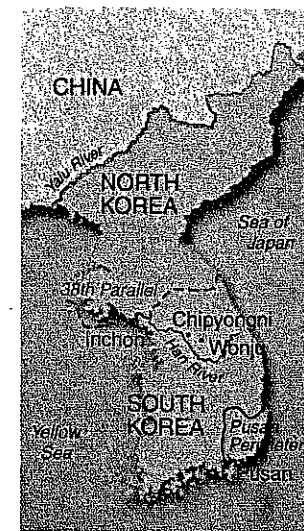


The American command was beginning to look at nearby Chip'yongni as critical, because it would help them control access to Wonju, the larger communications center, where the Americans, like [Chinese General] Peng Dehuai, now believed one of the fateful battles of the central corridor would be fought. In late January, as Ridgway's forces over on the west began their first major operation, the 2nd Division found itself ordered to protect its flank on the east and at the same time to move into the Chip'yongni area and try to locate the Chinese 42nd Army. Ridgway's intelligence people believed it was hiding out somewhere in the central corridor but had not yet revealed itself. For it was one of those great

1950 ★ 1953

contrasts of the first year of the war, the stark difference between the two armies and the way they maneuvered: on the eve of battle, even facing a force that had nine divisions in it, the Americans did not yet know where the Chinese were; by contrast, hiding an American division on Korean soil would have been comparable to hiding a hippopotamus in a pet store.

There were three stages to the Twin Tunnels battle: a recon and then two battles, each of escalating violence. The 8th Army's Operation Thunderbolt, Ridgway's main drive and his attempt to reclaim the initiative in the war, kicked off on January 26, and the first recon into the Twin Tunnels area, led by Lieutenant Maurice Fenderson, took place the next day. Fenderson was new to the 23rd, having arrived right after the Kunuri fighting, for which he remained eternally grateful. He was assigned to Captain Sherman Pratt's Baker Company, given its first platoon and, as an added welcome, assigned to take his men and recon an area to the east where there were some railroads and, he was told, two tunnels. There were scattered reports of some Chinese troops operating in the area. All he had to do was go over there and check it



out—nothing much to it, he was told.

It was an eerie assignment. Even the spot his motorized patrol started out from was already deep in enemy territory, far north of the American lines. At every moment he feared a possible ambush. As a kid of 17, straight out of high

school, Fenderson had served in World War II, as part of the 70th Division, mostly trying to keep up with George Patton as his tanks raced across France. That race, its sheer muscularity, stood in stark contrast to the patrol he was now leading. This was about being apart from other American units and, more than anything else, about the loneliness of war. If bad things happened, you were out there by yourself. His patrol proceeded to the assigned location, perhaps a mile south of the tunnels, very cautiously. There, they spotted soldiers, almost surely Chinese, and a brief firefight ensued. Fenderson was then ordered to return to base, which he did, feeling he had done his job and been lucky as well.

The next day, on [8th Army commander Lt. Gen. Edward] Almond's orders, Freeman sent out a larger force to recon the area, setting in motion the next stage of the Twin Tunnels struggle. The men in this task force were to patrol the area, but if at all possible not engage any larger enemy force. Elements of two companies were sent in, the reconstituted Charley Company of the 23rd Regiment, commanded by Lieutenant James Mitchell, and a company from the 21st Regiment of the neighboring 24th Division, commanded by Lieutenant Harold Mueller. About half the men from Charley Company were brand-new, hardly surprising given all the hits the company had taken in the last few

months. Many of them were just out of the repot-depot, where replacement troops arrived, and few were trained combat infantrymen. The two units were to join up at the village of Iho-ri and then head for Twin Tunnels, some 15 miles away.

It was a relatively small combined force—four officers and 56 enlisted men. The weaponry was quite heavy for so small a unit: eight BARs, two heavy machine guns and four light ones, a rocket launcher, a 60mm mortar, and both a 57 and a 75 recoilless rifle. In a fight, nearly half the unit would either be firing a heavy weapon or assisting on one. They also had two three-quarter-ton trucks and nine jeeps. A liaison plane flew overhead, a spotter in case Chinese units, unseen from the ground, were moving in on them. The plane enjoyed better communications with their base than did the men on the ground, and

the plane's link to the men on the ground was weak. Captain Mel Stai, the assistant battalion operations officer, had also joined the unit. He was supposed to return to battalion headquarters when the patrol left Iho-ri, but he decided on his own to stay with them to Twin Tunnels. In his jeep was the only radio capable of contacting the spotter plane. It was slow going all day—there was a lot

of snow on the icy road and also heavy fog, all too typical of the Korean winter. The spotter plane was of little value for much of the morning.

They reached the Twin Tunnels area around noon, well behind schedule. Mitchell waited at the south end of the valley that led to the tunnels, until Mueller caught up with him. So far everything had gone reasonably well. Mitchell had kept his jeeps about 50 yards apart in the convoy and the trucks with the heavy weapons farther back, so if the jeeps were hit, they could quickly come to their aid. It was at this point, as Ken Hamburger later wrote, that a kind of Murphy's Law took over—and

everything that could go wrong began to go wrong. They had stopped just where the main road led north to the tunnels, but a side road shot off east to the nearby village of Sinchon. Because the patrol was late, Captain Stai volunteered as a courtesy to go into Sinchon by himself and look it over, allowing the main body to continue without interruption. He drove partway to the village, left his vehicle at the side of the road and walked in, taking with him, of course, the only radio compatible with the one in the spotter plane. That was a critical mistake. His jeep was soon destroyed, his driver killed, and Stai was never seen again.

Effective communication between the force on the ground and its eyes and ears in the sky was now gone. Up in the spotter aircraft, Major Millard Engen, the battalion executive officer, had spotted a sizeable force of enemy soldiers moving rapidly toward the Americans from the slope of Hill 453, which dominated the southern approach to the Twin Tunnels area. He immediately tried to radio Lieutenant Mitchell to get out of the valley as quickly as possible, but of course, he could not get through. Soon there was no need to warn them that the Chinese might attack—they were already being hit hard. The spotter plane then turned back to refuel, but not before Engen radioed regimental headquarters that the patrol was in danger of being wiped out.

In fact, even as they entered the open valley, they had been trapped by a considerably larger Chinese force. Private Richard Fockler, who was caught along with the other men in the patrol when the Chinese struck, later remembered that they were just about to have lunch when the first mortar round landed near them. Almost immediately other weapons joined in. The drivers were ordered to turn their vehicles around immediately. But the road was so narrow that it was hard for the jeeps, let alone the trucks, to maneuver. They had just gotten most of the vehicles facing the right way

when the lead jeep was hit. The driver, Fockler remembered, panicked and stalled it out, blocking the rest of the convoy. Then a Chinese machine gun began hammering away at them, the tattoo of an automatic weapon on a metal target, followed by the worst noise imaginable, Fockler believed,

a kind of terminal sound, that of coolant draining from a radiator. When the Chinese began to fire, there apparently was a brief disagreement between Mitchell and Mueller. In Mueller's view their only chance to avoid total annihilation was to head for the high ground—a hill just off to the east—and dig in. For a brief moment, Mitchell still hoped they might be able to fight their way out by road. Then Mueller yelled to Mitchell: "We're going to have to get to the top of that hill. The Chinese are coming up from the other side. This is our only chance!" The Chinese understood that as well, so both sides started racing for the hill and the high ground. But if they were in a race for the hill, and if time was suddenly the critical factor, then the Americans were going to have to travel light, leaving most of their heavy weapons behind. In the end, they took only a rocket launcher, a light machine gun, and some of the BARs.

The day the patrol was hit happened to be the 21st birthday of a young man named Laron Wilson, a driver for Headquarters Company of the 3rd Battalion of the 23rd Infantry Regiment, who had been loaned to Charley Company. The patrol was going to be an easy one, he had been assured, because the recon the previous day had made only the most minimal contact with the enemy. Wilson was just a little uneasy: For all of the

assurances, going on a mission always had an element of uncertainty and danger, and he was going to be doing it without knowing anyone else in the unit.

While the men who had been separated were being torn apart, the rest of the task force was scrambling up the hill under constant machine gun fire from an adjoining hill where the Communists had already set up positions. Wilson was tiring quickly as he climbed, needing to rest more frequently—and the enemy fire was getting heavier. About two-thirds of the way up, he stopped, sure that he was incapable of taking even one more step. That was when Lieutenant [William] Penrod came down for him, telling him he had to make it, and they had to get to the high ground. Not knowing where the enemy was coming from, but knowing that if his mind gave in to his body, he was surely dead, he pressed on. When Wilson reached the makeshift perimeter, he was exhausted, his clothes soaked with sweat in that freezing cold, and he was certain of one thing—if the Chinese didn't get him, the sheer cold would, that he was probably going to freeze to death on that hill. But he had made it, a triumph of adrenaline-driven fear over normal physical limita-

tions. Better yet, he had managed to bring the ammo with him, even though at certain moments as he had climbed, he wanted more than anything else to leave it behind. Later he was glad he had brought it up, because that night they ran perilously short early on, and if not for those two extra cans he had carried, they all would have been dead.

About 40 of them had made it up the hill, along with one light machine gun, eight BARs and a bazooka. The semi-automatic, crew-served BAR was one of an infantryman's best friends, much prized by the men who fought in Korea, because it could be used single-shot or as an automatic weapon. Two men handled it, one

firing, the other feeding it a clip of 20 rounds; Wilson became a feeder. The BAR man that Wilson worked with was from another unit, and later he could not remember his name (it was Private William Stratton). Wilson wondered, years later, if he had ever known it during those long hours when their lives were so closely bound together. Could they really have fought there, literally body to body, without exchanging names? Had Wilson ever mentioned that this day, possibly the last in his life, was his birthday? The only thing he knew about the BAR man, other than that he had a coveted white parka, which meant he was from the 21st Regiment, was that he had been a hell of a soldier. The Chinese launched assault after assault, their heads popping up as they tried to break into the perimeter, and Stratton just sat there, and waited and waited, and then fired, almost, it seemed, at the last millisecond. They had eight clips to spend, just 160 rounds of ammo to last what might well be their lifetime, and he had wasted nothing. Bless him for that, Wilson thought.

The Chinese kept pouring fire in their direction and finally hit the BAR man's right hand with a round, knocking off a couple of his fingers. But even that did not stop him. Wilson helped him bandage the hand, and he kept on firing. In all the wildness and the desperation of that fight, the gunner still managed to boast, in the age-old sardonic language of soldiers, that he now had his million-dollar wound, his war was over, and he wanted the names and phone numbers of everyone else so that he could call their loved ones when he got back to the States. Especially their girlfriends. Later, when the Chinese firing got even worse, he kept going around to the others, a number of them wounded by then, telling them that they were going to make it out, that they had to keep the faith and not give in mentally.

Nothing stopped Stratton. When he could no longer use his right hand, he switched to his left. When more Chi-

nese assaulted their position, he stood and emptied the BAR at them and was hit a second time—in the chest. Another soldier crawled out and pulled him back to the center of the perimeter. Then a Chinese grenade landed between his legs. He screamed in pain.

"For God's sake shut up!" Lieutenant Mitchell said.

"My legs have just been shot off," the BAR man yelled.

"I know it, but shut up anyway," Mitchell replied. A little while later Stratton was hit for the fourth time and died.

Almost everyone up on their tiny perimeter was hit that night. Penrod and Mueller had gone around telling the men not to cry out when they were wounded and not to moan from their wounds, because they did not want to give away the vulnerability of their position and encourage the Chinese. At dusk the men on the hill had gotten a boost when an Army spotter plane

marked some of the Chinese positions for American jets that raked the area with rockets, napalm and machine gun fire. Then the little plane returned and dropped some ammo and medical supplies. Most of it missed the perimeter, but one case of ammo got through. The pilot made pass after pass trying to drop ammo off, coming in so low they could see his face. Wilson added him to his pantheon of heroes, someone who risked his life again and again on behalf of men he had never met, pushed by an exceptional internal code of honor.

Finally the pilot came in low and dropped a yellow streamer that read, FRIENDLY COLUMN APPROACHING FROM THE SOUTH. WILL BE WITH YOU SHORTLY. But how shortly was shortly? If it was a long shortly, they would not live to see it. The men knew that when darkness fell, the Chinese would be coming again, and then maybe again, and that there were always too many of them. That

evening, as predicted, they did, with machine guns, grenades and burp guns. Mitchell eventually moved his men back from the edge of the knob, in part because they had so little ammo that he did not want any wasted on mere sounds—they were only to fire when they actually saw a Chinese head.

Back at headquarters for the 23rd, when Colonel Freeman heard that the patrol had been hit by a major Chinese force, he immediately ordered up an air strike. He was told by the spotter plane that at least two battalions of Chinese, perhaps even a regiment, had struck this small patrol. That made it a fight of quite possibly 2,000 to 3,000 against 60. Freeman immediately ordered Lt. Col. Jim Edwards, commander of the 2nd Battalion, positioned about 10 miles nearer Twin Tunnels than the rest of the regiment, to put together a relief force. Edwards chose Captain Stanley Tyrrell, commander of Fox Company, one of his

1950 ★ 1953

best young officers. It took about two hours to mobilize the men and the requisite gear, especially the heavy weapons—a section of 81mm mortars and a section of heavy machine guns. Edwards ordered Tyrrell to play it tough but smart, to try and rescue them that night, but to make sure his own troops were in a solid defensive position first. If need be, he was to button up for the night and attack in the morning. Tyrrell took off with a total of 167 officers and men.

Tyrrell's assault was almost letter perfect—in the words of Paul Freeman, "one of the most brilliant small-unit actions in the Korean campaign." His column arrived in the area about 5:30 p.m. As soon as the men reached the area, the Chinese opened up with two machine guns from Hill 453 across the valley. Tyrrell's driver dove into a ditch. "You'd better get in the ditch, Captain. The Chinks will get you," the driver exclaimed. "To hell with the Chinks," Tyrrell replied.

Tyrrell decided he had to take Hill 453, the tallest in the valley, before he did anything else. Otherwise his men would be cut down. He prepared two platoons to attack the hill from separate flanks and used his third platoon to lay down a withering mortar barrage and heavy machine gun fire just ahead of the attacking troops—so that a wave of death preceded them up the hill. The intensity of it, unusually deadly fire for so small a force, was too much for the Chinese, who abandoned the hill. There were many moments during the Korean War when the Chinese fought to the last man, but not that day, not on Hill 453.

The two flanks of Tyrrell's relief force came together about 10:30 p.m. Tyrrell immediately set up a strong defensive perimeter on the hill, which would give him good covering fire when he went to relieve the survivors on a nearby hill. Tyrrell originally intended to hold through the night on top of Hill 453 and attack in the morning, but a medic who had been with the holdouts slipped through the Chinese lines and found his way to Tyrrell's position. The besieged men, he said, were in desperate condition, almost out of ammo, three-quarters


of them already dead or seriously wounded. With that, Tyrrell decided to continue the attack right through the night.

Up on the knob of the hill, during the late afternoon, some of the men had noticed dust being kicked up by what were probably the jeeps and trucks of an American column. But Wilson doubted they would get through in time. The Chinese seemed so close—sometimes only 30 or 40 feet away, and there were so many of them and so few Americans that every assault made the defense that much weaker. More men were incapacitated or dying all the time. Some men who had been wounded were now dead, and some who had been able-bodied were wounded and unable to fire back. The living were busy scrounging bullets from the bodies of the dead. Wilson decided that his birthday was a disaster. How could you reach the moment when you were finally a grown-up, and could buy a drink in any state in the Union, and that was the end of it? What bothered Wilson most was that he was never going to see his daughter.

Once, when the Chinese were making a rush to the top, Wilson pulled the pin on his last grenade, but then when the Chinese broke off, ammo being so valuable, he lay down on it to keep it suppressed. Afterward he thought he might even have fallen asleep momentarily in that position. He remembered, in a dreamlike way, the last part of that night before Tyrrell's men arrived, part of it obviously real and part of it very fuzzy. He believed a few Chinese had actually penetrated the perimeter, and that one of them had kicked him hard in the ribs. In his

memory the Chinese had reached the top, and Lieutenant Penrod had told his men to pretend to be dead, and in time the Chinese had left. But he was unsure how much of what he remembered had any truth—although in the following days his side gave him a lot of pain, as if someone had in fact kicked him there.

He remembered the sound of heavy fighting when the troops from Tyrrell's company first started coming up the hill, and then a silence, such a deathly silence that he feared the relief column had been wiped out. Then around 11 that night, voices speaking English—as yet unseen—were yelling not to fire, because they were GIs. Someone on the knob yelled, "Who won the Rose Bowl game?"—but they were in Korea, so who the hell knew the teams in the Rose Bowl, let alone the winner?

It took almost four hours to get all the men—alive, wounded and dead—off that hill, with Wilson still carrying his live grenade. At one point he slipped and fell, and the grenade got away from him, but he quickly grabbed it, threw it as far as he could, and no one was hurt. Of the 60 men who had started out on the patrol, 13 were dead, five were missing (and presumed dead) and 30 were wounded, many quite seriously. Only 12 came out unscathed, one of them being Laron Wilson, who lived well beyond his 21st birthday. From then on, whenever he had troops in his jeep, he tried to make sure that at least one of them had a BAR. The survivors, grateful for their rescue, later had a banner made up that read, WHEN IN PERIL, SEND FOR TYRRELL. 

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