

THE HOOK – KOREA

By David Butler

When Peter Cook first asked me to write something on Bob Downey's article I was already conscious of what a great service Bob had done by putting the story of 2RAR on the Hook into context. Somehow the battle has never been talked about much, probably because it culminated in the Truce and was overtaken by that remarkable event. Nonetheless it was a tremendous battle and we have to wonder why it has taken so long for the story to be told.

Many who really know 2RAR would not be surprised 2RAR from its inception has always been quiet, professional, and no fuss battalion. Formed from the units of the Ninth Division, it would be easy to assume it would always carry the glamour, which that division seemed to attract. But the leaders within the unit at foundation were of the tough, dedicated Arch Denness, Ron Garland style who made sure the job came first and were never side tracked by the illusion of easy reputation. That character persisted within the unit and carried it through those awful years which were endured in Puckapunyal on return from BCOF in 1948.

Bob Downey correctly identifies that period in his article as a story to be told and properly alludes to the resultant difficulties which the unit had to fix as it come to readiness for service in Korea. Sensibly he did not dwell on the government and bureaucratic incompetence and neglect which placed the battalion in such an appalling situation for so long. Even allowance for the vast backlog of work which had to be undertaken in the nation in those post war years does not excuse the lack of energy and imagination at most levels. Some would say the war had exhausted the country; certainly there was little vitality in many of the levels of leadership. It was as if people were content to concentrate on rebuilding their own lives and families after the years of absence on war service.

Long after that time, I served with one of the players of those years who told me of an incredible experience he endured in the transition of the battalion from BCOF to Puckapunyal. The outline of his story may help to explain the state of things at that time. Paddy Brennan, that most marvellous of soldiers, was a young sergeant who had either enlisted in the Australian Army in UK, or from a British unit in Japan, I can't remember which. I believe he had gone direct from the British Army to 2RAR, or 66 Aust Inf Bn as it then was, without going to Australia. When the ship carrying the unit home from Japan docked in Australia the bulk of those returning marched straight out from the dock to discharge or leave. Paddy was in charge of the small party, not entitled to leave, who were to move direct to Puckapunyal as the advance party. Every one waved goodbye and the young sergeant made his way to the RTO, only to discover that nobody knew anything about

his party. They had no money and not even an authority to get from the docks to the railway station. It was hardly a pleasant introduction to Australia for that young sergeant. You would have to say it is hard to imagine such muck up when measured against the standards of today. Small comfort for the young man, totally new to Australia, absolutely on his own and very aware of his responsibility for the men. Somehow Paddy got to the station and managed to convince the authorities to move his team to Victoria. They arrived unannounced at Seymour in a weekend, scrounged transport to Pucka, only to be left to their own devices in empty and unprepared lines. Evidently there was no one in authority to be found. With no money, no rations and no equipment they were stranded, at least until the following Monday. To say the least, the party was absolutely frustrated and very hungry. All they could find was an axe in an adjoining woodheap with which they killed a sheep, butchered and barbecued it. Could you imagine skinning a sheep with a blunt axe?

Obviously things had to get better, but it was not the time to be in a regular infantry battalion in Australia. The unit became pretty much a depot battalion once the Korean War started, with a constant turnover of people. All the while the battalion endured barracks which should have been condemned years before. Just across the road the National Service battalions enjoyed high standard accommodation in barracks specially refurbished for them. Political correctness is not a modern day phenomenon; it was blatant in 1952. 2RAR faced experiences, which would have challenged any organisation to its very foundation. A handful of devoted senior officers and NCO's struggled to maintain stability and identify and deserve enormous credit. For example, Bob describes how the RSM, Lionel McCombe, during some of the worst time, persevered with training his personally selected cadre of young NCO's. Every morning, without fail, they would do an hour on the square before morning parade. At other times he would take them for weapon training for which he was famed. Incidentally he was the photographic model used in a rewrite of the Owen Gun pamphlet just after the war. Largely through his determination, example and encouragement the battalion developed a complement of outstanding junior leaders, ideally suited for the savage patrolling war they would eventually encounter in Korea. Furthermore, he set standards of the management of soldiers for those young men, which enabled them to absorb, without fuss, the large number of men the battalion took over from IRAR in Korea. Lionel McCombe was a soldier.

Bob has told the story of the Hook well. From his description the reader can form a good gauge of the enormity of the battle. Even so it must be very hard to

grasp the horror which was there for all to see when the war suddenly stopped as the Truce came into effect. There were over 3000 Chinese dead lying in front of the battalion. Many of the dead were laying two or three deep in rows, the whole scene was so utterly tragic. While the unit watched, it took the Chinese stretcher parties five days to take the bodies away. The spectacle so overwhelmed belief as to leave one to wonder what was going on in the Chinese lines. With so many fatal casualties there must have been at least 10000 wounded men. Our brigade commander, Brigadier John Wilton, echoed everyone's sentiment when he is quoted in the Official History as saying, "it was a horrible sight, which I will never forget."

In the face of events like these one has to ponder why that last Hook battle has never attracted the prominence of the early Korean battles, Kapyong and Maryang San. In terms of the numbers of troops engaged, ammunition expended and the challenge faced, the scale of the battle was enormous. For a considerable period of the battle there were at least nine Chinese battalions operating on 2RAR's front. There is no doubt had the enemy achieved his intention along the axis of Pt 121 he would have turned the line and visited a severe defeat on the UN forces. Because of its location near a bend on the Samichon River the Hook sector was always a hot spot. There were two particularly furious battles which come to mind, one against the BlackWatch in 1952 and the other against the Duke of Wellington's Regiment in 1953. On both occasions the position was just held in the most desperate of circumstances. Each time the Chinese, with overwhelming force and very heavy artillery support, penetrated the Hook company itself but could not hold under the weight and accuracy of the artillery storm the Commonwealth Divisional artillery developed against them. In July 1953 2RAR, newly arrived on the position, had only just gained an ascendancy in the patrol battle and wrested a precarious control of its front so gaining observation of the approaches to it before the Chinese attacked. Furthermore, in that short period after taking over the position before the Chinese attacked again, the battalion had not spread itself and worked without respite, night and day, to reestablish the defensive position. Fortunately all the effort paid off. The work was completed and it was a fully prepared and quietly determined battalion, which stood to and faced the commencement of the Chinese onslaught. At no time thereafter was the enemy able to effectively penetrate the battalion area. It was a classic defensive battle.

2RAR took over the Hook from the Kings Regiment, who had replaced the Duke of Wellington's after their gallant defence against the odds. The Kings were only there for a week, so a lot remained for 2RAR to complete. For starters the Chinese were on the wire. Quite literally they were camped there. Shortly after the hour appointed for the Truce a reinforced Chinese platoon suddenly appeared. They were dug in on the

northern (reverse) slope of the Green Finger, 30 to 40 yards from the forward pits of the Hook Company. Their orders had been to fight to the last man. It was no wonder the patrol battle for 2RAR had been so fierce. Every night for ten days or so there had been intensive, savage patrol battles to force the Chinese off the wire. At those close ranges it was difficult to even get out of the trench without contest with the enemy. It was a deadly race at dusk every day for those brave men. The cost had been heavy, but the battalion endured and was successful. The Chinese were slowly forced back. That Chinese platoon on first contact with our soldiers after the Truce, before the hierarchy arrived, made it quite clear they had not expected to withstand the aggressive Australian patrols for much longer. They were at the end of their tether. How vital it proved that the 2RAR standing patrols were forward of the main line of trenches when the main battle commenced and were able to direct heavy fire on to the first sign of enemy approach.

What is not generally appreciated from the accounts of the battle is that that standing patrol on the Green Finger was manned and remained in position throughout each night of the battle despite the presence of enemy in overwhelming strength. Furthermore, a Vickers machine gun section, located with the US Marine right forward company, about 500 yards west of the 2RAR position, sited so as to fire in enfilade across the battalion front, held its position when the US company was over run and continued to support the battalion. The section commander took as many men as could be spared from the guns and formed a defensive position, which gallantly and effectively halted successive Chinese attacks. Immediately east of those intrepid machine gunners was the Contact Bunker. It was so named because it was the link on the divisional boundary, sitting to cover the reentrant leading up to the 121 feature. The position, manned by a rifle section, was right on the axis of the Chinese thrust. It is not enough to talk generally about the patrol battle. People must be aware of the absolute necessity of capitalising on the advantages so hard won in that patrol battle. Those two cool young corporals at the Green Finger standing patrol and the Contact Bunker, together with the machine gun sergeant, each with their gallant sections, played such an important part in the successful defence and the final victory and provide a classic example of what should be done. Incidentally, the three gallant NCO's were each awarded the Military Medal for their outstanding feats of arms. I have often wondered whether, at other times, in other units, in other armies, or, in other wars, they may have been differently rewarded.

As already explained, on this occasion the Chinese had moved the main axis of their attack further west against the high ground represented by the 121 feature rather than at the Hook company itself, where they had paid so dearly in the past. Had they succeeded,

because of the nature of the ground, they would have been much harder to shift and would have, no doubt, rendered the battalion position untenable. Their major thrust was against the right forward battalion of the US Marine Division on the left of the Commonwealth Division. Here they did over run the right forward company and were threatening more. Since they had been unable to penetrate anywhere along the 2RAR line there was a base for the Commonwealth Division to stabilize and contain the Chinese penetration along the left divisional boundary. As if aware of this, the ferocity with which the Chinese attacked was awesome. They subjected 2RAR to an absolute artillery firestorm in an attempt to neutralise them. The weight of fire detected against the rifle companies particularly those on 121 and the Hook was sustained and incredibly heavy. I have seen in other publications the rate likened to that endured at Pozieres, which has always been regarded as the heaviest shellfire to which Australian divisions were subjected in World War I. The stoicism and bravery with which the men in the companies endured the most severe and prolonged of trails was inspirational and deserving of the highest praise.

In reply to this onslaught, the fire support the Commonwealth Division developed along the 2RAR front to engage the enemy movement was absolutely overwhelming. In addition to the planned artillery concentrations and the harassing and interdiction tasks of any battle, the divisional artillery fired in excess of 20 divisional targets at the maximum rate using Variable Time fuses against the massive Chinese concentrations as they approached dangerously close to the 2RAR positions. This meant 80 field guns were engaged. (At the time a US battery was available to allow the regiments to rest a battery at a time, as long as the resting battery remained with its guns in range for any emergency. The artillery otherwise got little respite during the long periods the division spent in the line). The maximum rate was, as best I can recall, was 5 rounds per gun per minute. The VT fuses burst at a predetermined height above the ground and inflicted great damage to troops in the open. The effect of 400 of these special shells falling every minute in a confined area against closely massed troops is just too terrible to contemplate. Medium and heavy artillery units, mortars, tanks, and medium machine guns supplemented the field artillery. The direction and coordination of fire, through the Commander Royal Artillery and the artillery staffs, was well practiced and absolutely superb. It was an outstanding defensive battle and the artillery produced the devastating results already mentioned. This artillery battle was so much different to the solitary struggles without much support earlier in the war and at Kapyong. The brilliant attack at Maryang San showed the success, which could be gained using all arms when complete army formations are employed. The Hook in July 1953 represented the absolute culmination of those experiences.

While it is easy to see the Hook battle of July 1953

as a great artillery victory, built on the impregnable defence of 2RAR; old soldiers will know it does not tell the whole story. 2RAR was a good patrolling battalion; we are already aware of the quality of the junior leadership and of some of the reasons why there were such fine young men able to move so positively on the battlefield. The battalion's first tour in the line on the 159 feature in May/June 1953 was a tough introduction. The patrolling contests, particularly around the Mound, were testing for all ranks. Importantly, the battalion settled down and became very professional in the planning and conduct of its patrolling programmes. Leaders at every level became familiar and were practiced with the precision and immediacy of the methods of employing and controlling fire then in use within the Commonwealth Division. Detailed target information and pre-registration of every feature on the battlefield, together with excellent and reliable communications, gave every patrol commander the ability to call for the divisional artillery if required, and, for that matter, every other weapon within range. That is to say the tank, machine gun and mortar targets were as carefully registered as the artillery and the whole was coordinated. Furthermore the patrol commander would expect an immediate response. Remember too, by the time the battalion took over the Hook, most of the young platoon commanders and sergeants had completed 20 or 30 patrols, were competent and did not frighten easily. So it was; all of those difficult years, the handicaps of poor equipment and little training and a myriad of other things were redeemed on the battlefield. The soldiers rose to the occasion and made everyone look good. We all know that is what usually happens; we all hope battalions will be given a much more even opportunity if ever they have to go to war again.

Having said all that, it is only right to say that under George Larkin 2RAR was a very happy battalion. He was a nice man who genuinely cared for his soldiers. Without pretence in his association, his easy way with them appealed, they liked him. No matter how hard things had been for him in the Command Post the night before; first light would find him out and around the companies in the trenches. All this was backed by considerable experience of war, a good tactical sense and an unflappability which was contagious. The team around him was an experienced one so that battalion was led and administered, it was accustomed for all the things around it to be well done. Nor did the battalion suffer the discontinuity and erosion of individual relief. In short the battalions was tidy, lived well and had plenty of spirit.

As has already been mentioned, the battalion also knew how to work hard. The amount of the work to be done will not be clear to every reader. The state of the Hook defences when the battalion took over could not have been worse. The Chinese artillery during the Duke of Wellingtons' battle had almost totally destroyed the defensive positions. In some places communication

trenches which had been 8 to 10 feet deep were now ankle deep. Many of the fighting bunkers no longer served their purpose. The whole of the elaborate fixed line communication system had been destroyed and the position was functioning on a most fragile arrangement using assault cable. The defensive wire had alarming gaps and had to be replaced. The whole scene was desolate, boggy and smelly, everything was grey and covered with dust, just like those awful photographs of France 1914/18. The Kings, in the short time they were there, could do little more than reestablish the defensive perimeter. 2RAR virtually had to start again while under the threat of the ominous presence of the Chinese and at the height of the intensely humid Korean summer. Nothing could be left to chance. Even the defensive fire tasks were found to have lapsed into inaccuracy over the years, every task had to be re-registered. In two weeks of nonstop effort, day and night, virtually the whole defended position was rebuilt; trenches, bunkers, minefields and communications, everything. As one example, over 200 miles of signal cable were laid by hand. All the while the patrol battle raged and the shelling was a daily feature of life. It was truly a herculean effort, completed just before the Chinese attacked again. The fact is that the fierce, sustained Chinese shelling flattened everything again on the first night of the battle, leaving the battalion to scramble through the next day to meet a repeat Chinese performance on night 2. Somehow the battalion rose to the challenge again, although it was a very tired battalion which welcome the Truce. It is hard to escape the conclusion that had the Chinese been able to follow their attack on the Duke's just a little quicker the result may have been different.

While talking about the spirit of the battalion I would be remiss if I did not make mention of the great delight everyone in 2RAR got from the the band. No doubt many readers will find it at least passing strange for such a comment to appear in an article about a battalion which had been engaged in an obviously Homeric struggle. I know bands were taken away from battalions over 30 years ago as an essential economy, which the bureaucrats were able to impose with such delight, and at no cost to themselves. All I can say is that the 2RAR band, under the energetic Bandmaster Fletcher, brought great joy and delight to all ranks in times of severe trial. A rendition of the favourite "Oopsie Do" was sufficient to have everyone smiling. Some things you just cannot measure or cost. 2RAR was a better battalion because of the band. It was a positively uplifting presence around the battalion.

We owe Bob Downey a debt of gratitude for reminding us of one of the Regiment's great battles. For once the outcome did not depend almost solely on the bravery and tenacity of a handful of ragged riflemen. This time the full armoury of a powerful and accomplished formation was deployed. On the tenacious defence of 2RAR the total power of the division was employed against an exposed massed

enemy. The combined power and precision of the divisional artillery absolutely and completely destroyed the enemy. The combined power and precision of the divisional artillery absolutely and completely destroyed the enemy. Despite the enormity and horror of the enemy dead left on the field, we cannot claim it as a total victory because the Truce dramatically stopped everything in mid battle. It is hard to imagine what the Chinese would have done next. They would not have been able to go forward without adding to the slaughter; could they have just left the bodies there without attracting the opprobrium of the world? In any case they must have been totally exhausted. We will never know how they would have reacted. We still don't even know what they had hoped to achieve in their flurry on the eve of the Truce.

I share Bob's concern there is no specific regimental battle honour for the Hook; currently the generic The Samichon is judged to cover the battle. The battle in which 2RAR played such a significant part produced the only clear cut victory achieved by either side in any of those torrid Hook battles. Since the two British regiments engaged in the earlier battles, The Black Watch and The Duke of Wellington's Regiment, each were awarded the singular battle honour, The Hook, it seems only proper The Royal Australian Regiment should be also rewarded for 2RAR's battle. Ironically the Samichon is not even emblazoned on the Regimental Colour.

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David is probably the only member of 1 Comwell Div. to take part in a major early battle (see Apple Orchard battle by David DF Sep 93) and the last battle of The Hook. (Ed.)

NSW ANNUAL RIFLE SHOOT

We are currently negotiating with the 18th Bn Memorial Rifle Club to join them on their Annual Guest Day Rifle Shoot.

Venue: Hornsby Rifle Range – Marcus Clark Way – Hornsby NSW.

Date: To be finalised but during October 2001.

Time: 1300 hrs.

Weapons: •303

Range: 200 metres.

Butts: Butts will be manned by local cadet corps volunteers.

Cost: Small subscription to enter.

Refreshments: BBQ before the shoot – drinks afterwards.

Trophies: Most definitely.

Expressions of Interest: Please ring Trevor Carter on 9546 1516 or Gus Breen on 9428 4683 by 31 July 2001 indicating your intention to participate. Full details will then be mailed as they come to hand.