

TO THE COLORS



By Bill Palmer

Part III

Doug reported to George Company of the 19th Infantry Regiment, in the center of the American lines in Korea.

The front where Doug's company was stationed was mountainous and bleak.

"Along the ridgeline the trees were all blown off," he explained, "but farther down there was vegetation and stuff."

The mountains and ridges made resupply a challenge. There were no roads so everything they needed had to be carried in by groups of Korean laborers or by the soldiers themselves.

"Everything came up by carrying party," Doug explained, "they would bring up water — they would bring up everything."

Meals on the lines were cold C-rations, but the men had their favorites.

"We kinda liked chicken and garbage we called it — it was rice and noodles and chicken in it," he recalled, "There was beans and wieners — they weren't too bad, but beans alone was tough." He added, "I remember I got a can of peaches once and God they were good, but you opened up that can of peaches and you're sitting on that hill — the bees would come — I got stung on the inside of my mouth once, the bees were so thick."

Doug's company rotated back to a rear area about every three weeks and spent four or five days in relative safety.

He explained, "You could take a bath in the river there; wash some clothes; you'd get hot chow; and they'd give you your Atabrine tablets there so you wouldn't get malaria."

Doug's unit participated in an offensive to push the Chinese lines back in October 1951.

The fighting was intense for weeks.

"We had a lot of casualties — a lot of good friends killed and stuff," he remembered.

He recalled the heavy bombardment directed against Chinese units on one particular ridge. The

Americans were worried because they knew the Chinese were entrenched and waiting, but the next morning when they assaulted up the hill they never even fired their rifles. The Chinese had pulled out during the night.

“We walked along that ridgeline and there were just Chinamen head to toe — hundreds of them were dead in their trenches,” he remembered, “we took the hill without firing a shot.”

The men were relieved at not having to fight up the hill, but clearing the carnage cost the unit in other ways. One of Doug’s friends was chosen for the burial detail for the Chinese soldiers, but he never returned from that mission. Doug heard his friend couldn’t handle the emotional toll of burying all the dead, blasted bodies.

“After Thanksgiving when we came off the hill, they had hot showers for us,” Doug remembered, “you hadn’t washed or showered or anything for one and one-half or two months — we got showers and clean clothes and boy oh, boy that was a treat!”

Doug remembered the Korean winter as similar to ours. The biggest difference was that he had to live in a hole in the ground, so that he would be less likely to be shot.

Their winter uniforms protected the men from the cold reasonably well.

“They got us coats; they got us sweaters; those wool OD’s (uniform shirts and trousers) were heavy; and then they gave you shoepacks — heavy boots that almost came up to your knees,” he recalled, “and you got mittens with holes in them so you could stick your hands out to work.”

Doug described a simple soldiers’ indulgence when it snowed.

“We always saved our chocolate for cocoa from C-rations and we always saved the sugars and creams in little envelopes,” he explained, “When it snowed we’d take our big coffee cups and we’d put snow in there and start adding the chocolate and creamers and sugars and just kept mixing snow in it.” He concluded, “It made the most fantastic ice cream you ever ate — it was really rich, but it was really good.”

Doug’s company was on the line for Christmas, but the company delivered their turkey dinner right up to the front lines. The men enjoyed that taste of home and enjoyed another unexpected treat.

The men of George Company, 19th Infantry Regiment held their positions through the winter of 1952. They probed the Chinese lines; repelled Chinese patrols; and did their best to support one another.

One magical day in early spring their division was relieved by the California National Guard.

“We were all taken off [the line],” he remembered, “We got on trucks and, boy it was a happy time!”

The Army shipped them south by train and then to a camp in northern Japan. Doug boarded a troopship a couple months later for the trip back across the Pacific and under the Golden Gate Bridge.

“Everyone was topside for the big moment,” he recalled.