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Fighting the Defensive Battle on the Jamestown Line

The Canadians in Korea, November 1951

David J. Bercuson

Barbed wire. Artillery duels. Patrolling in “no-man’s-land.” Static warfare from fixed defensive positions. This description could easily fit the western front in 1916. In fact, however, it also depicts the Jamestown Line in central Korea from the beginning of the static phase of the Korean war in late October 1951 to the cease-fire of July 1953. The apparent similarity of this static war to the Western Front from late 1914 to early 1918 has obscured the importance and uniqueness of the Korean experience to recent military history. For while stalemate on the Western Front derived from fundamental military problems, the stalemate in Korea was profoundly political in nature.

When the Panmunjom phase of the Korean armistice talks began on 25 October 1951, political limits to further military action in Korea were established. From then on, neither side would fight for outright victory. Indeed, both sides would maneuver for favourable position along a more or less pre-determined line of contact, and at a cost of thousands of lives.¹ In contrast to the situation prevailing on the Western Front in World War One, it imposed strict limits on what could, and could not be done in operations against the enemy. In essence, because of the intrusion of Cold War politics, the Korean war was Canada’s (and the world’s) first post-Hiroshima war, and it set much of the pattern for the wars that followed.

By far the most important limit was that restricting offensive operations. In his memoirs, Matthew B. Ridgeway, Supreme Commander of United Nations Forces in Korea in the late fall of 1951, explained the ground rules he laid down to Eighth Army Commander James Van Fleet:

With the resumption of truce negotiations, I instructed Van Fleet to assume an active defense, giving him authority to seize suitable terrain along the general trace of his present lines, but limiting offensive operations to the taking of outpost positions requiring commitment of no more than one division.²

Here, then, was another major difference between this phase of the Korean War and operations on the Western Front. Whereas the Western Allies launched major offensives from 1916 on to re-establish maneuver warfare,³ the UN Command in Korea sought only the limited objective of holding or improving ground.

Ridgeway’s decision was directly related to the political necessity of keeping the Korean War from becoming World War Three, and the limits flowed from numerous policy directives issued from Washington. Stalemate was the operationalization of US President Harry Truman’s determination to avoid a wider war. But it imposed serious limitations at the front where Corps and Divisional commanders were severely restricted in their ability to cope with continuous Communist attacks. At the battalion, company and platoon levels, it meant learning the art of active defence against an enemy unconstrained by public opinion in how many casualties he might suffer. For the Canadian army in particular, the testing came early, in November 1951, when it was forced to shoulder a disproportionate share of the defence of 1st Commonwealth Division’s portion of the Jamestown Line. In doing so, it suffered 37 killed in action and 126 wounded, missing or taken prisoner. Those numbers represented some 12 per cent of Canada’s battle deaths in the entire Korean war and 10 per cent of its



Canadian soldiers move up the line in Korea.

CF Photo SF-836

battle casualties in one month, or about 2.5 times the average Canadian army monthly casualty rate in Korea.⁴

The Problem of Defence

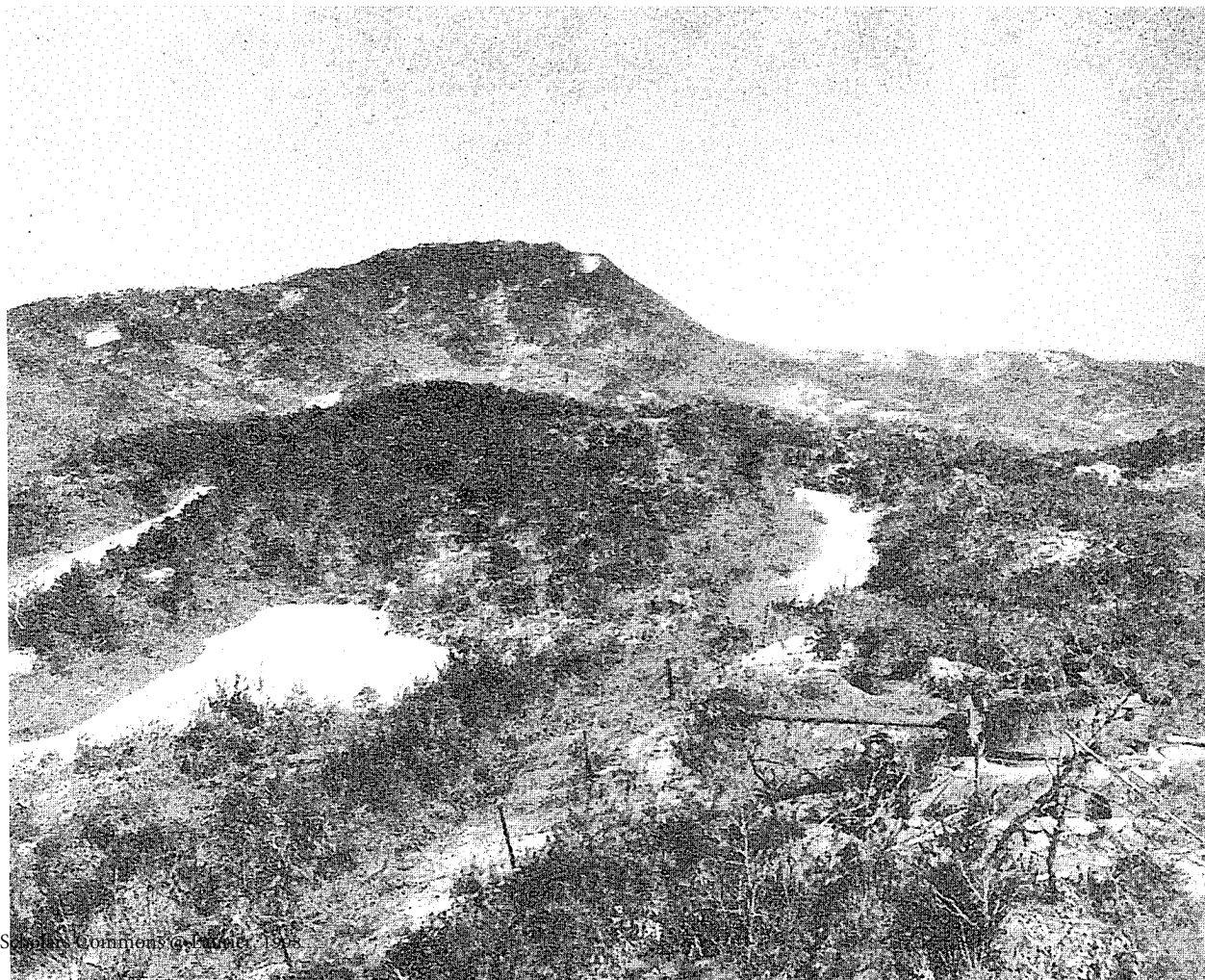
By the beginning of November, 1951 I Corps of the US Eighth Army had completed its five division push to what was to become the last UN defensive line in Korea – the Jamestown Line. First Commonwealth Division held some 12000 metres of front between 1st US Cavalry Division on the right and First ROK Division to the left. The Commonwealth Division, commanded by British Major-General A.H. Cassels, consisted of British, Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand combat troops.

The Canadian portion of the Division was supposed to have amounted to one third – one of three brigades. But the 28th British and the 29th Commonwealth Brigades were understrength so Canada's 25th Infantry Brigade was contributing three of the seven line battalions. In addition, each Canadian battalion had all four rifle companies up.⁵ That amounted to about half of the line infantry and almost two-thirds of the Divisional front.⁶ The Division was so dependent on Canadian rifle strength that when 2 PPCLI began its rotation home in late October, to be replaced by 1 PPCLI, the changeover was done *in situ*, a highly risky operation. In the initial stages of that rotation, two companies from 1 PPCLI ("A" and "D") entered the line alongside 2 PPCLI's "A" Company, which was not due for rotation until 11 November.⁷

The three Canadian battalions in the line at the start of November 1951 were 2 Royal Canadian Regiment, 2 Royal 22e Regiment, and three companies of both 1 and 2 Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. They were directly supported by the 25-pounder gun/howitzers of 2 Royal Canadian Horse Artillery and the 76 mm-armed Sherman tanks of "C" Squadron, Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians). They held about 9000 metres of north-south front roughly along a 100 metre contour line. The land dropped suddenly some 75 metres in front of their positions to a small stream flowing south to the Sami-chon. The Sami-chon fed into the Imjin River about 5 kilometres further south. The dominant peak in the region was Hill 355, dubbed "Little Gibraltar" by US troops. The highest feature in the UN lines west of the Imjin, 355 towered over the surrounding hills. It and Hill 227, 1500 metres due west, were then held by the 1st Battalion, the King's Shropshire Light Infantry [1KSLI] of the 28th British Infantry Brigade.

The Canadians faced the 568th and 570th Regiments of the 190th Division of the Chinese Communist 64th Army. Although the Chinese troops suffered many hardships compared to the UN forces,⁸ they were by then far better equipped than their compatriots who had suddenly appeared out of the mountains of North Korea a year before.⁹ Liberally supplied by the Soviet Union, the Chinese infantry were now supported by numerous direct and indirect fire weapons, Katyusha batteries, self-propelled guns, and large numbers of mortars all well dug-in to the northwest of the Canadian positions. The evolution of the equipment mix of the Chinese troops was reflected in the nature of Canadian battle casualties. Some 52 per cent of all Canadian casualties reported up to December 1951, were caused by fragment wounds; only 33 per cent were due to small arms fire or automatic weapons. The Canadian Operational Research Team called the mortar "the commanding weapon" at that stage of the war.¹⁰

Hill 355 viewed from behind the Canadian front line. The tank visible in the bottom right corner is located to provide fire support and guard against any attempts to outflank the position.



Ridgeway's decision to go over to the defensive ought to have dictated thorough preparation of defensive positions and aggressive tactics aimed at denying the initiative to the enemy, but that did not happen on the Commonwealth Division front. The problem began at Division HQ which never established or enforced a standard defence doctrine so that each battalion developed its defensive locality according to a single plan. That failure was compounded by shortages of materials for bunkers, trenches and dugouts, uncertainty produced by the armistice negotiations, and the sheer ignorance of many junior officers in the matter of selecting ground for defence. The static nature of the war discouraged initiative; battalions, companies, and platoons rotating into front line positions usually just occupied the defences already there, with only minor repair work and little improvement.¹¹

The defences themselves were largely patterned after those the Canadians had used in Italy in World War II. Rifle companies were positioned on hilltops along the front in positions encircled by a minefield, a single row of concertina wire, and a single circular main trench. Fire trenches radiated outward from the main trench. Platoons were usually positioned at the corners of these defensive localities in order to engage the enemy in defilade. The valleys between the hilltop positions were strung with wire and sown with mines. On the high ground to the rear powerful searchlights were sited so as to illuminate enemy troops trying to infiltrate between defensive localities.¹² There was much dead ground on the lower slopes however, while the minefields surrounding the hilltops had only one gap to allow access and egress for purposes of patrolling. Given the roughness and the hilly nature of the terrain, the platoon positions were often sited too far forward to be of much help to the other platoons and were easily isolated by the attacking enemy who usually went after them in company strength.¹³

There was also no defence-in-depth for these hilltop fortresses, either from other defensive localities close by, or to the rear – from the Wyoming Line, some eight kilometres back or from the Kansas Line, about 12 kilometres further back from the Wyoming Line. The Wyoming Line was intended as the UN's first

Main Line of Resistance should the enemy penetrate the Jamestown Line, the Kansas Line was to be the second. There was, then, virtually no chance that troops along the Jamestown Line could count on heavy fire support from the rear, except for rare occasions when Corps medium artillery could be brought to bear. To compound the difficulty of defence on the Jamestown Line, bad weather often made supply and reinforcement routes from the rear almost impassable.¹⁴

In World War Two Canadians had come to count heavily on their artillery. The system by which Forward Observation Officers (FOOs) could call down "Mike," "Uncle" or "Victor" targets had allowed them to devastate concentrations of German troops when spotted forming up for attack. When an FOO called for a Victor target, all 216 field guns of an entire Corps zeroed on the same coordinates. With a good rate of fire, literally a thousand shells or so could devastate a German position inside of a minute.¹⁵ The same effectiveness was also possible in the attack, of course. In Korea, however, the placement of the field artillery behind a strung out front line rendered it almost incapable of delivering concentrations of that magnitude; the best that could be done under even the most dire conditions was a three regiment "Uncle" concentration of 72 guns.¹⁶

The type of rough and ready defensive positions used in Korea had sufficed for the Canadians during the earlier Italian campaign; the Germans after all, had been defeated there. Thus Italy seemed to offer lessons for Korea because the terrain was somewhat similar and infantry dominated the battle. What appears to have been lost to the Commonwealth Division, and to the Canadian Brigade, is that there was a significant strategic difference between Italy and Korea. In Italy, the Germans were on the defensive, engaged in a fighting withdrawal to the north. When they were not withdrawing, they were engaging in active defence along well fortified lines such as the Winter or Gothic Lines. The Canadians, like the other Allies, were on the strategic offensive in Italy. The victory they sought could only come from successful advances. So even when fighting tended to slacken in the Italian winter, the Canadians and their allies still had no real need of a defence-in-depth. Indeed, construction of such a defence



CF Photo SF 5909

A 76 mm armed Sherman tank of the Lord Strathcona's Horse.

could have undermined an offensive spirit among the soldiers and precipitated a garrison mentality.¹⁷ None of that applied in Korea.

The Canadian defences on the Jamestown Line received their first serious test on 2 November 1951.¹⁸ Large numbers of Chinese infantry were seen massing across the valley from the 2 RCR positions at about 1300 hours. The Brigade artillery opened up with all 24 guns at 1520 hours but the Chinese continued to assemble on reverse slopes and in dead ground. At about 1800 hours Chinese howitzers opened up on the forward slope of the RCR's "A" Company while Chinese high velocity shells struck inside the "A" Company perimeter. The Chinese infantry, supported by from four to eight heavy machine guns firing from across the valley, moved up two hours later. With bugles and whistles blowing in the night, one company of Chinese infantry hit "A" Company, tried to penetrate between "A" and "C" Companies (about 250 metres to the north), then attacked "C" Company itself. It was followed in close order by two more companies.

These Chinese attacks, and the ones that followed throughout the night, were of a pattern. Chinese artillery landing to the front and sides of the Canadian positions forced the Canadians to keep their heads down while Chinese infantry with bangalore torpedoes blew gaps in the Canadian wire. Some Chinese cut the wire with hatchets. Still others, with thick padding on their coats, threw themselves over it to form human bridges for those behind. Once inside the wire, the Chinese tried to get into the trenches and firing pits. Canadian artillery and 4.2-inch mortars kept up a steady fire on the enemy forming-up positions, but this did not remedy the problem caused by those Chinese already on top of the Canadian positions. At 0200 hours some 15 Chinese were reported inside the wire of No. 1 Platoon even though their own artillery continued to pound the Canadians. No. 1 Platoon held out for an hour, then pulled back to the main company position closely followed by two companies of Chinese. Within minutes the Chinese were seen advancing against "A" Company HQ "in waves"; 2 RCHA

fired "Mike" concentrations on top of the position, breaking up the Chinese advance.¹⁹

The Chinese attack slackened toward morning. Three air strikes were called on the Chinese forward positions as "A" Company's No.3 Platoon went out to re-occupy the positions abandoned in the early morning hours. An overly exuberant RCR Intelligence Officer estimated 300 Chinese killed or wounded in return for one dead and eleven wounded Canadians, but there was no way of verifying that figure because the Chinese made great efforts to remove their dead from the battlefield. The next day, the figure for Chinese casualties was finalized as 18 killed, two wounded and one PW confirmed.

The rest of 3 November was quiet on the Canadian front as the Chinese prepared to take on the 28th Brigade to the north of the Canadians. That attack began with heavy shelling in the early afternoon of 4 November, followed by an infantry assault on the King's Own Scottish Borderers at about 1630 hours. Heavy fighting, some hand-to-hand, raged through the night with the KOSB suffering severe casualties and the loss of the western slopes of Hill 317 at midnight.²⁰ The Chinese attack was accompanied by "intense and well-coordinated" artillery fire. An estimated 20-30 SPs delivered one round every two seconds on the British bunkers and trench lines.²¹ At about the same time, an eight-man Chinese wire-cutting party was spotted in the valley separating 25th and 28th Brigades. It was driven off by "D" Company of 1 PPCLI. The Chinese attacks on the 28th Brigade continued through the night, their artillery destroying practically all the KOSB's line and signal equipment. The Patricias spotted Chinese infantry forming up in front of their positions shortly after first light and called for artillery fire, which drove the enemy off.

The Patricias endured shelling and mortaring for the rest of 5 November; nightfall brought another infantry attack. At 1815 hours the Chinese mounted two assaults on "D" Company. The Chinese infantry were equipped for a prolonged stay. Each carried an entrenching tool, spare ammunition in pouches and bandoliers, and extra hand grenades. They were armed with rifles, burp guns and Russian-pattern light machine guns, and brought rice,

tooth powder, cigarettes, an extra jacket, and North Korean and Chinese currency with them.

The fighting raged at close quarters. Land lines were cut almost as soon as the Chinese barrage started. The battalion FOO radioed for the searchlights to be turned on to pinpoint the enemy so that he could call their positions to the field artillery. Canadian gunners, machine gunners and mortar men worked feverishly to put a curtain of fire between "D" Company and the enemy and succeeded in driving the Chinese off. They returned under cover of a massive artillery barrage at 2020 hours and concentrated on 12 and 10 Platoons. No.10 Platoon fought to the last bullet, then withdrew down a crawl trench into the main company position, the Chinese hot on their heels. The 1 PPCLI war diarist summed up the action that followed: "Wave after wave of enemy charged at D coy's wire with bangalore torpedoes and small arms fire, to be beaten off by our small arms fire and grenades."

At 2300 hours, the hills across from the Canadian positions erupted with a chain of massive explosions as bombs from a B-29 radar-directed strike walked across the Chinese front. No one could tell how much damage the bombing had caused, but coming when it did, it was a definite morale booster for the beleaguered Canadians who now knew they could depend on air support even at night. Despite the bombing, the Chinese went at the Patricias one last time at 0130 hours, and again they targeted "D" Company. A massive concentration of 25-pounder shells from brigade artillery and 155 mm shells from the US Corps artillery was directed into the valley in front of "D" Company. Despite the barrage at least two companies of Chinese infantry moved up to attack 10 Platoon which had infiltrated back into its position during a lull in the fighting. The battalion's 81 mm mortars were directed to within 50 metres of the Canadian wire and had a devastating effect on the Chinese. Those who managed to get through the wire were killed by small arms and grenades. Once again the fighting was done at close range until two red flares went up from the Chinese lines, signalling a withdrawal.

In three attacks through the night, the Chinese had pushed the equivalent of a full

battalion at the green "D" Company of 1 PPCLI, but "D" Company had held. The Canadians suffered three killed and 15 wounded. The Chinese had left 34 corpses within 50 yards of the wire and seven more in the minefield. It was impossible to say how many more had been killed because the Chinese almost never left their dead if they could help it, and had clearly carted many away. The 1 PPCLI war diarist chalked up the failure of the Chinese attack to defensive artillery and mortar fire, excellent communications between the forward positions and the rear batteries, the concertina wire, and "the mettle of the men of 10 Pl[atatoon] in remaining in their slits to fight it out at close quarters with the enemy and the excellence of the leadership of the officers and NCOs in the company."²²

It is easy to discount the last of these observations. The war diary, after all, is written by the battalion intelligence officer and approved by the battalion CO. But "D" Company had done well in its first real battle and no doubt part of its steadfastness can be chalked up to intense training, regimental pride, and professionalism. 1 PPCLI was part of Canada's professional army. It had begun conversion from an ordinary infantry battalion to Canada's first standing peacetime paratroop unit in the fall of 1948 at Rivers, Manitoba. Although its first parachute drill, Exercise "Eagle" held in August 1949, had been a mixed success due to inadequate numbers of transport aircraft, the battalion itself had done well. It had also received arctic warfare training and been part of Exercise "Sweetbriar" in the Yukon in January 1950.²³ The CO of 1 PPCLI, Lieutenant-Colonel N.G. Wilson-Smith, was a decorated veteran of World War II, having been wounded in action in Northwest Europe.

In his recent comparative analysis of the performance of US Army and Marine Corps units during the fighting retreat from Chosin Reservoir in 1950, Faris R. Kirkland concluded:

The differentiating factor was the senior commanders. The Marines succeeded in fighting their way out because their colonels and generals knew what to do in field combat situations. The Army regiment was destroyed because its senior leaders had little experience of combat and field duty, and did not know what to do.²⁴

If we substitute battalion and company commanders for colonels and generals, the same observation can be applied to the performance of "D" Company, 1 PPCLI, during the Chinese attacks of 4-5 November. A mix of war veterans and tough, seasoned troops, the PPCLI fought well. It was not the fighting quality of the men that was later to be questioned, but the outmoded defence doctrine they adhered to. That factor was not of their making, but the result of the general doctrinal unpreparedness and lack of originality in the Canadian army itself.

Canadian Defensive Doctrine

In the late summer of 1953, Major W.H. Pope, who had commanded a rifle company with both 1 and 3 R22eR, analyzed the pattern of Chinese attacks that had started to develop in the fall of 1951 and offered his solution for a revised and more effective defence doctrine. Pope pointed out that the Chinese had developed a predictable pattern in their raids on the Canadian positions on the Jamestown Line. The sequence of Chinese moves and Canadian counter-moves which Pope discerned went something like this:

First, the enemy increased his patrolling in front of the position to be raided. The Canadians would either counter with patrols of their own or cease patrolling and await events. When Canadian patrols were mounted, they were invariably too weak to accomplish much and, instead, were engaged and chased off by the Chinese who maintained a stronger presence in no-man's-land at night. The mere presence of these weak Canadian patrols hindered the defence of the main positions on the Jamestown Line, however, because heavy mortar and artillery fire could not be brought to bear on the Chinese forming-up positions for fear of hitting the Canadian patrol. If no patrols were sent, however, there was little warning before the Chinese hit the Canadian wire.²⁵

Second, Chinese shelling would intensify on the Canadian positions in a classic World War One-era effort to neutralize the defenders by forcing them to keep their heads down, disorganize the defence, depress morale, and

keep them bottled up in their defensive positions during daylight. The tactic worked well, as one PPCLI sergeant told Canadian war correspondent Bill Boss:

The Communists are using much more artillery now and sometimes it gets hard to just sit and take it. My fellows are good, fairly new, and sometime they get jittery during the shelling, and if the Chinese come in and attack, they get excited during the grenade throwing.²⁶

Not only did the Canadians get jittery, but they surrendered the initiative during daylight. And that was precisely when their overwhelming strength in field and medium artillery, heavy mortars, and, most important, tactical air power, gave them a distinct advantage over the Chinese.²⁷

In Korea the UN allies had complete control of the skies over the front; fighter bombers laden with napalm were available continually during the daylight hours. The system on the Commonwealth Division front seems to have been a compromise between those used by 21 Army Group and 12 Army Group in Northwest Europe in 1944-45. Targets were first marked with smoke by artillery or tank fire. The FOO or company commander then passed the target coordinates in relation to the smoke burst to the artillery regiment Intelligence Officer at Brigade HQ. The IO then passed the information to the Tactical Air Command Patrol officer (TACP) sitting next to him in the communications van, who was in direct radio contact with the forward air controller flying above the battlefield in a "mosquito," usually a single-engine Harvard. It was the FAC's job to direct the incoming fighter bombers on to the target. The procedure was quite different from what the Canadians had learned in training. They had been taught to work with a TACP who observed the ground from the forwardmost infantry positions, not unlike a FOO. In their opinion, the system probably delivered close air support faster than it might have with a ground-based observer, but not as accurately.²⁸

Third, Commonwealth defensive localities were poorly laid out and weakly protected. Instead of clustering defensive positions on selected hilltops in such a manner that platoons covered platoons, and companies covered companies, defences were almost automatically

placed on every hilltop in the line. This was the Italian model, good for troops planning to move up against an enemy not planning to move back, but tempting to a habitual attacker. The single line of defensive hilltops not only thinned the defences, it also forced the very concept of defence into artificial and ineffective patterns that made enfilade very difficult.

Fourth, the defensive localities were themselves poorly laid out with a single encircling company trench which, when beleaguered, offered its occupants little protection. Pope thought there ought to have been at least three such encirclements, each offering fire protection for the other two, and much less use of mines which made movement as difficult for the defenders as for the attackers.

What all this amounted to was that the Chinese were able to seize the initiative, select the time and place for the attack, make up for whatever fire-power deficiencies they had by using the cover of darkness, and attack virtually at will. When they did attack, they were often through the wire and into the trenches as soon as their shelling lifted. Then Canadian infantry, with their outmoded bolt-action rifles, were forced to deal at close quarters with Chinese in the trenches firing automatic weapons, or on the open ground throwing volleys of grenades down into the trenches. As Pope wrote: "Rifles at five paces at night, with or without bayonets fixed, give one no confidence against a burp gun."²⁹

Here was yet another deficiency the Canadian infantry had to overcome; its basic small arms were inadequate for the type of fighting they encountered in Korea. One report from the front marked the venerable Lee-Enfield .303 rifle as "almost useless...except as a personal weapon for troops not manning the defensive positions, for example, troops in the echelons."³⁰ The Sten gun, one Canadian officer declared, "was a cheap 'backs to the wall' weapon produced to meet an emergency situation, so let's put it away until we have our backs to the wall again."³¹ The net result was a mass, unofficial, self-rearming of the troops, usually with American M2 carbines.³²

Many of the deficiencies Pope would later emphasize in Canadian fighting doctrine



Photo by Paul Tomelin, NAC PA 128848

Korean combat scene with Royal 22e Régiment riflemen and Bren gunner, 23 October 1951.

emerged during Operation "Toughy." This was a raid mounted against Chinese positions on Hill 166 on the night of 9th and 10th November by two platoons of "C" Company and the Scout Platoon of 2 R22eR. The raiders crossed their start line at 2100 hours; No.8 Platoon traversed a valley to move directly north on to the objective; No.7 Platoon attempted to move to the objective from the left. It was supposed to be a textbook fire and maneuver assault, but without any artillery or tank fire preparation. The fire plan was to be used only if the Canadians encountered opposition. This they did when No.8 Platoon came under automatic weapons fire and grenades about 15 minutes after crossing the start line. The platoon sought refuge in a crawl trench some 75 to 100 metres short of the objective, a knoll below the summit of Hill 166. Setting two of his sections up as a fire base, the platoon commander tried to get on to the objective with his third section moving around to the left. That did not work either, so the objective was plastered with heavy mortars and 25-pounders while the platoon assaulted the hilltop "firing from [the] hip, throwing grenades and yelling fiercely." That worked.³³

To the left, No.7 Platoon ran into similar problems and also went to ground. The platoon

commander sent two sections out to probe the approaches to Hill 166 but could find no clear path. He decided to go up the middle. His men rose up and charged, firing their guns and throwing their grenades until they reached their initial objective at about 0100 hours. The Scout Platoon, working around the far left of Hill 166, came under heavy automatic weapons fire at about 0122 hours and were forced to take cover. By this time, however No.8 Platoon was ready to go for the summit of Hill 166 and 2 RCHA began to lay on their fire plan. Mike targets were fired at the hilltop and at suspected Chinese mortar and machine gun positions, but No.8 Platoon could still not get forward, even with this support. The danger now increased by the minute that all three platoons would be pinned down, or worse. One platoon commander reported by radio that Chinese infantry had infiltrated his platoon, and that his men and the enemy were all mixed up. This made it impossible for the Canadian tanks to "bring down tank fire on previously registered targets" because of the danger to the Canadian infantry.³⁴ Under these circumstances the CO, Lieutenant-Colonel Jacques Dextraze, ordered a general withdrawal. The raiders were back in the forward defence positions by 0300 hours. Two men were missing, four wounded.³⁵

The low casualties suffered in this raid do not mask its complete failure. Nothing of any value was accomplished. No prisoners were taken. No intelligence was gained. The Chinese could not have sustained many casualties nor suffered any real damage to their defensive positions. Canadian casualties were low only because the battalion CO could easily see that the raid was going nowhere and that his men might be trapped if he did not act quickly.

What went wrong? There had been two few raiders. They had not used artillery, mortars, or close air support to mask their approach and neutralize the defenders because they chose to attack at night. When the artillery did get into the act, it fired according to pre-determined plans but darkness make the selection of new targets of opportunity almost impossible. The tanks could not use direct fire for fear of killing Canadians. "Toughy" was a classic example of how not to play to one's strengths, and yet it was only one of a pattern, as Pope later pointed out.

The Defence of Hill 227 "D" Company 2 R22eR

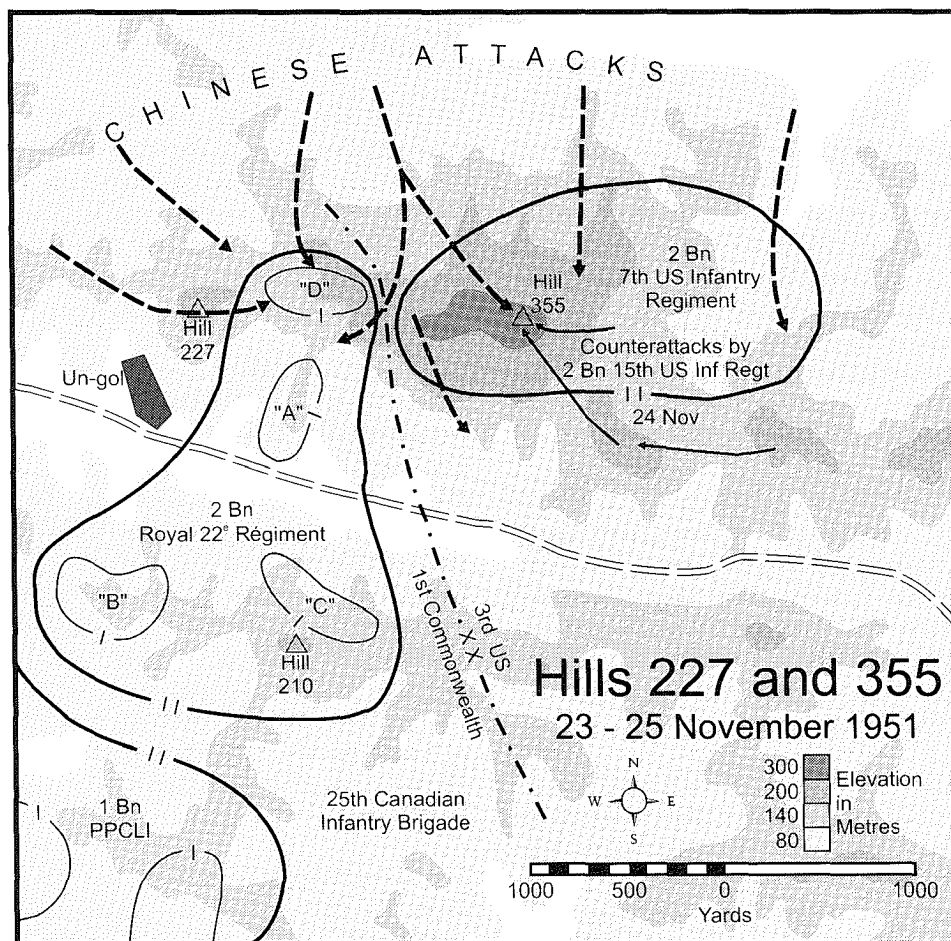
Though the Canadians were not heavily tested again for some weeks, casualties in the line mounted on a daily basis. Chinese sniping, occasional sudden barrages, and patrolling took their toll and few days went by when a man was not killed. By the third week in November the toll of dead for the month reached 17. But the Canadian losses were small compared to those suffered by the 28th Brigade which held that portion of the line from the Canadian positions to the divisional boundary with the 1st Cavalry Division. On 17 November, the Chinese pushed 1 King's Shropshire Light Infantry off of Hill 227. In the words of the 25th Brigade war diarist:

this was a serious turn of events as it exposed [a] good deal of the Patricia's right flank previously dominated by the two platoons and company headquarters of A coy [of 1 KSLI] on top of the feature.³⁶

For three days, the hill changed hands as British counterattacked and Chinese responded. On 20 November, it was permanently lost to the Reds.

The loss of Hill 227 created a salient in the Commonwealth Division's lines with potentially disastrous consequences even though Hill 355, 1.5 kilometres to the east, dominated the 227 feature. The existence of the salient was particularly dangerous because of the weakened condition of the 28th Brigade, which had few prospects for reinforcement. The division was already covering too much front with too few men and to partially remedy the situation Cassels ordered a repositioning of the brigades to enable him to take the 28th Brigade out of the line and shorten his front from 19,000 to 15,000 metres. The 25th Canadian Infantry Brigade was moved to the right to occupy the saddle formed by the west slope of Hill 355 and the foot of Hill 227.³⁷ Then the 28th Brigade was relieved by the US 7th Infantry Regiment of the 3rd US Infantry Division (which had replaced the 1st Cavalry) which thereby inherited the summit of Hill 355.³⁸ All three Canadian battalions were in the line with all four of their rifle companies; the RCR on the left, the PPCLI in the center, and the R22eR on the right – the last holding a section of line formerly occupied by most of a brigade.³⁹

The R22eR – the "Van Doos" – was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Jacques Dextraze, who had been decorated while leading Les Fusiliers Mont Royal for much of the Northwest Europe campaign. By his own admission, Dextraze was a "meddler" who took a "hands-on" approach to battalion command, even in battle.⁴⁰ He began to prepare his battalion for the move into the 227/355 area at an "O" Group on 19 November. He told his company commanders that he would retain control of, and assign fire tasks to, the 60 mm mortars, the 75 mm recoilless rifles, and the heavy machine guns. He urged a thorough check of all equipment even to the state of the Bren gun magazines. He demanded a tightening up of discipline with daily inspections, Tests of Elementary Training and range practise. He insisted on strict five yard intervals between men in the line, no one on forward slopes, and continuous observation of enemy positions. Above all, in the event of attack, there was to be "NO withdrawal, No platoons overrun and No panic. All would be expected to perform their duty in a typical "VAN DOOS" manner."⁴¹



The Van Doos began to move into their new positions on the night of 21 November after a hot Thanksgiving dinner of turkey and all the trimmings, courtesy of the US Army. Their task was to occupy and hold the saddle between Hills 355 and 227. The battalion took over a triangular-shaped defensive position formerly occupied by 1 KSLI. Dextraze placed "D" Company on a spur that ran north-south across the saddle at the front of the triangle. "A" Company was sited about 500 metres to the south, at the end of the spur, in the middle of the triangle. "B" Company took the bottom left corner of the triangle, about 1200 metres, and across a ravine, from "A" Company. "C" Company was positioned about 1100 metres to the east of "B" Company, with the same ravine between it and "A" Company.⁴²

These positions were inadequate for effective defence. The Officer Commanding "D" Company, Major Real Liboiron, later recalled:

The K.S.L.I. had good positions until they lost Hill 227 and then their platoons were not mutually supporting and were much too crowded. My No. 11 Platoon, for example, was

holding a position previously held by a K.S.L.I. section. The K.S.L.I. had also constructed "hot-D stands" (slit trenches and bunkers built with roofs several feet above the ground) which were perfect targets for SPs and were responsible for many casualties. I intended to readjust the positions at the first opportunity but as events turned out there was never the time.⁴³

What was true of the "D" Company positions was also true of the entire battalion. Though "A" and "D" Companies could offer supporting fire to each other, both were too separated from "B" and "C" Companies to help in their defence. Given the terrain and the short time which elapsed between moving into the line and coming under attack, it is hard to see what else Dextraze might have done to improve his position.

The battalion was in place by 0630 hours on 22 November and quickly got to work improving the defences. Dextraze himself supervised the laying of additional wire and mines, and the siting of the heavy .50 Browning machine guns, the lighter .30 Brownings, and even the .303 Brens. By mid-afternoon his HQ was functioning with radio and land-line

communication to the rifle companies and to Brigade HQ to the rear. Not long after, Chinese shells began to rumble in from across the valley. The shelling grew more intense by the minute and was soon joined by heavy calibre rocket fire. The Chinese concentrated on "D" Company and on the American positions atop 355. One Van Doo private was blown to bits when a shell exploded in his slit trench. Others were wounded by flying shards of steel or by the dirt, rocks, and pieces of smashed bunker which rained down on them. The concertina wire in front of the company positions was shredded. Telephone lines were cut. The minefield was pulverized. As night fell and the cold penetrated into the very bones of the Canadian infantrymen the shelling continued. It started to snow heavily, the first real snow of the winter,⁴⁴ but the Chinese did not come and when morning dawned on the 23rd November, the shelling slackened.

The men of "D" Company used the hiatus to repair damage and lay new telephone lines. In mid-morning a Chinese scout was captured near the Pioneer Platoon wire; minutes later shells began to fall once again, this time on "D" Company's left flank. The shelling forced the men to ground. At 1350 hours an observation plane reported at least a company of Chinese infantry advancing from the northwest, about a kilometre away, and called down an artillery concentration. In response the Canadian and New Zealand batteries plastered the paddy land in a valley to the left and front of "D" Company.

At 1620 hours Chinese rocket and shellfire began to strike the summit of Hill 355; less than ten minutes later, approximately two companies of Chinese infantry hit the "D" Company wire. The fighting was close, intense, and desperate. The Canadian infantry threw grenades, worked the bolts of their Lee-Enfield rifles at a fevered pace, and fired clip after clip of Bren gun and belt after belt of Browning machine gun ammunition at the onrushing Chinese. One Van Doo section broke but the platoon commander led them back into position. On Hill 355, Easy, Fox and George Companies of the US 7th infantry were under attack from an entire Chinese battalion. At 1735 hours word reached Dextraze that US infantry from 355 were arriving in the "A" Company area; the Americans had been forced off Hill 355.⁴⁵ This was a "very grave and serious situation," according to the 25th

Brigade war diarist. Hill 355 was not only the highest position in the line, it also dominated the lateral road running through the American sector. The Canadian right flank was now completely open and the Chinese could look down into the Van Doos' positions from their US-dug trenches and bunkers.

The Chinese had taken 355 but they had not taken the saddle; they attacked the Van Doos positions with renewed fury. At one point a single Canadian platoon was beleaguered by an estimated 400 Chinese soldiers. At Brigade HQ, the Canadian tanks were ordered forward to support the Canadian infantry. At his own HQ, Dextraze worked the radio, ordering his company commanders to hold fast and directing mortar, tank, and artillery fire, sometimes bringing it down virtually on the "D" Company wire. Four Chinese attacks were beaten off by morning; as the Canadians stubbornly defended their ridge, a US counterattack retook most of Hill 355.

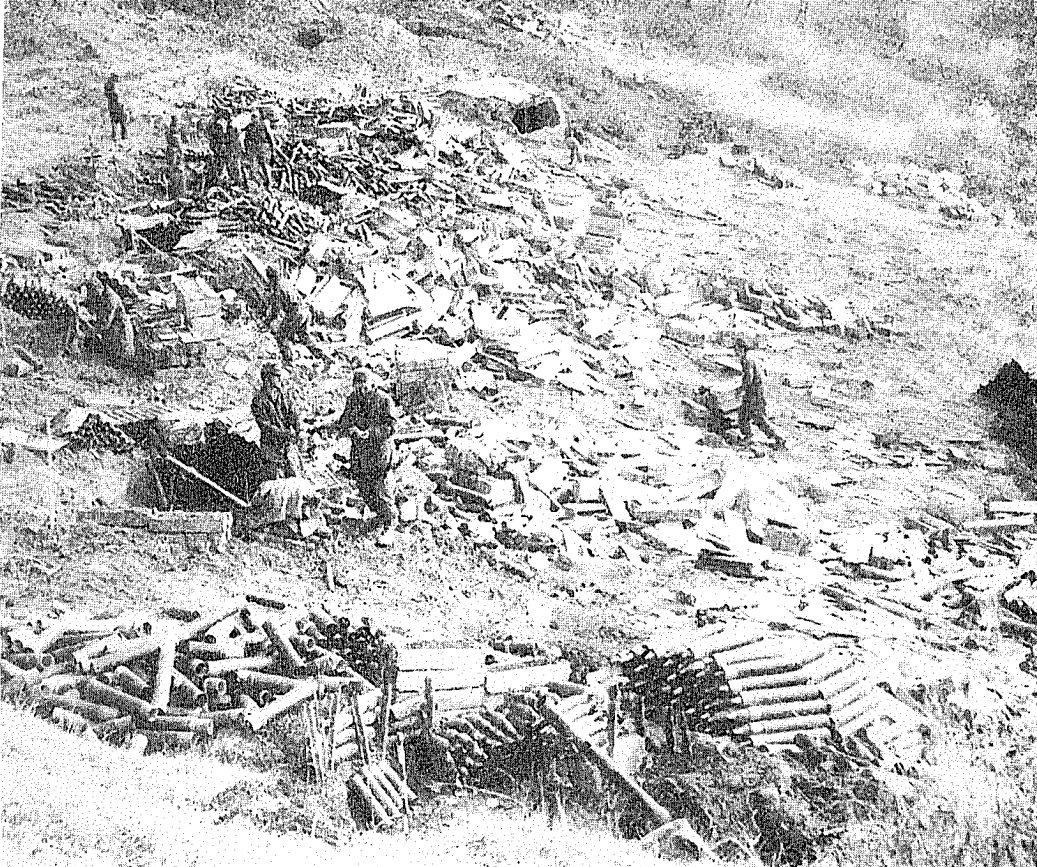
The Chinese attackers melted away at first light on the 24th, but intermittent shelling continued. Dextraze ordered a platoon counter-attack toward Hill 227. The advancing unit met little resistance and gained the summit of Hill 227 which it held until withdrawn in the face of another massing of Chinese infantry at about 1700 hours. Brigade and divisional artillery rained down on the Chinese forming up positions but failed to stop a renewed assault on the Van Doos' "D" Company. The Chinese came from all directions despite a hail of tank, mortar and artillery fire. "D" Company's left forward platoon collapsed back into the main company positions but the company itself held fast. Just before midnight, the Van Doos' Scout Platoon edged forward to retake the lost platoon position. They did, but were then strongly attacked by at least two Chinese companies and were forced to pull back to take cover in several shell holes. Dextraze then called down heavy mortar fire on the Chinese attackers. At about the same time, a forced withdrawal of US troops on the western slope of 355 once again exposed the Canadian right flank until 355 was retaken a second time before first light on the 25th.

In the morning, the Van Doos' Scout Platoon once more made its way back to the lost platoon position to the left front of "D" Company. Up on



CF Photo SF 3441

Above: Close up of a mortar pit of the Royal 22e Régiment prior to the fierce Chinese attacks of 23-25 November 1951.



Left: The Van Doo mortar position following the Chinese attacks of 24 November. The pit shown above is visible at the bottom of the photo at the left. Over 3,000 rounds were fired during the night, primarily in the defence of the exposed "D" Company position.

Hill 355 the Americans swept the entire feature from east to west, ferreting out any remaining Chinese. There were no more Chinese attacks on the Van Doos until dark when a small probe was sent against "D" Company from the direction of Hill 227. The Chinese were met with a volley of artillery fire and withdrew. That was the end of "D" Company's ordeal. Just before dawn on 26 November, Dextraze ordered "D" Company relieved by "B" Company. In the words of the brigade war diarist, "the troops of D Coy...had reached the limits of their endurance. They had been exposed to the snow, the cold of the day, the freezing nights, and had had no sleep since the evening of the 21st."⁴⁶ They had also received only minimal help from the other three companies of the battalion because the terrain, the woefully inadequate siting of the positions by 1 KSLI, and lack of time for correction of the situation, had not allowed it.

In the four days between 22 and 26 November, the Van Doos lost 16 men killed – nine from "D" Company alone – 44 wounded, and three missing and presumed dead after a direct hit by a Chinese shell on a Van Doos bunker.⁴⁷ Division estimated 2,000 Chinese dead in the operations around Hills 227 and 355, but only 742 enemy dead were actually counted.⁴⁸ The Division noted building defence-in-depth as one major lesson from the attacks, but little was done to improve defensive positions along the division front in the months, and indeed the years, to come.

The Canadians had fought well, as individual soldiers and as field grade officers. The 84 hour travail of "D" Company, 2 R22eR, was one of the finest defensive actions in the history of the Canadian army. But the magnificent effort of both officers and men was undermined by poor doctrine, and inadequate defensive training. Here was a Canadian "failure in high command,"⁴⁹ that was not to be remedied for the duration of the Korean war. But that Canadian failure was linked directly to the political decision to limit offensive operations on the UN front and go over to the defensive and the subsequent military failure to accommodate defensive doctrine on the line to the new political reality.

On the afternoon of 26 November 1951 two of the last Chinese shells fired in that month's

struggles along the Canadian front on the Jamestown Line fell on one of the 2 R22eR positions. One man was buried. When he was finally dug out, "there was so little left of him he looked as if he had been pulverized by the force of the explosion," his platoon commander, Lieutenant Gerard Belanger, wrote in a letter home. That letter mirrored Belanger's dark mood:

If we continue to lose men at this rate, the Battalion will be decimated in a few weeks...The snow covered the ground today: there are snow flurries this evening; it's quite a sight to see, especially when you're living in a hole without a heater to keep you warm. We're living like rats and we'll probably die like rats...It is now 0625; the day is just breaking and I haven't slept since yesterday morning. So much for the glorious life of a platoon commander.⁵⁰

These were the thoughts of one Canadian soldier fighting the defensive battle along the Jamestown Line in far away, frozen, Korea in November of 1951.

Notes

1. David Rees, *Korea: The Limited War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964) pp.256-257; 294-302; Anthony Farrar-Hockley, *The British Part in the Korean War*, Vol. II, *An Honourable Discharge* (London: HMSO, 1995), pp.233-247.
2. Matthew B. Ridgeway, *The War in Korea* (London: The Cresset Press, 1967), pp.190-191.
3. See, for example, Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack, 1916-1918* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp.3-44.
4. The average casualty rate is based on the approximately 24 months that an entire Canadian brigade was at the front: the first Canadian battalion at the front (2 PPCLI) entered combat five months before the full 25th Canadian Infantry Brigade formed up in Korea.
5. Herbert Fairlie Wood, *Strange Battleground: Official History of the Canadian Army in Korea* (Ottawa: The Queen's Printer, 1966), p.132.
6. National Archives of Canada [NAC], Brooke Claxton Papers (MG 32, B5), Vol.106, File "Far East Visit, 1951." Menzies to Pearson, 7 December 1951.
7. *Ibid*; Wood, pp.146-147.
8. Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (London: Michael Joseph, 1987), pp.359-361.
9. T.R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War* (Washington: Brassey's, 1963), p.348.
10. Department of National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage [DHH], File 410B25.059 (D1), "Preliminary

- Report on Battle Casualties of 25 Canadian Infantry Brigade." 5 December 1951.
11. DHH, File 681.011 (D1), "Personal Recollections of the Field Works of the Jamestown, Wyoming and Kansas Lines," by Captain J.R. Madden, 10 September 1954.
 12. Claxton papers, Vol.97, File "25th Canadian Infantry Brigade-27th Canadian Infantry Brigade (1)," Menzies to Pearson, 31 October 1951.
 13. Major W.H. Pope, "Infantry Defences in Korea," 19 September 1953. Supplied to the author by Pope.
 14. War Diary, 2nd Battalion, Royal 22e Régiment (WD 2R22eR), 23 November 1951 notes that the roads to the rear of the battalion had become impassable due to snow and mud. This was after 24 hours of Chinese shelling.
 15. George G. Blackburn, *The Guns of Victory: A Soldier's Eye View, Belgium, Holland and Germany, 1944-45* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1996), p.xii.
 16. WD 2 Royal Canadian Horse Artillery [2 RCHA], 1 November-30 November 1951.
 17. Pope makes these points well.
 18. The account of the fighting on 2-6 November is based on WD 25th Canadian Infantry Brigade [25 CIB], WD 2nd Battalion Royal Canadian Regiment [2 RCR], and WD 1st Battalion Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry [1 PPCLI] except for specific citations as noted.
 19. WD 2 RCHA, 3 November 1951.
 20. Public Records Office (PRO), WD HQ Main, 1 Commonwealth Division.
 21. WD 25 CIB, 5 November 1951.
 22. WD 1 PPCLI, 6 November 1951.
 23. G.R. Stevens, *Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry: 1919-1957, Vol.3*, (Griesbach, Alberta: The Historical Committee of the Regiment, nd) pp.264-267.
 24. Farris R. Kirkland, "Soldiers and Marines at Chosin Reservoir: Criteria for Assignment to Combat Command," *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol.22, No.2, Winter 1995/96, p.270.
 25. Pope.
 26. *Calgary Herald*, 23 November 1951.
 27. Pope.
 28. WD 1 PPCLI, 26 November 1951.
 29. *Ibid.*
 30. DHH, File 145.2R13019 (D1) "Sum of Experiences, Korean Campaign" report of Lt-Col. K.L. Campbell, n.d.
 31. *Ibid.*, File 115.3A1 (D2), Report on a Visit to Korea, n.d.
 32. Interviews conducted by Mr. Bruce McIntyre with approximately 50 veterans of 25 CIB in Calgary, August 1996. Photos of entire Canadian platoons in Korea show nearly all the men armed with the M2.
 33. This account is based on WD 26 CIB, 9 & 10 November 1951 and WD 2 R22e R, November 1951, Appendix V9, "Operation Toughy."
 34. WD "C" Squadron, Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians), 9 November 1951.
 35. WD 2 R22e R, 10 November 1951.
 36. WD 25 CIB, 17 November 1951.
 37. PRO, WO281/53 "1 COMWEL DIV 00 NO 5," order issued 21 November 1951.
 38. James R. Stone and Jacques Castonguay, *Korea: 1951, Two Canadian Battles (Canadian Battle Series)*, (Ottawa: Canadian War Museum, 1988), pp.330-31.
 39. Claxton Papers, Vol.106, File "Far East Visit, 1951," Menzies to Pearson, 7 December 1951.
 40. John Gardam, *Korea Volunteer: An Oral History From Those Who Were There* (Burnstown, Ontario: General Store Publishing, 1994), p.49
 41. WD 2R22eR, November 1951, Appendix 6, "Commanding Officer's Conference," 19 November 1951.
 42. This account of the positioning of the 2R22eR and the subsequent fighting for the saddle between Hills 227 and 355 is derived from: Stone and Castonguay, pp 32-39; Gardam, pp.59-60; PRO WO281/53 "1 COMWEL DIV INTREP NO 121" 24 November 1951; NAC RG 24, Vol 18357, WD 2R22eR, November 21-24, 1951. A significant action or development within the larger battle will be specifically cited.
 43. DHH, File 4101325.013 (D12), "Interview with Maj R. Liboiron, Lt R. MacDuff, Lt W. Nash, Lt T.R. Webb, 2 R22eR...1 Dec 51."
 44. PRO WO281/53, War Diary of "G" branch, 1 Commonwealth Division, 23 November 1951.
 45. WD 2R22eR, 23 November 1951.
 46. WD 25 CIB, 26 November 1951.
 47. WD 2R22eR, November 1951, Appendix VIII, casualty list for the period 23-27 November 1951.
 48. WO 281/142, "Statistical Summary of Enemy Ops...17/25 November, 51" Appendix B to Intrep No.134 of 7 December 1951.
 49. I borrow the phrase from Col. Jack English's landmark study *The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign: A Study of Failure in High Command* (New York: Praeger, 1991).
 50. Stone and Castonguay, p.40.

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