

BRANNINGERS

The 8th Ranger Company

"Black Devils" on Hill 628

by Eugene G. Piasecki



Activated on 20 November 1950, the 8th Ranger Infantry Company (Airborne) with the 3rd, 5th and 6th Companies began the second training cycle conducted by the Ranger Training Center at Fort Benning, Georgia. On 13 January 1951, the 3rd, 5th and 8th companies were sent to Camp Carson, Colorado for an additional three weeks of cold-weather and mountain training before leaving for Korea. After a few days at Camp Stoneman, California, the three Ranger companies departed for Korea on 5 March 1951. Landing at Inch'on 31 March 1951, the Ranger companies were independently attached to different American infantry divisions. The 8th Ranger Company went to the 24th Infantry Division (24th ID) located in central South Korea. Commanded by Captain (CPT) James A. Herbert, the 8th did not have long to wait for action.

On 3 April 1951, General Matthew B. Ridgway, the new Eighth Army (EUSA) commander, launched Operation RUGGED to push Communist forces north of the Imjin River.¹ The 8th Ranger Company led the 24th ID attack. They would suffer the fate common to all Ranger units in Korea. Tasked to hold key terrain, they suffered major losses because their fox-hole strength was one-half that of a 1951-era infantry company. Also, since they were well-disciplined, they were often used to resolve potentially desperate situations and plug gaps.

Initially, Operation RUGGED made great progress. In classic fashion, the 8th Ranger Company patrolling forward of 24th ID units, found and eliminated enemy positions and facilitated the rapid



CPT James A. Herbert commanded the 8th Ranger Infantry Company from its formation on 20 November 1950 until he was wounded on 25 April 1951 on Hill 628. BG Herbert was inducted into the Ranger Hall of Fame in 2004.



MG Blackshear M. Bryan assumed command of the 24th Infantry Division in March 1951. This was his first combat command and first combat experience despite an active duty career that began in 1923.

crossing of the Yongp'ong River. By 22 April 1951, the 24th ID had reached the Hant'an River before nightfall. As they prepared to continue the offensive in the morning, approximately 350,000 Communist troops (twenty-one Chinese and nine North Korean divisions) counter-attacked.² The speed and magnitude of the Communist Spring Offensive forced the outnumbered U.S. I and IX Corps to conduct a series of withdrawals through successive delaying positions before finally establishing a defensive line a few miles north of Seoul. During the withdrawals, UN forces inflicted significant casualties with artillery and air strikes.

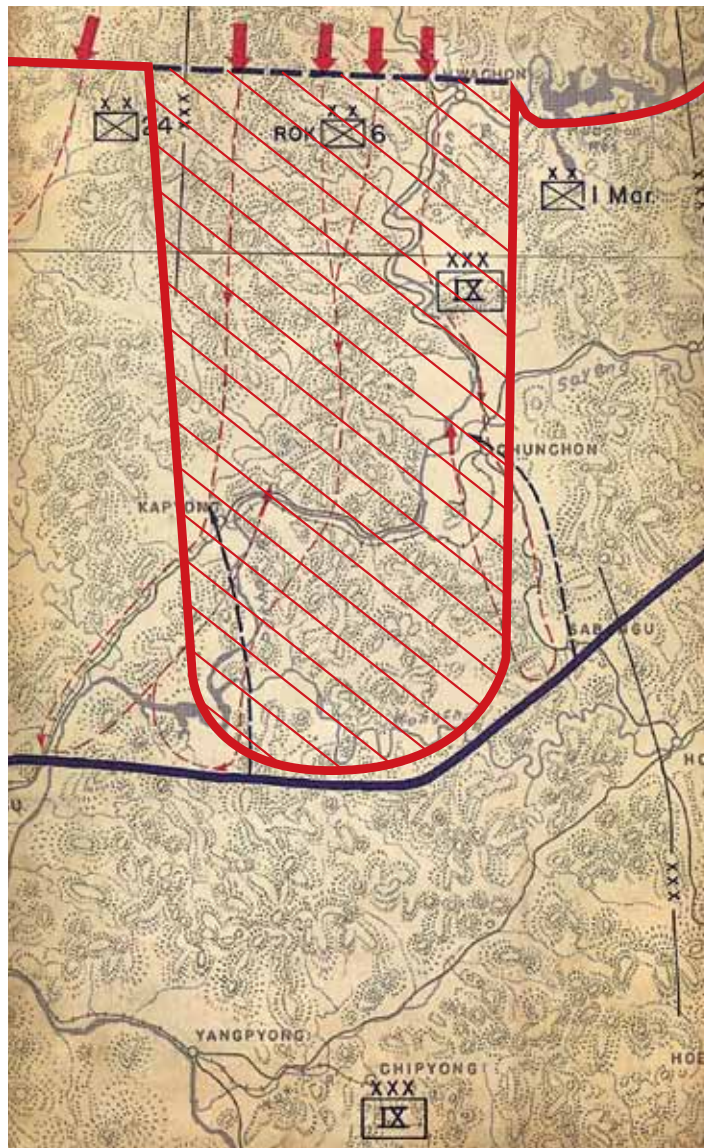
While the Americans held their ground in the initial stages of the Communist attack, the 6th Republic of Korea (ROK) Division, positioned between the 24th ID and the 1st Marine Division, received the main attack.³ At 0250 hours on 23 April 1951, hit hard by the Chinese *60th Division* in the Namdae River valley south of Kumhwa, the ROK infantry regiments disintegrated, abandoning weapons, vehicles, and equipment as they turned into a fleeing mob. Their sudden retreat created an almost twenty-one mile wide "U" shaped penetration in the UN lines. This put the 24th ID and the entire Eighth Army in jeopardy of being shattered by Communist forces.⁴ Having lost communication with the ROK 6th Division, MG Blackshear M. Bryan, ordered the Rangers to screen the division's exposed right flank with patrols to provide early warning of any approaching Chinese.⁵ In the meantime, MG Bryan also moved 24th



The men carried their combat packs, two days rations, bedrolls, mountain bags, and four to six grenades. The riflemen had three or four bandoliers of ammunition.
(Illustration by Mariano Santillan)

ID forces to protect this flank. The 1st Marine Division scrambled to guard its unprotected left flank. The 27th British Commonwealth Brigade and the U.S. 5th Cavalry Regiment were rushed in to blunt the Chinese onslaught.⁶

As the situation worsened, on 23 April 1951, the Rangers assembled at the 24th ID's command post at 1600 hours. They were ordered to occupy Hill 1168 and make contact with the ROK unit on the Ranger's right flank by midnight.⁷ It was a mission impossible since the Rangers would have to cross Hills 628 and 1010 to reach Hill 1168, and they were carrying heavier-than-normal packs. First Sergeant Charles R. Craig, Jr. said "The Rangers were prepared for a fight and had put two days rations and mountain sleeping bags in each combat pack. Each rifleman carried four bandoliers of ammunition with forty-eight rounds per bandolier, and four to six fragmentation grenades, although some carried as many as twelve."⁸ After traveling by truck, to the base of Hill 628, the 8th Rangers began climbing its forward



The Communist Spring Offensive main attack concentrated on the ROK 6th Division's front on 23 April 1950 and created an almost twenty-one mile U-shaped penetration of UN lines between the 24th Infantry Division and the 1st Marine Division.

slope. Leading the eighty-nine "Black Devils" was CPT Herbert with a small headquarters element. The First, Third, and Second Platoons followed behind in order. First Lieutenant (1LT) Alfred J. Giacharine, the company executive officer was at the rear of the column.⁹

When they reached the top of Hill 628 about 0330 hours on 24 April, the Rangers halted, established a perimeter defense, and dug in. At daybreak, CPT Herbert dispatched small patrols to locate the nearest friendly forces. After meeting a ten-man patrol from L Company, 21st Infantry Regiment and getting a general idea where the American units were, the Rangers left Hill 628. By 1800 hours they were atop Hill 1010. From there, CPT Herbert sent a patrol led by Master Sergeant (MSG) Phillip D. Moore, the First Platoon Sergeant, to recon Hill 1168 which was still three-thousand meters away. They soon returned to report that the Chinese were about a kilometer away. Corporal (CPL) Robert W. Black commented: "From my position on the hill (Hill



CPL Robert W. Black volunteered for the Rangers while serving in the 82nd Airborne Division. Assigned to the 8th Ranger Company on 20 November 1950 as a Browning Automatic Rifleman in Third Platoon, he was inducted into the Ranger Hall of Fame in 1995.

1010), I saw the Chinese moving boldly. They were below us in what appeared to be rivers of brown flowing south--Chinese in massive numbers moving forward to reinforce their attacking troops. What we saw did not bode well for us. We were deep in enemy-controlled territory and greatly outnumbered.¹⁰ What the Rangers did not know was that they were watching elements of the Chinese 40th, 20th, 26th, and 27th Field Armies rushing to exploit the gap between the 24th ID and 1st Marine Divisions.¹¹

At midnight, 24 April, CPT Herbert sent a four-man patrol back towards Hill 628 to find the 21st Infantry elements. Three and one-half hours later, CPL Michael Rosen returned to report that the 21st Infantry Regiment was no longer there, but the Chinese had occupied Hill 628.¹² At dawn, a group of fifteen South Korean soldiers, bypassed by the Chinese, stumbled into the Ranger's perimeter saying "many, many Chinese."¹³ In the face of mounting Chinese pressure, the 24th ID G-3 (operations officer) ordered the Rangers to pull back to Hill 628 and link up with the 5th Infantry Regimental Combat Team (RCT). MG Bryan was going to conduct a deliberate daylight withdrawal starting with the forward elements of his division.¹⁴

The 8th Rangers would have to fight their way out. CPT Herbert had First Platoon lead with the Third and the Second Platoons following in order as they headed southwest along the ridgeline to Hill 628. They had to prevent 3rd Battalion, 5th RCT from being cut off by the enemy. As they closed on Hill 628, CPT Herbert radioed 1LT Giacherine that there were "some Chinks in front (approximately fifteen) and that he was going to get himself some."¹⁵ The Rangers had come upon a large Chinese force preparing to hit the 24th ID flank guarded by the 21st Infantry. Realizing that the



1LT Berkeley J. Strong was a WW II veteran who became the third platoon leader. Wounded along with CPT Herbert, he remained in the Army and served in Vietnam as an advisor to the Vietnamese Army. He became a member of the Ranger Hall of Fame in 1996.

Rangers were all that stood in the way of preventing the destruction of that regiment, CPT Herbert and 1LT Berkeley J. Strong, Third Platoon leader, preemptively attacked the Chinese with the two lead platoons. Meanwhile, 1LT Giacherine and MSG Gayal H. Ellis, Second platoon sergeant, deployed his unit to protect the company's rear when CPT Herbert radioed that the company was going to have to fight its way through the Chinese.

When the 8th Rangers charged forward, Chinese small arms and automatic weapons fire erupted from the right. Skirting around the northwest slope of the hill, 1LT Giacherine did not see any supporting base of fire; every man fired as he pleased.¹⁶ LT Giacherine rushed forward to find his company commander. Unable to locate CPT Herbert, he looked for CPL Eugene C. Rivera, his radio operator. 1LT Giacherine "raised" the 2nd Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment to request American artillery to counter the Chinese fire. As the situation became desperate and more and more Chinese small arms and mortar fire bracketed their positions, Ranger casualties mounted. As the only officer still able to fight, 1LT Giacherine assumed command and told MSG Ellis to get a few Rangers positioned on the forward ridge and to form a perimeter with the others.

With his rear protected, 1LT Giacherine used MSGs Cox and Ellis and Sergeant First Class (SFC) McNeely



MSG Gayal H. Ellis was the platoon sergeant of the second platoon who assisted 1LT Giacherine in maintaining control and helped move the Rangers from Hill 628 to the evacuation point.



CPL Eugene C. Rivera was the company communications chief who maintained radio contact with the 24th ID to call for artillery fire and the 6th Tank Battalion to evacuate the Rangers. CPL Rivera's actions earned him a place in the Ranger Hall of Fame in 1998.

to coordinate the defense while he requested help from the 21st Infantry Regiment. Unable to break through to the Rangers because of increased Chinese pressure, the 5th RCT operations officer relayed their predicament through the 2nd Battalion, 21st Infantry and asked them to: "Send message to Ranger Company. Get out best way possible."¹⁷ Quickly assessing his options, 1LT Giachérine decided to withdraw along a trail to the northwest and asked the 2nd Battalion, 21st Infantry for tanks to evacuate the Rangers. At the link-up point, just short of a road, 1LT Giachérine positioned the wounded inside a hasty defensive perimeter and settled down to wait for "the cavalry." Fifteen minutes later, five M46 Patton tanks from C Company, 6th Medium Tank Battalion, 24th ID rumbled up. Wounded Rangers were loaded on the tank decks, and the combined force headed to the 21st Infantry Command Post where ambulances awaited.¹⁸

The fight at Hill 628 cost the 8th Rangers two killed and twenty-one wounded. The price was heavy, but as MG Bryan later explained to 1LT Giachérine: "It was necessary and that by the Rangers' reconnaissance he was definitely able to confirm that his entire right flank was exposed. They had prevented the 21st Infantry Regiment from being cut off, and saved the entire 24th Division."¹⁹ The 8th Ranger action at Hill 628 was strictly a conventional infantry response and they suffered heavy casualties because of their size. CPT Martin Blumenson, Fourth Historical Detachment, noted; "The Ranger Company is both too small and too large. It is too small to make a concerted attack five or six miles behind enemy lines by aerial drop. It is too large to infiltrate and penetrate enemy lines as a company."²⁰ Against all odds on Hill 628, Ranger spirit carried the day. ♣

Eugene G. Piasecki, a retired Special Forces officer, is a government contractor who has been with the USASOC History Office since 2006. He earned his Master's Degree in military history from Norwich University. Current research interests include Army special operations during the Korean War, Army special operations in Somalia and the History of Camp Mackall.

Endnotes

- 1 Robert W. Black, *Rangers in Korea* (New York: Ballantine, 1989), 56, 62, 101; Billy C. Mossman, *Ebb and Flow, November 1950-July 1951* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1990), 353-354; Robert B. Nelson, *Unit History 6th Ranger Infantry Company Airborne*, Robert W. Black Ranger Collection, Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 4 (copy in the USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC).
- 2 Black, *Rangers in Korea*, 138.
- 3 John Miller, Jr., Owen J. Carrol, and Margaret E. Tackley, *Korea. 1951-1953* (Washington, DC: U. S. Army Center of Military History, 1997), 103.
- 4 Black, *Rangers in Korea*, 139.
- 5 Black, *A Ranger Born. A Memoir of Combat and Valor from Korea to Vietnam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), 92.
- 6 Black, *A Ranger Born*, 92; Mossman, *Ebb and Flow*, 385-386.
- 7 First Lieutenant Alfred J. Giachérine, Executive Officer, 8th Ranger Company, interview by Captain Martin Blumenson, 7 June 1951, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, 1.
- 8 Black, *Rangers in Korea*, 141.
- 9 Giachérine interview, 2. **The 8th Ranger Infantry Company (Airborne) was given the name the "Black Devils" after they were observed putting on face camouflage before a night patrol.**
- 10 Black, *A Ranger Born*, 92.
- 11 Black, *Rangers in Korea*, 142.
- 12 Giachérine interview, 4.
- 13 Black, *Rangers in Korea*, 144.
- 14 Black, *Rangers in Korea*, 144.
- 15 Giachérine interview, 6.
- 16 Giachérine interview, 6.
- 17 Black, *Rangers in Korea*, 151.
- 18 Giachérine interview, 9.
- 19 Giachérine interview, 10.
- 20 Martin Blumenson note during interview with 1LT Alfred J. Giachérine, Executive Officer, 8th Ranger Infantry Company (Airborne), 7 June 1951, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, 11.

M46 Patton tank was the type assigned to the 6th Tank Battalion, 24th ID that evacuated sixty-five 8th Company Rangers on 25 April 1951. By the end of the war, the M46 was the Army's primary medium battle tank and had replaced the M24, M26, and M4A3E8.

