

The Men Who Put the Heart in "Heartbreak Ridge"

*American and French Boys
Crawled Over Dead Com-
rads, straight Into Enemy
Fire, to Win a Long, Bloody
Korean Battle*

By STAN CARTER



Victorious Americans poised to defend the hills they captured after a month-long struggle

THE tired, unshaven major looked up at the chaplain and grinned ruefully. "They're taking a beating, Father," he said. "They're giving a beating, too, but not many men are left."

It was in the desperate, early days on Heartbreak Ridge, where American and French soldiers of the 23d Infantry Regiment were fighting the longest and most costly hill battle of the Korean war. The major had just walked down off Heartbreak Ridge. He seemed beaten and without hope.

These men thought their mission was suicide. Yet they crawled again and again up sheer mountainsides over the bodies of their dead comrades into the face of Communist fire. In a battle that raged for 30 days and 29 nights, the 23d Regiment of the U.S. Second Division wrested Heartbreak Ridge from a numerically superior enemy. In the 23d Regiment, 1,650 men, about half the unit's combat troops, were killed or wounded.

The 9th Infantry Regiment suffered 200 more casualties in three days at the beginning of the battle. Probably 10,000 North Koreans were killed or wounded.

There were men who personally knocked out Communist machine-gun nests with grenades, men who carried wounded and dead out through fire, men who fought continuously until they were completely exhausted. And there were men who stood up in formation and attacked in formation through a barrage of enemy fire.

"There's scarcely been a battle like it—ever," said Colonel James Y. Adams, of Monterey, California, commander of the 23d Regiment.

Sergeant James E. Lunsford, of East Bernstadt, Kentucky, and Corporal James Skaggs, of Columbus, Ohio, were killed going into a Communist bunker with nothing in their hands but knives.

Private First Class Franklin D. Roton, of Sheridan, Wyoming, had been a medic just three and a half days. He was standing on the ridge, tending a wounded man. A North Korean tossed a grenade. Roton threw himself over his patient to shield him from the blast and was wounded by grenade fragments.

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Wet and cold, tired and dirty, infantrymen wait for transportation to the rear—and rest

Corporal Manley Hand, of Sanford, Michigan, continued to fire his machine gun while North Koreans swarmed around his company's position. The North Koreans threw grenades into his foxhole. Three times Hand picked them up and threw them back at the enemy. The fourth grenade exploded and killed him while he was raising his arm to hurl it away.

I was with the 23d Regiment during most of the battle. It lasted from September 12th to October 12th, while the Korean armistice talks foundered on charges and countercharges of violations of the Kaesong neutral zone. Heartbreak Ridge was named during the first week of the battle, when every Allied attack was turned back with withering Communist fire. A wounded soldier at a forward aid station shuddered, "It's a heartbreak, it's a heartbreak," and the name stuck.

The North Koreans had turned a four-mile-long ridge line 18 miles above Yanggu in eastern Korea into a fortress with 1,000 log and dirt bunkers so sturdy that even direct artillery hits sometimes bounced off. The terrain was the most difficult in Korea. There were three major peaks on the ridge line—one at the south, one at the north and one in the center.

There were countless small ridges, or fingers, running off toward the valleys on the east, and the west. Picture it as the spinal column of a fish, with hundreds of vertebrae.

Before the battle Heartbreak Ridge was covered with trees and undergrowth. At the end it was bald except for a few shell-splintered tree stumps.

The center, the tallest peak, was flat on top. Its southern slope was steep and could be crisscrossed by fire from the bunkers on the summit. The northern approach was an almost straight up-and-down cliff. The northernmost peak had a needlelike summit, with six Communist bunkers dug into the needle. South of the needle there was a bowl-like crater with 20 more bunkers. A flat, narrow ridge line led to the crater from the south. It was absolutely flat and open, with nothing on it to hide behind.

On each of the fingers, or smaller ridge lines, leading away toward the east and west, there were more bunkers placed so that they commanded all the approaches to Heartbreak Ridge. It took two and a half hours to climb the center peak of Heartbreak Ridge, and up to 10 hours to carry a wounded man down the steep trail.

Heartbreak Ridge was part of the main line of resistance the Communists established during the Kaesong truce talks. It commanded the major Communist supply route. The North Koreans were gathering troops and supplies in the Mundung-ni Valley, just west of Heartbreak Ridge, and they had concentrated mortars and artillery pieces in the Satae-ri Valley, east of Heartbreak Ridge.

"We watched the build-up on Heartbreak Ridge just south of the northernmost peak. It got to the top of the ridge the next day, but for three days the Communists clung to bunkers inside the battalion's perimeter, and there was continual stiff, hand-to-hand fighting before the foothold on Heartbreak Ridge was secured.

The Second Battalion tried a dozen approaches in an attempt to assault the center peak of Heartbreak Ridge, but it came under deadly Communist fire on every little finger and ridge line leading up toward the peak. Eventually it had to give up the attempt. Direct fire from tank guns destroyed most of the Communist bunkers at the

Heartbreak Ridge



An American tank rumbles down a road on Heartbreak Ridge, passing a machine-gun position and litters for dead and wounded.

southern end of Heartbreak Ridge, and a battalion of the 9th Regiment was able to take the southernmost peak with only four casualties.

But in the next three days the 9th Regiment lost 200 men from Communist mortar and artillery fire while barely holding on to the peak. The First Battalion, attacking from the southern peak north along the ridge line toward the center peak, was pushed back repeatedly by extremely savage Communist counterattacks. The casualties were heavy.

On the morning of September 15th the Communists overran Charlie Company of the First Battalion in a counterattack. The company had to withdraw, leaving behind two of its machine guns. The last time two of our men were seen, they were standing before their foxholes, fist-fighting with the Reds. Another man of Charlie Company killed a North Korean with an entrenching tool.

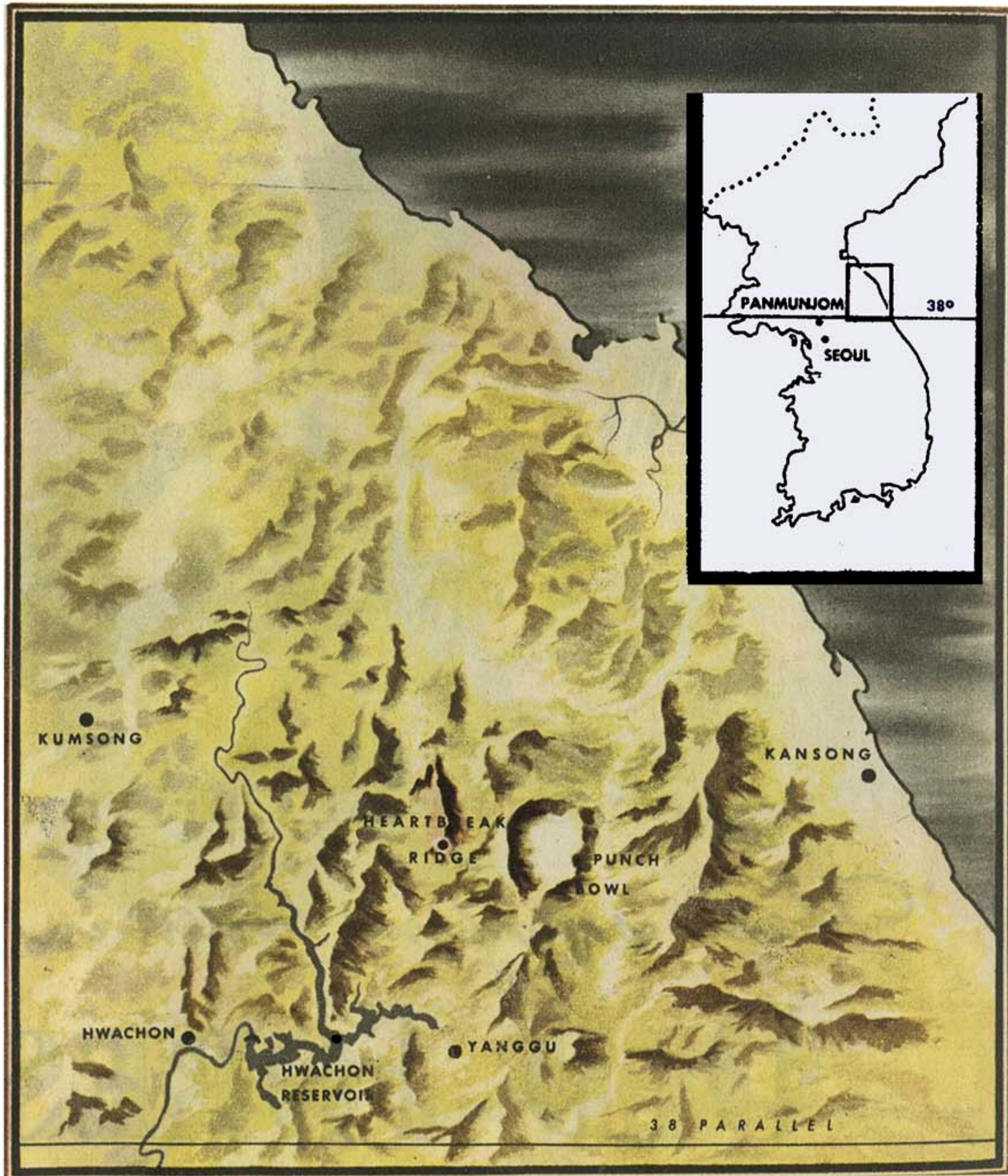
Three days later the Third Battalion got to the top of the northernmost peak in a night attack with flame throwers. At 1:00 A.M., September 19th, the Communists counterattacked. The Americans were still holding on to the summit at 6:00 A.M. and it looked as though they would be able to hold the hill. At 8:00 A.M., the enemy overran the American positions and killed everyone on the hill.

The First Battalion continued to attack the center peak from the south. On the fifth attempt, on September 23d, three men crawled to the summit of the high mountain. By evening, 21 Americans were on the summit, but the North Koreans were still inside bunkers on the mountaintop. With the weapons they had, the Americans could not get the Communists out. Early on the morning of September 24th, the Communists counterattacked. The Reds came out of the bunkers on the mountaintop and from the ridges to the west. Few of the Americans got off the hill alive.

About 4:30 A.M., the North Koreans swept down from the mountaintop and surrounded the remainder of the First Battalion on the southern slope. It took until dawn for the weary Americans to fight their way out of the trap, but at the end of the engagement there were 250 to 300 enemy dead in front of the First Battalion's positions.

On September 29th, Navy planes bombed, strafed and poured napalm on the center peak and the ridge west of it for a half hour. Then for a half hour the Second Division's artillery pummed the peak. After the shelling, the French battalion launched an all-out assault on the peak from the north while the First Battalion attacked it from the south. The First Battalion was

Heartbreak Ridge



Map shows scenes of heaviest fighting for Heartbreak Ridge, which U.S. and French troops took after seesaw battle over Korea's worst terrain

stopped in its tracks by intense enemy fire. In the first 15 minutes of their attack the French suffered 100 casualties. Six French soldiers crawled up the sheer northern slope of the mountain and spread a square of red cloth on the summit to indicate to Allied airmen that the ground was ours. Then they were killed by the Reds.

All three regiments of the Second Division began a limited objective attack the night of October 5th. The Americans and French in the 23d Regiment assaulted the center peak of Heartbreak Ridge and the smaller ridge lines west of it. A tank task force of the 23d drove up the Satae-ri Valley east of Heartbreak Ridge, drawing the bulk of Communist artillery fire away from the ridge itself. The 9th and 38th Regiments attacked in the Mundung-ni Valley and the mountains west of Heartbreak Ridge. At 6:00 A.M., October 6th, the center peak of Heartbreak Ridge was ours.

"The thing that cracked it was the attack in the west," said Colonel Adams. "It left the enemy uncertain and unable to concentrate his fire on Heartbreak."

Enemy Defends Ridge Savagely

The North Koreans had been told to defend Heartbreak Ridge to the death and that was what they were doing. On the night of October 8th, the enemy made an extremely violent counterattack against the Third Battalion, holding positions west of the northernmost peak of Heartbreak Ridge. The worst of it lasted 20 minutes. Waves of North Koreans poured in on the Americans, screaming unintelligible words. The Communist attack was broken after the Americans had suffered 90 casualties and the North Koreans had suffered many hundreds.

Fifty tanks of the 72d Tank Battalion and two companies of the 38th Infantry Regiment broke through Communist lines west of Heartbreak Ridge. The task force drove up the Mundung-ni Valley, flanking the Communists on the ridge.

At four o'clock in the afternoon of October 11th, American and French troops of the 23d assaulted the last Communist-held peak at the north end of Heartbreak Ridge. Allied artillery laid a curtain of fire behind the hill to prevent the Communists from receiving reinforcements from the north, but Allied infantrymen moving up the flat, open ridge line toward the peak were pinned down by intense Communist fire. A Chinese soldier was captured, but it ap-

Heartbreak Ridge

peared that the bulk of Communists on Heartbreak Ridge were North Koreans to the last. American troops on the ridges west of the peak joined in the attack on the last Red-held hill, and at dawn on October 12th they linked up with American and French elements attacking from the south.

Later that morning—at 8:00 A.M.—Colonel Adams announced jubilantly, “We’ve got it!”

It was just a question of time before the last die-hard Communists must surrender or die. There were still 35 North Koreans holed up in three bunkers on the summit, but they were surrounded by the Americans and French. The 23d spent the rest of October 12th mopping up. At dawn on October 13th, the last Communist resistance on Heartbreak Ridge ceased.

The men of the 23d Regiment had fought in some of the bitterest battles of the Korean war: they fought at Kunu-ri in November, they turned back the Chinese onslaught at Chipyeong in February, they were the blocking force in May when the Second Division almost singlehandedly repulsed the last major Communist offensive on the Eastern Front. But today they say that never have they seen nor heard of a battle as savage as the battle of Heartbreak Ridge. Colonel Adams said it was the toughest fight in the 90-year history of the 23d Regiment.

“The Red defense was fanatical,” Colonel Adams told me. “If they were my troops I’d be so proud of them I couldn’t see straight. We tried every finger, every approach. We crawled—that’s right, crawled—you can’t climb up that ridge.

“There have never been American troops who have fought harder. Those French are wonderful, too. Once they start, nothing will stop them.”

General Young said, “The Communists were fanatical. The terrain was the most difficult in the world. The gallantry of the men and officers of the 23d Regiment has been the outstanding feature.”

There will never be a complete list of the heroes of Heartbreak Ridge. Colonel Adams said 100 men deserved the Congressional Medal of Honor for their bravery. The names of many of them are unknown.

There was a Puerto Rican boy who hobbled off the ridge on the stump of his leg after his foot had been shot away by Communist mortar fire. He said no to an officer who wanted to call for a stretcher. The stretcher-bearers were needed more urgently on the top of the ridge where the really seriously wounded were, he said.

Master Sergeant Gaither Nicklas, of Clarkson, Tennessee, went four times into Communist-held territory to evacuate wounded men of his platoon. He went from foxhole to foxhole through intense fire searching for Americans. He miraculously escaped injury that day, but later he was wounded critically.

The medics went up to 72 hours without sleep, constantly tending and caring for wounded men. The First Battalion ran out of medical supplies twice because of the large number of wounded. The morphine and plasma were gone. The men gathered their individual first-aid kits into a stockpile and still they ran out of supplies. In the midst of small-arms and mortar fire the medics sat on top of the ground, taking care of the wounded.

Machine-gun fire from a Communist bunker three stories high stopped every American advance toward the tall, center peak. On September 22d, Lieutenant P. C. Mitchell, Jr., of Dalton, Illinois, led a patrol down the side of the ridge, around to the north, and back on top of the bunker.

Heartbreak Ridge

Lieutenant Mitchell was killed by enemy mortar fire while placing a machine gun on the ridge in full view of the enemy.

"I think Mitchell was responsible in great part for the high morale of the men," said Captain William S. Jordan, of Santa Clara, California, commander of Baker Company. "He was a superb battlefield leader. Every man in the First Battalion had blood in his eye because of the death of Lieutenant Mitchell."

A week before the battle ended, a helicopter landing spot was cleared on the center peak. Three Army helicopter pilots dodged Communist mortar and small-arms fire again and again to pick up the wounded. At times the Communists held positions within 300 yards of the landing area.

The 23d Regiment was being supplied on the isolated ridge partially by light L-19-type observation planes of the Second Division air section. Dodging enemy fire, they swept in low over Heartbreak Ridge and dropped cases of C rations as close as they could to the Americans' foxholes. Major Robert Boatright, of Santa Monica, California, was credited by grinning infantrymen with killing two North Koreans when he accidentally dropped a C ration box behind enemy lines.

One boy—no one knows his name—was shot in the stomach five times, but he kept charging forward into the enemy until he fell over.

Corporal Billy R. Burkhard, of Knoxville, Tennessee, was a cook who was killed because he volunteered to go up on the ridge to help out his buddies.

Private Clifford R. High, of Manteca, California, reorganized his platoon after the lieutenant that led it was killed. He assumed command on his own initiative and led the platoon to the top of the last Communist-held hill. Once during the action he was knocked unconscious by the concussion of a grenade explosion and was reported by his men as dead. He regained consciousness and led the platoon on to its objective.

"But getting down and saying this fellow was a hero or that fellow was a hero—gee, it's hard," said Lieutenant Raymond Riddle, of Dearborn, Michigan. "You see so much. They're doing it for their buddies. The men had spent so many lives and so many wounded getting what they held they just weren't willing to give it up."

THE END

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Stan Carter, an Associated Press war correspondent, covered the bloody battle for Heartbreak Ridge from the time of the first American assault until victory. He spent more time on this front than any other correspondent. Carter, 27, was born in Los Angeles, was educated at the University of Southern California and at Pomona College. He worked on four California papers, then joined the A.P. in 1949. He was assigned to the Korean war in March