

"When Men Don't Panic"

2nd Ranger Infantry Company on Hill 581

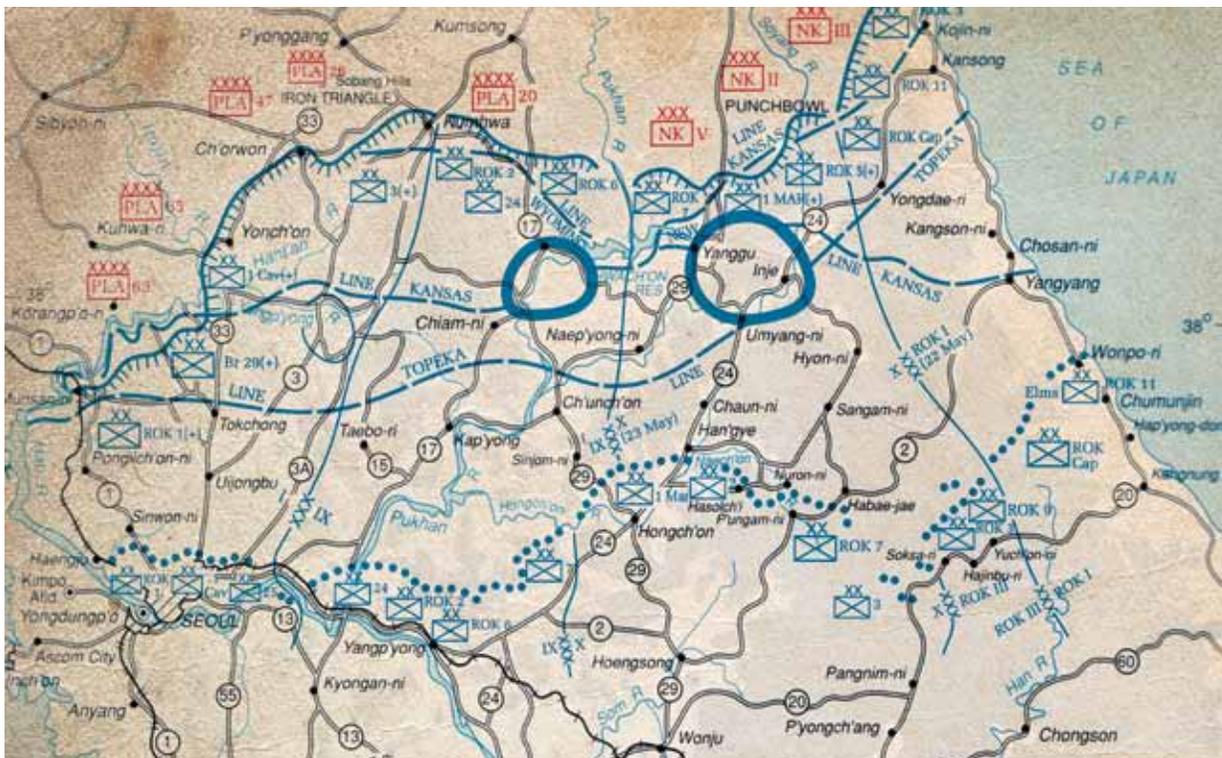
by Kenneth Finlayson



The American infantry company moved up the slope of the hill, the company commander in the lead. When the captain reached the crest, he halted his unit. More than sixty enemy bodies lay scattered around the hilltop and down its forward slope. Several U.S. soldiers sat cleaning their weapons. Others lay sleeping in foxholes. The captain spoke to the troops, questioning them on the recently concluded battle. He saluted the soldiers, then turned and addressed his company. "Look around," he said. "This is what happens to the enemy when men don't panic." With that, the company passed over the top of the hill and descended to take up their defensive positions. The hill was called 581. The defenders were the 2nd Ranger Infantry Company.

Six Ranger Infantry Companies fought in the Korean War. The 2nd Ranger Company (nicknamed the "Buffaloes")

was the only all-black company in what would soon be a totally integrated Army.² As one of the first three Ranger companies to arrive in Korea in December 1950, they were initially attached to the 7th Infantry Division (7th ID). The 2nd Rangers fought in numerous battles including at Munsan-ni, where they parachuted in with the 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team (ARCT) in March 1951. The subsequent weeks of combat and the injuries sustained in the winter weather took a toll and by April 1951, only 75 men remained from the original company strength of 122.³ On 24 April 1951 they were detached from the 187th and re-attached to the 7th Infantry Division. For the next three weeks, the majority of the company conducted combat patrols in front of the division while a small element acted as the training cadre for the black soldiers coming to the 7th ID as replacements.



The 2nd Rangers were attached to the 7th Infantry Division (circled). The action at Hill 581 was part of the Eighth Army advance north to reestablish the Kansas Line.



The 2nd Ranger Infantry company was the only all-black Ranger company formed in 1950. At the time of the fight on Hill 581, the company was down to seventy-five effectives.



L to R Captain Warren E. Allen, Company Commander, 2nd Lieutenant Vincent Wilburn, Second Platoon leader and 1st Lieutenant James C. Queen, Executive Officer. In the absence of Captain Allen, Lieutenant Queen led the company on Hill 581. Lieutenant Wilburn acted as the company executive officer.

First Lieutenant (1LT) Albert Cliette was the Third Platoon leader for the company. Of the replacements he said, "A lot of these guys were from support units and had not gone through infantry basic training."⁴ Sergeant (SGT) Cleveland Valrey was the non-commissioned officer-in-charge (NCOIC) of the new soldiers. "We did not use a formal program of instruction. We used our experience. We gave them a lot of strenuous physical training, weapons firing, hand-to-hand combat and took them on patrols."⁵ Of the several hundred replacements that came through the training program, they only kept ten. The rest were dispersed throughout the division.⁶ The Ranger cadre and their new replacements rejoined the rest of the 2nd Company on the Combat Outpost Line (COPL) during the second week of May.

The Rangers aggressively patrolled in front of the division, often to a depth of three miles, to determine the location and disposition of the enemy. "We ran recon patrols in the forward area," recalled 1LT Cliette. "We were north of the [Hongchon] river trying to find the Chinese and establish where the ROKs were."⁷ The patrols took the Rangers onto Hill 581, the scene of the battle to come.

1LT James C. Queen, the company executive officer (XO), was leading a patrol that crossed Hill 581 when he was recalled. "We got a withdrawal order to return to the regimental area," said Queen. "We had quite a bit of small arms ammunition we didn't want to carry back. I buried it on the hill in a mortar pit figuring we would be back there at some time."⁸ Queen's foresight later paid dividends.

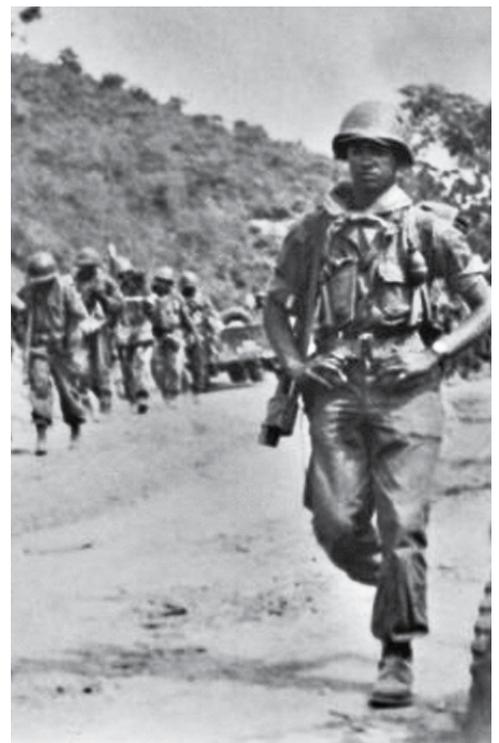
Upon the patrol's return, the men found out that some of them were selected to go on R & R (rest and recuperation leave). Since the unit's arrival in Korea in December 1950, there had been no leave for the men. Now the company had an opportunity to send fifteen men to Japan. The 2nd Company commander, Captain (CPT) Warren E. Allen,

Men of the 2nd Ranger Company moving with tanks of the 7th Infantry Division near Chachon, Korea in February 1951. The 2nd Rangers were attached to the 7th ID and the 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team during their seven months in combat.





As the Rangers moved up Hill 581, an airstrike of F-51 Mustang fighters dropped napalm on slopes ahead of them. (Illustration by Mariano Santillan)

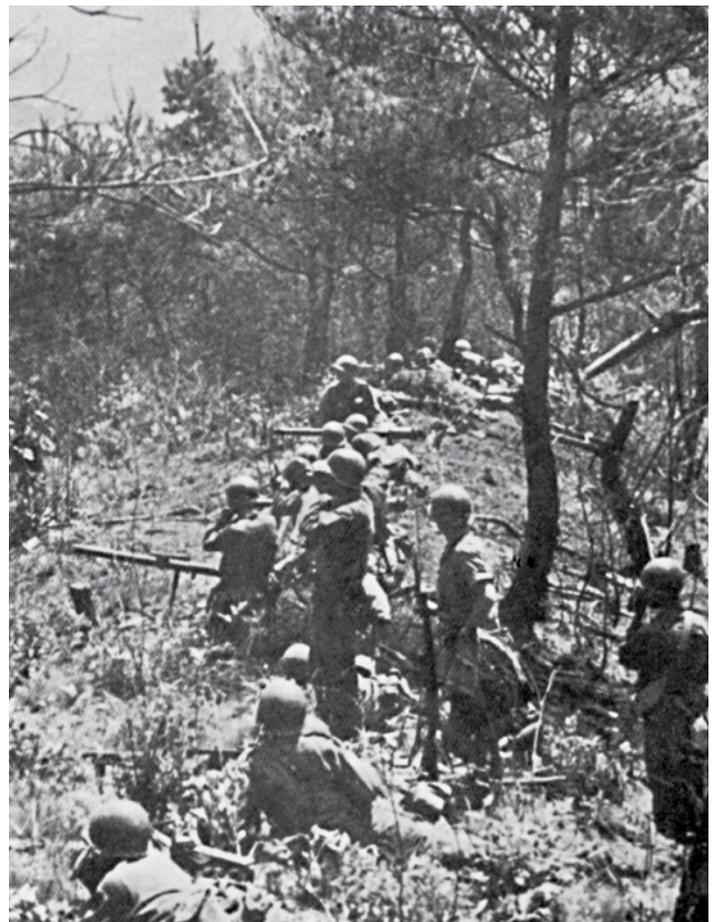


1LT Bernard B. Pryor leading his platoon. Pryor would be on R&R in Tokyo during the fight for Hill 581.

took lieutenants Bernard B. Pryor, James E. Freeman, Antonio Anthony and eleven enlisted men with him, leaving 1LT Queen as acting commander. Their departure reduced the company strength to three officers and sixty-five enlisted men. On 17 May the half-strength company moved on foot to the vicinity of the 31st Infantry Regiment headquarters, arriving in the early morning hours of the 18th. Here Queen received the order to assault Hill 581, a piece of key terrain in the regiment's sector.

For the attack, the 31st Regiment attached the 2nd Ranger Company to the 1st Battalion, (the "Legionnaires"). 1LT Queen acted as both the company commander and First Platoon leader. "I reorganized the company, combining First and Second platoons," said Queen. "Master Sergeant George Rankins, the First Platoon Sergeant, was in charge [of the combined platoons] with [1LT Albert] Cliette leading Third Platoon. [1LT Vincent] Wilburn acted as XO and he was back in the rear taking care of supplies and ammunition."⁹ The company moved out in the early morning over the now familiar ground leading to Hill 581. A Company, 1st Battalion followed behind the Rangers.

At about 1000 hrs the 1st Battalion operations section radioed 1LT Queen to alert him of an incoming air strike against the hill. Shortly thereafter, a flight of three F-51 Mustang fighters roared over the company and dropped napalm about one third of the way up the hill.¹⁰ The company pressed on in a column with Cliette's Third Platoon in the lead. As they neared the crest, the point element by-passed an outpost of three Chinese soldiers. The Chinese fled over the top of the hill. Private First Class (PFC) Winston Jackson, moving with the point element,



Troops of the 31st Infantry Regiment dug-in above the Hongchon River in May 1951. The 2nd Ranger Company was attached to the 1st Battalion, 31st Infantry at Hill 581.

recalled, "1LT Queen called out 'before this day is over, you are going to regret passing those enemy soldiers.'"11 The company reached the summit of the hill at noon, reported their arrival to the battalion, and started moving down the far side.

"We could see the [Hongchon] river from the top of the hill," said 1LT Albert Cliette. "In the distance it looked like enemy columns moving away from us back across the river."12 Not all the enemy forces were leaving the

battle area, however. "I remember vividly lines of Chinese soldiers marching up the hills on both sides of us," said SGT Cleveland Valrey. "I recall thinking we were headed into trouble."13 That trouble started when the company crested the hill.

"As we started to move down the other side, we came under merciless small arms fire," said Cliette.14 In the opening fusillade, Corporal (CPL) Ralph W. Sutton was killed and several Rangers were wounded. The infantry company from the 31st quickly moved forward to help the Rangers break contact. The Rangers pulled back to the top of the hill. The infantry moved back and occupied a small rise a few hundred yards down the slope behind the Rangers.

1LT Queen placed the small company in a circular perimeter with the composite First/Second Platoon on the left and Third Platoon on the right. He began to call for artillery fire against the advancing Chinese as the intensity of small arms fire increased. The Rangers took what cover they could among the sparse shrubs and small trees growing on the top of the hill. Some used old fighting positions they found there. The Chinese concentrated the bulk of their assault on the area held by the First and Second platoons. The battle raged around the top of the hill for several hours and ammunition began to run low. At that point Queen remembered the buried cache.

"About 1500 we got a machinegun section from the [1-31st] battalion a sergeant with five guys. They had two light machineguns, [M1919A4] .30 caliber," said



Sergeant First Class Cleveland Valrey was the non-commissioned officer-in-charge of the training of the new black recruits coming into the 7th Division. He was elected into the Ranger Hall of Fame in 2005.

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—SGT Cleveland Valrey

Throughout the night of the 18 May 1951, the 2d Rangers held off repeated Chinese assaults. Using artillery and mortar fire, the Rangers fought off several wave attacks until forced to retreat in the early morning. A short, violent counterattack enabled the Rangers to recapture the hill. (Illustration by Mariano Santillan)





Sergeant Joe Oliver awakens on Hill 581. Oliver was wounded during the eight-hour battle, but refused evacuation.



Members of the 2nd Ranger Company clean their equipment. After Hill 581, the Rangers would be engaged in one more fight before all the Ranger companies in Korea would be disbanded in June 1951.

1LT Queen. "I put them in between the two platoons as Cliette's platoon was a little isolated over on the right. We dug up that buried ammo when those guys arrived."¹⁵ The Rangers escorting some of the wounded to the battalion aid station also brought back a resupply of ammunition.¹⁶ The Chinese continued to attack the company position sporadically until midnight, when they dramatically increased the intensity of their assault.

"The Communists came in force about midnight," recalls 1LT Cliette. "Queen continued to call in artillery,



Master Sergeant Lawrence D. West with Corporal Donald L. Felder. WWII veteran West was the 2nd Ranger Company First Sergeant. Felder was one of the youngest members.

and he walked it right up to our position. The [60 mm] mortars were firing into the gaps and the machineguns and BARs [Browning Automatic Rifles] were all engaged."¹⁷ The unrelenting pressure from the Chinese forced the company to withdraw off the hilltop in the early morning hours. The Rangers did not move far and consolidated a short way down the hill.

The Rangers descended the slope about 100 yards and reestablished their defensive perimeter. "We were over on the right and there was a minefield there that kept us from moving straight back down," said PFC Paul T. Lyles, Third Platoon. "1LT Queen pulled us back in behind First Platoon, and then we moved down the hill."¹⁸ When the Rangers had consolidated, they prepared to counterattack.

"We pulled back fifty or a hundred yards, right in front of this other platoon [of the 31st Infantry]. The wounded were walking down. Only [SGT Kirk P.] Adkins was seriously wounded," recalled 1LT James Queen. "I decided we were not going to withdraw any further since we would be going back up the hill again." As dawn broke, Queen organized the company into a skirmish line and led the assault back up the hill.

In the half-light, the Rangers moved quickly uphill and drove the Chinese off the summit in a short, fierce engagement. As he had during the battle that night, Queen continued to call in accurate artillery fire and this, combined with the deadly violence of the Ranger assault, sent the Chinese into a pell-mell retreat. The Rangers re-occupied their former positions and set up their defensive perimeter.



Major General Claude B. Ferenbaugh, Commanding General of the 7th Infantry Division, awards the Silver Star to Corporal Anthony Andrade. Other Rangers awarded the Silver Star were, from left, Sergeant Edward L. Posey and Sergeant Culver V. Gibson.

Endnotes

- 1 William Weathersbee, 2nd Ranger Infantry Company presentation recorded by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 18 April 2003, Morgan State University, Baltimore, MD, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Albert Cliette, 2nd Ranger Company, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 3 October 2003, Fort Bragg, NC, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 2 Charles H. Briscoe, "The 2nd Ranger Infantry Company: "Buffaloes" in Korea 29 December 1950 to 19 May 1951," *Veritas: the Journal of Army Special Operations History*, Vol 2, No. 1, 2006, 27-38; this article is reproduced in the current issue.
- 3 **The Table of Organization and Equipment (TO&E) 7-87 of the Ranger Companies called for 5 officers and 107 enlisted men with the authorization to carry a 10% overstrength. Hence the 122 total.**
- 4 Albert Cliette interview, 2nd Ranger Company, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 3 October 2003, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, 3 October 2003.
- 5 Cleveland Valrey, 2nd Ranger Company, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 16 December 2005, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 6 **Corporal William Weathersbee recalls that while on the troopship bringing him back to the United States, he was approached by a number of black 7th ID soldiers who thanked him for the training they received from the Rangers.** See Charles H. Briscoe, "The 2nd Ranger Infantry Company: "Buffaloes" in Korea 29 December 1950 to 19 May 1951," *Veritas: the Journal of Army Special Operations History*, Vol 2, No. 1, 2006, 37.
- 7 Cliette interview, 3 October 2003. **ROKs was the term for Republic of Korea Army soldiers.**
- 8 **The exact amount of ammunition is uncertain, no more than a few cans, as the patrol would not carry an excess amount.** James Queen, 2nd Ranger Company, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 17 December 2003, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 9 Queen interview, 17 December 2003.
- 10 Edward L. Posey, *The US Army's First and Only All-Black Rangers: The 2nd Ranger Infantry Company (Airborne) in the Korean War, 1950-1951* (El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie LLC, 2009), 95.
- 11 Winston Jackson, 2nd Ranger Company, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 17 December 2003, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 12 Cliette interview, 3 October 2003.
- 13 Valrey interview, 16 December 2005.
- 14 Cliette interview, 3 October 2003.
- 15 Queen interview, 17 December 2003.
- 16 Posey, 96.
- 17 Cliette interview, 3 October 2003.
- 18 Paul T. Lyles, 2nd Ranger Company, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 19 Queen interview, 17 December 2003.
- 20 Headquarters 32nd Infantry Regiment, General Orders Number 28, 12 June 1951, Subject: Award of the Purple Heart, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

"A Company [1-31st Infantry] came up and relieved us in the morning," said acting commander Queen. "It was their commander who made the comment about what you can do if you don't panic."¹⁹ When they were replaced on the line, the Rangers moved down the hill for the final time and headed for the 7th Division rear area. There the company began to rest and recover from their hardfought battle on Hill 581. Soon they were joined by CPT Allen and the men back from R&R in Japan. The company remained attached to the 7th ID until June 1951.

Hill 581 cost the 2nd Ranger Company one man killed and over twenty wounded. Twenty-one Purple Hearts were awarded for the fight on 19 and 20 May.²⁰ The company later fought its last combat action in a similar engagement on Hill 245. Like the other Ranger companies in Korea, the 2nd was disbanded in June 1951 and most of the soldiers went to the 187th ARCT. The outstanding combat record of the 2nd Ranger Company is a testament to the professionalism and toughness of the "Buffaloes." ♠

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Captain Warren E. Allen, Company Commander, 2nd Rangers Infantry Company conducting bayonet training for new 7th Infantry Division replacements.

