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The last parallel: a marine's war journal

by Martin Russ

Rinehart & Company, Inc.: New York; 1957; 333 pp.; Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number 57-6097'.

The Institute is honoured to have counted among its members a number who fought in the Korean War (1950-53), including several who served as platoon commanders, some of whom were decorated for gallantry. It is a pity, then, that we do not hear more about the Korean War these days, so I was pleased to be lent this diary account written by 22-year-old United States Marine Corps Corporal Martin Russ, whose 1st Marine Division faced the Chinese Communist Forces in Korea, dug-in in static defence along the 38th Parallel, in 1952-53.

Russ paints an excellent picture of life and combat on the front line. His perspective differs markedly at times from what one might have expected from an Australian infantryman or, indeed, even an American Army soldier. This adds spice to his account. American terminology at times differs from its British equivalent [e.g. 'main line of resistance' (MLR) – the main front-line static trench system – equates roughly to 'forward defended localities' (FDLs)], but is mostly easy to follow. His descriptions of tactical situations are liberally illustrated with drawings – more crude mud maps than field sketches, but they mostly make the essential points very clear – which are a great help to the reader.

Russ's account has again reinforced for me how similar this static phase of the war in Korea must have been to the corresponding phase on the Western Front from 1915 to 1917 – two front lines generally no more than 300 to 1000 metres apart and separated by 'no-man's land' which was actively wired, mined and patrolled by both sides. Defence – well supported by machine-guns, artillery, air (which by now included napalm bombs – used by the Americans to devastating effect) and tanks, held the upper hand against attack. Indeed, attacks seem to have been limited to raids. On the American side at least, these were usually at rifle company strength, frequently with a view to capturing prisoners for intelligence purposes. They were usually easily repelled by the Chinese, with the attackers suffering heavy casualties – quite disproportionate to those inflicted on the Chinese. Not surprisingly, corresponding Chinese raids usually suffered a similar fate.

The Americans established outposts at regularly-spaced intervals forward of their main line of resistance to provide improved surveillance, early warning and a semblance of depth. The outposts were normally

manned at platoon strength by day and night. Each outpost usually had four or more listening posts around it which were manned by two or three men by night only. These outlying positions were relieved-in-place at night. Both sides employed reconnaissance and ambush patrols in 'no-man's land' but, on Russ's front at least, there appears to have been less use than I would have expected of combat ('fighting' – British term) patrols to deny information to the Chinese reconnaissance patrols. The Chinese also employed very patient and skilful snipers in 'no-man's land' to good effect, both as snipers and to call in mortar and artillery fire on the American outposts and listening posts when suitable targets presented.

It is interesting to observe how Russ matured as a marine and a junior leader over his period of eight months on the front line – the nightly patrolling of 'no-man's land' honed his skills in navigation, scouting ('point'), fieldcraft, battlecraft, infantry minor tactics and artillery fire direction – and as his skills increased and casualties mounted, so did his responsibilities – from light machine-gunner to fire-team leader, to patrol and squad leader, to, on occasion, acting platoon sergeant and even acting platoon commander (briefly). He was promoted to sergeant just before the truce.

The weather, freezing in winter and extremely hot in summer, was at times as much of a challenge as were the Chinese. As in France and Flanders some 35 years earlier, heavy periods of rain compounded the difficulties of living in and fighting from the trenches, particularly in the outpost positions.

The primary focus of the book is on service on the front line and more especially on the outposts, listening posts, patrols, raids and other activities undertaken in 'no-man's land'. There are, however, a couple of interesting chapters dealing with service in the reserve positions behind the main line of resistance, describing such things as the defence works constructed, training undertaken, deliberate attacks rehearsed and other duties performed, mainly of a logistics nature.

The account is also leavened by interspersed anecdotes of brief respites in Seoul and other periods of leave – marines who fight hard, like to play hard, too, when they get the opportunity, rare as that opportunity was in Korea.

This book will give you little insight into the strategic or higher-level operational aspects of the war in Korea, but it will give you a candid look at the minor tactical level. At this level, it is an excellent account of life and combat on the front line and is well worth the read.

David Leece