

# A HOT COLD WAR: KOREA 1950 - -1953



MILITARY HISTORY AND  
HERITAGE VICTORIA INC.

**THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE HELD AT  
THE POMPEY ELLIOT MEMORIAL HALL,  
CAMBERWELL RSL BY MILITARY HISTORY AND  
HERITAGE, VICTORIA.**

**21 NOVEMBER 2015**

Proudly supported by:



# The Battle which ended the war: Samichon River & the Hook 24–27 July 1953

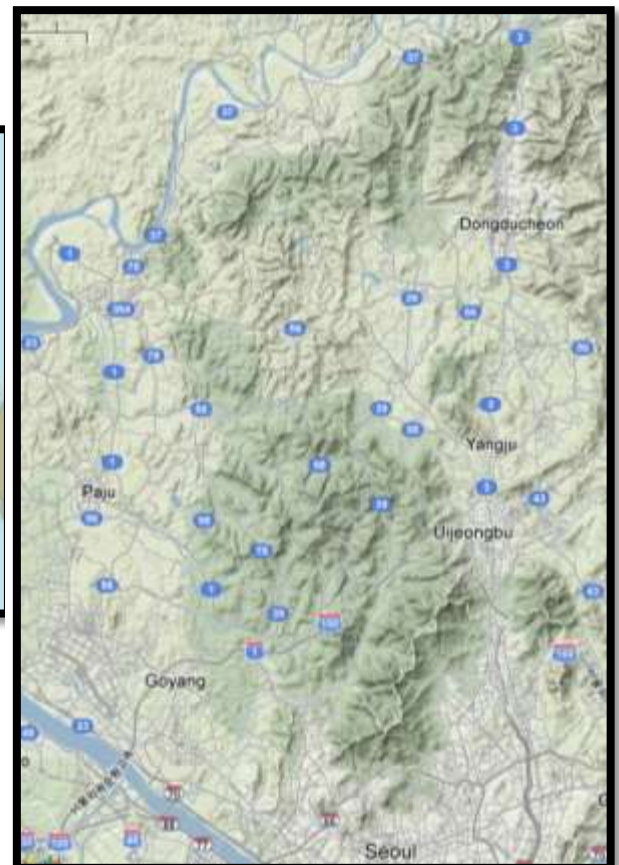
Michael Kelly

## Introduction



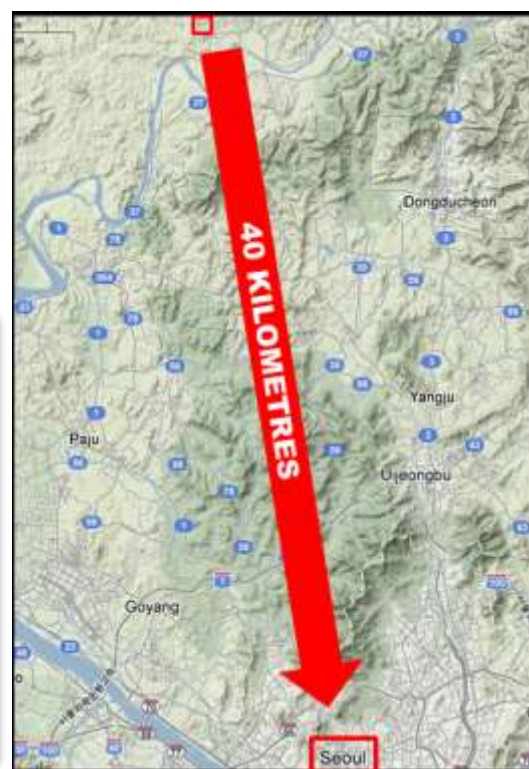
The Battle of the Samichon began on the evening of 24 July 1953. The fighting lasted for three days, which were also the last days of the Korean War. Armistice negotiations had begun in July 1951 and two years of on again, off again and often strained negotiations followed before an agreement between

the belligerents was finally reached on 19 July 1953. The date of the armistice was set for 27 July. 19 July also saw an increase in the intensity of Chinese offensive action in the Samichon Valley as they tried one last time to take vital high ground and drive UN troops back across the Imjin River.



During this paper I will present an overview of the location, terrain and effects of weather on the battlefield in the Samichon Valley over the last weeks of the Korean War. I will briefly examine why the Hook was so important to both the United Nations Command and Chinese, highlight the Australian and some of the US Marine positions, before giving an account of the battle with a focus on events between the Hook and Hill 111.

### Location & Terrain & Weather



The Samichon Valley is located forty kilometres north of Seoul, and is now part of Korea's De-Militarised Zone. Like many places in Korea the terrain is mountainous. Steep hills dominate the skyline and the valley floors were, at the time, largely given over to the production of rice.







July in Korea is normally the wettest month of the year. The country receives up to 60% of its annual rainfall during July alone. Flooding is common and July 1953 was no exception.



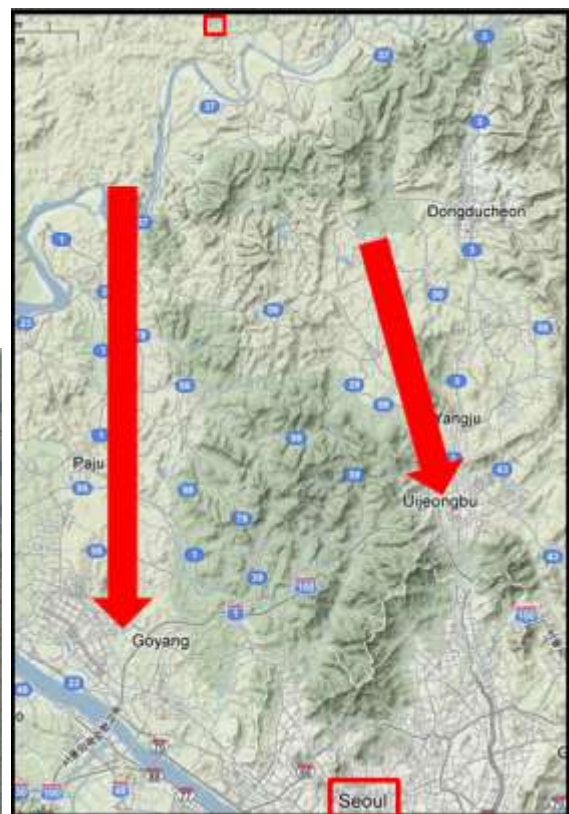
The heavy monsoonal rain, especially the downpour on 15 July, caused the Imjin River to rise 20 metres, destroying Spoonbill Bridge and closing Teal and Harlequin Bridges and the Widgeon Ferry for three days. Road traffic was brought to a halt forcing supplies and ammunition to be transported by US Marine amphibious DuKWs. Any wounded were evacuated on the return journey.





The heavy rains caused several bunkers to collapse in the Australian positions, and on at least one occasion, the occupants had to be rescued after becoming trapped. Trenches were turned into something resembling the Western Front in the winter months of 1914-18, but in this case conditions were hot and very humid, the other end of the front line misery scale.

### Why the Hook?



The Hook was one of the most contested locations of the Korean War. This part of the Jamestown Line covered a direct approach to Seoul and was one of the original invasion points used by the North Korean Peoples' Army when they crossed the 38th Parallel on 25 June 1950. The Hook gave the occupants the vital high ground advantage covering north and south. The Chinese wanted the position back as it gave them an overview of the Imjin River and a perfect place to launch another offensive towards Seoul.

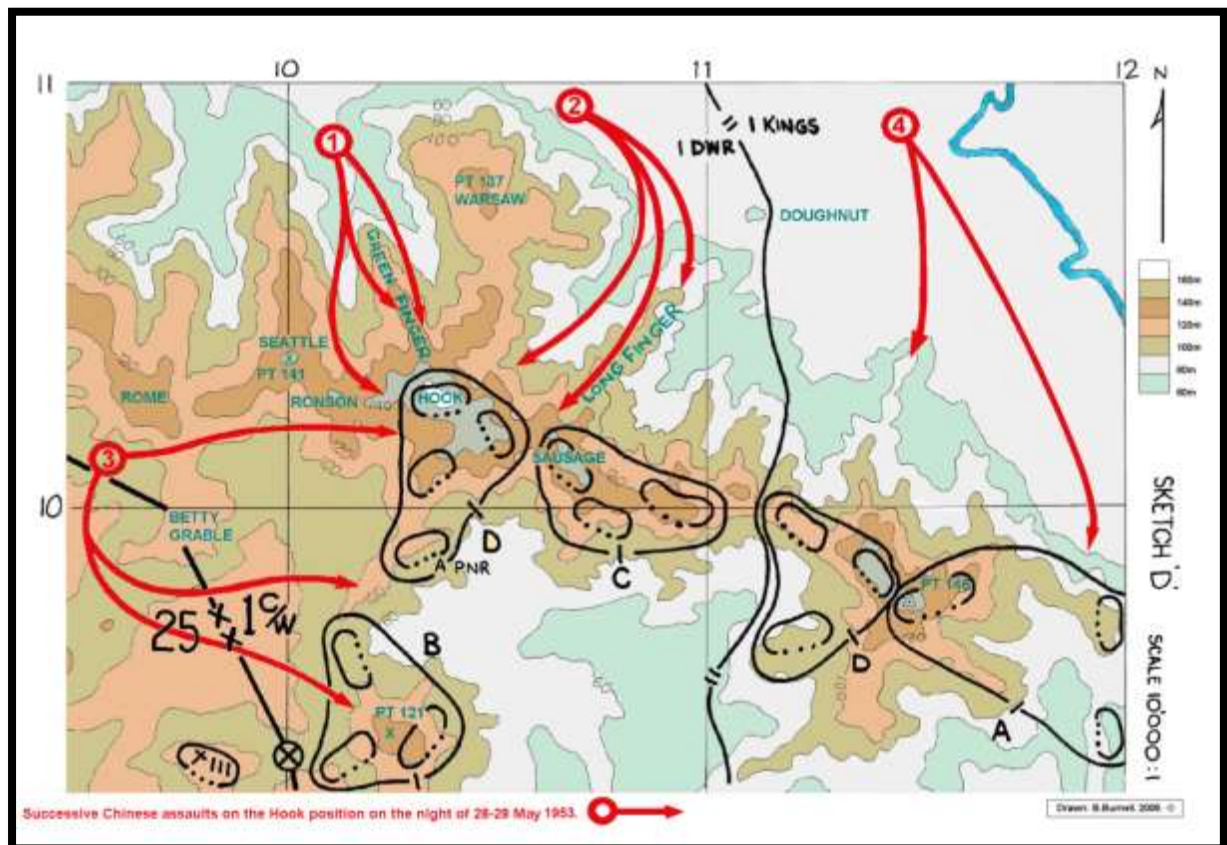
The Hook and surrounding positions had been captured from the Chinese during the UN offensive in October 1951. Over the next twelve months saw this section of the Jamestown Line held by US Divisions, including the 1st Marine and 25th Infantry Divisions. A screen of Combat Outposts, known as the Nevada Complex were established forward of the Main Line of Resistance or MLR as a forward defence buffer.

The Chinese maintained constant pressure on this part of the UN frontline and the patrol war in no man's land was fierce. The Chinese first attacked the Hook in strength on October 26 and over two days of heavy fighting the Marines lost the Hook and quickly re-gained it again. It was about this time too that the divisional boundary between the 1st Marine Division and the 1st Commonwealth Division shifted to the west. This slightly compressed the Marines' defensive frontage, which at that time extended some 35 miles from the west coast of Korea to Hill 111, held by an understrength division, a huge undertaking. Responsibility for the Hook and its surrounds passed to the 1st Commonwealth Division.

Three more attempts were made by the Chinese to take the Hook by massed infantry assaults. The 1st Battalion, Black Watch defended the Hook twice, first on 18/19 November 1952, the



week they took over the positions from the marines, and again on 8 May.



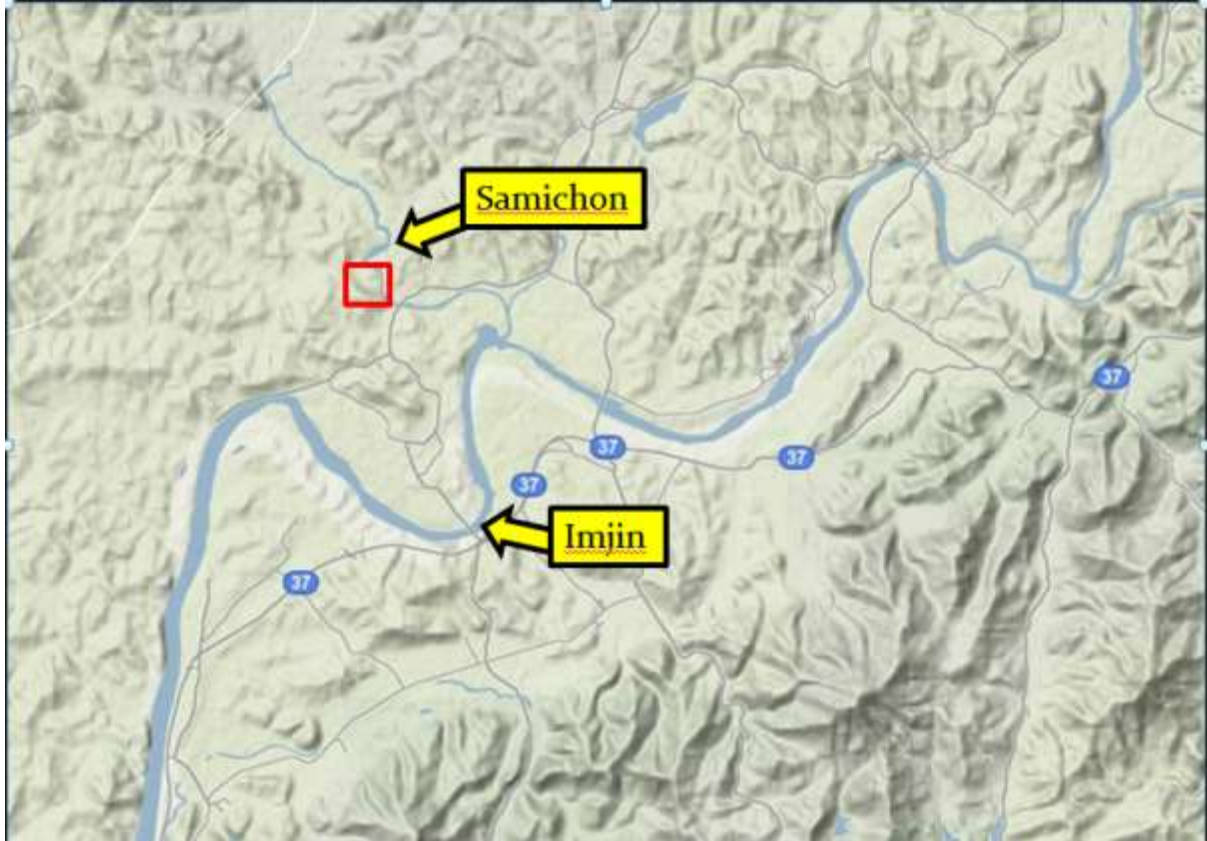
The 1st Battalion, Duke of Wellington's Regiment replaced The Black Watch in mid-May and they in turn defended the Hook on 28/29 May. The Chinese broke into the Hook and had to be driven out by the reserve company. Divisional artillery and mortars also played a vital role in stopping the attacks. The 29th Brigade was exhausted and Major General Michael West, GOC 1st Commonwealth Division instituted a divisional move in place. Known as Operation Emperor, the move saw the 28th Brigade move from the right sector to replace the 29th Brigade.

Having focussed on the Hook for so long, the Chinese turned their gaze towards the neighbouring Marines. If the Chinese could not take the Hook by coup de main, they would try turning the flank and rolling up the Hook from behind.



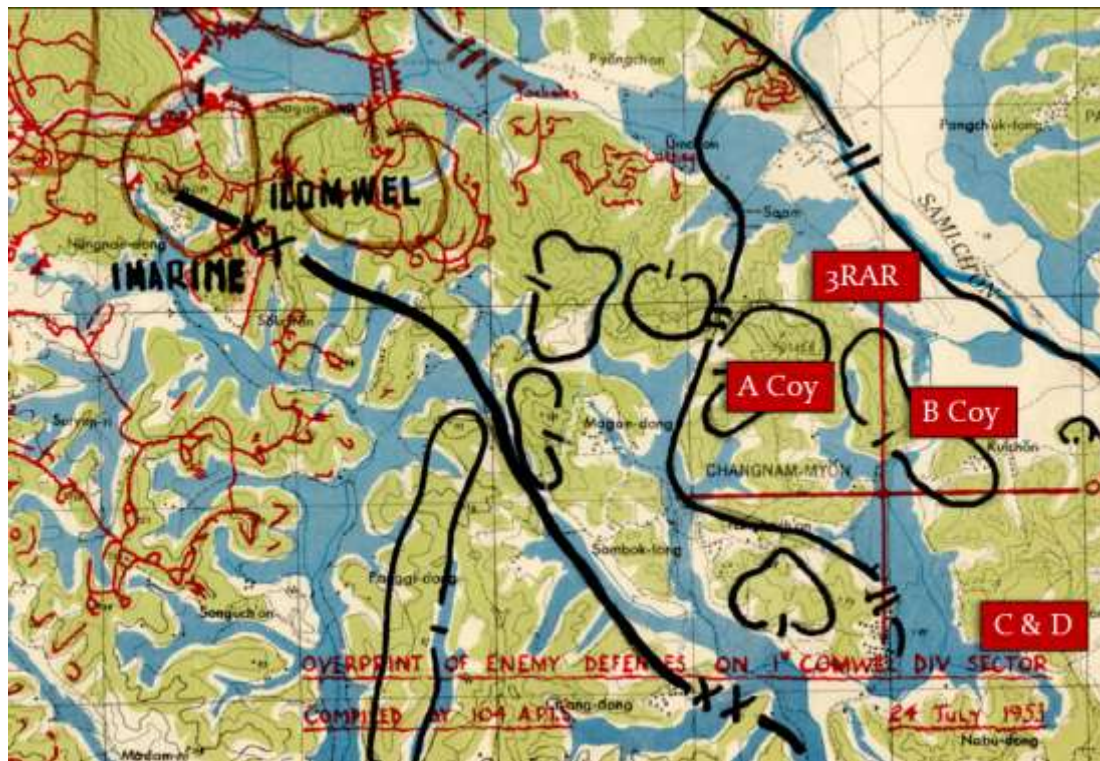
## Battlefield & Dispositions

The 28th Brigade's new area was divided through the middle by the Samichon, which became the right flank of the impending battle. Following the rain, the river was still fast-flowing and provided a formidable obstacle for any potential infantry crossing.

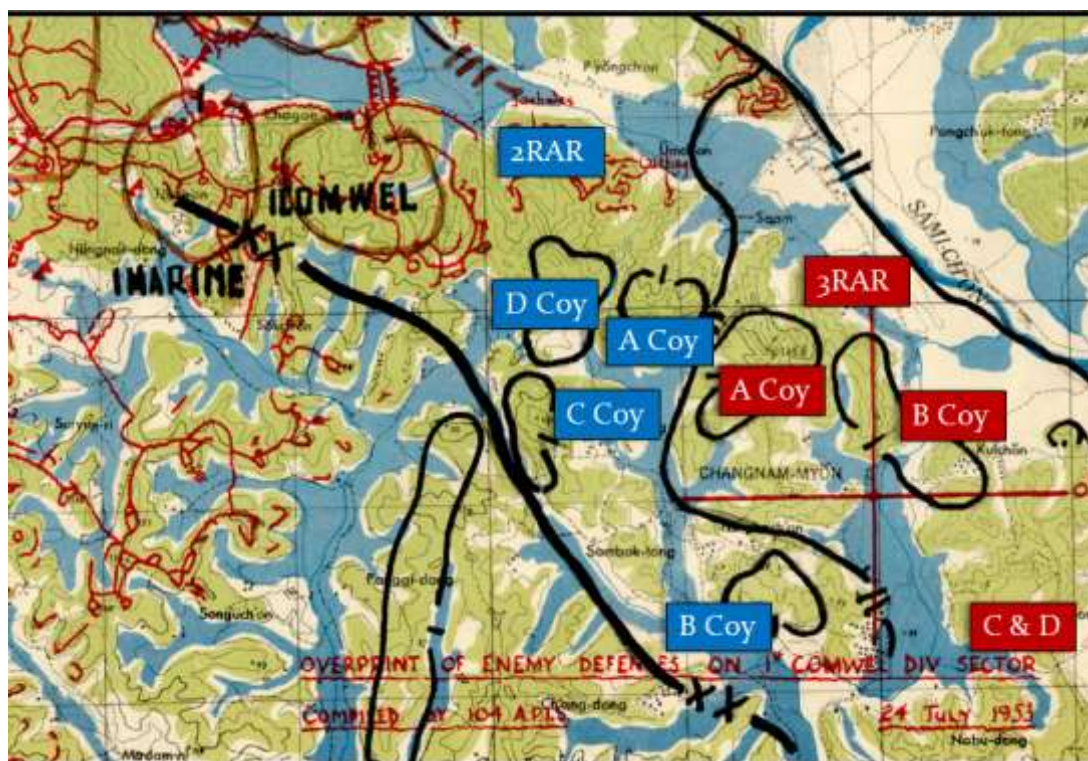


The Imjin River, to which the Samichon is a tributary, flowed behind the 28th Brigade's positions and was the greatest concern for the defenders, as a flooded river with minimal bridging across their line of retreat was a recipe for disaster.

Brigadier John Wilton, 28 Brigade's commanding officer made 2RAR and 3RAR, the strongest battalions in his brigade, the forward battalions on the Hook.



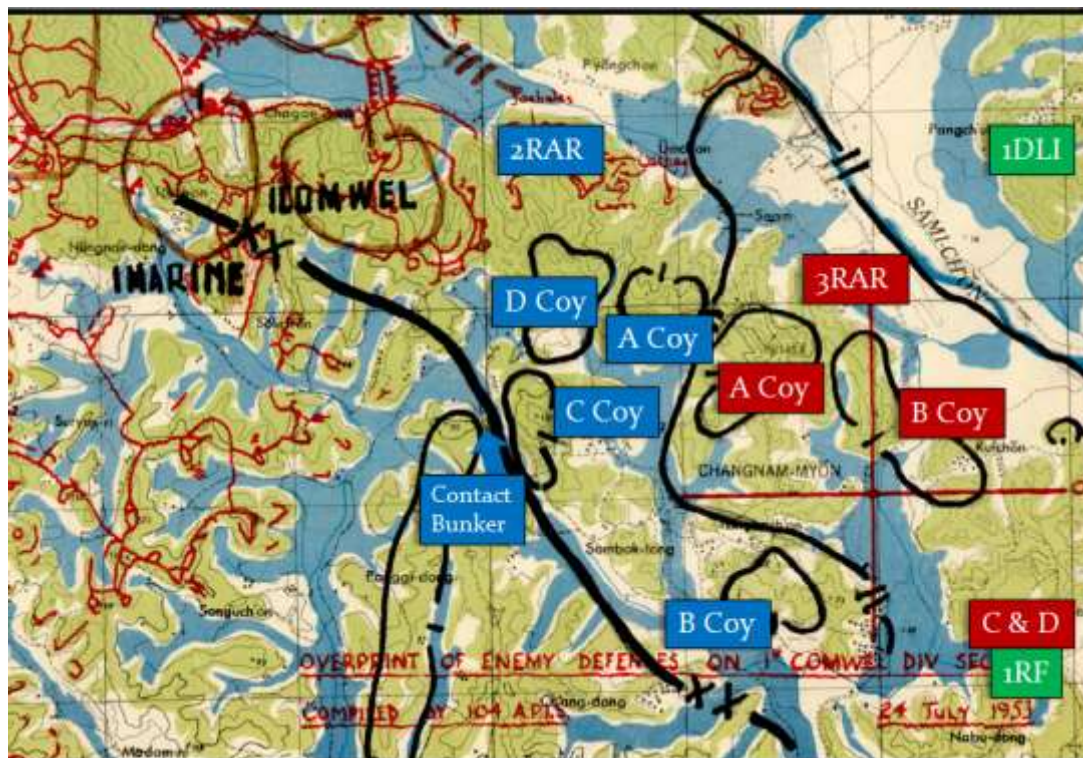
3RAR occupied positions immediately to the west of the river with A Company on Sausage and B Company alongside the Samichon. C and D Companies were in reserve.





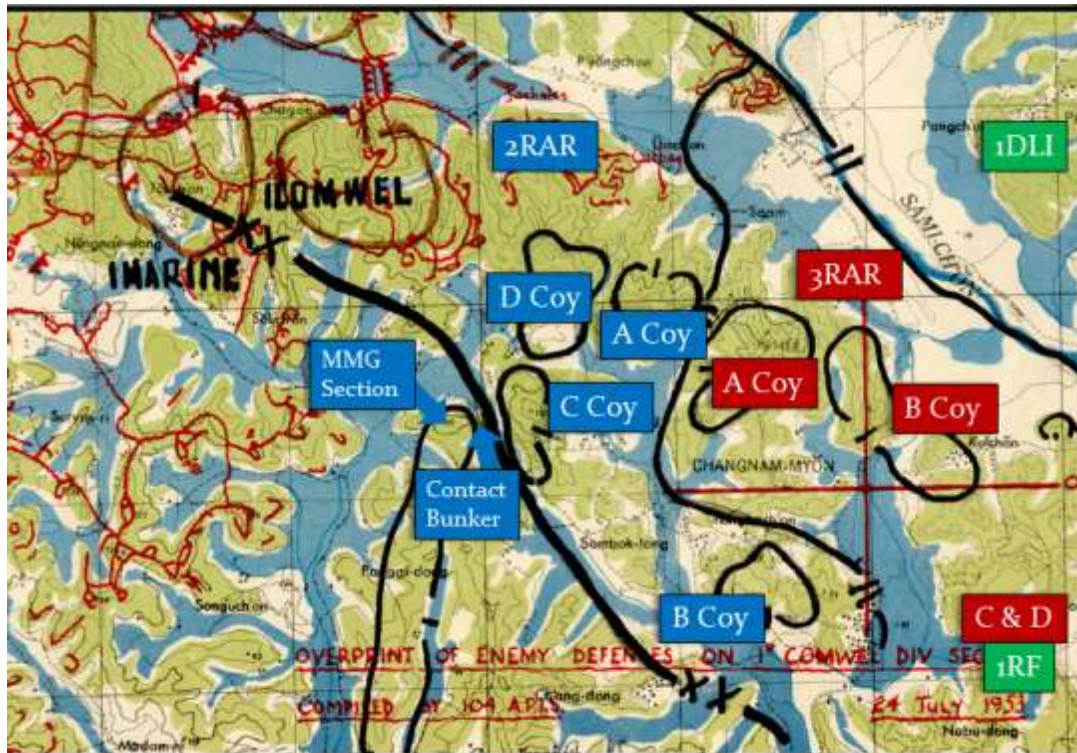
2RAR became “the Hook” battalion and A Company was the link with 3RAR. Initially B Company was placed on the 146 Feature, “the Hook”, but went into reserve the day before the battle. D Company, who had been in reserve, took over. C Company occupied Hill 121, the left section of the Hook. This position overlooked Hill 111 and the saddle between the two positions, which was also the divisional boundary between the Commonwealth and Marine Divisions.

A re-entrant that led from the saddle up behind Hill 111 was covered by a position known as the Contact Bunker

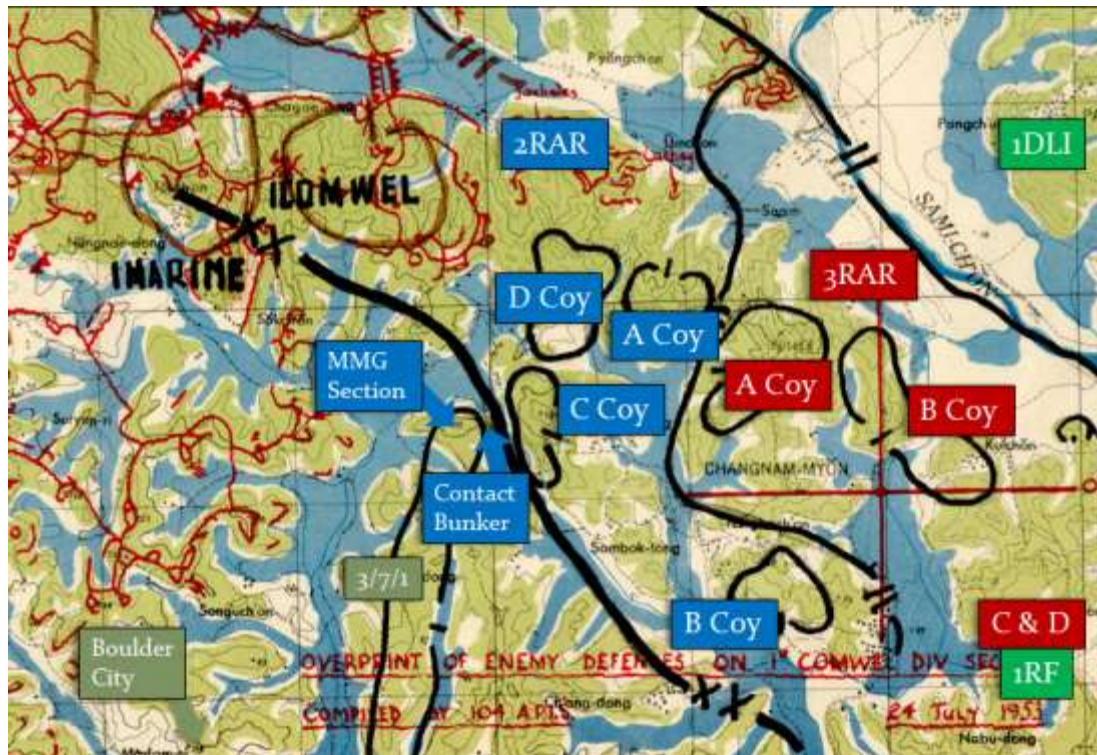


This position was occupied by Lance Corporal Ken Crockford and six men.





Occupying Hill 111 was a ten-man section from 2RAR's Medium Machine Gun Platoon, commanded by 19 year-old Sergeant Brian Cooper.



He was embedded amongst the Marines of the 3rd Battalion, 7th Regiment. Positions held by the 7th Regiment stretched from Hill 111 to Hill 119, known as Boulder City. This was where



the Chinese turned their attention after their failure to dislodge the British from the Hook at the end of May. I'm not going to speak much on actions fought by the marines time today does not allow it.

### **The lead up to the end**



After several months in reserve, the 1st Marine Division began returning to the MLR on 6/7 July. The following night, as Sergeant Cooper and his section relieved the Dukes' MMG section on Hill 111 the Chinese launched attacks against the Berlin and East Berlin outposts. The fighting was fierce, but the outposts held.

Cooper and his men came in for attention from Chinese artillery and though they suffered no casualties, their defences were battered.



2RAR took over the Hook on 9 July and 3RAR took over their positions the following day.

The Australians were faced with the daunting task of rebuilding the shattered defences of the Hook, which they set to with a will. Despite great attempts by Mother Nature and the constant harassing fire of the Chinese artillery, within a fortnight, bunkers had been rebuilt, trenches restored and the defensive minefields had been re-marked and fenced by the pioneer platoon, led by the seemingly unflappable Lieutenant Patrick Forbes, who would be awarded an MC for his efforts in the face of enemy interference. The Hook's defences were as formidable as ever.

Both Australian battalions maintained nightly standing and fighting patrols, and there were frequent contacts with Chinese patrols. These constant patrols and the determination to dominate no man's land by 2RAR and 3RAR drove the Chinese off the Australian wire, giving them some breathing space. Though, the Chinese had dug in on the reverse slope of Green Finger and had a cave dug from where they sent ambush patrols.

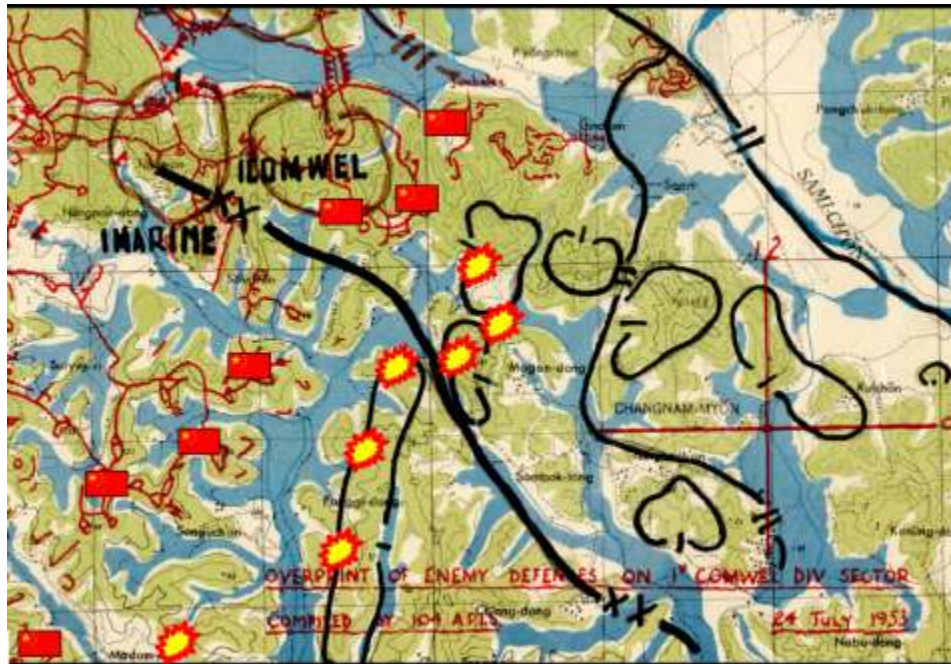
On the evening of 19/20 July an overwhelming Chinese attack drove the Marines from outposts Berlin and East Berlin. The Chinese paid heavily for their efforts, with at least one battalion being all but annihilated by artillery and small arms fire.

A directive from the Marines' high command prevented any counter-attacks to re-take these positions, an order the marines were less than pleased with as the Chinese now had direct access to the Marines' front line. It also turned the Australians' position on the Hook into a larger salient.

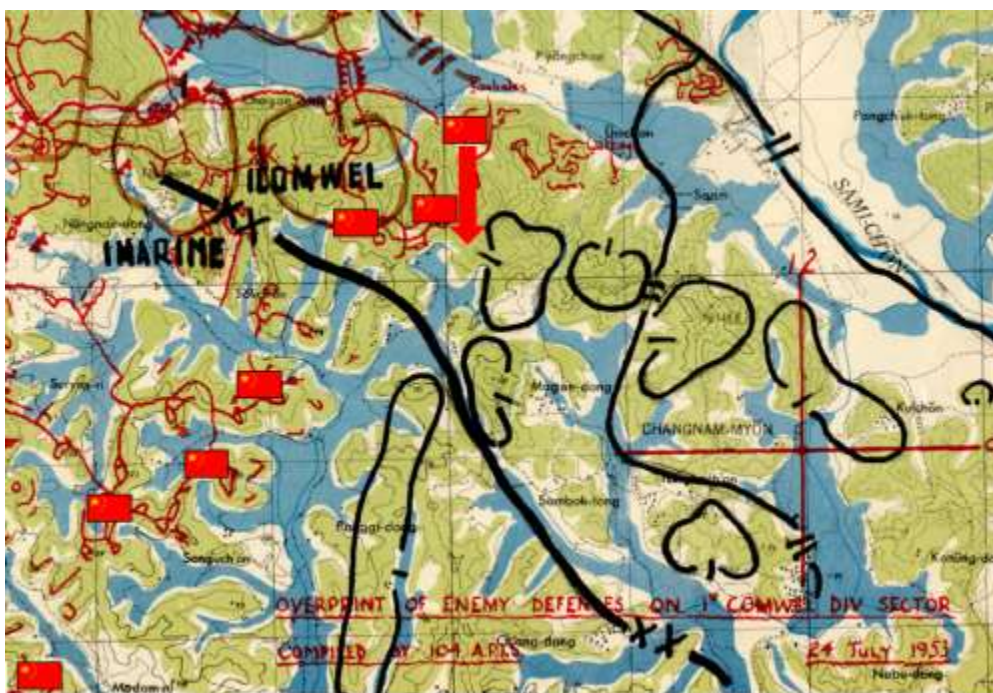
On Hill 111, the Marines and Sergeant Cooper's section were heavily shelled and drove off a probing attack by Chinese infantry. 500 rounds of artillery and mortar fire also fell on Hill 121 and the Hook, wounding four members of 2 RAR.

The Chinese were particularly active in the weeks leading up to their last offensive. Their patrols frequently clashed with the Australians and Americans and they were able to successfully ambush some of the Australian and Marines patrols, including on 22 and 23 July when D Company, 2RAR patrols were ambushed on Green Finger. The ferocity of the Chinese attacks in capturing the outposts forward of the Marines' positions, their offensive patrolling, combined with allied intelligence pointed to another imminent offensive.

## The Battle - 24/25 July

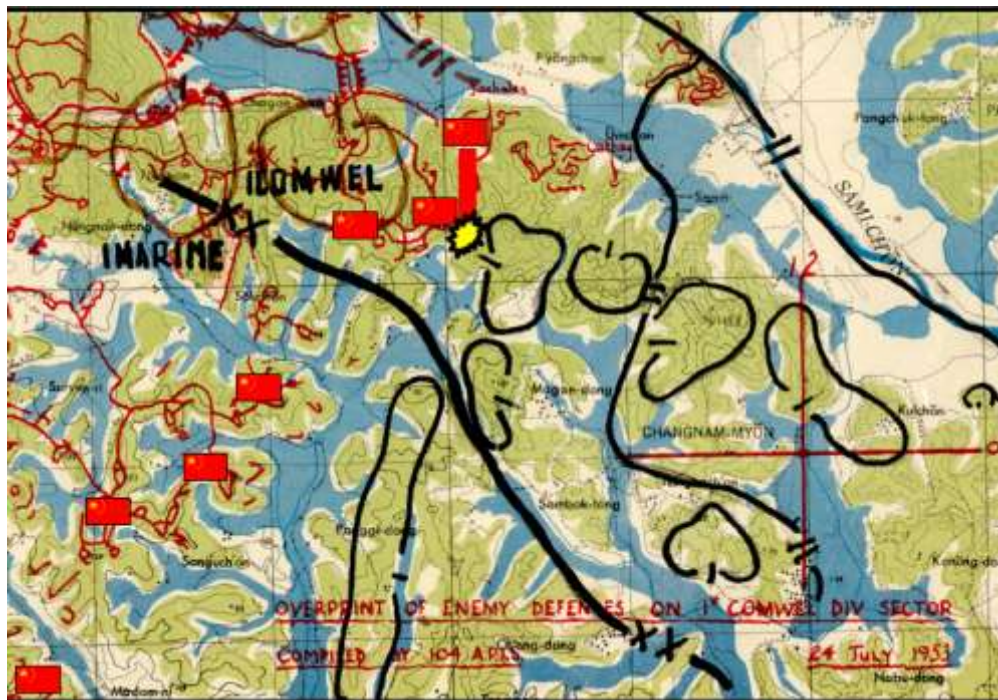


Throughout the day of 24 July, Chinese artillery had been limited to harassing fire on 2RAR's and Marines' positions. But at 8pm, with heavy rain falling, the Chinese artillery fire increased to a barrage focused on positions at the Hook, Hills 121, 111 and Boulder City.





Soon after, the Australian standing patrol on Green Finger called in an artillery strike on a group of fifty Chinese infantrymen who were moving towards the Hook and Hill 121.



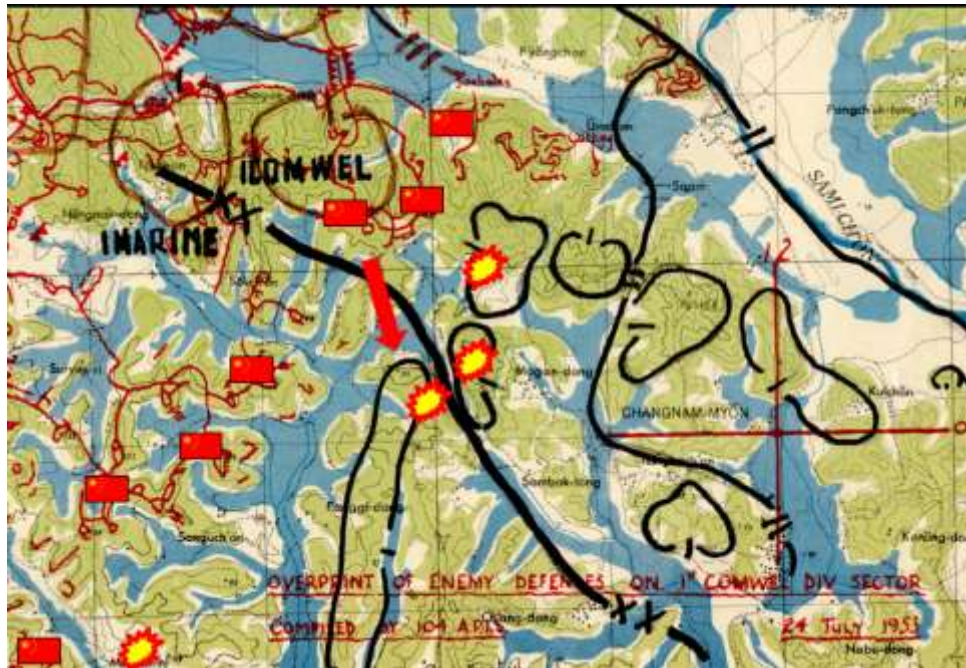
The New Zealand gunners responded and using variable timing fuses on their shells to create airbursts, the Chinese attack was halted.

Though several more attempts were made by the Chinese over the next few hours to attack the Hook and Hill 121, the New Zealander's artillery fire was so effective, that the attackers did not even get close to the defensive wire. However, they did get spotters into a position where they could call accurate fire down onto 2RAR's mortar baseplate position and rear areas.

The Chinese shelling caused a number of Australian casualties. 2RAR lost two men killed and several others wounded. One of those killed was Corporal Albert Wells of D Company. Corporal Jack Philpot, on his second tour in Korea was next to Wells when a shell hit their position. He described the moments immediately after:

*“hey, turn off that bloody tap, what’s going on, I can’t see!! I came out of a state of unconsciousness to find that the man next to me had half his head blown off. An enemy shell had scored a direct hit on our trench. The sound of the tap was his life blood pouring out onto the floor of the trench.”*

There is a little bit more to his description but it is quite grisly.



Even before the Chinese barrage lifted off Hill 111, their infantry, having lain amongst the rice stooks, charged through their own artillery in an attempt to overrun the Australians and Marines on the hill. They used satchel charges against bunkers and quickly gained the Marines’ front-line.



*Sergeant Brian Cooper (L) and Lance Corporal Ken Crockford. Both men were awarded Military Medals, but were certainly worthy of higher honours for their actions during the course of the battle.*

Cooper organised his men into all-round defence, keeping his two Vickers guns on their intended trajectory covering Hills 121 and 146. He placed a Bren gun facing into the Marines' positions, which were now over run. 11 surviving Marines joined Cooper and his men in their positions and assisted in holding off the Chinese. Several took cover in one of the gun bunkers and Ron Walker was heard to say; "get out of there, you bastards!"

Corporal Doug "Kipper" Franklin and Private Dan Mudford were wounded. Mudford had dirt and sand blasted into his face and eyes and was temporarily deafened by an explosion.

Franklin was shot in his left upper arm as he defended the Australian positions as the Chinese attempted to over run them. He was thrown back into the trench, blood spurting everywhere from a severed artery.

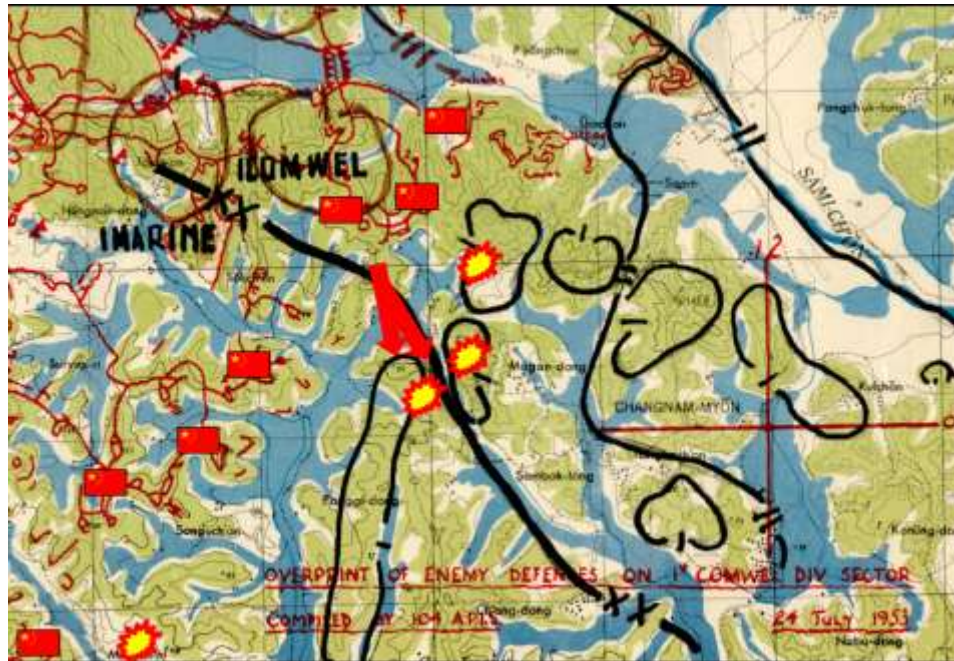
Franklin took himself to the Marine CP at the rear of Hill 111. Here he joined Mudford and his wound was treated by a marine corpsman. There were also a dozen wounded marines in the CP, all needing evacuation.

The mode of evacuation arrived in the most unlikely of forms. Corporal Les Pye, a New Zealander on secondment to the 1st Battalion, Royal Tank Regiment, arrived as crew commander of a Centurion MKI, which had been converted from a gun tank to a ammunition carrier/ recovery vehicle. The vehicle's turret had been removed and two steel doors welded on top. A crew commander's structure had been added, to which a Browning .30 machine gun had been added as a defensive weapon.

Les recalled that he didn't notice the terrain as the vehicle made its way to the marines' CP. He mentioned the heavy incoming small arms and mortar fire and the curses of his driver as hot brass flew into his compartment from the .30 as Pye engaged Chinese targets. The Australian and marine wounded were evacuated through 2RAR's RAP to the Indian Field Ambulance and on to the Norwegian MASH.

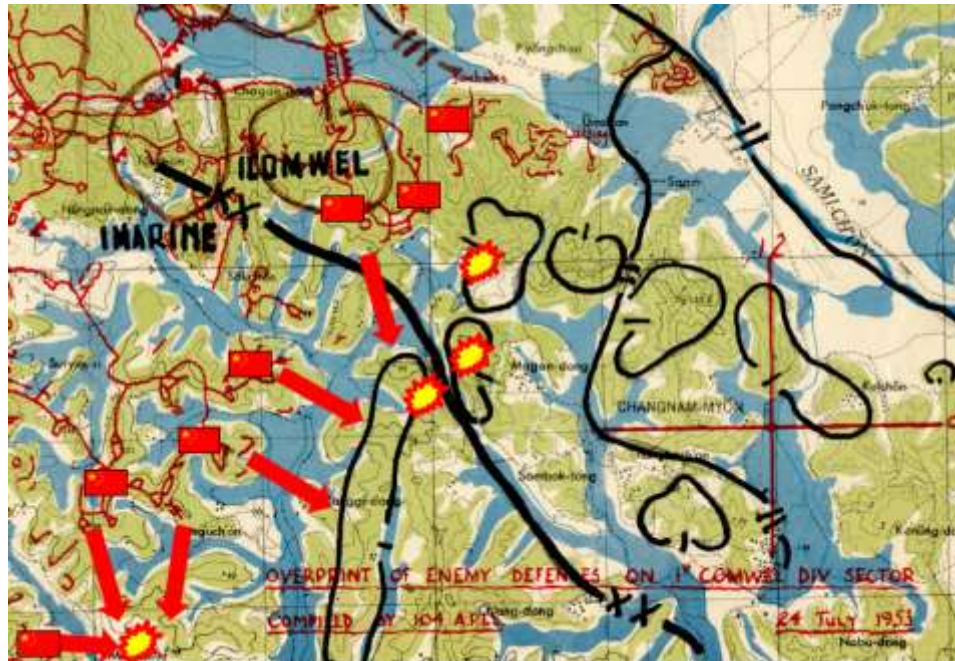
As the fighting intensified, Chinese porters were observed bringing up supplies of small arms, grenades and other materiel, making it obvious to those on Hill 111, that the Chinese intended to take and hold their position.



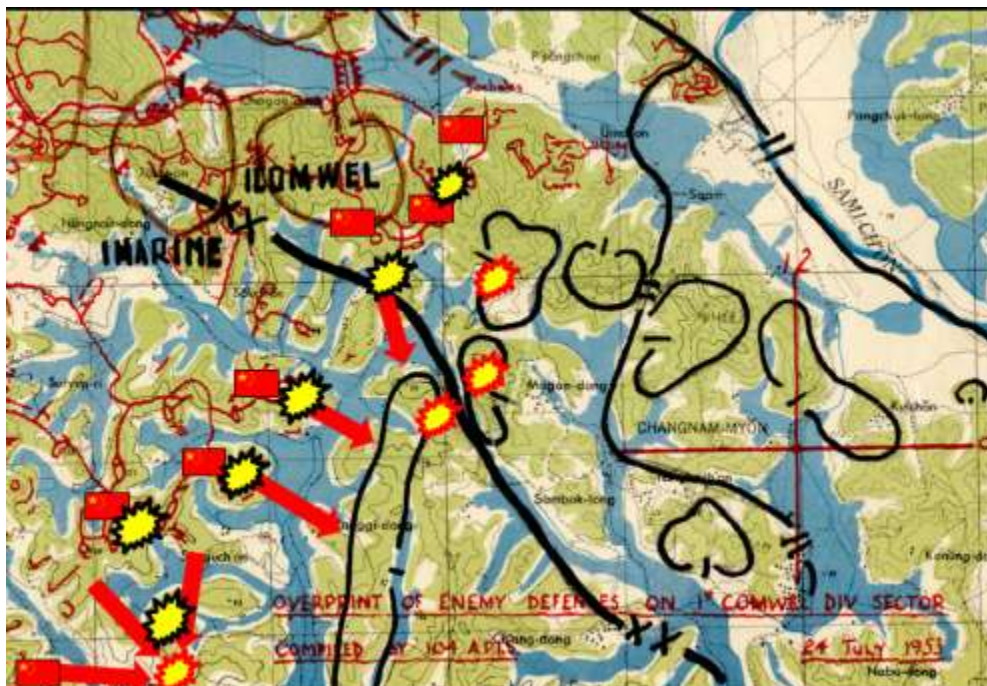


In the nearby Contact Bunker, Lance Corporal Ken Crockford observed Chinese troops in front of his position. He and his section engaged them, forcing the Chinese to retire after a short fire-fight. With the situation on Hill 111 becoming dire, Cooper called a “box me in” barrage onto his position.

The New Zealand gunners again with their excellent gunnery and the deadly variable timing fuses on their shells stopped the Chinese attack in its tracks. For the remainder of the night, Cooper and his men fought off repeated Chinese attacks, which were intended to overrun his position, but as dawn on the 25th of July broke, the Chinese attacks ceased.



The night had been desperate for the Marines on Boulder City. The initial Chinese barrage devastated the defensive wire and minefields and also destroyed much of the Marines' trenches, bunkers and fighting positions. Like at Hill 111, the Chinese attacked through their own barrage in what seemed to be overwhelming numbers.





The Marines' artillery, ably supported by batteries from the US Army's 25th Infantry Division, the Turkish Brigade and the 1st Commonwealth Division, especially the 16th Field Regiment, Royal New Zealand Artillery, pounded Chinese forming up points and their attack routes, but the situation was still dire for the Marines. During the night they were forced off the forward slope in a bitter hand-to-hand struggle where platoons, fire teams and even lone Marines fought to hold on to their positions. Others, cut off, simply played dead until it was relatively safe to make their way back to friendly positions. During the first night of the battle, more than 3,000 Chinese troops had assaulted the MLR between the Hook and Boulder City.

**25/26 July**

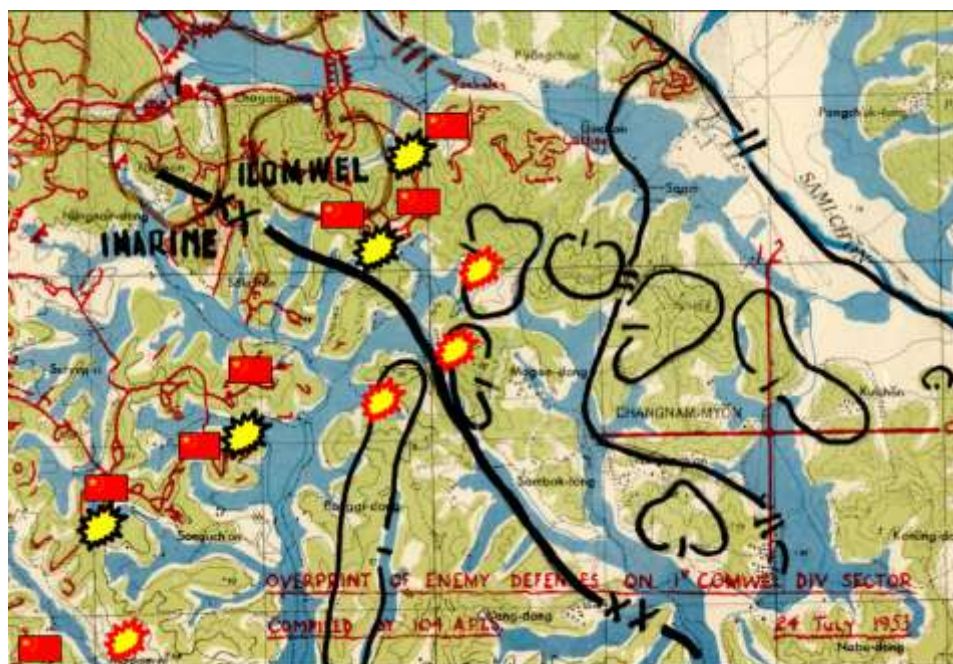


As dawn on the 25th of July broke the Australians and Americans on the front line took stock. The positions on the Hook had not been directly attacked, though there had been casualties to the patrol on Green Finger and in the C and D Company positions.

The Chinese had taken the forward trenches to the west of Hill 111, what was left of them, some had holed up in bunkers, including one near the MMG section. This was discovered when Ron Walker and Private Cranston conducted a reconnaissance into the marines' communication trench to the west of the Australian positions.

On approaching one bunker, Walker and Cranston were greeted by a Chinese grenade. The shrapnel from the resulting explosion wounded Cranston in the buttocks, but he remained on duty. The Chinese soldier did not surrender and Cooper ordered grenades thrown into the bunker. The Chinese soldier was killed.

The Marines went to work clearing Chinese infantry out their positions to the left of Hill 111 and on Boulder City. It took most of the day to reclaim their positions, which were further deteriorated through the Marines use of a 3.5 inch rocket launcher, borrowed from Cooper's position, flame throwers and fire support from their M-46 Patton tanks to clear their area.

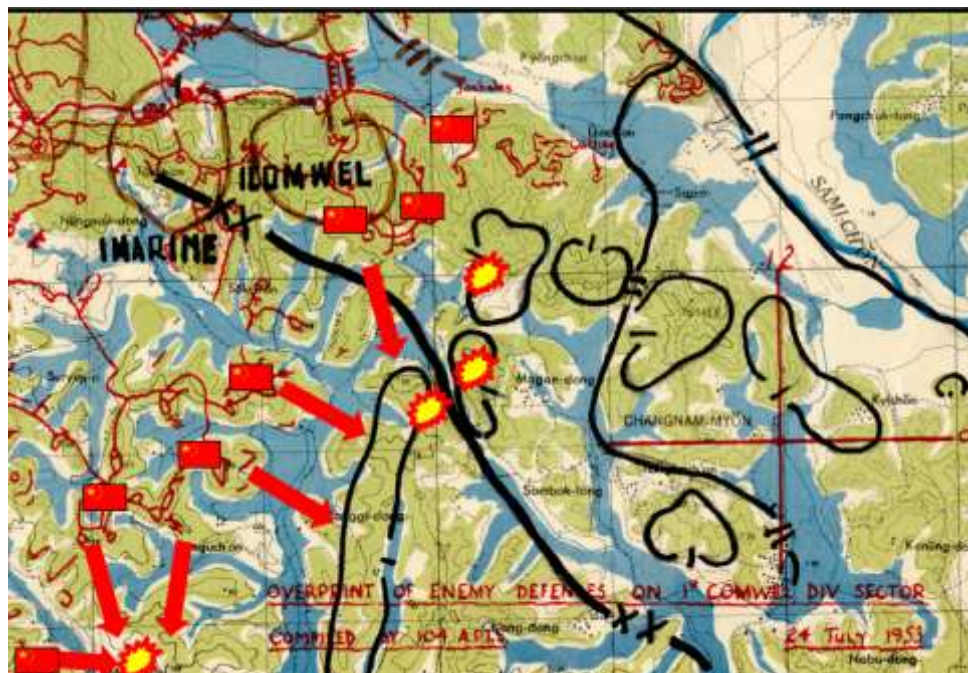




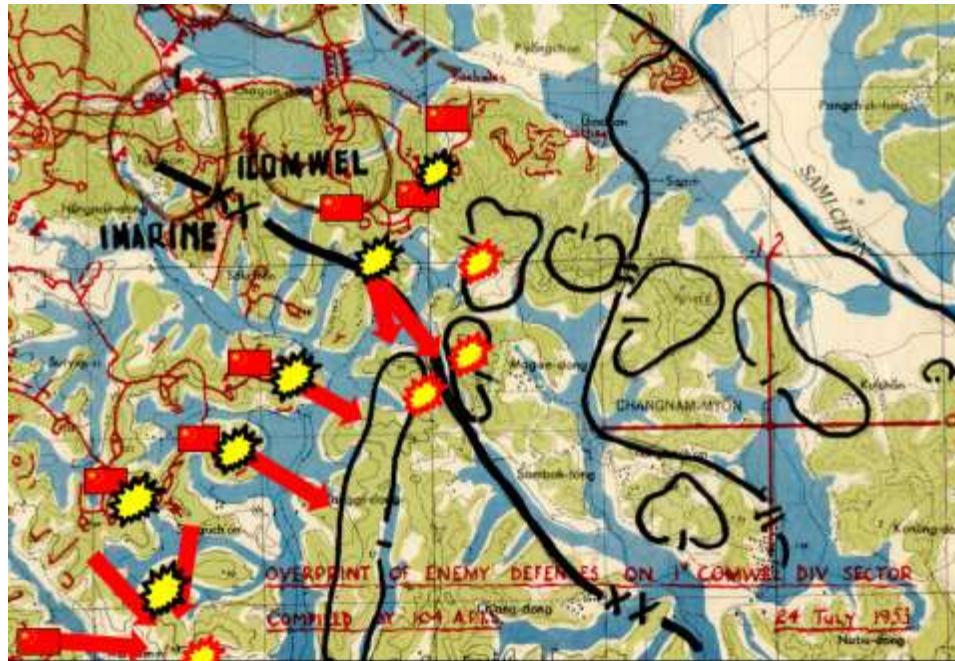
While the fighting in the Marines' positions was going on, Chinese stretcher parties approached the Marines and Australian positions to collect their wounded and dead. The Chinese stretcher parties were left alone. In an interview I conducted with Brian last year, he mentioned that the stretcher parties were left alone, as they were non-combatants. Those carrying weapons and moving about were engaged.

Ron Walker recalled sitting outside his dugout watching marine bodies being stretchered to the rear and feeling quite upset by it.

Throughout the day, the Chinese kept up a sporadic artillery fire on the Australian and American positions. Once again as evening fell, the artillery fire intensified to a barrage and the Chinese advanced once more to attack.



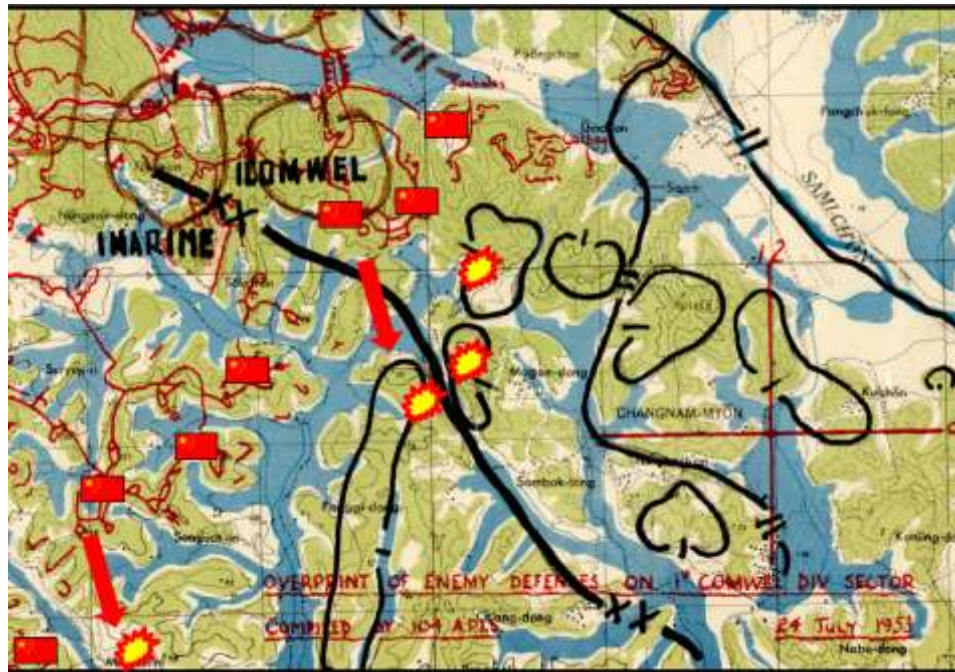
The US and Commonwealth artillery again opened fire on Chinese form up points and on the attacking waves of infantry as they stormed forward to attack Hills 111 and Boulder City.



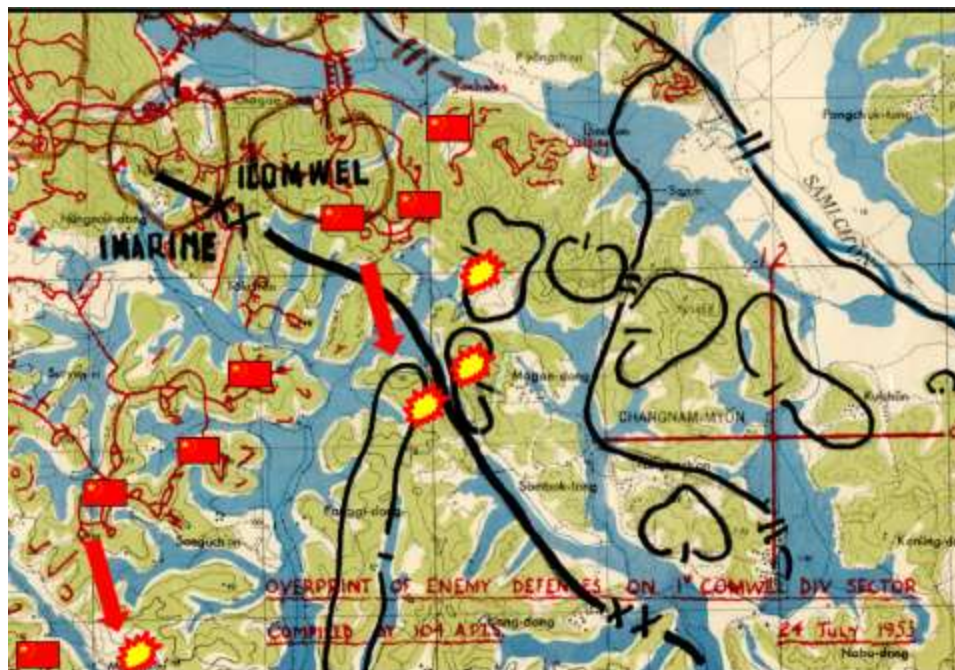
The Chinese again quickly gained the Marines' front lines and surrounded the Australian position on Hill 111. Lance Corporal Ken Crockford's position was also surrounded and Chinese infantry were engaged in the trenches and bunkers in hand to hand fighting, which lasted well over an hour. Crockford like Cooper the night before, was forced to call artillery onto his position to avoid being overrun. The New Zealanders again responded and the Chinese attack through the gap to Hill 121 was stopped.

Fighting still raged on around Hill 111 where five men of the replacement MMG section were wounded throughout the night.





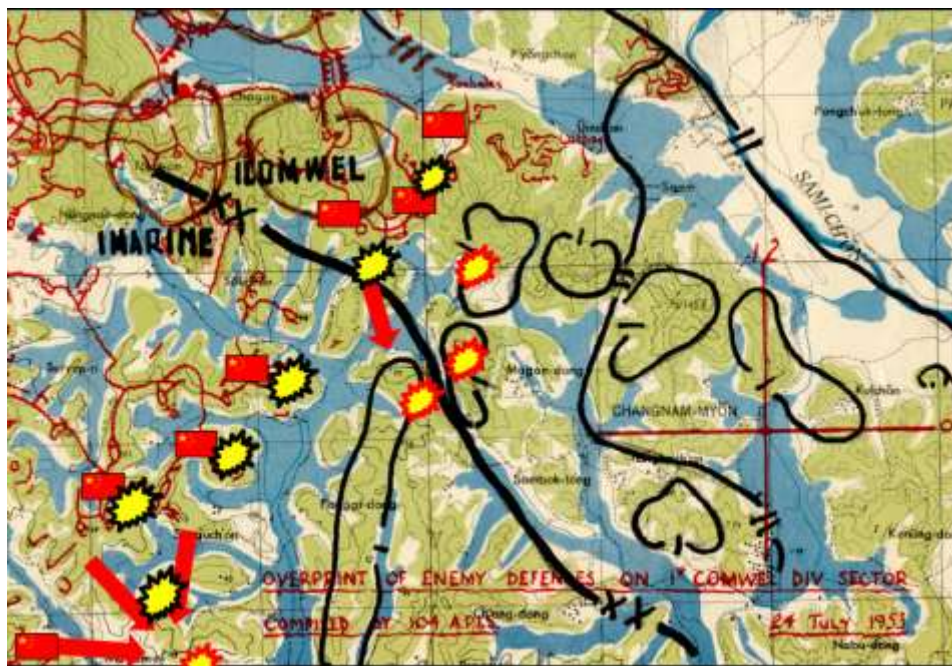
The Chinese attacked in greater numbers than the previous night and again the artillery of the 1st Commonwealth Division, the Marines and US Army proved decisive. Like the day before, the Marines spent much of 26 July reclaiming their forward positions.



The Chinese attacked again that evening, but these were not driven home with as much intensity as the previous two nights and though Boulder City and Hill 111 were again attacked, the Chinese were easily repulsed.

## 27 July

Just after midnight, the Chinese once again attacked the marines on Boulder City. From the after action reports in the 1st Battalion 7th Regiment's war diary, this attack was of company size and did not appear to the defenders to have been driven home with any great enthusiasm by the Chinese. The Marines however, held nothing back. With artillery and tank support, the infantry drove back the attackers with heavy casualties.



The last infantry actions came during the morning when platoon sized Chinese forces attacked Boulder City and Hill 111, in what was thought to be covering actions to allow their stretcher bearers to retrieve wounded comrades. During these actions the Chinese also suffered further casualties. The fighting was still going on as the Armistice was being signed a little over 8 kilometres away at Panmunjom by the United States and North Korean delegates, who no doubt would have heard the action still going on. At 10.10, Private Harry Grenfell, a member of the MMG section on Hill 111 became the last Australian combat casualty of the war, when he was wounded by Chinese small arms fire. Soon after this, the Chinese were driven off Hill 111 for the final time.



During the day, the Australian and Americans took fire from Chinese artillery, but received no further casualties.



The New Zealanders fired a number of counter-battery shoots throughout the day and the Americans fired as many mortar, artillery, tank and small-arms rounds as they could at the Chinese positions. Though by 10pm the front lines had become silent.

CASUALTIES 24-27 JULY 1953	
<b>2<sup>ND</sup> BATTALION, ROYAL AUSTRALIAN REGIMENT</b>	
<b>KILLED: 5</b>	
<b>WOUNDED: 24, 2 DOW</b>	
<b>1<sup>ST</sup> DIVISION, UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS</b>	
<b>KILLED: 43</b>	
<b>WOUNDED: 316</b>	
<b>46<sup>TH</sup> CORPS, CHINESE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY</b>	
<b>KILLED: 2 – 3,000 (EST)</b>	
<b>WOUNDED: 10,000 (EST)</b>	

## Casualties

During the three days of fighting, 2RAR suffered 5 men killed and 24 wounded 2 of whom, died from their wounds. The Marines suffered 43 men killed and 316 wounded. The exact Chinese casualty figures will likely never be known, but witnesses on 28 July, such as Brigadier Wilton and Captain David Butler, estimated that between 2 to 3 thousand had been killed and up to 10 thousand wounded.

## Conclusion



The consequences of Boulder City, Hill 111 or Hill 121 and the Hook falling to the Chinese would have been disastrous for the United Nations forces. Had the Chinese broken through in force, their positions would have become untenable and with a flooded Imjin River to their rear with limited bridging, there was a great possibility of being annihilated against the river. For them the fight was in effect a last stand.



Intelligence reports from the 1st Commonwealth Division and the 1st Marines Division showed that the allies were well-aware of the Chinese offensive. The taking of the US outposts in the area combined with a detected build-up of troops and signals traffic. Though a number of Australian and American veterans of the battle, from privates to generals, believed that had the Chinese attack been successful, the armistice which had been agreed to in principle back on the 19th of July would likely have been re-negotiated. And if the talks failed, UN Commanders believed that the Chinese were more than capable of starting a new offensive towards Seoul.

The battle of the Samichon is certainly worthy of further study. It is a classic multi-national, combined-arms defensive action. The infantrymen of the 1st Commonwealth and 1st Marine Divisions, supported by well-coordinated artillery, armour and close air support held precarious defensive positions against massed infantry attacks supported by artillery. Their



efforts were an outstanding feat of arms, smashing a division from an elite Chinese corps.

This battle was in no small way responsible for bringing the war in Korea to an end on the 27th of July 1953.



Cpl Ron Walker & Sgt Brian Cooper MM