and on one occasion I thought I heard some of the dry weeds click as it passed through.

I don't remember much of the following morning, whether we got rations or simply formed up and began to march. I do recall we had been constantly warned "Don't drink from the streams – the North Koreans may have poisoned them as they retreated." So for hours we marched – a single column on each side of the road with a very clear small creek running south just to the west side of the road. As the day wore on the fall sun beat down on us and the temperature climbed. By midmorning most of us had no water left in our canteens. We were hot and dry and were constantly reassured that water was being brought and would catch us soon. The stream to the left of the road was a constant temptation but no one wanted to die.

It was maybe 3:30 in the afternoon as we approached the dryness of parchment a truck arrived and we lined up for the anticipated water. As each man stepped up to the truck he was given a half a canteen cup of water and turned away.

Now we had marched all day to that point in what was actually hot weather for fall. We were so dry that it seemed the walls of the mouth absorbed most of the water ration leaving little for the stomach and the rest of the body. Thirst raged. It was just too damned much. The company, the entire company simultaneously decided to disobey orders. We fell into the creek and drank ... and drank ... and drank. God it was good and we probably didn't much care if we did die or not at that point. Then we all filled our canteens to the top with the water and now satisfied returned to the road.

As we began the march again there were short bursts of burp gun fire ahead. I hated the burp gun because of its sound and what little I knew about it. It had a terrifying sound because of its rate of fire. It was rumored at the time that a slug left the muzzle of a burp gun there were two more in the barrel behind it on the way. Now I no longer believe this is possible but we believed it at the time. We did not yet know on the rifleman level at least of the poor consistency of the Chinese loads. After I had been wounded and was in Brooke General Hospital in San Antonio there was a fellow patient who had been hit by a burp gun burst up the back. He had been hit 18 times, some near through wounds, some barely penetrating.

Powell Sale, the platoon Sgt. said "Sharp, take your squad around there and see if you can locate that burp gun. I had transferred to William Sharp's squad after we had come through Taejon in September.

Dead Bodies in the Creek: We dropped down onto the creek bank which at this point flowed from the northwest to the road where it turned south. Working our way upstream for about a quarter mile the creek again turned north and widened. There we approached a pool area that was several inches deep – maybe 18" to 24". There was no flat bank here to walk on and so we got out of the streambed to go past the pool area. From the three to four foot bank we could see clearly into the water and there was an entire North Korean squad beneath the water surface, dead along with one machine gun. Some GIs from another outfit then appeared and said they had found the burp gunner and removed him as an obstacle. At this point we began to discuss whether we should tell the rest of the company about the dead bodies in the creek just upstream from where we had all just drunk our fill. My grandfather used to say that flowing water purified itself every 30 or 40 feet. I hoped he had been right and offered "There's no damn use tellin' 'em about it – we've already drunk the water." And we didn't.