

Infantry In Action



Heartbreak Ridge

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second in our INFANTRY IN ACTION series. It is reprinted from COMBAT ACTIONS IN KOREA, by Russell A. Gugeler. (Army

Historical Series. Office of the Chief of Military History, United States Army, 1970.) The narrative of this action was written in Korea by Captain Martin Blumenson.

In the complex structure of enemy defensive positions protecting the seven-mile-long hill mass that became known as Heartbreak Ridge, Hill 520 was only a small, subsidiary position — a hump at the western end of a spur from the Heartbreak ridgeline.

Fighting for Hill 520 came near the end of the month-old battle for Heartbreak Ridge. On 10 October 1951, United Nations troops, holding the main north-south ridgeline, had already secured the steep part of the spur ridge that slanted down toward Hill 520. That part of the 520 ridge still in enemy hands consisted of several humps, the last and highest of which was Hill 520 at the blunt tip of the ridge. Responsibility for seizing this hump had passed from the Eighth Army to X Corps to the 2d Infantry Division, and, finally, to its 23d Infantry Regiment and to Company G, whose battalion commander selected it to make the attack.

Fighting had been so severe on Heartbreak Ridge that at one time Company G numbered only twenty-three men. By 10 October, however, enough replacements had joined to build the strength of each of its platoons up to about twenty men. The commander of Company G had gone to Japan for the five-day rest and rehabilitation tour. Accordingly, Lieutenant Raymond W. Riddle, a combat-experienced executive officer, was in command of the attack. He decided to commit his 3d Platoon (under Corporal David W. Lamb, acting platoon leader) to make the first move.

The other two rifle companies from the 2d Battalion were in positions to support the attack. Company F, located on the same ridge just behind Lieutenant Riddle's

men, was prepared to pass through Company G and continue the attack, if necessary. Company E was to support the attack by firing from a parallel ridge five hundred yards to the south (see accompanying map).

The flat top of Hill 520 was not more than two hundred yards beyond Company G's line of departure. On the ridgeline, about halfway between these two points, there was a small knoll. After considering an envelopment of the enemy position by sending Corporal Lamb's platoon into the Fluor Spar Valley — a narrow strip of flat land between his position and Company E on the next ridge to the south, and so named because of fluor spar (the mineral fluorite) mines in the valley — Riddle decided to make a direct assault along the ridgeline. There were enemy minefields in the valley. He could see some enemy movements on the objective. Hoping to draw fire so he could estimate the enemy strength there, Lieutenant Riddle ordered everyone in the company — including the mortar men — to fire on the objective for thirty seconds. The enemy, however, did not return the fire.

When this ruse failed, Lieutenant Riddle called for supporting fires from the artillery, heavy machineguns, and Company E's 57mm recoilless rifles. At about 1300, after ten or fifteen minutes of preparation, he stopped the artillery and instructed Corporal Lamb to double-time his platoon to the intermediate knoll under cover of fire from the machineguns, the recoilless rifles, and the other riflemen in Company G. Once there, he was to set up a platoon base of fire and make the final assault on the objective.

Moving out quickly, Lamb's platoon reached the knoll without difficulty. The machinegun crew set up its weapon and opened fire on the main objective. After deploying his platoon around the base of the knoll, Lamb reported back to Lieutenant Riddle "No casualties yet, but receiving plenty of fire." In response to Lamb's request, Riddle instructed the support elements to intensify their fire, especially on the south side of the objective.

PI-C Harry E. Schmidt, who was with Corporal Lamb's platoon, had a yellow panel wrapped around his waist. His mission was to stay with the lead assault elements so that the supporting elements would know where the platoon was. Although conspicuous himself, Schmidt made it easy for the rest of his company and for men of Company E to identify the most forward position of the attacking platoon.

While the rest of the platoon fired at bunkers on the east end of the hill, Corporal Lamb sent one squad around the left side of the objective. Brisk enemy fire drove the squad back to the platoon base, proving that both the preparatory and supporting fires had been ineffective against the enemy bunkers. Several men from the attacking squad were wounded, and enemy fire, reaching back to the intermediate knob, had caused several other casualties there. Corporal Lamb radioed to Lieutenant Riddle for reinforcements.

Loading the 1st Platoon with ammunition, Riddle committed it to assist in the attack. Lieutenant Jay M. Gano, a recent replacement, commanded the 1st Platoon. Since he was inexperienced in combat, he had instructed

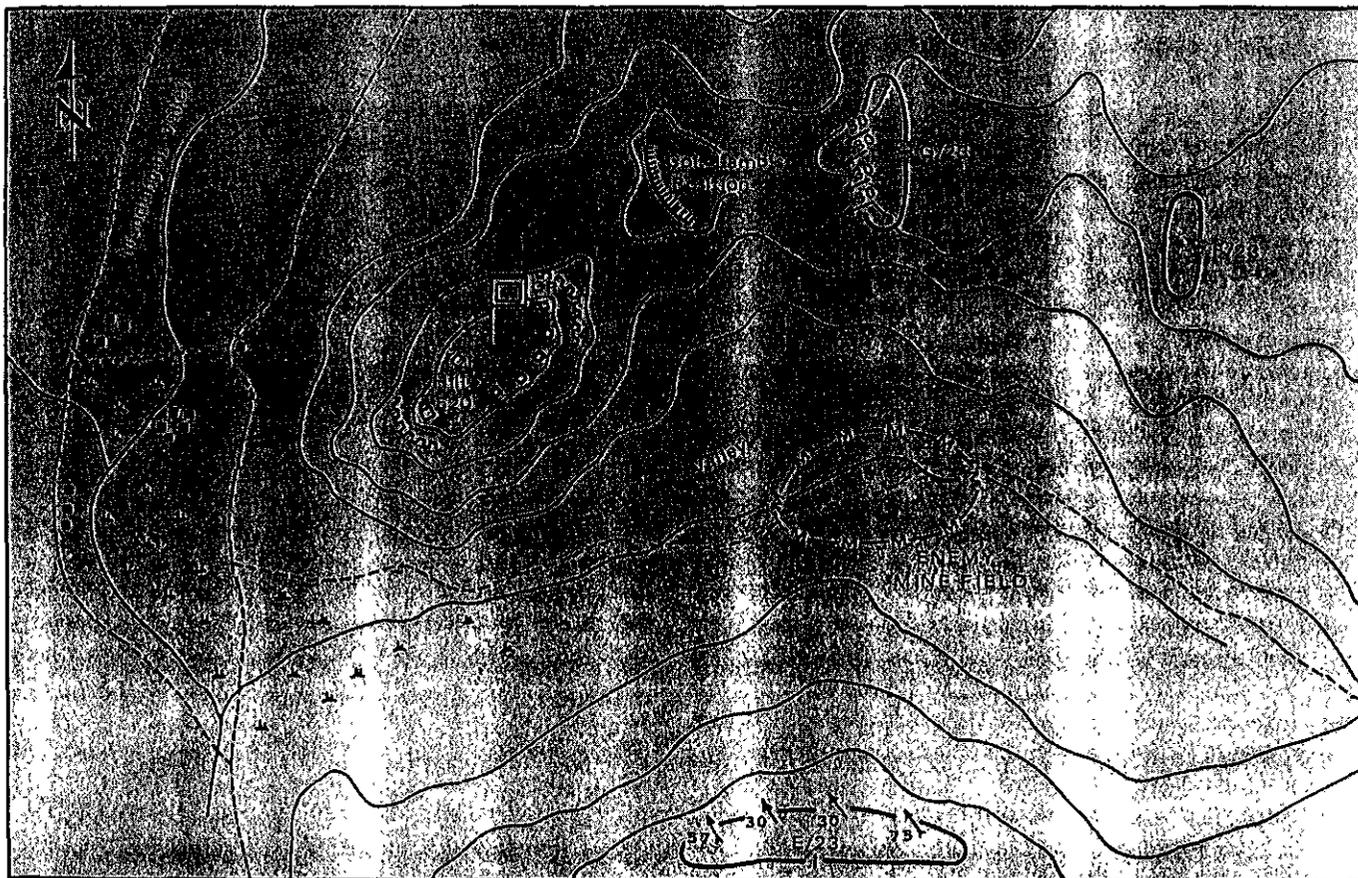
Private Cliff R. High, who had been running the platoon, to continue to do so for the time being.

As the 1st Platoon crawled toward Lamb's position, two men were wounded not far beyond the line of departure. One of them, seriously wounded in the face and neck by a machinegun bullet, became hysterical, and it was necessary for High to hold him down. Farther forward, Lieutenant Gano, with the lead elements of his platoon, had almost reached the intermediate knoll when he was killed on this, his first, attack. The platoon halted, pinned down by hostile fire.

Just at this time Corporal Lamb's machinegun ceased firing. "I'm out of ammo!" the gunner shouted.

Seven or eight enemy soldiers came out of their bunkers and suddenly appeared on the slope of Hill 520 descending toward Lamb's platoon. He reported that he was being counterattacked. Supporting machinegun fire was too high to be effective. Lamb's riflemen opened fire, the ammunition bearers fired their carbines, and even the machinegunner began firing his pistol. Part way down the slope the enemy soldiers stopped, then turned back.

A brush fire had started in the area between Lamb and the company's original position. The haze and smoke from the fire drifted north over High's immobilized platoon, making it impossible for Lieutenant Riddle to see the objective. Taking a chance, Riddle ordered his machineguns at the line of departure to fire on Hill 520. Lamb reported back that the machinegun fire was "just right."



Under cover of the machinegun fire and the smoke from the brush fire, High, having calmed the wounded man, sent him and another casualty to the rear and then worked his platoon forward, meeting eight or ten wounded men from Lamb's platoon who were making their way back to the company.

Corporal Lamb needed more machinegun ammunition, and Lieutenant Riddle sent a squad from the 2d Platoon up with eight boxes. In the meantime, Lamb and High planned their assault.

Several enemy mortar shells now fell among High's platoon, wounding six more men. High sent them to the rear. He now had 11 men besides himself; Lamb had about 12. After the ammunition arrived, the two platoon leaders, leaving six men to man the machinegun and fire rifles from the intermediate knoll, called off their long-range supporting fire and then assaulted with the remaining men deployed in a skirmish line, firing as they moved forward.

Sixty yards of open ground lay between the jump-off point and enemy trenches on the slope of the objective. All went well until, halfway across, the enemy commenced firing automatic weapons. This fire was not effective, however, and did not stop the advance. When the skirmish line reached the base of the knoll, enemy soldiers stopped firing and began throwing fragmentation and concussion grenades. These caused trouble. One of the grenades wounded Lamb. Corporal Arne Severson, seeing the skirmish line falter, picked up his machinegun and walked forward, firing as he advanced. When he reached the base of the hill an enemy grenade exploded at his feet and broke both of his legs. But he set up his gun and continued to fire until the attack stalled. Two men dragged him back.

High moved the remaining members of both platoons back to a covered position and radioed Lieutenant Riddle to bring in the machinegun fire again and to send help, if possible. North Korean soldiers in bunkers on the objective began to taunt High and his men with phrases such as, "American, you die!"

SECOND TRY

Deciding to make a second attempt — this time a close-in envelopment of the objective — High called off the supporting fire again and led about a dozen of his men downhill toward the south, where they could move without being seen or fired upon by the enemy. They then climbed the hill, moving north to the top of Hill 520. When the men broke defilade, the enemy opened fire and began throwing grenades again. A concussion grenade knocked High down. The rest of his men, believing him dead, straggled back to the platoon base. Within a minute or two, however, High regained consciousness and returned to the platoon base where he reorganized the remaining men — about twenty in all.

In the meantime, regimental headquarters had sent three flamethrower operators to the 2d Battalion, two of them designated for Company G and one for Company

F. Lieutenant Riddle sent all three men, their flamethrowers strapped to their backs, forward to help High. One operator was wounded almost immediately upon leaving the line of departure; the other two reached High as he was preparing to make another assault. He sent one flamethrower operator and two riflemen directly to the front.

Under cover of fire, the men crawled into positions from where they could place flame on the foremost (eastern) bunker on Hill 520. As soon as this bunker was destroyed, High led the rest of his platoon around to the left and formed a skirmish line facing another enemy bunker on the south side of the hill. In position, he signalled the flamethrower to open up. As soon as the flamethrower commenced operating, High was to signal for the assault. This time the flamethrower failed to work.

By then only two enemy bunkers were interfering with the attack. A machinegun was firing from each. High decided to make the assault without the flamethrower. He sent a Browning automatic rifle (BAR) team to knock out one bunker while he, with a rifleman and the third flamethrower operator, walked toward another. Firing as they walked, the men exposed themselves because High feared that if they tried to crawl they would be pinned down. Ten yards from the bunker, the second flamethrower failed to work. Standing exposed to enemy fire, the operator took it apart but was unable to repair it. Finally, High told him to get out of the way because he was too conspicuous.

High stationed one of his riflemen in front of the bunker. Unable to hit anyone in it, he nevertheless prevented the North Koreans from firing and thus neutralized the position. Just about that time an automatic weapon began firing from another bunker on the left, and High told Private Joe Golinda to get it. Golinda approached it from one side, High from another, while a third man covered them. Golinda threw a grenade into the bunker, and the gun stopped firing.

With only a few men firing rifles and BARs for support, High and four or five other men made the final assault on the top of Hill 520. Private Schmidt, still wearing the yellow panel wrapped around his waist, stayed up with the foremost men as he had throughout the attack. The group moved on around the hill, firing into the apertures of three other bunkers. All were empty. Once they reached the top of the hill the men saw eight enemy soldiers running over the hill toward the northwest, and opened fire on them. On the north side of the hill High came upon a bunker that had been the enemy's command post. Eight enemy soldiers, still holding their weapons, were huddled in front of the bunker. When High's men fired into the group the North Koreans threw up their hands and surrendered themselves.

The knoll was secure at 1600. Company G had incurred slightly over thirty casualties, most of which were due to minor grenade wounds. Several other casualties were sustained by the mortar men as a result of enemy counter-mortar fire.