

War of the Hills

North of Kumhwa, Korea, May 1953:

Cheng Ching got his first taste of the front on a dreary day in April. Winter snows had given way to spring rains and the blood-soaked mud of the previous season had reverted to primordial ooze. That slippery mess splattered shoes, clung to clothing and caked weapons. Life in the deep bunkers and trenches was dominated by it.

Death seemed a perpetual presence around the pock-marked hills, amidst the litter of rusting barbed wires, cartridge casings, dented helmets, camouflage webbings, remnants of ripped clothing and abandoned human parts. Blasted stumps of spruce and pine stretched their mangled fingers towards the sky, signalling the threat of booby traps, trip wires and anti-personnel mines.

Yet, after a few days of sunshine, nature reasserted itself. The ooze dried and timid sprouts of grass and tentative buds started colouring that martyred terrain again. Larks, thrashers and the odd butterfly returned. But none of them were signs of hope, as Cheng Ching had learned. Rather they represented fresh dangers. Anyone trampling on new growth left tell-tale trails to bunkers and gun emplacements. The enemy was observant. More circuitous routs when discharging duties and greater care with camouflage became essential.

Cheng Ching was assigned to a salient which had already changed hands five times during the year. Fierce fighting in late March left almost half the company killed or wounded. Among the replacements were two other volunteers, Lee and Lai, who had trained with Cheng Ching just south of the Yalu throughout the bitter winter.

Lee was a touchy, muscular giant with a bull neck and a swagger to match. Lai was a swarthy, foul-mouthed smart Alec who smoked at every opportunity. Like the majority of volunteers, they were peasant lads who had signed up on a whim, a dare, or an irresistible impulse to discover what lay beyond their villages. Neither possessed much political consciousness and had not even been selected for the Communist Youth League.

Cheng Ching remembered how frequently they had complained during training, particularly about the back-breaking work of digging and filling sandbags for defensive positions.

“Fuck!” Lai had exploded. “I volunteered to fight Americans, to defend socialism, not to dig fucking tunnels and trenches! Our fucking instructor’s never satisfied. He keeps blasting our work with his artillery and telling us it’s no fucking good. What the fuck does he expect?”

“Yeah,” Lee responded, cracking his knuckles. “I came to fight too. At this rate we’ll never see action. The truce talks have been going on for eighteen months. If war ended tomorrow, what would we have to show for it? We’d go home without a single trophy, without a single tale of beating the imperialists to hell. Everybody would laugh at us for freezing our balls off digging holes in the frozen earth!”

Cheng Ching did not share their lust for danger. He had learned from his father what to expect and had secretly hoped the war would indeed end before he got there. But that hope had been vain.

All along the front, the opposing forces confronted one another, seldom more than a mile apart. But at his particular salient, identified only by a number or a set of co-ordinates on operational maps, the enemy was barely two hundred yards away. They were looking down each other's throats. It was a war for snipers.

Because Cheng Ching was one of the very few in the company who could read and write, the commander, Old Tung, took him under his wing. Old Tung was a regular army man, aged about forty, who had originally been in the 135th Regiment of the elite 15th Army. Before that he had done a spell as a merchant seaman on a British freighter.

He had been assigned to the command two years earlier, after his predecessor had been killed in action. He had a squarish face and a personality like a warm stove in winter. The loss of every man weighed with him. For that reason he never allowed men to take unnecessary risks. And they loved him in return. But Chinese commanders below battalion level had little room for initiative. Old Tung could only carry out his assignments, with the Political Commissar looking over his shoulder.

Two or three others in the company had been at the front longer than Old Tung. There was no fixed tour for either regulars or volunteers. No pay, too, for volunteers. Home leave was virtually unknown. Everyone fought till he was wounded or killed, or till the war was over. Living conditions in the subterranean caves and bunkers were appalling. But morale remained high because Old Tung managed to convince the men they were fighting for a just and noble cause.

The soldier with the longest service was Mad Fan. He relished fighting. He volunteered for every dangerous mission and somehow always managed to return with no more than a few scratches. His obsession was rifling the pockets of the enemy dead, not so much for valuables, but for photographs of their families. Like most of the others, he had no picture of his own, cameras being virtually unknown in his village. When Mad Fan brought back new photographs, they all crowded around to look and to offer comments.

Mad Fan never tired of staring at his captured photographs. He studied them for hours on end, pretending the images in them represented members of his own family. Once he broke down and confessed he could no longer visualize the faces of his children. Sometimes, looking at the pictures, he would suddenly wail: "Your Papa's never coming back. Your Papa's coming back no more."

No one could figure out whether he was crying because he genuinely felt the pain suffered by those in the photographs or whether he simply wanted to give vent to his own loneliness. Old Tung warned replacements to stay away from Mad Fan.

The first thing Cheng Ching noticed about the bunkers and tunnels was the stench of human odours and stale cigarettes. Bunkers could be massive affairs, sometimes big enough to house a company or even a battalion. The four at his salient were more modest. They were on the reverse slopes, connected to both the fighting trenches zig-zagging ahead for over a hundred yards and to the maze of tunnels and communication trenches reaching back for miles to successive defensive positions. That enabled troops under pressure to fall back to pre-prepared positions. On

the forward side, tunnels and trenches led downhill to outposts and look-outs designed to alert the main garrison of any attack.

Ventilation in the bunkers was poor. Sunlight seldom penetrated. The sweat-soaked uniforms stank and provided an ideal breeding ground for lice. Most men smoked because cigarettes were the only luxury, being issued free. For a non-smoker like Cheng Ching, the tobacco fumes were a trial. During the rainy season stagnant water and mud added to the stench.

Another horror for Cheng Ching was the blaring of foreign words from loudspeakers located somewhere out in no man's land. They called out intermittently and incomprehensibly, throughout the day and night. At first he thought they were simply a form of harassment. What was the point, he wondered, of broadcasting words practically no one understood? What messages were they trying to convey?

Later, out of curiosity, he asked Old Tung. His company commander responded with a throaty laugh. "You'll have to get used to that jabbering," he said. "After a while it becomes background noise. It beats the whine of approaching shells. You want to know their purpose? Well, what did Kung Ming advise back at the time of the Three Kingdoms? Did he not say that when attacking an enemy, one must first attack his heart? That's the reason for the broadcasts. They're attacking the enemy's will to fight."

"You mean those broadcasts are made by us and not the enemy? What do they say?" Cheng Ching asked, amazed.

Old Tung cocked his ear and listened for a while. The voice in English came through loud and clear. "American soldiers, greetings!" it began. "You're fighting on the wrong side. Come over and join us. Don't be misled by wicked war-mongers and greedy Wall Street capitalists. Don't let them turn you into cannon fodder. Think about why you're here. Are you volunteers or have you been drafted to fight? And what are you fighting for?"

"The Korean people want self-determination. They want to rule themselves and to live in peace and freedom. They have not attacked Americans in Kansas or Alabama. They have not travelled across the oceans to harm your families and loved ones. So why have you come here to kill them?"

"We are Chinese volunteers. We have come to help our Korean brothers defend their homeland and their families. Don't be tricked by the lies of militarists and war profiteers. We are peace lovers. Today is Saturday. Think of what your wives or girl friends might be doing tonight. Don't throw your lives away. Throw down your weapons and go home to them. We are not your enemies. Your enemies are in Washington."

As Old Tung conveyed the gist of the words, Cheng Ching felt as if the reasons for his involvement in the war had suddenly been articulated. The broadcast seemed to explain why he had volunteered.

"Can you teach me those foreign words?" he asked at once. "They reflect my sentiments. If I come face to face with an American I want to explain my point of view. That might spare us killing each other."

“You think you can talk to the enemy? You’ll get a bullet before you can open your mouth,” Old Tung said, curtly. “Leave peace-making to the generals in fancy uniforms. You can learn all the foreign words you like when the war’s over. For now, just keep your eyes peeled and your head down.”

When the front was quiet, as it was during April and much of May, the fear of annihilation receded and an intense boredom settled upon the men. For relief some tuned in to Radio Peking. The more sober-minded played Chinese chess or took the opportunity to learn to read and write. Those who could sleep did so. Others gambled.

Mad Fan and the volunteer Lai were fond of gambling. One day, Mad Fan played poker with Lai and four others and totally cleaned them out. His haul included a Parker fountain pen, a pair of sunglasses belonging to Lai, a penknife, a mouth organ and a gold wedding band.

“See, I’m in luck,” Mad Fan crowed. “I’m always in luck. That’s why in spite of all my years at the front I’ve never been on the receiving end of a bomb or a shell or a bullet.”

“Everyone has a quota of good luck and a quota of bad luck,” Lai retorted. “I’ve deliberately used up my ill luck by losing at poker! It seems others want to lose theirs outside.”

The others, cheered by Lai’s remarks, chimed in along similar lines. Mad Fan glared at them malevolently as he gathered up his winnings.

Since most of the company were illiterate, Cheng Ching assisted them to write letters home. But what words could he use to comfort their families? The truth was disheartening. It would in any case never get past the censors or the local cadres in charge of reading out letters from the front. In his own case his father could read between the lines. If he wrote: “The powders you gave were much appreciated by my comrades,” his father could gauge their situation. But what prospect was there of peasant families finding out what was actually going on?

Old Tung and the Political Commissar did their best to take the men’s minds off the poor food, perpetual damp, chronic trench foot, recurring fevers and constant danger. It was a daunting task. Slogans about defeating imperialism and establishing world peace were too abstract to deflect men from their miseries.

They dreaded night duties most. Mines, booby traps and trip flares, destroyed or damaged through shelling, had to be restored. Bushes used for camouflage needed to be replaced when they withered. Then there were the patrols to set up ambushes, to destroy enemy outposts and to gather intelligence. The risk of stumbling on some rotting body part was always there.

Prior to Cheng Ching’s first night patrol, Old Tung had gathered the new replacements for a pep talk. “Night patrols are not picnics,” he warned. “Remember what you have been taught during training. Man is naturally fearful of the dark but darkness is the friend of those facing a stronger or better equipped enemy. Make darkness your element. Learn to move in it as silently as fish in water. By doing a few simple things well in total darkness you can cancel out most of the enemy’s advantages.

“Be light of foot when the enemy is the opposite. Train your ears to distinguish between the rustle of leaves and the rustle of clothing. Learn to draw the right conclusions from the sounds of shifting gravel and snapping twigs. Use retreats and ambushes as well as advances to

gain your objectives. Master those skills and you will be able to destroy the enemy before he realizes you are there.”

During his first patrol on a moonless night, Cheng Ching’s heart thumped as he moved towards what lurked menacingly ahead. The highland winds seemed to carry the moans of the wounded and dying. To avoid being separated, men moved with one hand either on the shoulder of the soldier in front or by holding a part of his tunic. Once that tenuous contact was lost, men seemed to melt into the shadows or disappear like objects in a conjuror’s hand. Whenever the enemy fired a magnesium flare or scanned no man’s land with their searchlights, everyone had to fall instantly to the ground, to avoid being exposed or temporarily blinded.

During a subsequent patrol Cheng Ching had thrown himself down in such haste that he did not realize till afterwards he had pressed his face against a putrefying body. That was preferable to stepping on a mine or a booby trap, a likelihood which increased as a patrol got closer to an enemy position. That turned out to be the fate of volunteer Lee. He became the first fatality in the company after six weeks. Although he was not particularly popular, his death cast a pall over the men.

“Lee had small ear lobes. Fortune-tellers regard that as a sign of a short life,” a soldier named Koo remarked.

Cheng Ching had frequently played chess with Koo and the observation caused him to reflect upon the size of his own ears. They were well-shaped, with long, fleshy lobes like those commonly depicted in images of Bodhisattvas. But that did little to remove the dread of venturing out at night.

Old Tung seemed satisfied with his progress, however. “You’re doing all right for someone barely out of his nappies,” the company commander said. “You know how to be afraid, not like Mad Fan. Stay cautious and you might just live to tell your grandchildren about this war.”

Then the heavy artillery barrages began.

“Sounds like we’re going to have a bit of fun, probably a ground attack,” Mad Fan observed, matter-of-factly.

There was nothing anyone could do except to huddle in the tunnels and bunkers, clenching teeth and pressing lips. The bunker supports groaned under the falling shells and loose earth cascaded down on the men, making them curse and bellow like animals in terror. Some fouled their trousers.

“There goes our returning fire,” Mad Fan announced. He sounded like a radio commentator reporting on a sporting event.

The next day the Americans sent in bombers but the salient only suffered one direct hit on a forward observation post, killing three. Veterans knew, however, that in spite of the shells and the bombs, their real ordeal was yet to come.

Old Tung saw to it that every member of the company was briefed on what to expect. The People’s Liberation Army was extremely democratic in that respect. High Command believed that men would be more committed if they knew their roles in an overall plan. So every foot soldier

was briefed in detail. For that reason Americans invariably tried to capture Chinese prisoners while Chinese soldiers often preferred death to capture.

The attack came just before midnight, after more than forty-eight hours of shelling. The lightly-manned outposts, radiating from the main fighting trench like points of a star, were the first to engage. Reinforcements were despatched as necessary along the communication trenches.

Cheng Ching watched the unfolding drama from a slit hole prepared for snipers. It was his first taste of fighting on such a scale. He saw the formidable blackness of night being punctured by the tracery of flying bullets, the explosions of phosphorus grenades and the brightness of magnesium flares drifting down on parachutes. The rattle of gunfire erupting from every outpost suggested a large scale attack.

When trip flares and booby traps close to the fighting trench were triggered, Cheng Ching knew the forward positions had been overwhelmed. The company's heavy machine guns opened up and he himself sent burst after burst into the darkness, without knowing precisely where the enemy was.

The confused battle raged for three hours before the first enemy gained the fighting trench. Old Tung gave the signal to retreat. The men melted away into the darkness.

The enemy was given time to occupy the fighting trench, where explosives had been buried to detonate upon a counter-attack. When it came, bugles sounded and whistles blew. What was left of the company, reinforced by fresh troops, let out blood-curdling yells and swarmed back to the fighting trench. Those with good pitching arms took the lead, lobbing grenade after grenade as they went. The main body reached the fighting trench in the morning light. A brief period of hand-to-hand combat ensued. The enemy had been badly maimed and it took less than thirty minutes to put them to flight.

The fighting trench was littered with the fallen from both sides, their smashed bodies frozen in the undignified postures of death. Among them was the body of Lai. So many young lives obliterated, before adulthood could begin, thought Cheng Ching with a numbing sadness.

He wondered about his own part in the carnage. He had fired his burp gun into the blackness, in a fury of rage and fear. At one stage, he really felt murder in his heart. He was filled with hatred for those who had turned him into a wild beast. The sensation frightened him. How many dead had he been responsible for? Perhaps it was better he did not know. He saw how right his father had been. How could there be victors in such a mad conflict?

He was assigned by Old Tung to search for survivors and to disarm possible booby traps. He did the work slowly and methodically. It was common to find booby traps under corpses. After twenty minutes he had found no booby trap but did discover one member of his own company alive, with three bullet wounds in his body and legs. He did not know the man's name but he had him moved to the field hospital. The enemy wounded looked beyond help. The explosives and grenades had done their job well.

As Cheng Ching rounded a bend in the fighting trench, he saw a young American soldier lying flat on his back, whimpering, his eyes wide with fear and pain. A grenade had wounded him in either the stomach or the pelvis, for the lower part of his uniform was stained with

blood. He seemed half-paralysed, though he still clasped an M-1 rifle to his chest, with a finger on the trigger.

Cheng Ching judged he had the advantage, for the wounded man's gun barrel was pointed towards the ground whereas his burp gun was aimed directly at the man's head. At last he was face to face with the enemy.

But the wounded man did not look like an enemy. His helmet had fallen off, to reveal short golden hair. His features were unclear because his face had been smeared with camouflage paint. But his eyes were blue. They did not seem like the eyes of a murderer or a rapist or a ruthless aggressor. He appeared only a frightened boy, hardly older than himself.

What was he here for, Cheng Ching wondered. Why was he risking his life so pointlessly? What principle or point of honour was he trying to establish? He wanted to find out and to explain his own position. But, before he could do that, he had to save the man.

"Don't be afraid," Cheng Ching said slowly, in Chinese, cursing himself for having no command of English. "I want to help you. I have medicine to stop your bleeding."

The wounded soldier showed no spark of understanding. He made a frightened, garbled sound, with fear intensifying in his eyes. In desperation Cheng Ching removed his left hand from his burp gun and opened his palm. He wanted to indicate that he meant no harm, that he sought only to remove the M-1 rifle so that his father's blood-clotting powder could be used pending the arrival of the medics.

As Cheng Ching reached down for the rifle the wounded man swung it up with what was left of his strength and fired.

Cheng Ching felt a searing sensation on his cheek and his right eye was immediately blinded by blood. He fired instinctively in return. He clasped a hand to his wound as he stumbled against the wall of the trench, breathing hard. With his good eye he saw the wounded man's head had been smashed open by the burst from his burp gun. Blood, brains and spinal fluids were bubbling out of the American's shattered skull.

The sight caused Cheng Ching to vomit.