

NEWS DRIFT II



Determined: The heroic efforts of British troops thwarted a planned shock invasion by the Chinese

It's an awesome tale of courage against overwhelming odds – 4,000 British soldiers holding at bay 300,000 fanatical Chinese with bayonets and bare fists. Yet today, shamefully, our bloodiest ever St George's Day is almost totally forgotten

and the Royal Ulster Rifles. Attached to them was a crack battalion of Belgian infantry, a tank regiment (the 8th King's Royal Irish Hussars), a Royal Artillery regiment and a contingent of Royal Engineers.

All in all, there were some 4,000 men under British command along the Imjin that day. Unbeknown to them, 27,000 Chinese troops at the head of a 305,000-strong force were lying in wait.

April 22 was a rather jolly Sunday. For the men of the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, it was a day of preparation for April 23 – St George's Day – which was their traditional regimental feast.

The troops gathered stockpiles of beer and rations while the cooks prepared a big turkey for the following day. Every man was issued

with red and white imitation roses to stick in his cap. In as far as it was possible in a slit trench on a Korean mountain, there was a party atmosphere.

Rumours of an attack were building, though. And, at nightfall, a small patrol from the Glosters discovered what was on its way. Second Lieutenant Guy Temple took his men down to the water's edge to glean local intelligence, and saw waves of Chinese troops starting to wade across.

He opened fire, called down a massive artillery bombardment and wiped out countless enemy troops before getting his men back to their lines unscathed.

It had been an exemplary ambush – he would receive the Military Cross for the action – but the Battle of the Imjin had just begun.

'I have always found firework displays terribly boring after that,' Temple tells Andrew Salmon, author of *To The Last Round* (Aurum Press £25). All along the allied front, the troops were hearing the unnerving prelude to a Chinese attack – a shrill bugle.

This would be followed by hundreds of well-camouflaged men charging out of nowhere firing and hurling grenades. The British machine guns would kill most of the initial charges, but, eventually, superiority of numbers would win out.

Lieutenant George Truell of the Royal Artillery was busy firing 25lb shells in support of the Glosters away to his left when the Chinese came charging down the hill to his right. Truell had no option but to resort to Battle of Waterloo tactics.

He lowered one of his huge guns to the horizontal, aimed it at the Chinese on the hillside – no more than 150 yards away – and let rip.

'It caused a fair old bang,' he recalls, 'and the Chinese took themselves off.' The scene – complete with the St George's rose which Truell had stuck in his cap – is immortalised in a famous Royal Artillery painting, *Over Open Sights*.

By now, the Glosters were being pushed to the limits. A key bunker had been captured by the Chinese, who were using it to rain murderous fire down on British positions.

It had to be recaptured at all costs. Lieutenant Phil Curtis – a melancholic figure whose wife had recently died in childbirth – took his platoon to deal with the problem.

They were soon pinned down

themselves, whereupon Curtis leaped up and dashed forwards, only to be cut down by the enemy machine gun.

As his awe-struck men tried to administer some basic first aid, he jumped up again, made another solo charge and threw a grenade into the bunker just as machine gun fire finished him off. The bunker was secured and Curtis won a posthumous Victoria Cross.

Similar heroism was taking place all along the British front that St George's Day. The Fusiliers were amazed to see a death-defying double act involving Major David Winn and Fusilier Ronald Crooks, a mouthy regimental troublemaker who had also earned the Military Medal in World War II.

FOR HOURS on end, the gangly Winn would rush at enemy positions hurling grenades, while the equally tall Crooks would run alongside him blasting away with a Bren gun (both would be decorated for their heroics).

'They were coming at us like ants,' recalls John Bayliss, himself a D-Day veteran. 'The boxing training was useful. If you hit 'em, they stayed down. You had no time to think or you were dead.'

Gradually, the brigade commander started to pull his units back, but there was no way out for the Glosters. They had been cut off and were surrounded on a single hill.

On April 24, their commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel James Carne (later awarded the VC himself), received the order to stay put for another night.

'If it is required that we shall stay here,' he replied over a dying radio set, 'we shall continue to hold.' And so they did.

They were out of crucial supplies. Any available water had gone to the wounded, but water was still needed to cool the overheating barrel of the Vickers machine gun. A bold sergeant went round ordering troops to urinate into a container.

He found that most men were too dehydrated to produce anything, and was then shot dead by a Chinese bullet.

The following morning, April 25, most of the Glosters had fought to their last round. There would be no cavalry coming to their rescue. But they had held the line. They had halted the Chinese for a crucial period of days when others would have crumbled in minutes. The planned shock invasion had been thwarted.

After all they had been through, the remnants of this proud regiment were not simply going to surrender. Lt-Col Carne issued a final order: 'Every man to make his own way back.'

Of the 650 men of the Glosters who had started the battle, the final tally was 56 killed and 180 wounded. The rest did their best to make a break through the surrounding Chinese lines, but were soon trapped. Just 41 made it out. The rest would endure more than two unspeakable years in North Korean prison camps. David Binding was one of them.

He still feels that his was a forgotten war, but he does not regret it. After the Imjin, the communists never made serious inroads into South Korea again and a thriving democracy took root.

'When I go back and see South Korea today, I feel that it was worth it,' he tells me from the Seoul hotel room where he has been staying for the anniversary. 'The people could not be more grateful.'

Sadly, the same cannot be said for his own country. But at least, in this week in which we celebrated another St George's Day, we should remember the heroes of the Imjin who never made it home.