

**The Hill**

A Brief Memoir

Victor T. Stella

It is rare that I think about the Hill anymore. When things got sticky or pressure built up, I thought about it often in those busy years raising the children, working two jobs, and taking courses toward an M.A. Now, over 50 years since that terrible night, it isn't often that I have to recall the Hill to put things into perspective. Nothing could ever be as bad as things were then.

Why shouldn't I use it to help to get on in life? The fact that I had lived it, suffered it, and survived it earned me the right. I didn't talk about it much but I didn't avoid it if someone asked directly what I did during that so-called "police action" in Korea. Once or twice I had even used the Hill to help someone else get through a bad stretch.

But here I am now in my 75<sup>th</sup> year, a comfortable old age. My focus these days is on taking the medications to keep my blood pressure and cholesterol down and making sure my patient spouse does the same. There seldom is the need to conjure up the Hill anymore; these are indeed the Golden Years.

But this very evening my grandson Steven, a boy enamored of all things military, had asked that trite old question, "What did you do during the war, Grandpa?"

Of course, my beloved spouse, urged me to tell the boy of my experiences. She hoped it might in some way turn him away from his fascination with war.

So, I told my story with the boy's eyes growing bigger with each terrible detail.

### My Story

"We were in a valley, Choan- Ni, I later learned, and we were completely surrounded by Chinese. Word was that there were 10,000 of them on the ridges around us.

"I was company clerk in Headquarters Company, 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 23<sup>rd</sup> Regiment of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, the Indianhead Division. My main function, as I recall, was to keep the Morning Reports accurately. These Reports were a record of those killed, wounded, returned, and so on.

"The 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant barged into our office tent yelling, 'Let's pack it up, kid. We're making a run for it. Make sure you get your Reports into the foot locker and into the jeep. Let's hit it!

"In minutes, we were bouncing down the road in what seemed a complete rout. The Chinese up on those ridges were shooting down at us like 'fish in a

barrel' as someone said. A young G.I. frantically driving our jeep was trying to avoid bodies in the road when he got hit. We slammed into an abandoned truck. I was tossed out, luckily not breaking anything. I ducked behind the truck for protection against the fire from above. Across a clearing, I could see some GIs on a wooded knoll, yelling and gesturing to me to run across and join them, an invitation I couldn't refuse.

"I jumped up and sprinted across the clearing but there apparently was a Chinese sharpshooter up on a ridge waiting for me to make my run for soon as I cleared the truck and got into the open, he let off a stream of shots from his 30-caliber machine gun. They kicked up the dirt in front of me. One ricocheted off the ankle of my boot but another caught me in the thigh a few inches above my left knee. I sprawled about ten feet short of the knoll. My buddies on the knoll were yelling encouragement at me to hurry as I crawled the rest of the way. Thankfully, that fellow on the hill either ran out of ammo or took some kind of pity on me.

"Well, we couldn't stay where we were. My buddies stripped a couple of boughs and used a field jacket tied between them to make a stretcher. They laid me on it and proceeded to carry me over the hills away from that valley of death.

"We were a band of forty or fifty led by a green 2<sup>nd</sup> looey. The boys who carried me were saints; it was a struggle climbing those hills. Finally we got to one

hill where we were again completely surrounded by Chinese who were blowing their bugles and winging up hand grenades at us.

"I lay there on my stretcher watching my buddies fighting and dying valiantly. I made a last good Act of Contrition and commended my soul to God, convinced that I would meet Him shortly.

"Suddenly, I heard the Lieutenant yelling 'Surrender! Surrender!' and soon the enemy was swarming about us jabbering and grabbing our weapons.

"Night fell and we had to spend it on that hill. I thought about my young bride of six months back home 9000 miles away saying Novenas for me. Well, it seemed that they had been answered up to a point.

"The night was long and sleepless. One badly wounded boy constantly moaned for his mother until about 3 o'clock when his silence signaled his death.

"The next morning our captors marched us down off the hill; I stumbled along hanging on to one of my buddies. Our route took us through the valley, a scene of unbelievable carnage and chaos.

"My wound turned out to be a so-called million-dollar one; the shot had missed the bone and major arteries. The entrance wound was already scabbing over but the large exit wound needed care. I managed to beg salt from my captors, shaking it upon the wound which burned devilishly. Yet it kept maggots out of it; something the other wounded were not able to do.

"We were force-marched at night to avoid being strafed by U.N. forces who could not distinguish who we were on the ground. So for several nights we stumbled over that beautiful but rough countryside by the light of the moon thinking about those fly boys up there drinking hot coffee from their thermoses and munching on cookies or even buns.

"Another unexpected benefit from the wound was that I couldn't keep up with the main body of prisoners. When myself and two others who had wounds hampering their walking fell behind, two Chinese grunts were assigned to us. These were soldiers who for most of their lives had never been more than fifteen miles from their homes. They were not cruel; on more than one occasion one even ran across the paddies to find a well and bring me back a saucer of water. Our only food was the Chinese soldier's field ration, a paste made from wheat flour poured into that saucer from a pouch they carried on their belts.

"On the ninth day, we got another break: a massive U.N. counteroffensive had started and all soldiers were needed. Our two captors were recalled to their units so they put us into an abandoned farmhouse and with so many gestures warned us to stay there until they returned. (The Novenas were still at work.) As soon as they left, we ensconced ourselves in a bunker in a nearby field where we spent the night with the field mice.

"The next morning was brilliantly clear and I remember foolishly thinking that the beautiful countryside would make a fabulous vacation spot. My two companions and myself set off southward as fast as we could hobble. One fellow, named Shoemaker, had a mangled foot which hampered him badly. The other fellow, whose name I don't recall, was an old-timer who had taken a shot a shot in the groin which exited just above his rectum, miraculously missing bones and major organs.

"We came to a farmhouse with an old couple and a boy of about 12 or 13. The boy eagerly gestured that he knew where there were others like us. He indicated that he would run to get them with which we were happy to agree. He took off down the road at a full run. We settled in with the old couple expecting a long wait but early in the afternoon we saw a cloud of dust down the road and within a minute or two a Marine six-by roared into the yard in front of the farmhouse. (Those Noyenas were still working.)

"Our liberators gave us some C-rations which we wolfed down to our later regret since we really hadn't eaten anything much in nearly ten days. The Marines piled us into their truck and set off for the rear where we were turned over to a MASH unit. From there we enplaned to Japan; this was still the tenth day of our capture.

“Here’s the final miracle: I knew that the Army notified next of kin of an MIA after ten days. I got to a phone as soon as I could to call home. My mother-in-law and sister-in-law had received the telegram notifying them of my status and they were agonizing over how to tell my wife who was at work. My call came in time to relieve them of all that.”

So that’s my story. I received a second chance on the Hill that night fifty-three years ago. I have since sired 6 children and 10 grandchildren. After losing my beloved wife Ann late in life, I have the great good fortune and privilege through a fortuitous marriage to become grandfather to 18 more grandchildren.

I tell this story for three reasons. First, to show the horror of war, which is to be used only as a last resort. Second, to help keep the everyday problems and pressures in perspective and not succumb to them.

I tell this story mainly for my grandchildren but also those other children who have grown to adulthood in an extremely Godless, secular world. It seems that in times of war the foolishness of materialistic secularism is exposed as it is again in the Iraqi War.

Understand that while I was in Korea, I was a bitter man. I was dealt a hard hand and was feeling sorry for myself. I cursed my captors and almost got my head smashed in with a rifle butt on one occasion for I let my feelings be known. I was

not saying prayers; it was the prayers of my long-suffering wife that were answered. I think my extraordinary escape and recovery were a direct result of them. I have since found in my own prayer life the power there, especially the Rosary. I highly recommend it. That is my third reason.



## A Short Visit to a Korean Farm

I have never forgotten an incident that happened nearly fifty years ago to the day. I was a reluctant warrior, recalled to active duty during the Korean War, six months married and in my junior year at college. Our battalion CO had ordered a contingent to go on ahead to prepare a forward campsite for his headquarters.

The contingent consisted of a young 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in charge, the 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant, myself as Company Clerk, and 15 or 20 foot soldiers. We set off across the rugged hills and soon came upon a farmhouse with a boy of seven or eight sitting on the small front porch. An old cow whose hide hung on it like an oversized coat stood in the yard staring vacantly at us.

A GI who fancied himself a joker, jumped up on the cow, pretending to be a rodeo rider. The cow stumbled a few yards and quickly broke a leg. The joker, feeling stupid now, performed what was supposed to be an act of mercy by shooting the cow. The whole scene displayed nothing but brutality.

We went into the farmhouse and in a back room came upon a pathetic scene. There on the floor sat a little baby of less than a year and behind her lay the body of her dead mother. In any place but a war zone, the child would have been offered succor, the mother buried, and the boy provided a home and life's necessities. No such thing occurred here.

Myself and a few others tried to persuade the Lieutenant to do something, at least bring the boy and baby with us, but he was adamant, saying there was no place for them in the forward camp. He cut off further discussion, obviously distraught, and ordered us to leave the boy C-Rations with an can opener it was doubtful he could operate. We straggled out of that farm, leaving it worse than we found it, loaded with a sense of guilt that none of us would be able to shake off.

There are many things in my life that I'm ashamed of but leaving that farm in that way ranks at the very top.

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