

Russell Gugeler. *Combat Actions in Korea*. Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1970.

Chapter 7

Twin Tunnels Patrol Ambush

The event corresponds less to expectations in war than in any other case whatever.

Livy, *History of Rome*, XXX: 10.

During the withdrawal from northern Korea in December of 1950, U.S. Eighth Army outdistanced the pursuing Chinese and North Koreans and broke contact with the enemy. By the end of January 1951, as a result of firm orders from its commander (Lt. Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway) the army turned and took up defensive positions near the 37th parallel, and from there sent feeler patrols northward to locate the enemy again and reestablish contact.

The 24th and 2d Infantry Divisions occupied adjoining positions near the center of Eighth Army's line. Late on the 27th of January, the commanding general of U.S. X Corps directed the 2d Division to send a reconnaissance patrol northward to the vicinity of two railroad tunnels a few miles south of Chipyeong-ni. It was to join forces at Iho-ri with a group from the 24th Division, after which the composite patrol would proceed to the objective.¹

Because the order reached the divisions so late, the 24th Division was unable to make arrangements for crossing the unbridged Han River in time to effect the meeting. A patrol from the 23d Infantry (2d Division) reconnoitered the Twin Tunnels area, however, and returned to its base without incident.²

¹ 23d Infantry Regiment: S-2 journal, entry 12, 27 January 1951; 23d Infantry Regiment: special report, Patrol Ambush and Rescue Action, 29 January (hereafter cited as 23d Infantry: Patrol Ambush).

² 23d Infantry: Patrol Ambush.

At 2240 on the night of the 28th, X Corps directed the 2d Division to run the same patrol on the following day, again in conjunction with a patrol from the adjoining division. This time the 2d Division was to furnish five additional jeeps to carry the men from the 24th Division, which was still unable to get its vehicles across the river.³

First orders concerning the patrol reached the 23d Infantry at 2300. They were passed on down to the 1st Battalion which, in turn, called Company C and gave preliminary instructions to Lt. James P. Mitchell (one of its platoon leaders), asking him to report to battalion headquarters the following morning at 0600 to get complete orders.⁴

It was still dark, the sky was clear, and the temperature was a few degrees above zero when Lieutenant Mitchell reached the S-3 tent on the morning of 29 January. Here he was given the mission of making another reconnaissance of the Twin Tunnels area-by road, about thirty miles north of Company C's location-and told to make contact with the enemy, if he could, but to avoid combat with any large enemy force. He was ordered to move out as soon as possible since he was scheduled to meet the 24th Division's patrol at 1030. By 0630 Lieutenant Mitchell had returned to his company to organize his group.

Plans for the patrol were being made and changed while the members assembled. Battalion headquarters called three times between 0630 and 0800, each time adding men and weapons to the patrol. There were also difficulties and delays in securing enough vehicles and radios, both of which were acutely scarce as a result of heavy equipment losses which the 2d Division had sustained during its withdrawal from northern Korea. The 1st Battalion finally arranged to borrow three jeeps, with drivers, from another battalion of the same regiment, and extra radios from an artillery battalion. Lieutenant Mitchell had two SCR-300 radios, neither of which worked well, for communications within the patrol. To help maintain communications between the patrol and its headquarters, the regiment had arranged for an L-5 liaison plane to circle above the patrol and act as a radio relay station. It was therefore necessary to have an SCR-619 radio to communicate with the plane. To be safe, the 1st Battalion borrowed two. On the morning of 29 January, however, the artillery battalion complained because two of its radios had been damaged when loaned to the infantry the previous day, and insisted on furnishing its own operators with the radios. It was 0900 before the artillerymen reported, and the patrol was ready to get under way.⁵

³ 2d Infantry Division: G-3 journal and file, entry 107, 28 January 1951.

⁴ Unless otherwise mentioned, the account of the Twin Tunnels patrol action is based upon interviews by the author with the following officers and men who participated in the action: Lt. James P. Mitchell, Lt. William G. Penrod, PFC Bobby G. Hensley, Cpl. Billy B. Blizzard, PFC Thomas J. Mortimer, PFC Bernard L. Dunlap, and Sgt. John C. Gardella

⁵ Major Millard O. Engen: comments and notes. Major Engen was executive officer of the 1st Battalion, 23d Infantry, at the time of the patrol action.

Lieutenant Mitchell was in command of the patrol. As finally organized, it consisted of forty-four officers and men, most of whom were members of his Company C rifle platoon. Nine members of the patrol, including an officer, were from Company D; the others were the artillery radio operators and the drivers from the 3d Battalion. These men were mounted on two 3/4-ton weapons carriers and nine jeeps, five of which were for the 24th Division men. Mitchell's men carried two BARs and either rifles or carbines, plus a 75-mm and a 57-mm recoilless rifle, a 3.5-inch bazooka, a 60-mm mortar, and two caliber .50 and three caliber .30 machine guns mounted on the vehicles, and two light machine guns with tripod mounts.

For 20 of the 44 members of the patrol, this was their first combat action since they had joined Company C only four days before. They were from specialist schools-listed as draftsmen, mechanics, and technicians and had received little training as infantrymen.

Another officer joined the patrol just before it left. Capt. Melvin R. Stai (battalion assistant S-3) went along only to be certain that Lieutenant Mitchell's patrol met the men from the 24th Division as planned. He was told to return to battalion headquarters after the composite patrol departed for the tunnels.⁶

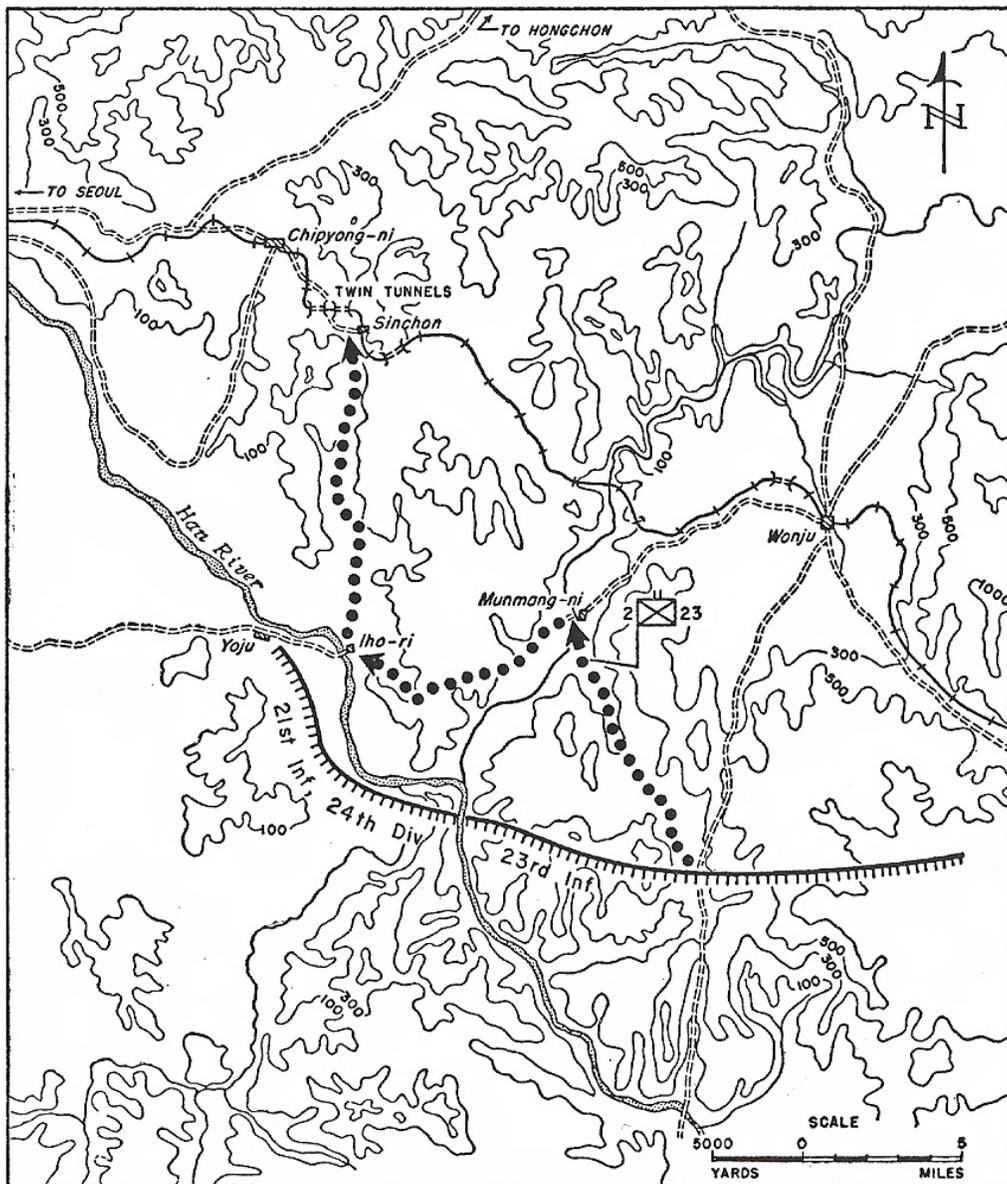
Lieutenant Mitchell, with four men in a jeep mounting a caliber .50 machine gun, made up the advance party and led the patrol by about fifteen hundred yards. The main body, under the control of Lt. William C. Penrod (a Company D platoon leader), followed, with intervals of at least a hundred yards between vehicles. For Korea, the road was good but movement was slow because of heavy snow in shaded spots and patches of ice that covered some sections of the narrow road.

The liaison plane circled above the vehicular column as far as Iho-ri where it lost visual contact because of the haze that frequently filled the narrow Korean valleys during the morning hours.

At 1115 the column reached Iho-ri, a small village on the east bank of the Han River, where the patrol from the 24th Division was waiting. The group from the 24th consisted of Lt. Harold P. Mueller and fourteen men whom he had selected from his platoon of Company F, 21st Infantry. In addition to rifles, the men had six BARs and a light machine gun. They had reversible parkas which they wore with the white side out, including white hoods over their helmets, whereas the men from the 2d Division were dressed in fatigue clothing and field jackets. The combined patrol now numbered 4 officers and 56 men, including Captain Stai, who decided at Iho-ri to accompany the patrol instead of returning to battalion headquarters. It proceeded at once toward the objective, which was still approximately fifteen miles away.

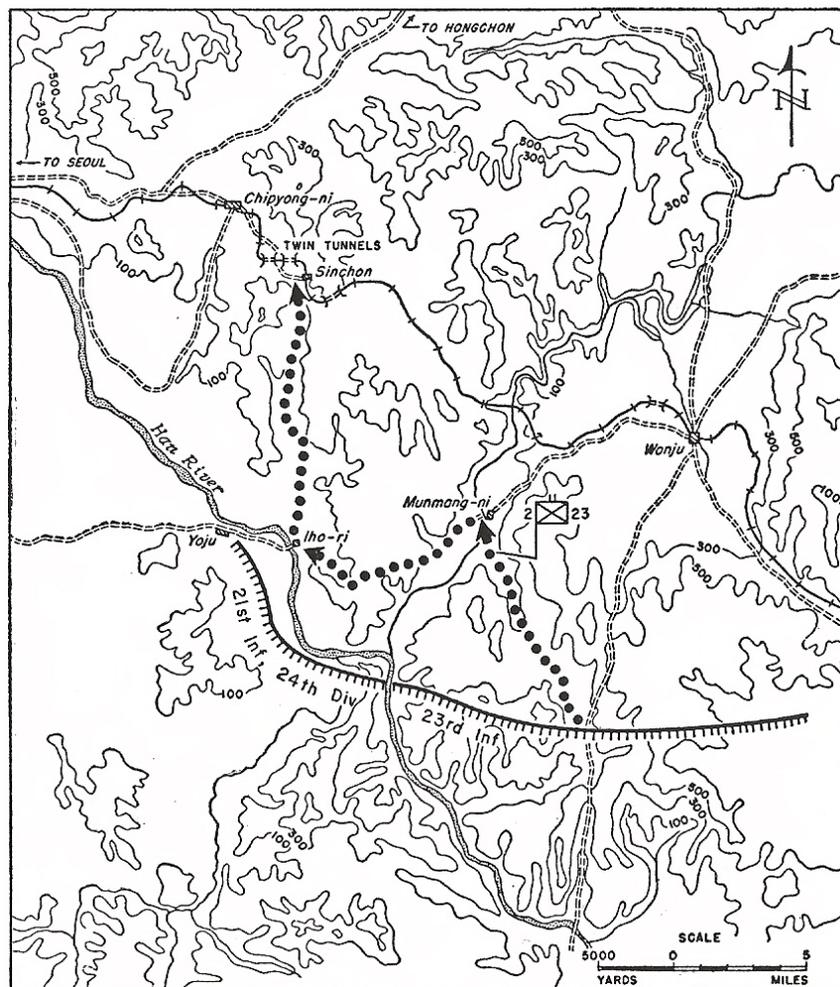
⁶ Engen, Op. Cit.

The Twin Tunnels were located about three miles southeast of Chipyeong-ni and less than a mile northwest of a little village named Sinchon. As Lieutenant Mitchell in the lead vehicle neared the objective, he passed a large hill that rose steeply on the left (west side of the road, dominating the entire area. This was Hill 453. Skirting the base of the hill, the road crossed a ford in a shallow stream and then split at the base of another, smaller hill. One fork of the road turned right to Sinchon; the other fork went west for several hundred yards, then turned north for another two thousand yards where it crossed the railroad track between the two tunnels.



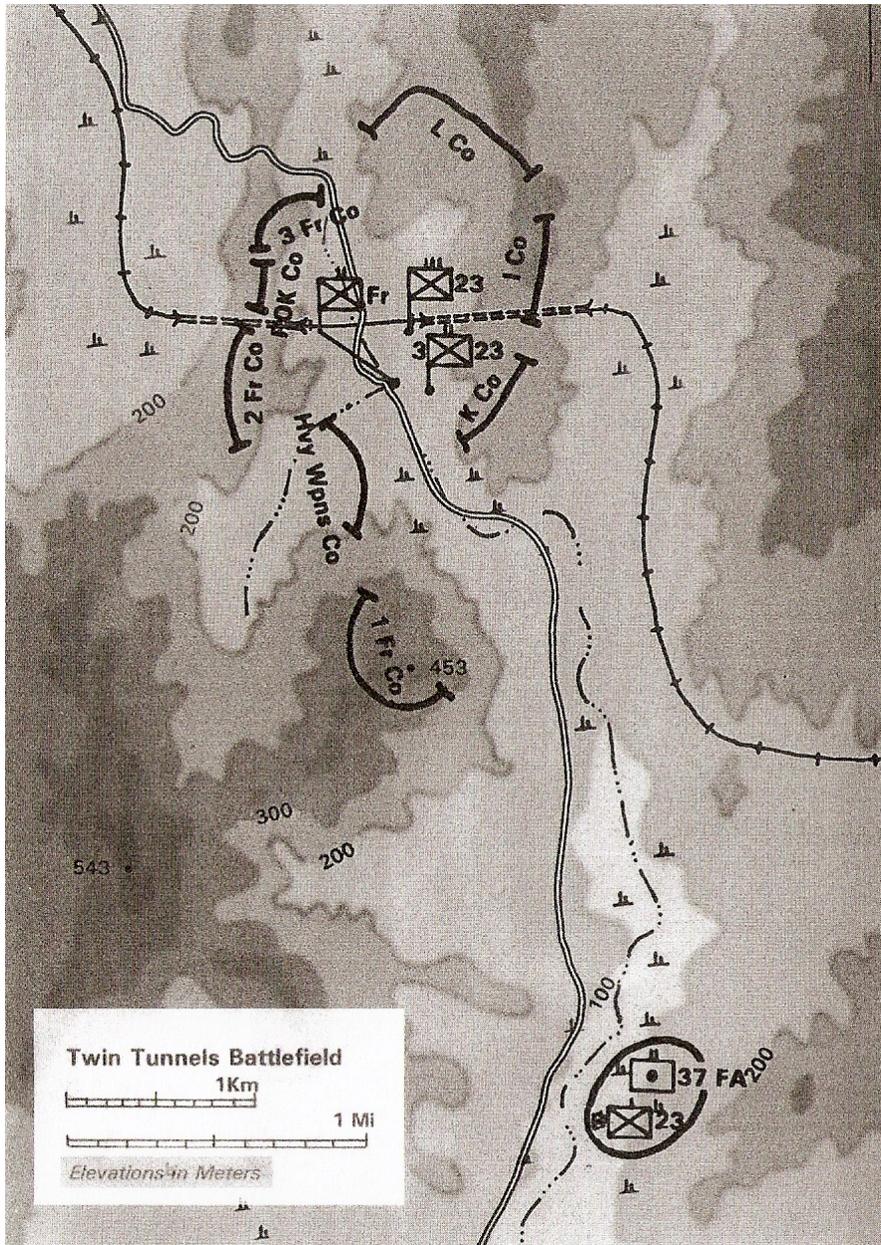
At the ford Lieutenant Mitchell stopped to wait for Lieutenant Mueller and Captain Stai, who were riding in the two jeeps immediately behind. Since the patrol was already behind schedule, Captain Stai offered to go alone into Sinchon while the rest of the patrol went on to investigate the tunnels, after which they would be ready to return. Accordingly, the two lieutenants and the men with them proceeded to the railroad track, turned their vehicles around in position to go back, and then waited near a farm house. The tunnels were not side by side, but were, instead, end to end, cutting under two steep ridges, one on each side of the road and narrow valley. On the west side the ridge rose toward the south to the hill mass of which Hill 453 was a part; the ridge on the east side of the road sloped north to Hill 333. Between these two ridges were a stream, terraced rice paddies, and scattered Lombardy poplars, all typical of the Korean landscape.

Captain Stai left his driver and vehicle by the road, walked alone toward the cluster of drab houses in Sinchon and disappeared. The time was about 1215.⁷



⁷ An enemy radio broadcast made in March or April 1951 mentioned a Capt. Melvin R. Stai, claiming he was a prisoner of the Chinese Communists.

Trouble started within a minute or two after the two jeeps stopped by the railroad tracks. Men from the 21st Infantry patrol spotted 15 or 20 Chinese soldiers running from a small hill just north of the railroad crossing, and opened fire on them. The others of the patrol ran up to see what was happening. Soon after the first shots, ten or twelve scattered mortar rounds fell near the road, landing just south of the two parked jeeps and in front of the other vehicles which were now closing into the tunnels area.



At about this time the liaison plane appeared overhead again. The battalion executive officer (Major Millard O. Engen) was in the plane which, after it had

turned back at Iho-ri because of ground haze, was now returning since visibility had increased. Major Engen saw the same enemy troops whom Lieutenant Mueller's men had taken under fire, as well as another company-sized group on Hill 453. He immediately reported this over the SCR-619 radio together with instructions for Lieutenant Mitchell to turn his patrol around and get out of the area at once.⁸ Lieutenant Mitchell did not receive this message because of faulty radio reception.

By the time the last vehicle in the column crossed the ford near Sinchon, Mitchell also saw enemy movement to the south and suspected that his patrol had been caught in a well-planned ambush. He realized that from the fingers of Hill 453, which dominated the road and even the ditches along the road, the Chinese could see when the last vehicle of the patrol closed into the tunnels area. Hill 453 also blocked the route of retreat. Further advance of the column was stopped by enemy positions on Hill 333 northeast of the railroad crossing. Lacking radio communication with the liaison plane and also within the column, and since the ridge tips crowded so close against the road that the men in the trailing vehicles could not see ahead, the vehicles and the entire patrol bunched up in the area just south of the railroad crossing.

Lieutenant Mitchell had decided to make a run for it before the last vehicles in the column had come to a stop.

"Let's get out of here!" he shouted to the men, most of whom had dispersed to seek cover when the first mortar rounds fell. "Let's get out of here!"

Before the last vehicles to arrive could be turned around, however, the men could see Chinese soldiers running from Hill 453 down toward the ford.

In the plane overhead, Major Engen also watched the Chinese moving to cut off the patrol. He radioed new instructions, this time directing Mitchell to head for the high ground east of the road. He then left the area since it was necessary to refuel the plane. No one received this message either.

Men in the get-away jeep, which having turned around was now in the lead, opened fire with their caliber .50 machine gun, but the gun was cold and had so much oil on it that it took two men to operate it, one to jack it back and another man to fire it. It had little effect. Lieutenant Penrod tried to get the 75-mm recoilless rifle in position to fire, but gave that up when he saw that the Chinese had already cut the road and that they were racing for the high ground on the east side of the road. He called back to Mitchell to say they couldn't get through.

After Captain Stai had walked off toward Sinchon, his driver followed him in the jeep for a hundred or two hundred yards and had then stopped in the single-lane

⁸ Engen, op. cit.

road to wait. When the enemy force began running from Hill 453 toward the east side of the road, the driver left, apparently trying to join the main body of the patrol. He was shot and killed before he had gone far, the jeep overturning by the road.

When the firing commenced, Lieutenant Mueller looked at the hill on the east side of the road. Realizing they had no chance of breaking out of the ambush by following the road and, wanting to get on defensible high ground, he started up the hill, calling for his men to follow.⁹

A single, narrow ridge rose abruptly at the east edge of the road, and then extended east for nine hundred yards to the high part of the ridge. The ridge was only about four hundred feet higher than the road, and both it and the ridge leading to it were covered with low brush and, on the northern slopes, a foot of wet snow. After climbing a short distance, Lieutenant Mueller stopped to study the area through his binoculars. To the south he saw the Chinese running toward the same hill for which he was heading.

"We're going to have to get to the top of that hill," he called back to Lieutenant Mitchell. "The Chinese are coming up from the other side! This is our only chance!"

From this time on it was a race for the high ground, with the Chinese climbing the south slope of the hill from which the snow had melted.

The patrol, well equipped when mounted, was forced to abandon most of its heavy and crew-served weapons now that it was on foot. Penrod and Mitchell loaded their men with as much ammunition as each man could carry, and with the tripod-mounted caliber .30 machine gun and the 3.5inch bazooka. Mueller's men had another light machine gun with them. The two recoilless rifles, the 60-mm mortar, the five machine guns mounted on the vehicles, and the ammunition that could not be carried, were all left on the vehicles which were abandoned on the road, their engines still running.¹⁰

Seven of Lieutenant Mitchell's men, all from the group of replacements, stayed in the ditch by the road. They had become frightened at the outbreak of the enemy fire, had taken cover in the ditch, and refused to leave when the other men

⁹ Statement of Lt. Harold P. Mueller. Lieutenant Mueller and his men reached the top of this hill some time before the men from the 23d Infantry.

¹⁰ Although several reports indicate these vehicles were destroyed before they were abandoned, Lieutenants Mitchell and Penrod, in Twin Tunnels interviews, say they were not destroyed then, and that the engines were left running since they thought there was a possibility that they might later escape and need the vehicles. The next day (30 January) the 2d Division requested and got an air strike to destroy the vehicles. See Capt. William G. Penrod, letter to the author, 6 May 1953; also 2d Division: G-3 journal and file, entry 36, 30 January 1951.

started for the high ground. All seven were killed in the same ditch later that afternoon. With Captain Stai and his driver, nine of the original sixty men were out of action. It was after 1300. The remaining fifty-one men were climbing the steep northern side of the ridge.

The climb was agonizingly slow. Since enemy soldiers were climbing the hill on the south side of the same ridge, Mitchell's men had to stay on the north, steep, snowy side. Even so, they were under fire from several enemy riflemen and an enemy machine gun located to the north. Men from the 23d Infantry were conspicuous targets since their dark clothing made them prominent against the bright snow. Much of the way they moved on their hands and knees, pulling themselves from one scrub brush to another. Enemy fire was so accurate they would often pretend that they had been hit, deliberately roll a short distance down the hill and lie quietly until the enemy rifleman shifted his fire to someone else. They did this in spite of the extreme difficulties of carrying their heavy loads up the steep, slippery ridge.

Within a short time all of the men were wet, either from the snow or from perspiration, and several of them were injured on the way up. PFC Bobby G. Hensley, who was carrying the light machine gun and tripod on his back, stumbled and fell forward over a pointed stump, breaking several ribs. Sgt. Alfred Buchanan, who was with him, carrying four boxes of ammunition, rubbed snow in Hensley's face to revive him, and had him on his feet a few minutes later when Lieutenant Penrod came along and told Hensley to throw away the bolt and leave the machine gun. Hensley said he didn't think he could make it any farther.

"You've got to make it, son," said Penrod. "Just keep climbing."

Sergeant Buchanan left the ammunition and helped Hensley part way up the hill.

Lieutenant Mitchell also became a casualty before reaching the hill. During World War II he had received an injury to his spine, which left his back and legs weakened. Three fourths of the way up the hill one of his legs became weak and numb. Mitchell slid himself along the ground for a while but finally sat down in the snow to rest. While he was sitting by the trail a jeep driver (PFC William W. Stratton) stopped and urged Mitchell to go on. Stratton was one of the recent replacements and this was his first day in combat. When Lieutenant Mitchell explained that he couldn't move for a while, Stratton offered to stay with him. Just about this time, three Chinese riflemen appeared on top of the ridge and stopped about fifteen feet from where the two men were sitting. Mitchell was hidden partially by brush. Stratton saw them first and fired seven rounds from his rifle, missing each time. Mitchell fired one round and missed. His carbine jammed then and he had to take out his bayonet and pry the cartridge from the chamber. Meanwhile, a bullet from one of the Chinese guns hit the stock of Stratton's rifle and then his hand, tearing it badly. Then the enemy gun jammed. The other two

Chinese had turned their backs and appeared to be listening to someone who was shouting to them from the opposite side of the hill. Lieutenant Mitchell finally got his carbine in operation and killed all three of the enemy. The two men slid down the hill a short distance to a small gully that offered more cover from enemy fire. Hensley (the machine gunner with the broken ribs) was already sitting in this gully, having been left there by Sergeant Buchanan. The three men sat there for about a half hour.

Except for one man, the remaining forty-eight men left in the patrol reached the crest of the hill. Sgt. John C. Gardella, loaded with machine-gun ammunition, slipped in the snow and fell down a steep part of the ridge. Since he was unable to climb back at that point, he circled to the north looking for an easier route. As it happened, he went too far north and suddenly came upon several enemy riflemen and a crew operating a machine gun. He was within twenty feet of the group before he noticed it and, although he was in heavy brush at the time and had not been seen, he was afraid to move back. He lay there for the rest of the day and throughout the night.

Lieutenant Mueller and his fourteen men were the first to reach the top of the hill. Once there, they learned that it afforded little protection from the enemy guns, which both to the north and to the south were located on higher ground. The ridge, which extended south from Hill 333, was made up of several pointed peaks connected by narrow saddles. The hill Mueller's men now occupied was approximately sixty feet lower than the top of Hill 333, nine hundred yards to the north, and a little lower than another hill not more than one hundred and fifty or two hundred yards to the south. The Chinese reached the hill to the south about the same time Lieutenant Mueller occupied the center high ground. In addition to the two narrow saddles that connected Mueller's position with the enemy-held ground both to the north and to the south, there was another narrow saddle between his hill and a smaller mound of earth to the west, on the ridge that the patrol followed toward the high ground. This mound of earth was within grenade-throwing distance. All three of these saddles were under enemy fire.

The useable area on top of the hill was so small it could have been covered by a squad tent and was tilted so that it sloped toward the east side of the hill, which was so steep that there was no danger of enemy attack from that direction. However, the hilltop was too small to accommodate all of the men, so Mueller and Penrod put some of the men along the saddle toward the north. Even then, it was crowded. There were no holes and the ground was frozen too deep to allow digging.

Enemy activity commenced almost at once, with machine-gun and rifle fire coming from both the Chinese north and south positions. The activity from the south was the more serious threat for two reasons. The enemy machine gun on the southern hill, being only slightly higher than the hilltop occupied by the American patrol, fired from a flat angle. Its beaten zone, therefore, was long and

almost exactly covered the hilltop. In addition, the saddle connecting the two hills was so deep that the Chinese would be able to move under the machine-gun or other supporting fire until they were within a few yards of the patrol before they would mask their own fire. This would place them within easy grenade range. Fortunately, this same path was so narrow that the Chinese would be limited to small groups for each assault. Lieutenant Mueller, realizing that this was the critical part of his perimeter, placed his machine gun to guard this approach. (The machine gun was the only one left to the patrol by this time. There were eight BARs and the 3.5-inch bazooka.) The first enemy assault was prepared by mortar fire while the Chinese moved under the machine-gun fire until they were within easy grenade range. Mueller's men stopped it just below the rim of the perimeter with the machine gun and a concentration of BAR fire. The Chinese backed away and the enemy was comparatively inactive for about twenty minutes.

Meanwhile, the three injured men-Lieutenant Mitchell and Privates Hensley and Stratton-worked their way up on the hill to join the rest of the men in the perimeter. Stratton, pleased because he thought his shattered hand would be sufficient cause for returning home, crawled around the perimeter and showed it to some of the men.

"Give me your telephone number," he said to several of them, "and I'll call your wife when I get back to California."

Soon after the initial thrust from the south, the enemy gun to the north opened fire, wounding seven men at that end of the perimeter. The men lay as still as possible to avoid this fire, except for an eighteen-year-old squad leader (Cpl. LeRoy Gibbons) who already had been wounded six times during the Korean war. Gibbons wanted to talk with Lieutenant Mitchell, who, by this time, had reached the small, flat part of the perimeter. He stood up and walked erect through a string of tracers that went past him. Several of the men yelled at him to get down.

"Aw, hell," he said, "they couldn't hit the broad side of a barn," and continued walking.

After this demonstration, Sgt. Everett Lee decided to take the enemy gun under fire. He crawled about fifteen feet farther north, saying to the other men nearby, "I'm going to get that son of a bitch." He fired two rounds to zero in his rifle, then killed two of the men operating the machine gun. Other men near him joined in the firing and the enemy gun went quiet and did not again fire. Sergeant Lee stood up and walked back to his position on the line. This relieved much of the pressure on the north end of the line and, from then on, the main enemy efforts came from the south and from the west.

Lieutenant Mueller's machine gun, the only one to reach the top of the hill, was the main strength of the defense. Five or six separate assaults were directed

against the south side of the perimeter during the afternoon. Each time the men held their fire until the enemy soldiers were within close range and then directed all available fire at the narrow enemy approach route. The machine gun was effective and Mueller's chief concern was keeping it and several BARs operating at the south end of the line. Seven men firing these weapons were either killed or wounded during the afternoon, all hit in the head. When one man was hit others would pull him back by his feet and another man would crawl forward to man the machine gun.

One of the machine gunners (Cpl. Billy B. Blizzard) raised his head not more than six inches from the ground and was struck by a bullet that went through his helmet, cutting into the top of his head.

Lieutenant Mitchell noticed Blizzard's head jerk and saw the hole suddenly appear in his helmet. He yelled to him, "You aren't hurt, son. That was a ricochet."

Corporal Blizzard turned so that his platoon leader could see the blood running across his forehead. "Like hell it's a ricochet," he said.

Mueller put another man in Blizzard's place. "For God's sake," he kept saying, "we've got to keep this gun going."

During one of the attacks, a Chinese crawled close to the perimeter, stood up and fired a continuous burst from his burp gun. He hit five men, including Mueller, before one of the Americans killed the enemy soldier.¹¹

When Major Engen (executive officer of the 1st Battalion) and the liaison pilot left the Twin Tunnels area to refuel their plane, they immediately reported to the 23d Infantry that the Chinese had ambushed and surrounded Mitchell's patrol. The regimental commander (Col. Paul Freeman) immediately requested an air strike, ordered the 2d Battalion to send relief to the patrol, and directed that a liaison pilot make a drop of ammunition to the patrol.

The 2d Battalion occupied a patrol base forward of the regimental line and was already about ten miles (road distance) nearer than the remainder of the regiment. The order reached the 2d Battalion commander (Lt.Col. James W. Edwards) at 1300.¹² Colonel Edwards immediately called Capt. Stanley C. Tyrrell, whose Company F had performed a similar rescue mission the day before. Even though Company F was available at once, it required a little more than two hours

¹¹ Lt. Harold P. Mueller, letter to the author, 30 January 1952.

¹² The narrative of the action of Company F, 23d Infantry, is based on an account by Lt.Col. James W. Edwards, CO, 2d Battalion, "Patrolling at Twin Tunnels," and upon two letters from Major Stanley C. Tyrrell to Major Leonard O. Friesz, dated 5 March and 9 September 1952. These letters were written in answer to questions submitted by OCMH.

to assemble the vehicles, weapons, and necessary supplies for the company, which consisted of 3 other officers and 142 enlisted men. Colonel Edwards added a section of 81-mm mortars, a section of heavy machine guns from Company H, and included an artillery forward observation party because its radio was necessary for communications with the liaison plane. Thus reinforced, the total strength of the force amounted to 167 officers and men.¹³

Captain Tyrrell's mission was to rescue the ambushed patrol and to recover the bodies and the vehicles. Since darkness was not far off, Colonel Edwards instructed Tyrrell to form a defensive perimeter and proceed with the mission the following morning, if he could not gain contact with the ambushed patrol that night.¹⁴ Company F started north at 1515.

Back at the perimeter, the afternoon wore on with occasional lulls between enemy assaults. Toward late afternoon ammunition was getting scarce and the officers kept cautioning their men to use it sparingly. Medical supplies were exhausted three and a half hours after the fighting had begun.¹⁵ More than a third of the men had become casualties, although many of the wounded men remained in the perimeter fighting.

Private Stratton (the jeep driver with the shattered hand) had taken over a BAR from another wounded man. He fired it with his left hand. During quiet periods he crawled around the perimeter telling the other men not to worry about their situation. "We'll get out of this all right," he kept saying. However, by evening few of the men there expected to get out alive.

Lieutenant Mitchell pulled his men back several feet to the rim of the hilltop. There were advantages to this move. There, the Chinese could not spot American weapons so easily, and from the new position the Americans could not see an enemy soldier until his head appeared a few feet away. This saved ammunition since the men could not fire until they could see a Chinese head. As a frozen crust formed over the snow, the men braced themselves for the heavy blow they expected as soon as the darkness was complete. Said one of the men, "I'll see you fellows down below."

The first help for the surrounded patrol members came late in the afternoon. A Mosquito plane appeared above the patrol about 1730, just before sunset. The men watched as it circled above them and then screamed with delight when the first fighter planes appeared. Altogether they were two flights of four planes each. The first planes were jets, and they came in so low the men thought they could

¹³ Statement of Lt. Col. James W. Edwards.

¹⁴ Tyrrell, op. cit., 5 March 1952.

¹⁵ Mueller, op. cit.

have touched them with the tips of their bayonets. Enemy activity stopped abruptly and, for the first time that afternoon, the men could raise their heads from the ground and move around freely in their crowded perimeter. The first planes fired machine guns and rockets. The second flight carried napalm bombs that burst into orange blossoms of flame among the enemy positions. It was excellent close support, and Lieutenant Mitchell and the members of his patrol grinned with appreciation during the half hour that it lasted.

Immediately following the air strike a liaison plane came over to drop supplies to the patrol. It made four runs over the group of men, each time flying no higher than fifteen feet above their heads, so low the men could see that the pilot had pink cheeks. And because the enemy hills were so close, the plane had to cross the enemy positions at the same height. The pilot dropped thirty bandoleers of rifle ammunition, two cases of machine-gun ammunition and several belts of carbine cartridges and then, on the last run, an envelope to which was fastened a long, yellow streamer. Except for one box of machine-gun ammunition, all of this fell beyond the tiny perimeter and, now that the air strike was over, in an area that was under enemy fire. Nevertheless, several men dashed out to retrieve everything that was close.

A young soldier raced after the message, which fell well down on the eastern slope, and took it back to Lieutenant Mitchell. The message said, "Friendly column approaching from the south. Will be with you shortly." Mitchell read it and then crawled around the perimeter to show it to the rest of the men.¹⁶

About the same time, there was the sound of firing to the south. A few minutes later mortar rounds exploded on the top of Hill 453. Hopes of survival soared suddenly and the men shouted for joy. This, they decided, was the friendly relief column.

The airplanes left just as darkness began to set in, and Mitchell and Mueller warned their men to expect an enemy assault just as soon as it got dark. They also told the men not to yell out if they were hit because they did not dare let the Chinese know how many of the group were wounded.

Several mortar shells fell in the area, and one exploded in the center of the crowded perimeter, wounding one man seriously. The Chinese added automatic-weapons and rifle fire, building up the volume fast. There was the sound of bugles and of enemy voices and, between bursts of enemy fire, the sound of enemy soldiers walking over the crusted snow. Four men crawled forward until they could see the enemy approaching across the narrow saddle from the south. One of them, Sgt. Donald H. Larson, began yelling: "Here they come! Here they come!" They opened fire but within a few seconds all four of the men were hit. They crawled back.

¹⁶ Statement of Lt. Harold P. Mueller.

Sergeant Larson pointed to his head wound-his fifth for the day-as he crawled past Lieutenant Mitchell. "That's enough for me," he said.

The situation was grim. The fire fight that had flared up in the vicinity of Hill 453 had stopped, and there was now no evidence of friendly troops nearby. Gradually, the men who had been looking anxiously toward the area from which Captain Tyrrell's men had been firing lost their hope of getting out of their perimeter. It was colder now. Their wet clothing was freezing to the ground. Several men were suffering from frostbite. More than half were casualties. Those with serious wounds had been dragged to the rear (east) part of the hilltop where they were laid on the frozen earth. The hill was so steep there that if grenades were dropped they would roll on down the hill away from the wounded men.

Those men who were less seriously wounded kept firing on the line or loading magazines for automatic rifles and carbines. One man with a large hole in his stomach loaded ammunition for an hour and a half before he died.¹⁷ Lieutenant Mueller, who had been wounded earlier when a bullet struck his leg, was hit a second time-this time in the head-injuring his left eye. He began to see flashes of light and occasionally lost consciousness.¹⁸

Instead of the expected help, a second night attack hit Mitchell's patrol. It began with the usual mortar and machine-gun fire, worked up to grenade range, but again stopped a few feet from the edge of the perimeter when faced by the concentrated fire at the south end-fire from the machine gun and from several BARs. Private Stratton fired one of the automatic rifles with his left hand. When the Chinese were close, he stood on the rim of the perimeter, leveled his BAR at them and emptied the magazine. He was hit a second time, this time through the chest. Someone pulled him back toward the center of the perimeter. Soon afterwards a grenade exploded between his legs. Stratton screamed.

"For God's sake," said Mitchell, "shut up! "

"My legs have just been shot off," Stratton complained.

"I know it," the Lieutenant answered, "but shut up anyway."

Soon after this Stratton was wounded a fourth time, and died.¹⁹

While all of these events were taking place on the hill, Captain Tyrrell's rescue mission was progressing even though Mitchell's men could see no action.

¹⁷ Mueller, op. cit.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ In order that his family may not suffer unnecessary anguish, "Stratton" has been substituted for the real name of this brave soldier.

Company F had arrived in the Twin Tunnels area between 1720 and 1730-as the air strike was in progress and a few minutes before darkness. The vehicular column of eight 3/4-ton trucks and thirteen jeeps, with all of the trucks and some of the jeeps pulling trailers loaded with extra mortar and recoilless rifle ammunition, followed the same road used by the patrol. While the column was en route, an observer in a liaison plane dropped a message giving the exact location of the ambushed patrol, its vehicles, and also several positions where he had observed groups of enemy soldiers in that vicinity.

Nothing important happened until the two jeeps that formed the point of the column were within one hundred or two hundred yards of the ford near which Captain Stai had disappeared earlier in the day. Two machine guns on Hill 453 opened fire on the jeeps, bringing them to a quick halt. The occupants scrambled into the ditch for protection.

Captain Tyrrell, in the third jeep, soon appeared. He dismounted and walked back toward the rest of the column while his driver, already in the ditch, called after him, "You'd better get in the ditch, Captain. The Chinks will get you."

Tyrrell walked on back toward the 2d Platoon, which was next in column. "To hell with the Chinks," he said.²⁰

Deciding he could not proceed to the patrol with enemy machine gunners in his rear and riflemen on the highest hill in the area, Tyrrell hurriedly prepared to attack Hill 453. He ordered his 2d Platoon to dismount and lay down a base of fire to support an attack by the other two platoons. The 2d Platoon was firing rifles at Hill 453 within three to five minutes after the Chinese began firing. In the haze of dusk, Tyrrell sent his other two platoons toward the top of the hill, attacking up two of three spur ridges which extended generally east from Hill 453 and ended abruptly at the road. The heavy-machine-gun section was in action by the time the infantrymen started up the steep ridgeline, and before they had gone far the 81-mm mortar section began firing. Captain Tyrrell told the mortar crew to plaster the hill during the attack, moving the shell bursts up the ridgeline just in front of the advancing platoons. All of this had taken place in no more than twenty minutes, and in the midst of brisk enemy fire.²¹

The first sergeant of Company F, in the meantime, had all vehicles turned around and parked in a closed column near the mortar section so that the drivers and other men not actively engaged at the time could guard both the mortar section and the vehicles.

There was no fight for the top of Hill 453; the Chinese abandoned it and fell back in front of the mortar and machine-gun fire. In fact, enemy fire fell off sharply after

²⁰ Edwards, op. cit.

²¹ Tyrrell, op. cit., 9 September 1952.

the first half hour, and thereafter there was negligible opposition. Darkness, however, retarded the advance, which was already difficult and tedious because of the snow and the steepness of the ridge. It took two hours or longer for the 1st Platoon the one that attacked straight west-to gain the top of Hill 453. Once there, Captain Tyrrell told it to form a hasty perimeter for the defense of the hilltop and then send one squad south to contact the other platoon, which was coming up along the southern of the three spur ridges, thus making certain that the top of the hill was free of enemy soldiers. At 2030 these two platoons made contact.²²

From the hill to the north came the sounds of grenade explosions and heavy firing as another enemy attack fell against Lieutenant Mitchell's patrol.

Having secured Hill 453 and eliminated the threat from his rear, Tyrrell was ready to go ahead with his original mission. His 2d Platoon, which had been in support so far, was on the road and ready to head straight north toward the surrounded patrol just as soon as the rest of the company could be maneuvered into place to support the attack. By radio Captain Tyrrell ordered one of the platoons on Hill 453 to return to the road by the most direct route, and told the other one to move northeast to a point approximately two thirds of the way down the northernmost of the three spur ridges from that hill mass. When this platoon reached a position from which it could support the 2d Platoon by fire, it was to hold in place. He also sent the heavy-machine-gun section up the northern ridgeline to join the platoon that was to form the base of fire.²³

This re-positioning of his force required time, and in the meanwhile Tyrrell went to the area of his 2d Platoon to work out the complete plans for its advance and to make certain that all men of the platoon knew of the movements of the other platoons so that units of his company would not get into a fire fight among themselves. Having done this, he walked off to choose new positions east of the road for the heavy mortars, which he intended to displace forward. It was, by this time, 2100 or later.

While Tyrrell was thus engaged, he heard a voice coming from the direction of Sinchon: "Hey, are you GIs?" It sounded like an American voice.

Captain Tyrrell called back, "Who are you?" and received an answer that they were three wounded Americans.

Returning to the road, he alerted the platoon there to the possibility of some incident occurring on its right flank, moved a squad into position about a hundred yards east of the road and then, with his runner and radio operator, walked forward toward the direction from which the sound of the voice had come. They

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

stopped at a ditch and Tyrrell called for one man to come forward to be recognized. Someone answered, claiming they could not come forward separately since two of them were wounded-one seriously-and could not walk alone. Tyrrell, by this time reasonably certain that they were Americans, told them to come forward together. It was so dark that Tyrrell could distinguish objects only a few yards away and although he could see nothing, he could hear the three men stumbling through the crusted snow. He saw them first when they were only a few yards away, halted them, and asked who they were.

The three men explained that they were members of Mitchell's patrol. They had escaped from the perimeter and had made their way down the steep east side of the hill to the railroad tracks, which they had followed south. All of them appeared to be excited and suffering from exhaustion. One was bleeding badly. Tyrrell told them to get into the ditch with him and remain quiet while he listened for the sound of any enemy soldiers who, he thought, might have followed them. The six men sat quietly. There was no sound anywhere in the area, only darkness and stillness. After several minutes of waiting, they returned to the road and the area of the 2d Platoon.²⁴

Everyone else in the patrol, according to the three men who reached Company F, was dead. They described the last attack which ended with Chinese swarming over their perimeter, shooting and throwing grenades. Only the three of them had escaped and there was nothing on the hill now, they claimed, but "hundreds of Chinese." Although Captain Tyrrell questioned them in detail, they were emphatic in stating that the entire patrol had been overrun and all members had been killed.²⁵

The last fire fight on the hill had ended abruptly after what seemed to Tyrrell like a half hour of heavy fighting. He now decided to wait until morning before continuing, since his battalion commander had told him that if he could not make contact with the patrol before dark, to form a defensive perimeter until morning to prevent falling into an enemy trap or getting into a fire fight with friendly troops. He advised his platoon leaders of the change in plan.²⁶

Ten or fifteen minutes later the leader of the 1st Platoon (Lt. Leonard Napier), which was moving down the northern ridge from Hill 453 with the mission of establishing the base of fire for the next attack, called his company commander by radio.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Tyrrell, op. cit., 5 March and 9 September 1952.

²⁶ Ibid.

"If you had talked with a man who just came into my position," he told Tyrrell, "you wouldn't believe the patrol was wiped out."

This was Lieutenant Mueller's aid man who had run out of medical supplies during the afternoon and had left the perimeter after dark to try to get back to the vehicles where he hoped to find more supplies. For some unaccountable reason, he had gone too far south and there encountered Napier's platoon. Captain Tyrrell, questioning the medic over the radio, learned that the patrol was still holding at the time he left, even though three fourths of the men were casualties.²⁷

At once, Tyrrell issued new orders for his 2d Platoon (Lt. Albert E. Jones) to head north up the end of the long ridge toward the ambushed patrol. In the path of this platoon were three high points on the same ridgeline. Moving as quietly as possible, without preparatory or supporting fires, Lieutenant Jones and his platoon started forward, experiencing only the difficulties of moving and maintaining contact over steep terrain. They could hear another fire fight starting at the perimeter. They reached the first knob an hour later. The next knob ahead was the one from which most of the Chinese attacks had originated. Beyond that was the slightly lower knob where the patrol itself was located. There was no firing going on at the time Jones's 2d Platoon arrived at the southernmost knoll. Afraid that he might be walking into an ambush with his own platoon, he halted and then decided to go forward with one squad while the rest of his men formed a defensive perimeter.²⁸

Several hours had passed since Company F had done any firing. To the surviving members of Mitchell's patrol there was no evidence of the promised rescue. Enemy attacks, however, continued. Between first darkness and about 2100, the enemy made four separate assaults, all of them against the south end of the perimeter. It was the last of these that Captain Tyrrell had heard end abruptly while he was waiting for two of his platoons to get into position. Like the others, this attempt was preceded by heavy machine-gun and rifle fire with a few men making the final assault. It was broken up by Cpl. Jesus A. Sanchez, one of Lieutenant Mueller's men from 21st Infantry. Sanchez loaded two BAR magazines, waited until the Chinese were almost upon them, then jumped up and forward a few feet, and emptied both magazines at the Chinese. He ran back and lay down again.

There was respite for an hour before the enemy struck again, this time as Lieutenant Jones's platoon began moving north. For this assault the Chinese shifted to the small mound just west of Mitchell's hill, and attacked from that direction. Ten or fifteen enemy soldiers crawled up under the mortar and

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Edward, op. cit., p. 11.

machine-gun fire and attempted to overrun the American position. Since Lieutenant Mueller's machine gun was still guarding the south end of the line, five men with rifles and automatic carbines waited until the Chinese were at the rim of their perimeter, then fired at full rate for a minute or less. There was another brief lull before the Chinese made one more assault. This time three enemy soldiers succeeded in getting into the perimeter where they caused considerable confusion in the darkness. One Chinese soldier stood erect among Lieutenant Mitchell's men.

"Get the son of a bitch!" one of them yelled.

Several men fired at once, killing him. They killed another one who appeared immediately afterwards. A third Chinese walked up to within a few feet of SFC Odvin A. Martinson (Mueller's platoon sergeant) and fired at him with a burp gun. Sergeant Martinson, who already had been wounded five times that day, fired back with a pistol. Neither of them hit the other. PFC Thomas J. Mortimer, who was lying on the ground immediately behind the Chinese soldier, raised up and stuck a bayonet into his back as someone else shot him from the front. Sergeant Martinson picked up the body and threw it out of the perimeter.

"I don't want them in here," he said, "dead or alive."

The time was now 2230. There were between 27 and 30 wounded men in the perimeter, including those who were unable to fight, and several others, like Martinson, who had been wounded but were able to keep fighting. Lieutenant Mueller, having become conscious again, kept experiencing flashes of light in front of one eye. Ammunition was nearly gone, the effective strength of the patrol was low, and several doubted if they could hold off another attack. A few of the men wanted to surrender.

"Surrender hell!" said Sergeant Martinson who was, by this time, thoroughly angry.

Two red flares appeared toward the west and thereafter it was quiet. The patrol members waited for a half hour or longer while nothing happened. Then they heard footsteps again, the same sound of men approaching over frozen snow. This time the sound came from the south again. When the footsteps sounded close, Lieutenant Mitchell's men opened fire.

"GIs!" someone below yelled. "Don't shoot! GIs!"

For several seconds no one spoke or moved. Finally Corporal Sanchez called down, "Who won the Rose Bowl game?"

There was silence again for a few seconds until someone below called, "Fox Company, 23d Infantry, by God!"

Lieutenant Jones and his squad from Company F moved on up, following the same snow-beaten path over which the Chinese attacked during the afternoon and evening. Sanchez, the BAR man, stood up.

"We're relieved, fellows!" he yelled. "We're relieved!"

The others who could also stood up and, from then on, they disregarded the Chinese who had, apparently, moved back for the night.

A thin moon came up and furnished a little light, which made the evacuation of the wounded men easier. Nevertheless, it required more than three hours to move everyone off of the hill. Corporal Sanchez took charge of the top of the hill and supervised the evacuation from that end, searching the hill to be certain no living men were left behind, and emptying the pockets of the dead.²⁹

Some of the men whose wounds were not serious complained about the cold and the hardships of walking over the difficult terrain in the dark, but those men who were wounded seriously expressed only their gratitude, and tried to help themselves. Sergeant Martinson, with five bullet wounds, left the litters for the other men and hobbled out with two other men. Private Hensley, who broke several ribs while climbing the hill at the beginning of the action and had received help himself at that time, now helped carry another man down the hill. It was 0330, 30 January, before Company F men had carried down all surviving members of the patrol. Captain Tyrrell gave the word to move out and the column started south with one platoon of Company F marching ahead of the column and another following on foot behind the trucks.³⁰

The sun came up as the column reached Iho-ri.

DISCUSSION

An army is a team. It is composed of many subordinate teams, called organizations or units, which make up the whole. An army operates by teamwork. Only under extreme circumstances should subordinate units be broken up and teamwork jeopardized.

The patrol to the Twin Tunnels area was not a team. It had a rifle platoon, three drivers from another battalion, radio operators from an artillery battalion, attached heavy-weapons men, fourteen men from a platoon of another division, and an

²⁹ Mueller, op. cit.

³⁰ Tyrrell, op. cit., 9 September 1952

extra captain. Eleven All Stars do not make a football team until they have worked together. Fifty-six men and four officers do not make a patrol.

Security for a motorized patrol may be provided by speed, by regulated movement, by reconnaissance and observation to the front and flanks, and by the use of a proper formation. Either this account lacks detail or the patrol commander depended almost entirely on speed. No mention is made of movement by bounds from one position of observation to another. No patrols or individuals were sent out from the column to reconnoiter. No system of observation from within the column is described. The patrol leader-more courageously than wisely-is a part of the sole security element-four men in a jeep a hundred yards ahead of the main body.

It is doubtful, although the patrol followed the same route as a patrol on the preceding day, that the Chinese had prepared an ambush. A more probable explanation is that the patrol blundered into Chinese forces moving into or through the area. By any standards an organized ambush when sprung should have placed more immediate and more destructive fire on any enclosed patrol. If the enemy is to be credited with skillfully executing an ambush he must be criticized for permitting his prey to escape. If the enemy had not prepared an ambush, then he must be commended for his prompt and vigorous reaction.

In spite of the organizational handicap facing the patrol leader, he had almost unanimous support in his obviously good plan to break out of an awkward position. Only unity of effort and courageous leadership saved the patrol until a well-coordinated and skillfully executed attack by the Company C *team* relieved it.