

## Where's Wayne?

“And He allowed me to go to the top of the mountain. And I’ve looked it over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land.”

—Martin Luther King Jr.

“I’ve Been to the Mountain Top”

Company L had been at the base of a mountain. And we had looked it over. And we had seen Hell.

We were agonizing over our losses from the August 8 ambush when orders came to prepare for a raid on August 12. Hill 121, occupied by the Chinese, was our objective. There was to be a dry run in the daylight and a run at night using live ammo.

Who had planned this operation? We were still exhausted from the August 8 nightmare. Four men had been killed and eight wounded. But orders are orders. John Wayne, in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, said that the only freedom a soldier has is the freedom to follow orders. Like good soldiers, we began exercising our freedom.

A skeletal crew remained in the bunkers while the men involved in the raid scrambled down the reverse slope toward a clearing for an orientation. Whitefeather steadied himself by grabbing bushes to support his slide down the hill. How did he ever become a paratrooper? I wondered.

Wayne was already at the base of the hill waiting for us.

Sweating, C rations, and no mail for a week had left Lancaster in a foul mood. “Hey, Oscar, where the hell is this 121? I’m thinking of not going.”

The heat was setting everyone on edge. Clyde Miele was in no mood for humor. He stripped his cigarette, and spit the remaining bits from his lip. Then, narrowing his beady eyes, he glared at Lancaster. “Lancaster, you better bring your ass and your machine gun crew or I’ll recommend your miserable self for a general court-martial.”

Oscar, trying to snap the tension, quickly cut in. “From our bunkers, the Noris are blocking the view of Hill 121. It’s on the other side of Nori, about a mile away, at the end of a wide valley. There’s a knocked out U.S. tank there.”

Charley, also anticipating a clash, took the edge off the bickering with “Hey, Oscar, when you’re discharged you could return here as a tour guide.”

Sweaty, somber faces stretched into smiles. The second platoon was restored. Lieutenant Meese led us to an open area surrounded by the omnipresent hills. Gathered around a tilted sand table were our regimental commander, Colonel Middlebrook, our battalion commander, Colonel Welch, our company commander, Lieutenant Sidney, and the two platoon leaders involved in the raid, Lieutenants Meese and Wilhoit. On the table, wet sand was molded into a mock-up of the approach, the surrounding terrain, and our target, Hill 121. To me, the lumps in the diorama resembled a combination of dog turds, cow flops, and horse dung. How was I to recognize these hills and valleys in the darkness? I'd just follow my squad leader, Danny Brown. But sitting alongside me now, he was as bewildered as I was.

We were briefed on the order of approach—which platoon would form the base of fire and which platoon would attack. The base of fire platoon would be the first to leave. Its mission was to clear the area, set up a defensive position, and prevent an assault on the attacking platoon passing through them. The attacking platoon would then close in on Hill 121.



Briefing for the raid on Hill 121:  
left to right, Lieutenants Meese, Sidney, and Wilhoit.

Supporting the assault were the cannon and heavy machine guns of a British Centurion tank, 105mm howitzers from artillery, 81mm mortars from a heavy weapons company, and our fourth platoon's recoilless rifle team. This was a major operation. My platoon was selected for the assault, the third platoon for the base of fire.

At the end of the briefing, Meese asked if there were any questions. Coy Jaegers, who had never brought home a grade higher than an F, raised his hand.

“Why can’t we have that big old tank come with us instead of it staying back safe in the woods.”

“Jaegers, what’s between that tank and Hill 121?”

“Trees?”

A roar of laughter exploded from heads swiveling in disbelief. Meese removed his helmet, wiped his brow to contain his laughter, then shouted with a grin, “There’s a river, you idiot! I’ll see you guys tomorrow morning for the dry run. Meanwhile, Jaegers, when we return, take a trot through the minefield.”

On the march back, Lieutenant Meese stopped to tell me that for this raid we were going to pass through a wide open field, so he didn’t need a runner. “Get a grenade launcher, a flare, and an M1 rifle when we return. Flaherty will show you how to use it.”

What was this? A grenade launcher? An M1? A carbine was my weapon. What had I gotten into as a runner?

Flaherty was waiting near his bunker with what appeared to be a short pipe (the launcher) in one hand and something else I’d never seen (the flare) in the other.

“Get an M1 from Massey,” he said.

I left my carbine with Wayne and returned with an M1. Then Flaherty and I went to a clearing. He connected the launcher to the end of the rifle barrel and set the flare into the launcher. He had me put a strange round into the M1 and wedge the stock of the rifle firmly into the ground. Flaherty told me to hold the rifle firmly and close my eyes when I pulled the trigger because a bright flash would burst from chamber. It was a simple procedure, and it went well.

“What’s with this grenade launcher, Flaherty?”

“Just before our platoon goes into the attack, the flare will signal the support weapons to cease fire.”

The following morning, we familiarized ourselves with the operation. We went through a couple of dry runs (no live ammo) in the rear. On the return to our bunkers, John Hollier’s hands broke the tension we were all feeling. No sooner had I removed my helmet than his familiar hand, like a baseball glove, formed a vise grip around my scalp. He loved the glistening pate beneath the thinning hairs of my shaved head. Lancaster kept goosing CP Jones with the barrel of his carbine in an attempt to get him to move faster. Little Gus Chobot walked in a circuitous path seeming to follow his twenty-pound BAR wherever it wanted to go. Was this silly horseplay a

method of maintaining our sanity? Or were we simply a platoon of immature twenty-two-year-olds?

Wayne Caton, our medic, was like the doting grandfather. He enjoyed the foolery around him but didn't join in with the little ones.

Charley Kauneckis said he had a plan to sneak out into the valley later in the evening. He'd scout the area we were to pass through.

"Bullshit. You're not going anywhere," said Whitefeather.

Charley smiled. "If I'm not back by 2 A.M., mail me what happened on the raid to a POW (prisoner of war) camp somewhere in North Korea."

In the evening, we repeated the exercise. We could have been in Jalalabad or Timbuktu. We were confused. Men were wandering about looking for their squads, and platoon leaders were trying to locate their missing men. Almost everyone was disoriented. Chaos turned into order when we were sobered by the sound of live ammunition on the next run. Everyone knew his role. The bases of fire were in position. We passed through them and reached our target. Lieutenant Meese signaled to fire the flare. I anchored my stock into the ground, squeezed the trigger, and closed my eyes. When I opened them, a beautiful pale blue luminous streak was arching through the darkness. Then we moved up the hill. The throb of the machine guns, the crackle of rifle fire, and the smell of gunpowder awakened us to the reality of our mission. Quietly, we returned to our bunkers.

August 12. A silence enveloped the breakfast chow line, punctuated by monosyllables. The raid weighed heavily on our psyches. Digestive systems were completely out of sync. Coffee was the appetizer, entrée, and dessert. Wayne and I promised we would stay in sight of one another. What else was there to say?

In the afternoon, we cleaned our weapons. Wayne checked his medic bag. I made sure the grenade launcher was secured to my M1. But how many times could I check my ammo, secure the launcher, and clean my equipment? How many times could Wayne inventory his morphine Syrettes, dried plasma tubes, sterile water, and bandages?

What was holding back the twilight? Massengale's death was raw on my mind. Unbearable tension crept in. The shock of the ambush in the last raid hadn't worn off.

"Who do you think is going to be your first patient?"

"That's not funny. It might be you," replied Wayne.

"You're right," I said, wondering if it might be me.

Finally, dusk crept in. Why so quickly? I now thought. Couldn't it have been delayed for an hour or two? Maybe till tomorrow? Next week? Never?

From his supply bunker on the reverse slope, Massey distributed bandoleers of ammo, grenades, machine gun canisters, and rounds for the recoilless rifle team. On to the assembly area.

The chaplain was waiting. We got on our knees as he recited the Twenty-third Psalm. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He anointeth my . . .”

Are these words supposed to give me confidence? Will I write a letter to my parents tomorrow? Who will I see on the chow line in the morning? Will I be there? Too much time to think. Let’s get on with it.

Dusk darkened to nightfall. I glanced at the men around me, envying those who derived solace from the psalm. Then I recalled the same chaplain in the same grove standing among the same men reciting the same psalm, which had had the same irreverent effect upon me four nights earlier before the ambush. Hadn’t I returned safely? But this was logical thinking. When fear grips your muscles and your mind, logic is also trapped in its grasp. Isn’t it strange how we could feel invulnerable before one operation and become paralyzed with fear before another? Too much time to think.

The only solace I could garner was from Lieutenant Sidney, our company commander. He strode confidently among us, carrying his M1 rifle like a toy in his right hand, saying a few words while ostensibly checking and adjusting our equipment. In spite of his detached and correct military bearing, he knew our need for contact with him.

What is Fry doing here? I wondered. I thought he was stateside trying to resolve a serious marital problem. We’d wished him good luck a few weeks ago when he left. Now here he was, wrapped in an armored vest, his grimy, stubbly beard glistening in the moonlight, his distant reddened eyes focused on nothing, as he stood clutching the strap of his BAR.

Lieutenant Meese ordered us to move out. The path was hidden by a grove of trees interlaced with dense vines. This trail had never seen the sun. Most of the vegetation beneath our boots had lost its battle with the bacteria of decay, producing an odor so pungent, so obnoxious, so perfect a setting for all our missions. We groped our way through the darkness to the jon boats scattered on the shore of the Imjin.

The dependable four-man jon boats were always there, waiting to carry us to a new adventure. Wayne, Charley, Truman, and I bunched up for our turn to enter the boat. My anxiety was working overtime. Could a Chinese FO (forward observer) see us? Would he transmit the info to his buddies launching the horrible mortars? Would we be greeted with those overhead VT (variable time) fused mortar rounds that would send a shower of shrapnel down on us?

We stepped into the boat. Charley grasped the heavy rope anchored to metal stakes at opposite sides of the river to pull us across. Wayne, Truman, and I, trying to neutralize our fear, clustered close to Charley, forming a four-man-clump. I wanted to say something clever but my tank was dry. Wayne smiled; Truman returned it. Maybe that loosened the knots in their intestines. Charley continued to pull the boat while I was trying to chase the demons that had harassed me since the night we were ambushed. Once ashore, our platoon assembled at the base of our outpost the Bubble. Danny Brown, our squad leader, gathered us to review the mission.

“Do you have enough ammo for your BAR, Truman?”

“My pouches are full.”

“I didn’t ask you that. I asked you if you have enough ammo.”

The strain was changing friends into foes. Danny was interrupted by earsplitting booms from the cannon of the Centurion tank across the river behind us. Its shells joined the 105mm howitzers and 81mm mortars to rip apart Hill 121. Accompanying the thunder was the crackling staccato of the tank’s heavy machine guns joining in the prelude for our attack.

The first platoon moved out. I was on one side of Lieutenant Meese with my grenade launcher, and Mendel, our commo man, was on the other with his reel of wire connecting Meese’s phone to the tank. On Meese’s signal, our platoon moved out.

My thoughts ran wildly. Surely Hill 121 will be flattened by the time we reach it. What the hell kind of operation is this? What could they be thinking?

A searchlight company’s beams bounced off the overhead clouds to illuminate the entire valley before us. If the Chinese hadn’t seen us coming before, I thought, by now we’ll be glowing like candles as we approach them.

We moved on. There was only one approach to Hill 121, and the Chinese knew it. We made our way through the wide valley, with Meese directing the tank’s cannon and machine guns.

The base of fire platoon moved out to clear an area. Lancaster and Staszewski set up their machine gun crews at opposite ends of a long knoll where they had a good field of fire. Riflemen fanned out to protect our flanks and rear. Our recoilless team scrambled up a ridge to our right opposite Hill 121. The riflemen waited. So far, it was a textbook operation.

The shelling increased. The whistles, the sizzling hisses of the tank’s shells penetrating the air above us followed by the thunder of shell bursts were earsplitting and numbing. With each blast of ordnance, the vibrations pressed my pants tightly against my thighs and ricocheted off my vest, causing a tremor in my cheeks. For a moment I stood petrified. Then the bubble burst. Suddenly, all the tension, all the fear, all the apprehension rushed out. It was exhilarating standing

in the middle of all this chaos. (Later I read poet Wilfred Owen's description of this phenomenon in World War I: "When we heard the guns . . . it was a sound not without a certain sublimity.")

Pinstriped tracers pointed the way to Hill 121 as we awaited the signal to proceed. I thought back to the day I had been assigned to Company L, when I asked myself, How does one go to war? The question had been firmly answered four days ago, on August 8, the night of the ambush. It was reinforced tonight as we prepared to attack Hill 121.

We passed through the base of fire and moved toward our objective. Still no response from the Chinese. About 50 feet from the hill, Lieutenant Meese signaled to halt. He tapped me on the shoulder. I fired the flare. I did exactly what I'd done the night before, but curiosity got the better of me, and I kept my eyes open. A blinding flash burst from the cartridge chamber of my rifle. The supporting tank, which served as an artillery piece, the howitzers, the heavy machine guns, and the mortars ceased fire. Then silence. That awful silence.

Lieutenant Meese raised and then lowered his arm, shouting, "Let's go!" Our platoon went into the attack. Burp gun fire buzzed overhead like a swarm of bees. The hill was illuminated by bursts from concussion grenades.

Suddenly I thought, Why hadn't I asked whether I could fire this rifle with the grenade launcher attached to the barrel? I'd forgotten to take a few bandoliers of ammo. Except for my two grenades, I was useless.

As I climbed Hill 121, whenever I blinked, a flashbulb went off in my eyes. Between flashes I caught sight of Sergeant Flaherty with his men moving forward. Wayne was alongside him. I gave them a bravado thumbs up.

We weren't told that a series of deep concentric trenches ringed the hill. The Chinese lay at the bottoms of these trenches, which reduced the effect of our artillery. Subsequently, they climbed to a firing step to defend their positions. If necessary, they could withdraw to the trench line behind them.

We followed them up the hill. As I threw one grenade, I stepped into space. I'd fallen into an abandoned trench, scraping my forehead against its rear edge. My helmet toppled off and rolled down the hill. It was a very deep trench but I found the firing step. Standing on it, I threw my rifle over the lip of the trench, and then grasped the top to pull myself up and out. Burp guns were belching, and concussion grenades added to the confusion. I reached my squad, but where was Wayne? Grenade bursts and the lights clearly showed Flaherty on my forward left leading his men toward the top of the hill, but Wayne was nowhere in sight. I dropped when a blast from a Chinese concussion grenade in that area blurred my vision.

Where was Wayne? I guessed he had moved forward with Flaherty. The exchange of fire amplified by grenade blasts was earsplitting. I couldn't crawl any lower. My fatigue shirt was tilling the soil.

I crept toward Gus who was lower to the ground than I. He was replacing a magazine in his BAR.

"Hey, Gus, have you seen Wayne?"

"He's probably behind us with the wounded."

We were distracted for a moment by piercing shrieks echoing in the valley to our rear. On the ridge of the hill behind us, our recoilless rifle team had spotted a squad of Chinese attempting to encircle us. Three rounds from our riflemen incinerated them. How did Sid know to place the rifle team there?

Lieutenant Meese shouted to withdraw. I crawled to the area where I thought Wayne might be. Nothing, no one. He'd been alongside Flaherty the last time I'd seen him. I'll check with Flaherty as soon as I see him, I thought.



KATUSAs, our Korean litter bearers.

Like sprinters, our men crouched and dashed through our supporting platoon. Every cell in my body seemed to be producing an amphetamine. I wanted to leave my skin because it wasn't



moving as fast as my heartbeat. I caught sight of Flaherty. He was draped on a litter being evacuated by the KATUSAs (Koreans attached to the US army). A concussion grenade had pulverized his jaw; it lay like a wet sock bleeding on his chest. Ed Heister was running frantically with a wounded man on his shoulders.

Where was Wayne?

At the shore of the Imjin, I joined three shaken men. A jon boat brought us across the river. A battalion truck was waiting a quarter of a mile to the rear. We folded down the slatted benches in the back of the truck and then collapsed onto them in drained silence.

Spent and numb from the operation, Fry, sitting on the bench opposite me, had a glassy, vacant gaze on his sweaty face. He was in a hypnotic trance, his BAR between his knees. Once we were underway, he raised the BAR to his lap and then pointed it upward. He stuck his finger into the trigger housing and squeezed, emptying his magazine. Everyone fell to the floor. The burst of bullets shredded the truck's overhead canvas. We didn't rise until the truck arrived at battalion headquarters. Fry was sitting in the same spot, gazing, motionless. The medics evacuated him.

At battalion the same questions came at us during the debriefing.

"How many did you kill?"

"Did you see anything unusual?"

"What could we do better next time?"

The honest answer was, "I don't know." How could we absorb what was happening in this mayhem?

Lieutenants Sidney, Meese, and Wilhoit remained at the battalion tent to await further news. Ten yards from the tent, I joined Charley Kauneckis, George Whitefeather, and Oscar Konnerth. We sat in benumbed silence, lost in a state of shock.

From the side of the doughnut truck, we were given coffee and partially cooked, greasy doughnuts. They slid down my throat in raw lumps. The minutes dragged. Without a word, Charley, Whitefeather, Oscar, and I made for a clearing to the left of the battalion tents. No one was going to intrude on our trauma. Hunched over on the ground, we sat silently awaiting another truck.

A motor hummed in the distance. The truck pulled up near the tents.

"Hey, Gus! Where's Wayne? Don, did you see Wayne Caton?"

"Maybe he's on the next truck."

There was no next truck.