



# A HOT COLD WAR: KOREA 1950 - -1953



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# **The Battle of Maryang San: Australia's Finest Feat of Arms in the Korean War?**

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The Australian Army's participation in the Korean War included several quite exceptional unit actions. In 1950-51 3rd Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment (3 RAR), maintained the excellent reputation of the Australian profession of arms by fighting well during both offensive and defensive operations. This tradition was continued by the other battalions of the RAR after they were deployed to Korea in 1952.

Three battles stand out as fine feats of arms by 3RAR during the first two years of Australia's participation in the Korean War:

- The Apple Orchard 22 October 1950
- Battle of Kapyong 24/25 April 1951
- Battle of Maryang San 2-8 October 1951

The Apple Orchard was the Australian's first encounter with North Korean forces and received recognition from British and American senior officers, as well as one war correspondent who wrote:

*'Man to man, and all things equal, the Australian proved themselves worth a score or more of the enemy in honest facts and figures.*

*...The Australians were tearing into a full one thousand of the enemy with the bayonet and slaughtering them ...'*

The British Brigade Commander remarked:

*'Then I saw a marvellous sight. An Australian platoon lined up in a paddy field and [then] walked through as though they were driving snipe [small birds hunted in Britain].*

*The soldiers, when they saw a pile of straw, kicked it and out would bolt a North Korean. Up with a rifle, down with a North Korean.'*

The results of this encounter battle were seven Australians wounded in action. In reply 3 RAR killed 150 enemy, wounded 239 others (small arms fire and bayonet) and took 200 prisoners in three hours of close combat (Source: 3 RAR Commander's Diary). One US Silver Star to Lieutenant David Butler (later to become a Major General), a Bronze Star to Private Jack Cousins. Also, a Military Cross to Captain Arch Denness and a Military Medal to Private McMurray.

Kapyong is well-recognised and commemorated (US Presidential Unit Citation). It was not a big battle but it was an important one. Timing was the key to its importance and subsequent recognition. On 23-24 April a Chinese offensive forced an entire Republic of Korea infantry division into chaotic retreat past a Commonwealth brigade holding position in the Kapyong Valley, the main invasion route to the city of Seoul, the South Korean capital.

On the night of 24 April and during the next day 3 RAR stopped the Chinese advance on Seoul. A Canadian battalion held up the Chinese offensive for another 24 hours after 3 RAR conducted a fighting withdrawal on the evening of 25 April.

The 48 hours respite enabled UN formations further south to regroup and establish a defensive line which subsequently stopped the Chinese offensive and saved Seoul. Professor Jeffrey Grey wrote: ... they fought an entire enemy division to a standstill.

Professor Robert O'Neill, Official Historian:

*If any factor stands out in 3 RAR's conduct at Kapyong it is the unfailingly high morale which its members showed throughout the battle. It was difficult enough to fight off waves of attacks at night. It was yet more demanding to endure the following day in a relatively open position, exposed to enemy on all sides, cut off from other battalions by several kilometres and under constant fire. ... Soldiers must trust and have confidence in their commanders ... [Kapyong] was a testament to their fighting spirit, their self-confidence and their commitment to each other [mateship].*

The Battle of Kapyong is the most commemorated individual Australian Army unit action in the Korean War. Like the defensive Battle of Long Tan during the Vietnam War where Australians held ground while out-numbered, out-gunned and under constant fire by day and at night, the Battle of Kapyong is the iconic battle of Australia's participation in the Korean War.

But is Kapyong the Australian Army's finest military feat of the Korean War?

For Australia's official historian, Robert O'Neill, there was little doubt:

*In this action 3RAR had won one of the most impressive victories achieved by any Australian battalion. In five days of heavy fighting 3RAR dislodged a numerically superior enemy from a position of great strength. The Australians were successful in achieving surprise on 3 and 5 October, the company and platoon commanders responded skilfully to [Commanding Officer] Hassett's directions, and the individual soldiers showed high courage, tenacity and morale despite some very difficult situations ... The victory of Maryang San is probably the greatest single feat of the Australian Army during the Korean War.*

Lieutenant General John Coates, the Australian Chief of the General Staff in 1991, echoed O'Neill's summary:

*The scale of manoeuvre of the rifle companies of 3 RAR during the action packed five days of the battle – by night, in fog, across rugged terrain and for much of the time under artillery and mortar fire – can only challenge contemporary Australian infantrymen to strive for similar levels of excellence. The display of endurance, courage and aggression during the battle are timeless benchmarks for offensive operations.*

O'Neill and Coates's summaries suggest that 3 RAR must have been an experienced, superbly trained, cohesive and well-equipped battalion to have achieved in five days what

American and British battalions had failed to achieve after a number of costly attacks. Not so. Lieutenant Colonel Frank Hassett, a 33-year-old Duntroon graduate, had taken command in July 1951. He had 10 weeks to adjust to working within a newly-formed British brigade under a new brigade commander. The strength of 3RAR lay in the experience of individuals, not in unit cohesion. By the end of September many of those who had fought during the winter campaign were returning to Australia at the end of their 12-month tour of duty. Fortunately, some of their replacements were experienced Second World War veterans, but others were new. Hassett described them as “K Force volunteers, patriotic and adventurous young men fired up by the experiences and stories of the Second World War”. There were differences and rivalries between the older veterans and newly-arrived enthusiastic, unblooded reinforcements. He opined later that, “... it [3RAR] was basically an organised collection of well-trained individuals which had been strung out in a defensive position for the past three months and was quite unpractised as a unit in the battle procedures and techniques required for a battalion in attack.”

The preparedness of the companies for offensive operations was low. Ahead was a multi-phased attack against well-fortified positions occupied by experienced troops who had repelled American battalions with heavy casualties. Major Jack Gerke, commanding C Company, had a small number of NCOs and soldiers with some previous experience in action. He was the only officer who had been under fire. Two of his platoon commanders were Lieutenants Maurie Pears and Arthur “Bushy” Pembroke; both had graduated from Duntroon in December 1950 and arrived in Korea in July 1951. Major J. “Basil” Hardiman, commanding D Company, remembered that for a second his heart stopped when Hassett told him that he was to be first in the assault on Maryang San. His company was down to 72 men from an entitlement of 140. He remembered later: “I thought how unprepared we were for such an operation – too many new faces, lacking some items of equipment and not fit enough for a long, tough attack. We [had] spent the last three months in defence. In attack you use entirely different muscles to defence.”

### **Bold Attack Plans**

Brigadier George Taylor’s attack plan created a furore with his two British commanding officers, one of whom warned that the brigade might suffer 1,000 casualties. Hassett trusted Taylor and, as the “new boy” and a “colonial” to boot, kept his own counsel and remained

loyal to his superior. Taylor gave 3RAR a long approach march with open flanks, and directed Hassett to attack for over three kilometres against well equipped, well dug-in enemy forces that were determined to hold high ground. The first British objective was nicknamed 'Little Gibraltar' and the second was a hill adjacent to the Australian objective of Maryang San, nicknamed 'The Hinge'. Maryang San was a towering hill that rose sharply to a narrow pinnacle. On the first day after a long approach march on 2 October, Taylor directed 1st Battalion, the King's Own Scottish Borderers, to capture Little Gibraltar. On the second day the Australians and 1st Battalion, Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, were to capture Maryang San and The Hinge, respectively.

Hassett matched Taylor's audacious plan with his own. Despite his youth, Hassett was a veteran of the south-west Pacific campaign in the Second World War. He had seen Australian battalion commanders use ground and timing effectively against Japanese defensive positions. Hassett decided not to follow the American precedent of attacking Maryang San frontally across a valley. He planned to surprise and split the fire of the Chinese, in both the timing and direction of attack, by assaulting out of the morning gloom along a line of knolls from a flank, while distracting them with a secondary noisy demonstration from Major Jim Shelton's A Company positioned in the valley with tanks. Hassett's plan obliged his assault companies to navigate by night, silently over rough terrain (hilly, thick timber and long grass). They would have to creep up to Chinese fortifications, undetected, in order to take advantage of first light to assault over a short distance and be among defenders with grenade, bullet, butt and bayonet before everyone was awake: close combat through a labyrinth of trenches, foxholes and bunkers.

### **Adaptability**

Taylor's plan faltered on 3 October when 1st Battalion, the Borders, failed to take Little Gibraltar. Taylor directed Hassett to support a renewed attack by the Borderers the next day by capturing two hills close to the main Chinese fortifications, from where they could attract Chinese fire away from a second Borderer assault. Twenty-one-year-old Lieutenant Maurie Pears's platoon led Jack Gerke's C Company assault on these two hills at first light after a pre-dawn approach march through thick fog and mist. The element of surprise resulted in the

first objective falling quickly, and the second fell after heavy fighting. Maintaining momentum as the Chinese withdrew in front of them, the Australians raced to high ground on top of Little Gibraltar. The Borderers, who had taken heavy casualties the day before, moved through with their bagpipes playing triumphantly to occupy vacated Chinese defensive positions. Taylor's two-pronged attack had split Chinese fire. Fearing being overrun by simultaneous Australian and British assaults, they withdrew.

Taylor was delighted with the performance of the Australians. His attack plan was one day behind schedule, but he had succeeded in taking the first of the brigade's three major objectives. Hassett regrouped his companies and adapted his plan, now that his reserve company had been involved in battle and had sustained casualties. 3RAR prepared for the assault on Maryang San on 5 October and the Fusiliers prepared to attack towards The Hinge. He did not know it then, but the Australian assault force of 320 men (A, B, C and D companies) faced two fresh battalions of well-equipped and supplied Chinese infantrymen: about 1,200 men.

## **Resilience**

On the morning of 5 October 1951, four companies of about 75 Australian infantrymen, each made up of three platoons of less than 25 men, set out to meet their fate through the night and fog – a navigational nightmare but a tactical godsend. The fog lifted mid-morning. The Australians found themselves less than 50 metres from the edge of Chinese positions. Unfortunately, a Chinese medium machine-gun fired into Major Hardiman's D Company headquarters, wounding him and one of his platoon commanders. A platoon commander, Lieutenant Jim Young, took command of the company. The company's three platoons were now being led by sergeants, one of whom, Sergeant Bill Rowlinson, went on to earn a bar to the Distinguished Conduct Medal he had won at Kapyong. This was a professional display of resilience. The company rebounded bounced back under new commanders and began its assault into the Chinese positions, inflicting heavy casualties as they went – savage close-quarter fighting with point-blank shooting, and the use of grenades and bayonets, accompanied by the aggressive yells of men killing other men and roaring orders and warnings to each other.

## **Endurance**

Jim Young and his men took the first knoll leading to Maryang San, sustaining further casualties, but inflicting many more on surprised defenders. Hassett prepared a fire plan to support a further assault to a second knoll, but feared that Young and his men would be spent if they succeeded, and therefore unable to assault the final objective, Maryang San. He needed another company to punch through after Young took his next objective. Hassett turned to Jack Gerke, his reserve company commander, and ordered him to get in behind Young's men and assault through them after they had taken their next objective and capture Maryang San.

Gerke's men headed out for their forced march as Young's men waited for the end of the artillery bombardment of the Chinese positions ahead of them. They Young and the remnants of D Company commenced their assault against stunned Chinese whose machine-guns pointed south and did not have time to turn and fire on the Australians assaulting from the east: surprise, speed and aggression won the day. Nearly 70 Chinese defenders soon lay dead. Over 100 wounded and 30 dazed prisoners fell into Australian hands. Three Australians were three killed and 14 wounded. The company was now half-strength, just over 35 men, and spent.

The victorious Jim Young and his exhausted men D clapped and cheered as Gerke and his warriors pushed through their lines towards Maryang San. Ahead of the final Australian assault, artillery pounded their objective, shattering Chinese confidence; they abandoned the heights now that the approaches were in Australian hands. Gerke's attack was an anti-climax of climbing on hands and knees to the summit for a grand view of the surrounding countryside. The honour of taking a second summit in 24 hours fell to Maurie Pears. Hassett consolidated his blackened, bedraggled and exhausted troops around his prize, and for the first time in four days of moving with heavy loads and fighting, the Australians had a night of rest that was only interrupted by sentry duty. The next morning Pembroke's platoon attacked another occupied feature on Maryang San to give the Australian position some depth before expected counter-attacks. Pembroke's dawn attack without preliminary artillery and mortar bombardment caught the Chinese by surprise: he and his 21 men, out-numbered and out-gunned, drove off a company of over 100 men, inflicting heavy casualties in the process.

Once again Taylor's attack plan faltered when the Fusiliers failed to capture the Hinge after a second attempt on 6 October. He turned to Hassett to save the day again. Hassett assigned

Captain Henry “Wings” Nicholls’s B Company to form up behind Pembroke’s platoon position and assault The Hinge after the artillery bombardment and the morning mist lifted. The assault was successful but the ensuing retaliation from Chinese artillery and mortars posed the most danger to Nicholls’s men. Indeed, the whole Maryang San position had become perilous as the Chinese pounded it in preparation for a major counter-attack to wrest The Hinge and Maryang San back from the Australians.

By this time, the Australians had been moving and fighting for almost five days without respite. Taylor had overextended them to occupy The Hinge, which British troops should have captured. The Australians had sustained over 100 casualties and were struggling to evacuate them and to bring up resupplies of ammunition, using hapless Korean porters under steady Chinese artillery and mortar fire. Hassett recalled later that:

*Platoons were now down to 15 to 20 strong, too low for orthodox tactical use. It was not just the casualties. Most were physically exhausted. Lack of sleep and battle stress apart, just moving under heavy load, let alone fighting, in hilly, difficult terrain was most demanding. The Battalion was just about spent.*

The Chinese had given the Australians some respite on the night of 5-6 October before shelling them on 6 and 7 October as they consolidated, evacuated wounded and ran the gauntlet of fire with ammunition and food. As night fell on 7 October, Chinese assault formations crept stealthily to the edge of Australian positions on The Hinge. The time had come to test whether the Australians were as good at defending as attacking. At 8 pm Chinese artillery and mortars began a 45-minute preparatory bombardment, followed by the first assault. Like a battle cry, the Australians shouted to each other, “Watch your front!” The Chinese attacked two more times during the night. Low on ammunition, the Australians took to the Chinese as they arrived in savage close-quarter combat, kicking, strangling and bayoneting many to death. Brave stretcher-bearers evacuated the wounded under fire, and terrified Korean porters carried in ammunition with their Australian escorts. In addition to fierce defence on the perimeter, British and New Zealand artillery scythed through the ranks of attacking Chinese. Scores of bodies and body parts lay in front of the Australian positions the next morning.

Taylor finally decided that the Australian had done enough after six days of combat which included capturing two objectives that he had assigned to his British battalions. After first light on 8 October, Hassett permitted Chinese medical orderlies and stretcher parties to come



forward and collect scores of wounded under a flag of truce. The Australians began to withdraw from their hard-won territory later that day. Taylor recalled later:

*Lieutenant-Colonel Frank Hassett showed very great tactical skill in keeping up the momentum of the attack on 317 [Maryang San] ... All ranks of the Battalion backed him up wholeheartedly. You could not have found better company commanders in the Commonwealth than Gerke, Hardiman, Nicholls and Shelton. The bravery and skill of junior leaders was remarkably backed up by the men in the platoons and sections. It was a very emotional moment for me when I went to see the Battalion after it occupied new positions to thank all ranks from the bottom of my heart for the great part they had played in ensuring victory in a very tough battle.*

The six-day battle of Maryang San stands alone as a magnificent feat of arms. Days of fighting and moving culminated in a horrendous night enduring heavy shelling and wave after wave of Chinese attacks. Stretcher bearers, signallers rolling out telephone lines and those carrying ammunition forward under fire joined their front-line comrades in the pantheon of bravery. A young commanding officer had developed a bold plan and led a collection of individuals and new teams made up of seasoned veterans and adventure-seeking reinforcements into battle. He adapted his plans to capture British objectives as well as his own. He depended upon the resilience and endurance of his men to navigate by night in fog and take and inflict casualties for many hours. As leaders fell, others took their place and directed the grisly work of infantryman in close combat. The resilience, courage and endurance of the Australians at Maryang San equalled the performance of their peers at Kapyong, who enjoyed much more international and national recognition.

The final word goes to Frank Hassett:

*Unquestionably, the soldiers won the Maryang San battle, not just because they were brave, but because they were smart also. They recognised that if they were to get 317 [Maryang San] at all, let alone without massive casualties, then they had to move quickly. This they did. There were no heroes' welcome home for these warriors. They left from Australia [in 1950 and 1951] as individuals or in small groups and returned the same way, unheralded and unsung. Somehow, it did not seem to matter. There was much quiet satisfaction just knowing that one had fought at Maryang San.*