

11 » THE STRUGGLE ON THE IMJIN

On Sunday 22 April 1951, the new commander of Eighth Army, General James Van Fleet, held his first press conference. ‘General,’ a correspondent demanded, ‘what is our goal in Korea?’ Van Fleet replied, memorably: ‘I don’t know. The answer must come from higher authority.’ Yet the most obvious goal of the United Nations forces – survival in the face of enemy assault – required no definition. That same Sunday, the Chinese launched their fifth offensive of the Korean War. Eighth Army was well advised of its coming, and anticipated that the enemy’s main attack would fall upon the centre of the front in the Pakyong–Chunchon area, against IX Corps. For three weeks, the United Nations had been pressing cautiously northwards with the intention of securing a line of commanding ground around the 38th Parallel – the KANSAS Line. The Chinese proposed to arrest the UN advance, and throw Van Fleet’s army back southwards. Chinese prisoners declared that their commissars were promising the celebration of May Day in Seoul.

The 1st Marine Division in the so-called ‘Iron Triangle’ between Chorwon, Pyongyang and Kumhwa received two hours’ tactical warning of the Chinese assault, which fell most heavily in the west, against the 7th Marines, who were engaged a few minutes into the darkness of 22 April. Their position deteriorated rapidly when the ROK 6th Division, on their left, collapsed and began streaming to the rear, impeding the advance of American supplies and reinforcements. The Marines were compelled to hinge back their line, to cover the open flank to the west. By the morning of 24 April, they had been obliged to give substantial ground. But

they had broken the impulse of the Chinese advance, and inflicted the usual huge casualties on the enemy's massed frontal assaults.

The gunners of the 16th New Zealand Field Regiment, who were firing for 6th ROK Division, found themselves in a desperate position when the South Korean infantry broke in front of them. DC Corps insisted that the New Zealanders must continue to support the ROKs. But they gained permission to take a British battalion, 1st Middlesex, to protect their positions. For a few perilous hours, the two units held their ground. Then, when it became apparent that the ROK collapse was irreversible, they were allowed to pull back down the Kapyon river. Here, they were joined by the rest of 27 Commonwealth Brigade, brought out of reserve to fill the gap opened by the Koreans' precipitate departure. Between the nights of 23 and 25 April, the British, Australian and Canadian battalions fought a fine defensive battle against repeated attacks by the Chinese 118th Division. For almost twenty-four hours, the men of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry were surrounded and cut off, dependent on air-dropped supplies and ammunition. Their achievement has been overshadowed by the bloodier and even more dramatic action that took place further west at this time. But 27 Brigade won much professional admiration from their allies for the fashion in which they broke the communist attack north of Chongchon-ni. It is a typical irony of history that, because their battle ended in success at small cost in Commonwealth lives, it is little remembered. There, at the centre of the UN front, the line stabilised, and held. The surviving attackers withdrew. One arm of the Chinese offensive was shattered.

But even as 27 Brigade and the US Marines were fighting their battle, twenty-five miles further west on the I Corps front, another action was taking place, which passed into the legend of Korea. The British 29 Brigade – three infantry battalions with a fourth, Belgian unit under command – was holding positions along the line of the Imjin river, just over thirty miles north of Seoul. Throughout the war, the contribution of the lesser United Nations contingents was dwarfed by the dominant role of the Americans.

But just once, the British played a part which captured the imagination of the Western world: the battle of the Imjin river in April 1951.

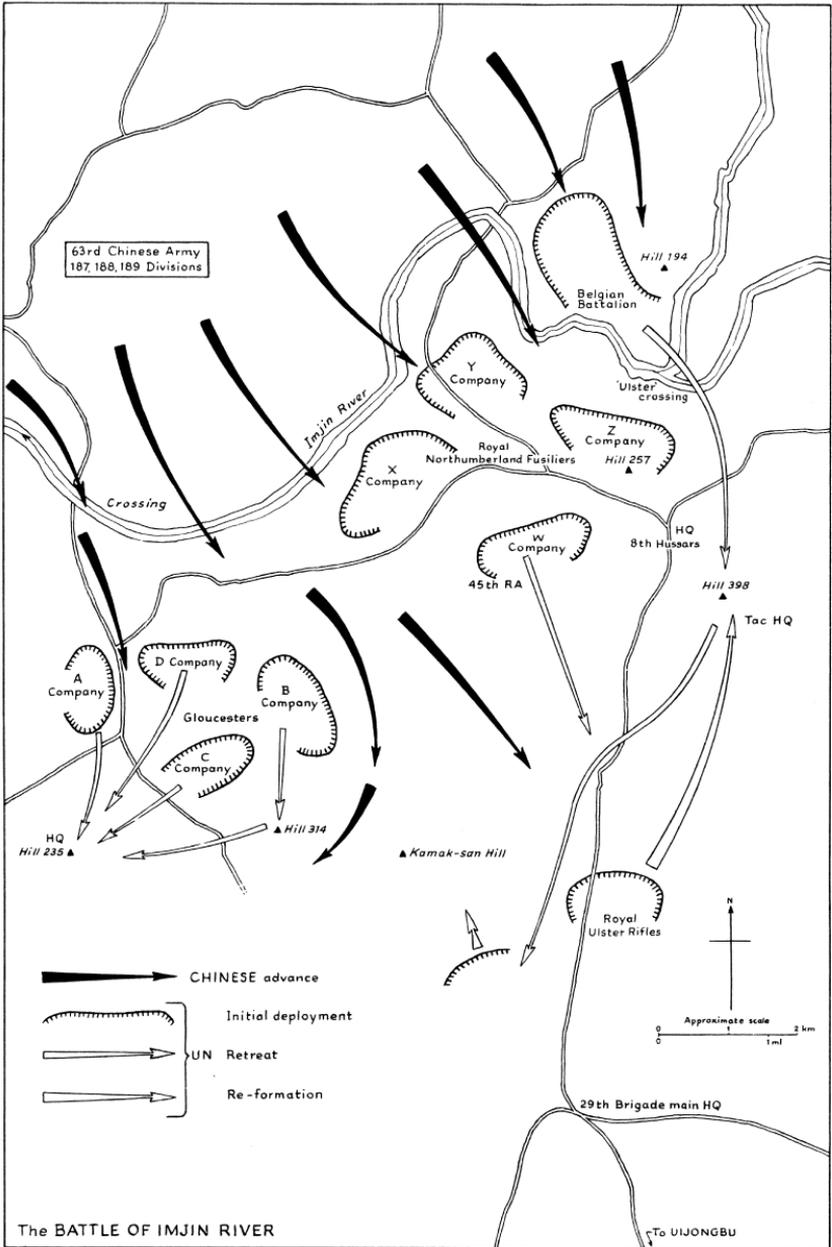
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To an inexperienced eye, the hill range south of the Imjin offers a defensive position of such overwhelming strength that it appears almost impregnable. The highest peak, Kamak-san, rises to 2,000 feet. The river bows north in front of the British line, almost every yard of its banks plainly visible from the high ground. The ROK 1st Division occupied positions to the west. The American 3rd Division stood to the east. Yet the Imjin position was by no means as strong as at first appeared. The river at this point was shallow enough to be easily forded, and thus to offer little difficulty to an attacker. The brigade relied for fire support upon the 25-pounders of 45 Field Regiment, RA, but lacked ready access to medium or heavy artillery, always in chronic short supply. Any position is only as strong as the force that defends it. 29 Brigade possessed pitifully small numbers to cover almost seven and a half miles of front. If they were to do so, indeed, there was no possibility of holding a continuous line. Brigadier Tom Brodie determined to deploy his men in separate unit positions, centred upon key hill features. He placed the Belgian battalion on the far right, north of the river. On the south bank, the Northumberland Fusiliers took the right flank, with the Gloucesters on the left, the Royal Ulster Rifles in reserve. Up to two miles separated each of the Northumberlands' company areas from its neighbour. Their positions were neither deeply dug, nor wired, nor mined, because the British did not expect to hold them for long. They were merely a springboard from which the advance to the KANSAS Line would be continued. Though some work had been done to clear fields of fire, the thick scrub covering the hillsides throughout the area offered plenty of useful cover to an attacker. It is difficult to overstate the influence of the lack of defensive preparations upon the British difficulties that were to follow. Infantry with good overhead protection, and minefields

and wire to impede assaults, can achieve miracles even against overwhelming enemy forces, especially when these lack artillery support. Infantry without these things are critically handicapped in their own defence.

Some officers were most unhappy about the scattered deployment of the small force, when 29 Brigade's position lay across the historic route southwards to the Korean capital. They argued in favour of concentrating the battalions where they could provide effective mutual support, for instance on the dominant heights of Kamak-san, where there were superb natural defences and ready access to water. Major Tony Younger, commanding the British engineer squadron, was in Japan on leave when he saw speculation in the US Army newspaper *Stars and Stripes* about a possible Chinese thrust towards the Imjin. He flew hastily back to Seoul, and rejoined the brigade. He was dismayed to find that no special precautions were being taken: 'We were not really in a defensive frame of mind. We had been crawling forward, probing forward for months. We didn't even really know exactly where on our front the Imjin was fordable.'¹ Major Guy Ward of 45 Field Regiment, the gunner battery commander with the Gloucesters, found the atmosphere 'relaxed. Too relaxed'. Despite all the intelligence indications of an imminent Chinese offensive, the extraordinary absence of enemy activity in front of Brodie's men suggested that the blow would fall elsewhere. The Imjin position was deemed safe.

During the days following their arrival in the line on 5 April, the British probed north in search of the enemy. On the 14th, the Belgians and tanks of the 8th Hussars skirmished with a Chinese patrol four miles north of the river, and took a prisoner. On the 16th, the Northumberland Fusiliers and the British Centurions carried out a reconnaissance in force nine miles into no-man's-land. Again, they met only token Chinese fire. Their officers carried out laborious interrogations of local villagers through interpreters. 'In a language which required eight minutes to say "perhaps",' wrote one of the participants irritably, 'battleground interviews of this nature were often more exasperating than instructive'. On



The BATTLE OF IMJIN RIVER

20 April, yet another 'armoured swan' drove eighteen miles north. 'Lowtherforce', led by the CO of the 8th Hussars, again skirmished with a small Chinese force which withdrew at once under pressure. Aerial reconnaissance reported no sign of significant enemy forces on the British front. All the evidence suggested that the Chinese possessed only a few observation posts, keeping a cautious eye upon 29 Brigade.

On the morning of 22 April, patrols of the Gloucesters and the Northumberland Fusiliers north of the Imjin reported the astonishing news that major enemy forces were on the move on the British front. By afternoon, the Gloucesters' CO was at 'Gloucester Crossing' on the river bank, personally directing mortar fire on Chinese parties moving on the north side. By 6 p.m. that evening, the Belgian battalion also reported contact with the enemy. The brigade adopted a 50 per cent stand-to for the night hours. But the Chinese were still expected to open the battle with their customary local probing attacks, before committing themselves to a major assault. At 10 p.m., on Brodie's orders the Ulsters' battle patrol was sent hastily forward in Oxford carriers to secure the bridges at Ulster Crossing, the ford by which they had been passing the Imjin for three weeks, and to protect the Belgians' line of retreat.

Few young men had gone to as much trouble to arrange their own presence on the Imjin as Lieutenant P. J. Kavanagh, the battle patrol's twenty-year-old second-in-command. The son of a well-known comedy scriptwriter, Kavanagh found the tedium of National Service at the regimental depot intolerable, and volunteered for Korea. Once in the country, he lobbied incessantly for a transfer from the rear areas to a fighting battalion. His wish had been granted a few days earlier. Now, he stood with the patrol commander, Lieutenant Hedley Craig, peering warily into the darkness north of the river.

'Looks a bit fishy.'

'Yes.'

'Better push on a bit, though.'

‘Right.’

He screwed his eyes up so tight he saw stars, private semi-voluntary comment on fatuousness [Kavanagh wrote later]. Slowly they move off again, pressing into the tautening membrane of the night. Grind, whirr, whine go the tracks, the engines, a defined envelope of noise in the white moon-silence.

Penetration! The membrane snaps. Flames, rockets, yells, a thousand Cup Final rattles, Guy Fawkes, one of the carriers in front goes up, whoosh! Christ! Fifty of us have run into a bloody army! Weapons, helmets, wireless sets, all go flying in the mad scramble to get out, back into the womb of the dark away from the red bee-swarms of the tracers.

‘Come back,’ he shouted. Not quite sure why, except that he didn’t particularly fancy being left sitting there alone. Anyway it annoyed his schoolboy sense of order to see them running off into nowhere. Run home by all means, I’ll come with you except the river’s in the way, but not into the meaningless no-direction dark.

‘Stop!’

Some do uncertainly. A few run on, never to be seen again, ever. He dismounts gingerly from his lonely chariot.

‘Lie down, face your front and return the fire.’

Good notion that, keep us occupied for a bit. Irregular spiritless bangs begin around him.

‘Get that bren gun going.’

‘There’s something wrong with it, Sorr.’

‘Mend it.’

Splendid stuff this. And will the First Cavalry, just in the nick, pennants a-flutter come riding riding . . . No. He wished he wasn’t there.

‘I can find nothing wrong with this bren, Sorr, known to God or to man.’

Oh, the Irish, the irresistible cadence, unresisted.²

In the chaotic loneliness of the night, Kavanagh struggled to push a morphia syrette into a wounded man, scrambled alongside

Craig to restore some control to the ruin of the patrol after the Chinese ambush. They began to straggle back on foot towards the river, losing men as they went. A few hundred yards on, they paused for the survivors to regroup.

'Sir, Leary's got hurt on the way across. Can I go and get him, Sir?'

'No.'

'But he's my mukker, Sir!'

Blank consternation. Greater love than this . . . Another face, contorted, is thrust into his –

'Sir, there's one of 'em moving about just down there. Shall I kill him? I'll throw this at him.'

Brandishing a grenade, hopping up and down. You'd have his head in your knapsack, too, wouldn't you, you blood-crazy little bastard. Takes people different ways, apparently.

'Shall I kill-kill-kill um, Sir?'

'No.'³

The Ulsters' survivors were bewildered that they were allowed to withdraw, when the Chinese seemed to have the patrol utterly at their mercy. Communist infantry were moving all around them. Lieutenant Craig and ten men covered the withdrawal of Kavanagh, wounded in the shoulder, with the remainder. Craig himself was briefly taken prisoner, but escaped to find his way back to the British lines two days later. Kavanagh rejoined the battalion in the early hours of the morning with five men. That brief, ferocious glimpse of battle was the young officer's first and last. He was evacuated to hospital in Japan. He was one of the lucky ones, the men who escaped the carnage that now overtook 29 Brigade.

Lieutenants Bill Cooper and Jimmy Yeo of the Fusiliers' W Company had taken a jeep down to Yongdungpo that Sunday, to visit the 8th Hussars. For Saint George's Day, every Fusilier had already been issued with the regiment's traditional red and white roses, specially flown in from Japan. Yeo, a regular in the East Lancashires who had volunteered for Korea to get in some active

service, met a friend from Sandhurst, with whom they shared a pleasant tea. They drove back to their own positions for evening stand-to, lying in silence in their slit trenches gazing out into the dusk. Nothing happened. Stand-down was called. Then, as they cooked the usual Sunday stew, they began to hear grenades and gunfire further west, towards the Gloucesters' positions. Once more, the word was whispered down from trench to trench by running NCOs: 'Stand to!' They lay straining their ears, momentarily unnerved by the sound of many feet running near them. Yet even as they cocked their weapons, the alarm was dispelled: the feet were British. For two more hours they waited, passive. Flares erupted from time to time to their left, but strict standing orders specified that they should keep silent, and remain in their slits.

Then brief bursts of fire opened in front of them, and shuffling movements began in the darkness. The Chinese were probing towards them. There was an explosion, then the muffled thud of a mortar illuminant bursting before them. Cooper and Yeo's neighbouring platoons began to fire across each other's fronts, exactly as they had planned. But the Chinese did not throw their weight against W Company that night. They were fully occupied elsewhere. Throughout the hours of darkness, wave after wave of attackers threw themselves upon the Fusiliers' X and Z Companies, and the Gloucesters' A and D. The absolute unsuitability of the brigade deployment for meeting an all-out attack by large forces now made itself clear. Each company was compelled to meet the Chinese alone. X Company of the Northumberland, nearest the river on the left, was impossibly exposed, and withdrew towards the battalion position before first light. To the alarm of the Fusiliers, however, at 6.10 a.m. on the 23rd, the Chinese gained a key hill position overlooking a major road junction held by Z Company. The enemy had been able to bypass Y Company, nearer the river, and strike at the positions behind it. Z Company's commander, Major John Winn, won a DSO for his superbly courageous direction of the defence of his line that day. But the Northumberland were compelled to fall back. Of all the actions at this period, that in

which the Northumberland lost vital ground so early in the battle had most serious consequences, and is most open to criticism. The British were dismayed to find Chinese infantry now firing upon their artillery positions, and already establishing themselves upon the untenanted high ground of Kamak-san. Centurions of C Squadron, 8th Hussars, covered the retreat of the Fusiliers' Y Company. The Ulsters, hastily moved forward from their reserve positions, were now committed to clearing and holding the high ground east of the vital road to the rear.

On the left flank, the battle began well for the Gloucesters. Their standing patrol on the river bank, commanded by Lieutenant Guy Temple, poured devastating small-arms fire into the first Chinese attempting the night river crossing. 'Guido' Temple, nicknamed for his swarthy Italian looks, had been considered a somewhat feckless young officer back in England, repeatedly in trouble for late return from nightclub outings. Yet now, in the words of a fellow-officer, he proved 'a good man in a difficult time', lying with his men over their weapons looking down on the moonlit river. Four times, the Chinese came, and on each occasion they were repulsed. Then, with their ammunition expended, Temple's platoon withdrew into C Company's perimeter on the hillside more than a mile to the rear.

The Chinese were now crossing the river in force at a dozen places. In the hours before dawn they launched repeated attacks on the Gloucesters' A and D Companies. Lieutenant Philip Curtis won a posthumous Victoria Cross for leading a counter-attack to recover A Company's Castle Hill position. Although wounded early in the action, he struggled on to the summit, wiping out a Chinese machine-gun team with grenades seconds before he fell dead from the effects of their fire. The company commander, Pat Angier, spoke by radio to Colonel Fred Carne, the Gloucesters' CO: 'I'm afraid we've lost Castle Site. I want to know whether I am to stay here indefinitely or not. If I am to stay, I must be reinforced as my numbers are getting very low.' Flatly, Carne told him that the position must be held – at all costs. Angier signed off reassuringly:

'Don't worry about us; we'll be all right.' He was killed fifteen minutes later. By mid-morning only one officer of A Company remained in action. All the others were dead or wounded. Yet still Carne was compelled to order the survivors to hold on. If A Company's ground was lost, the remaining battalion positions also became untenable. Again and again, with their customary indifference to casualties, the Chinese assault groups crawled to within yards of the British trenches under cover of withering long-range machine-gun fire, then threw themselves forward with their burp guns and grenades, their screams and bugle calls. Each party was eventually destroyed. But each assault knocked out a Bren team here, killed the occupants of a slit trench there, removed an officer or NCO with grenade splinters. Major Pat Angier was one of the last Gloucester casualties whom a handful of his comrades and the padre could spare time to bury with the hasty rituals of the Church. His batman followed his body in tears.

Meanwhile, further east, Colonel Kingsley Foster of the Fusiliers concluded that he must counter-attack to recover Z Company's lost hilltop, from which the Chinese were bringing down fire across the entire battalion area. W Company clambered doggedly up the hillside covered by heavy machine-gun and tank fire, taking pains to keep their line, hardly losing a man until they came within fifty yards of the crest, for the Chinese rounds were flying above their heads. Then, as they neared the objective, the enemy defenders began to hurl down grenades and satchel charges. Brian Millington, the mortar observation officer, was wounded in the back by a grenade exploding below him as the Fusiliers gained the crestline. There was a moment of exhilaration as the Chinese manning it turned and fled. Then, beyond them, another Chinese unit rose from the ground and charged at the British. W Company's assault collapsed, men turned and ran back down the hill for their lives.

Bill Cooper was shocked to hear clearly the 'thwack!' as bullets slammed into his own men. He saw his radio operator collapse to his knees, mortally wounded, as the set on his back disintegrated. Halfway down the hill, he saw that Millington was missing, and

scrambled up again until he found him lying in the scrub. Urgently, he asked if the young officer could move. 'No, I think I'm dead,' muttered Millington. 'It's no good. You'd better leave me.' Cooper picked him up in a fireman's lift, and staggered down the hill, pursued by desultory Chinese fire. Back at the start-line, the doctor examined Millington for a moment, then shook his head: 'He's moribund.' About half the men who had taken part in the counter-attack had failed to return. Deeply despondent about their failure, the survivors of W Company trudged back to their old positions. Cooper became even angrier later, when somebody told him that they had never been expected to gain the hill. Their attack was chiefly a diversion, to keep the Chinese busy while the Belgians withdrew from the north bank of the Imjin. That evening, with some American tank support, the Belgian battalion successfully disengaged from its positions, crossed the bridges at the junction of the Imjin and Hantan rivers, and began moving to take up new positions alongside Kamak-san, to the rear of the Gloucesters and Northumberlands. The British liked the men of their attached unit, a tough, swashbuckling bunch with a proud '*Vive La Belgique*' banner displayed behind their positions. On the Imjin, the Belgians fought as hard as any battalion in 29 Brigade.

That afternoon, Padre Sam Davies of the Gloucesters listened grimly to the news over the radio that Chinese elements were already attacking the brigade's rear echelon: 'Standing in the sunny hollow where main Headquarters lay, I tried to realise the position. We were isolated by Chinese hordes intent on the kill. It was simply a matter of hours before darkness fell, and the lonely battalion would be assaulted on all sides in the nightmarish moonlight. Gloucester was 11,000 miles away. I longed to be able to say "Stop" to the rushing minutes: to prolong this quiet, sunny afternoon indefinitely.'⁴

By evening on 23 April, it was apparent that the forward battalions of 29 Brigade must concentrate, or be wiped out piecemeal. Around 8.30 p.m., the survivors of the Gloucesters' A and D Companies withdrew from their positions, and filed through the dark-

ness into the battalion headquarters area to redeploy, Korean porters moving their heavy equipment. During a lull in the renewed Chinese attacks that night, Major Paul Mitchell's C Company was also pulled back. But it proved impossible to disengage Major Denis Harding's B Company. Between 11 p.m. that night and dawn the following morning, Harding's men faced seven major assaults.

The company commander himself was a thirty-six-year-old veteran with great experience in World War II. That morning, one of his NCOs had led a patrol to explore the ground around the company positions, and returned to report bleakly: 'There's not just dozens of them down there – there's thousands.' Yet Harding still felt confident of his company's ability to hold its ground. He had spent much of the day with his artillery observation officer, calling down fire on enemy concentrations whenever they could see them. Then he fell asleep for a time, and while he rested ammunition and food were brought up to the company area from the battalion echelon. The officer who brought them, Captain Bill Morris, should then have returned to the rear with the carrying party. But he was reluctant to wake Harding, and stayed to cover for him. By evening, it was too late for him to go anywhere. Morris remained, to share the fate of the battalion.

All that night, amid the cries and orders and bugles from the darkness, B Company grenaded and poured fire into the Chinese with rifle, bren and sten. By dawn, one platoon's positions had been entirely overrun. Sheer weight of numbers had driven in Harding's perimeter. At first light, the survivors withdrew to join the rest of Carne's men on Hill 235 – the height that was to become known to the British Army as Gloucester Hill. There were only Harding himself, his sergeant-major, and fifteen others. Their ammunition was virtually exhausted. The remains of B and C were merged to form a single weak company. The Gloucesters had begun the battle with some seven hundred infantrymen holding a front of over 12,000 yards. Now, both their numbers and their perimeter had shrunk dramatically. Yet one of Support Company, hearing from the colonel that they were to concentrate on the

higher ridge for the last round, declared cheerfully: 'We shall be all right, sir, 'twill be like the Rock of Gibraltar up here.'

The quality about the Gloucesters' stand upon which all the survivors focused in their later accounts was the confidence: the serene conviction of most officers and men that they could cope, even as their casualties mounted, their perimeter shrank, and their ammunition dwindled. Infantrymen are often impressed by the magical fashion in which a gunner battery commander can use his telephone to drop fire within yards of their own positions. But Guy Ward and his officers from 70th Field Battery were acknowledged as supreme wizards. Ward was astonished to see Chinese cavalry in the valley below him. To a professional gunner, 'they were magnificent targets'. 25-pounder shells poured down on them. The 4.2-inch heavy mortars of 170 Battery, RA, compounded the communists' dreadful losses. Chinese infantry concentrations were shattered again and again by devastating British artillery fire: 'The slaughter we did was absolutely tremendous,' said Ward, although like most of his companions, he was astounded by the fashion in which the enemy still kept coming.

That day of the 24th, efforts were made to pass a column of the 8th Hussars' Centurions down the narrow, winding valley road to the Gloucesters' positions. Infantry cover was provided by a Filipino battalion, who were responsible for sweeping the high ground on either side. The operation failed. One of the three Filipino light tanks leading the column was knocked out, blocking the road; it could not be dislodged by its successor. There is little doubt that the infantry advanced too close to the road, and did not climb high enough to have any chance of keeping the armoured column out of range of the Chinese. But the track was anyway almost impassable by the big, heavy Centurions. And with the limited forces available, it is not unlikely that the relief column would itself have become trapped with the Gloucesters, even had it been successful in making contact.

Some of those most intimately concerned with the Imjin battle believed that it revealed the fatal disadvantages of committing an independent national brigade group in a major war. Brigadier Tom Brodie found himself bearing the brunt of an assault by two Chinese divisions, with important implications for the safety of Seoul. Yet as a British officer under temporary American command, he could not be expected to achieve the clear understanding with higher formations that would have been possible with his own fellow-countrymen. A British officer at Brigade HQ believed that the Americans did not understand until much too late how desperate was the predicament of 29 Brigade: 'When Tom told Corps that his position was "a bit sticky", they simply did not grasp that in British Army parlance, that meant "critical".' Brodie was twice told by American Corps headquarters that he could not withdraw his brigade, and he felt that he had no choice but to obey. Those around the brigadier said that he found the strain almost intolerable, commanding a brigade that was being shattered beneath his eyes. The Imjin battle confirmed the urgency of bringing into being the planned Commonwealth Division, commanded by a major-general with the rank and authority to safeguard the interests of his command.

It was not that Brodie blundered, but that his position was exceptionally difficult, as a British officer naturally anxious to 'keep his end up' with the Americans. 29 Brigade had dug and wired rear positions weeks earlier. On Gloucester Hill, the battalion adjutant Captain Tony Farrar-Hockley repeatedly asked himself why they had bothered to prepare such a fall-back line, if not for just such a situation as this. Knowing that his men were asking the same question, and demanding why they were receiving such limited air support, he told them that another big battle was being fought elsewhere. 'Higher Sunray' – higher command – 'have insisted we stay.' There were other difficulties: although 45 Field Regiment's 25-pounders were fine guns, they possessed limited killing power. There was a desperate need for the support of heavier metal. Yet the Gloucesters' American artillery liaison officer had

been withdrawn a few days before the battle, and they possessed no means of calling in 155mm fire. The British battalions' establishment of automatic weapons was inadequate to face the sort of devastating attrition battle in which they were now engaged. Above all, perhaps, the brigade was able to call upon too little close air support, too late. That first bloody day, the Gloucesters received none whatever. Even in the days that followed, it was apparent that 29 Brigade was not being given high priority.

Once the assessment had been made that the British faced a major Chinese assault, which they could not possibly hope to overcome in the dispersed positions they held, rapid disengagement and withdrawal were by far the most prudent military options. This was a classic case for 'rolling with the punches'. Like so many sacrificial actions which pass into military legend, that which was now unfolding on the Imjin should never have been allowed to take place.

In the next twenty-four hours the men in the British trenches, and even their officers, possessed astonishingly little notion of what was happening beyond the knowledge of wave after wave of Chinese attacking their positions. Rumours filtered through that the brigade would soon be fetched out. The brigade-major told the Gloucesters' adjutant on the radio that an American infantry-armour column in brigade strength would be moving to the battalion's relief later that day. Lieutenant Bill Cooper's company commander in the Northumberlands told him that 'the idea is to make the Chinese deploy, then withdraw on to the Americans behind us, who need more time'. The Fusiliers had received a hasty reinforcement of National Servicemen, thrown overnight from a transit camp in Japan into the midst of the battle. Cooper's quota of seven replacements were understandably appalled and bewildered by their new circumstances. In the darkness, the platoon commander was exasperated to see one of the new arrivals yet again defying the order to stay in his trench. 'Bloxham!' he called furiously. 'Get back in your trench!' Then he saw that the man was a Chinese. Cooper was not holding a weapon and found himself

thrashing on the ground, hand to hand with the communist soldier, until an NCO ran forward and shot the man in the head.

At dawn, nervous and uncertain, the Northumberlands were ordered to withdraw and redeploy, some eight hundred yards to the rear. To their immense relief, the Chinese did not interfere. That day, they lay in their positions, suffering little from the enemy, but listening to the fierce struggle further west, where the Gloucesters were under desperate pressure. They cursed the feebleness of their air support, the sluggishness of the reinforcements alleged to be preparing the blocking positions behind them. The tempo of battle was leavened by a moment of black comedy, when inquiries were made about charges against a Fusilier who had stopped dead in the midst of an assault, because he claimed that 'the Lord Jesus had instructed him to take no part in the attack'. He was sent for court-martial.

Men were constantly asking their officers: 'What happens next, sir?' 'When can we get out?' They received repeated bland reassurances about help on the way. Ammunition was running short, above all grenades. The Fusiliers met one Chinese attack with a barrage of tins of compo cheese, to deceive the enemy into putting their heads down. The incoming mortaring intensified. The weariness showed above all in men's eyes, red and raw and aching from their tiredness. Yet still they remained unaware of the huge risk that they would not get out at all.

During the night of 24/25 April, orders at last reached 29 Brigade to withdraw from the Imjin to new positions north of Seoul. Infiltration parties were now deep behind the British flanks. Chinese snipers were firing on transport four miles behind 29 Brigade's front. Yet the Ulsters were bemused and dismayed by the order. Throughout the battle, their acting CO, Major Gerald Rickord, a highly experienced officer who ended World War II in command of an airborne battalion, felt less than happy with the level of information reaching him from Brigade HQ. He knew nothing of the Belgian withdrawal, of the exposure of the brigade's right flank, of the increasingly desperately predicament of the

Gloucesters. His men had thus far repulsed the Chinese wherever they met them, and suffered very few casualties. Above all, Rickord was dismayed by the plan for the withdrawal, which called for his companies to leave their positions on high ground, and descend to the valley road. The Ulsters would have vastly preferred to walk out along the ridges, keeping the enemy below them. But Brigadier Brodie decreed otherwise. While the OC 29 Brigade had been given an impossible task, holding a difficult area of front with a small force against overwhelming odds, there was considerable criticism after the battle of his tactics, from some of those who survived.

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At 8 a.m. on the 25th, the retreat began in a thick ground mist, commanded by Colonel Kingsley Foster of the Fusiliers. There is no more difficult operation of war than disengagement when closely pressed by the enemy. Chinese infantry were now deployed on high ground from which they could overlook every stage of the British movement. As soon as they understood what was taking place, they hastened forward to exploit their success in forcing 29 Brigade back.

Most of the Northumberland Fusiliers got away intact down the road south, past a vital defile held by B Company of the Ulsters and a troop of 55 Squadron Royal Engineers. Their worst enemy was now their own exhaustion: '... the infantry, after seventy-two hours of fighting, were in no state to do more than walk out, fate being willing, on their own feet', in the words of a Hussars officer.⁵ The British began their descent from the high ground in textbook fashion, counting their men through checkpoints, moving by bounds. But as the Chinese swarmed forward in their wake, the Ulsters and the Belgians became engaged in a desperate piecemeal scramble for safety. In the words of Major Henry Huth of the 8th Hussars, it was 'one long bloody ambush'. After so many months in which the tanks had languished idle, without a role in impassable country, along the valley road from the Imjin to Uijongbu they found their moment. They fought in troops and half-troops: some tanks provid-

ing direct fire support for infantry defending stretches of hillside, others crashing down the road to safety laden with exhausted and wounded survivors, others again covering their departure. Their 20-pounders and Besa machine guns raked the hillsides. When Chinese infantry began to scramble on to the hulls, Captain Peter Ormrod and Gavin Murray resorted to machine-gunning each other's Centurions to sweep them off. Sergeant Jack Cadman drove his tank through a Korean house, to dislodge a Chinese battering on his turret hatch. All that day, the Centurions fought along the road with a continuous rain of small-arms fire splattering against their armour, driving off periodic rushes of Chinese seeking to dash near enough to ram pole charges through their track guards. Major Huth, C Squadron commander, won a DSO for his direction of the tank actions during the retreat, and for the personal example he set: his own was the last Centurion out of the valley.

A runner reached Bill Cooper's platoon of the Fusiliers around 11 a.m., with news of the withdrawal. They were told to 'leave the heavy stuff, but bring all the ammunition you can'. There were believed to be enemy across their line of retreat, and they must be prepared to cut their way through. The Gloucesters would be moving independently. Cooper and his weary men reached the pass held by the Ulsters and Engineers, to see Colonel Foster standing among a clutch of Centurions and a half-track ambulance clustered by the roadside under increasingly heavy fire. Foster stopped him: 'I can't order you to do this,' he said, 'but I would be very grateful if you would stay and see the wounded out on the half-track.' Cooper's subsequent memories were a confused blur of grenades and mortaring, of a boy named Angus screaming after a tank ran over his legs, of a Chinese grenade that blew him off his feet and knocked him out. He awoke to find a Chinese searching his body. He sat up, causing the astounded enemy soldier to spring backwards. It was dusk. His elbow was shattered, he had splinter wounds from his knee to the top of his thigh. He was led to join a group of fellow-prisoners, lying and sitting by the roadside. Suddenly, an American aircraft swung low past them, and a napalm

tank fell away from its belly, to land by the crippled Centurion it had been sent to destroy. For the watching British captives, this was the last glimpse of friendly forces for many months to come.

Colonel Foster followed his Fusiliers down the road in his jeep. At the pass held by the Ulsters, their company commander urged him to take to his feet – the route was under heavy fire, and a jeep was instantly vulnerable. Foster declined, and was killed a few moments later by a Chinese mortar bomb, which destroyed his vehicle. The commanding officer of the Belgian battalion was terribly burned by phosphorus, pouring from a tank grenade discharger as he stood alongside it when it was hit by a chance Chinese bullet.

Private Albert Varley of the Ulsters had been slightly wounded by fragments in the eye early in the battle, when a bullet struck his bren. The Regimental Aid Post sent him back to his company, as they lacked means to evacuate him. His platoon was one of those on the high ground, swarming with Chinese, which received the order: 'Every man for himself!' He and his 'oppo', a National Serviceman from Bristol named Ronnie Robinson, stumbled down the hill towards the road. Robinson was supporting a man with a shattered arm, who kept pleading to be allowed to stop and give himself up. Varley paused every few moments to turn and fire a brief burst towards their pursuers. He was convinced that they would never make it. But at last, they staggered thankfully on to the road, and clambered on to a Centurion, Varley casting away the pieces of his bren. They bucketed off down the road, Ulsters clinging desperately to every hull projection, the tank crew firing their Besa continuously until its ammunition was exhausted, then bouncing high-explosive shells off the road in front of them. A clutch of Americans appeared from somewhere, who also boarded the Centurion. One fired his bazooka at a hut surrounded by Chinese, who were also overrunning a stranded Centurion by the roadside. The surrounding hillsides now seemed infested with running, standing, crouching Chinese, firing down upon the hapless British below.

Varley was one of the lucky escapers. Many of the wounded and survivors of the Ulsters who crowded on to the tank hulls for that last desperate ride out of the valley were shot off as the Centurions drove back through the Chinese. On the radio set, the retiring tank crews heard their doctor, left behind them on the road with his charges, reporting bleakly: 'I am about to be captured . . . I have been captured.' It was now a race between the retreating British, struggling along the road and over the hills, and a mass of thousands of Chinese, moving with astonishing speed across country, unmoved by the losses inflicted upon them at every turn by tank gunfire.

Private Henry O'Kane of D Company had scarcely fired a shot during the preceding days, which he remembered chiefly for the confusion of moving from position to position every few hours, apparently without reason. As the withdrawal lapsed into a chaotic struggle for personal survival amid the milling rush of Chinese, he was hit in the leg by a mortar fragment. He collapsed into a ditch by the roadside for a moment. Then he unbuckled his equipment, threw it down, and limped along the road until somebody pushed him up on to a tank already crowded with men. He lost consciousness, then woke to find himself once more in a ditch beside the Centurion, which was slewed disabled across the paddy. Chinese soldiers scuttled up and thrust pole charges through its track guards. Those of the British who could still move, now ran. Those who could not, such as O'Kane, lay exhausted as the battle lapped past them. Another Ulsterman put a field dressing on his leg, and gave him a swig of rum. The sound of gunfire receded, while Chinese infantry ran heedless past, still intent on pursuit. At last a Chinese officer wearing a wooden Mauser holster stopped, gazed down on the motionless huddle of men, nursing their pain, and said in careful English: 'I think it is a good fight.' O'Kane and the other walking wounded were gathered and led away, hands on their heads. They never saw the stretcher cases again. They were given 'safe-conduct passes', declaring that they had been 'liberated by peace-loving peoples'. Then they passed into the bleak cycle of

marches, makeshift political lectures, weary pauses in peasant huts, and the diet of sorgum, peanuts and beanflower that was their introduction to captivity.

The survivors of 29 Brigade reached safety behind the protection of a blocking position established by the US 25th Regimental Combat Team. Word was passed from the 8th Hussars to Brigade Headquarters: 'Everybody's come down who's coming.' The road back from the Imjin lay strewn with the wreckage of the British retreat: wrecked vehicles, abandoned equipment, bodies and shell cases. Fire still flickered from the remains of one of the abandoned Centurions, demolished to prevent its use by the enemy. Tom Brodie seemed vastly relieved, and frankly surprised, to see Gerald Rickord and the Ulsters B Company who had provided the rear-guard. They were told that they must expect to fight another battle, that they must begin to dig in again at once. 'It was odd to hear that old clink of picks and shovels going again,' said Rickord. But late that night, fresh orders came. It was recognised that the brigade was exhausted. Sufficient American forces were now in the line to hold it against any new Chinese pressure. The men were coaxed and prodded a few miles further down the track, to a rendezvous with transport. Then they were driven away, overwhelmed with relief at their own survival, to recover from the ordeal.

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For one group, of course, there was no escape from the ridge above the Imjin: the survivors of 1st Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment. Attempts to resupply them by air achieved little – most of the drops fell outside their perimeter. Since the first day, helicopters had been unable to reach them to evacuate wounded. Contact with the outside world was fading as their last wireless batteries died. They knew at 6 a.m. on the morning of the twenty-fifth that they were doomed to death or captivity. At that hour, Brigade informed Colonel Carne's headquarters that the other battalions were with-

drawing, that no further attempts to break through to their rescue were possible. Brodie could only tell Carne to stand his ground. 'I understand the position quite clearly,' said the colonel. 'But I must make it clear to you that my command is no longer an effective fighting force. If it is required that we shall stay here, in spite of this, we shall continue to hold.' Carne left the radio set to tell his adjutant: 'You know that armour/infantry column that's coming from 3 Div to relieve us?'

'Yes sir.'

'Well, it isn't coming.'

'Right, sir.'⁶

The natural comradeship of war is surpassed by the bond between men who find themselves doomed to share disaster. Colonel Fred Carne was a taciturn, in the eyes of some, almost inarticulate officer who had never in his army career been regarded as a 'high flier', despite experience of commanding an infantry battalion in Burma in World War II. Yet Carne, with his pipe and unshakeable calm in the face of tragedy, assumed heroic stature on Gloucester Hill. Early that morning his adjutant, Captain Anthony Farrar-Hockley, met Carne coming down the hill with two regimental police, a driver, his pipe and a rifle, after a brutal little firefight.

'What was all that about, sir?'

'Oh, just shooing away some Chinese.'⁷

Farrar-Hockley himself was an exceptionally tough, clever and ambitious officer who had enlisted under age in World War II and served as an airborne soldier. His ruthless single-mindedness and commitment to discipline did not make him universally beloved. Yet in the Imjin battle, he was able to show what the same uncompromising purpose and stubbornness could do to the Chinese. Farrar-Hockley it was, in the early dark hours of the 25th, who responded to the nerve-stretching bugles of the communists, gathering for yet another assault, by ordering Drum-Major Philip Buss to return their calls on his own bugle. The moment

when Buss stood at attention on the position, playing in succession 'Reveille', 'Cookhouse', 'Defaulters' and 'Officers Dress For Dinner' passed into the legend of the Imjin battle.

There were others: Sergeant-Major Jack Hobbs; Padre Sam Davies; Denis Harding; Guy Ward of 45 Field Regiment; Captain Bob Hickey, the doctor; and a rollcall of officers and other ranks whose names became familiar throughout the British Army. There are those who have claimed, since the war, that the ranks of the Gloucesters were filled with exceptionally keen and dutiful soldiers. This does the regiment no service. In reality, there were as many disgruntled reservists and brassed-off regulars on Gloucester Hill as in any other unit of 29 Brigade. It was this that made their fate and their performance the more moving: they were a typical, perhaps a little above average county battalion, who showed for the thousandth time in the history of the British Army what ordinary men, decently led, can achieve in a situation which demands, above all, a willingness for sacrifice.

Brodie left it to Carne's discretion whether his battalion should attempt to break out; or whether, if this was impossible, they should surrender. Soon after 9.30 a.m. on 25 April, the colonel was informed by Brigade that within the hour he would lose all artillery support as 45 Field Regiment were compelled to pull out their guns. He gave the order to his company commanders to make for the British lines as best they could. Most of them had not eaten for forty-eight hours. When the men checked their ammunition, they found that each rifleman possessed just three rounds, the bren gunners a magazine and a half. They had begun the battle with more than fifty refills a magazine. 'I'm afraid we shall have to leave the wounded behind,' Carne told Bob Hickey. 'Very well, sir,' said the doctor. 'I quite understand the position.' Hickey and the chaplain, along with some of the medical staff, stayed with the eighty casualties on the position. 'This looks like a holiday in Peking for some of us,' remarked Padre Davies to the RAMC sergeant.⁸ He and the others were taken prisoner soon after. Major Mike Harvey led the survivors of D Company by a circuitous route,

first north towards the river, then west and south again. They encountered only one group of Chinese, whom they killed. Thereafter, they survived intact until, two days later, they exposed themselves before a group of American tanks, which promptly opened fire, inflicting some casualties. When they at last identified themselves, Harvey and his thirty-nine men were carried in safety into the UN lines. They, alone of their battalion, came safe home.

Some men, too weary to face a desperate march in doubtful pursuit of freedom, lay down on the battalion position to await capture. The men of A, B and C Companies who set off directly southwards immediately encountered heavy Chinese machine-gun fire. It fell to Farrar-Hockley, of all men, to call on them to lay down their arms and surrender: 'Feeling as if I was betraying everything that I loved and believed in, I raised my voice and called: "Stop!"'⁹ This did not prevent him from making three escape attempts in the days that followed.

Like many men that week, throughout the battle Major Guy Ward had sustained a curious conviction that in the end, 'it would all be all right'. Even after the order was given to make for the British lines independently, he did not lose this faith. Then, as he walked, 'I suddenly saw hundreds and hundreds of Gloucesters in a corner surrounded by Chinese. I thought: "Oh my God, here we go again."' Guy Ward had been a prisoner of the Germans from 1941 to 1945. Colonel Carne, RSM Hobbs and a handful of others evaded capture for twenty-four hours. Then they, too, joined the rest of the battalion 'in the bag', where thirty more of them were yet to die. It was weeks before the survivors of 29 Brigade even knew that more than half the Gloucesters were alive and in enemy hands. A large part of Brigadier Brodie's personal trauma stemmed from the conviction of himself and his staff that all but Major Harvey's party had perished. 'The Brigadier seemed shattered by the whole experience,' said one of his officers.

The Imjin battle has been the subject of some controversy in the past thirty years. Men of the Ulsters and the Northumberland Fusiliers have been irked by the massive tide of publicity that

flowed over the Gloucesters in the days and years after the destruction of Carne's battalion. They point out that the overwhelming majority of the Gloucesters' casualties were taken prisoner – the battalion also suffered sixty-three killed and perhaps thrice as many wounded. It is invariably the case that decorations and eulogies are heaped upon the survivors of military disasters, to make both themselves and their nations better able to endure sadness and dismay, less likely to ask The Reason Why. There is a quality about 'Last Stands' which draws painters and poets. Intelligent soldiers are more inclined to demand, sceptically, whether it should have been necessary for any last stand to take place. In the cold accountancy of war and history there may be headlines to be extracted from defeat, but there is no virtue.

29 Brigade's battle is unlikely to find a place in any manual of military instruction, except as an example of how not to hold a difficult position. If the brigade had been prepared for a big defensive action, its men had ample time to surround themselves with obstacles covered by fire, the first resorts of the infantryman in defence. They could have concentrated their forces either to cover the eastern or western passes through their sector. They had insufficient forces to do both. The communist attackers did not hold all the cards. They possessed ample mortars, which they used to great effect, but no air or artillery firepower. It is a remarkable tribute to the limitations of air support that, with the vast air forces at the disposal of the UN, tactical air strikes could not be used to more effect to break up the Chinese attacks. It was a tragedy – worse than that, it was a blunder somewhere in the UN chain of command – that the brigade was not pulled back from the Imjin positions as soon as the scale of the Chinese assault became clear. In the Korean campaign from the beginning of 1951 to the end, there was no other instance of the UN Command permitting a substantial force to be isolated and destroyed piecemeal over a period of days. Campaign histories attribute losses of 10,000 killed and wounded to the Chinese, against 1,000 29 Brigade casualties in the battle, around a quarter of the British front-line

strength. 169 of 850 Gloucesters mustered for rollcall with the brigade after the battle. The estimated communist loss figure is an arbitrary one, based upon the minimum that seemed credible to the British, given the weight of their own fire they saw take effect upon their enemies.

Major Rickord, the Ulsters' acting CO, came away from the Imjin 'feeling devastated'.

I believed that we had lost the battle, had suffered a disaster. But I was afterwards reassured that it was by no means a disaster. The morning after we came out, the soldiers were singing Irish songs, playing a banjo. I told the quartermaster to get them a bath and their green tropical uniforms. He said: 'It's much too cold for that.' But I said - 'No, go on, do it. It'll make all the difference in the world to them to get a change of clothes.' And forty-eight hours later, they were fit to fight again, which was a wonderful feeling. I think they felt very proud of the fight they had put up. We felt no particular animosity towards the Chinese. Indeed, I think we felt great respect, even liking for them. But the regiment's old motto - *Quis Separabit* - was something we felt very strongly about.

The Northumberlanders, the Belgians, the Gloucesters, the gunners and mortar crews would have said the same. If Rickord's words might sound to a cynic like the bromides of a professional soldier, the sentiments are none the less powerful and valid for that. When all the sceptical comment has been made, when all the exaggerations of time and regimental pride have been discounted, the British can still reflect with pride that they broke one arm of the communist spring offensive in those three days on the Imjin. If it was always unlikely that the Chinese could have got through to Seoul, they might have expected at least to drive south further and faster, and at much lower cost. There were repeated instances in Korea of UN units crumbling remarkably easily in the face of pressure, giving ground which had to be regained later in bloody and painful counter-attack. On the Imjin, the Chinese discovered

the price of meeting efficient, determined footsoldiers who cared little for the Cold War, for the glory of the United Nations or the survival of Syngman Rhee; but to whom the regiment, the unit, a man's 'oppo' in the next trench, were everything. The most political army in the world encountered the least political – and was savagely mauled to gain its few sterile miles of rock and paddy. Across the breadth of the Korean front, Peking's spring offensive had failed. Never again in the war did the communists mount an all-out assault which appeared to have the slightest prospect of strategic success.