

# From Hill 710 to "Big Switch"

Ranger Edmund J. Dubrueil, 1st Ranger Company

by Kenneth Finlayson

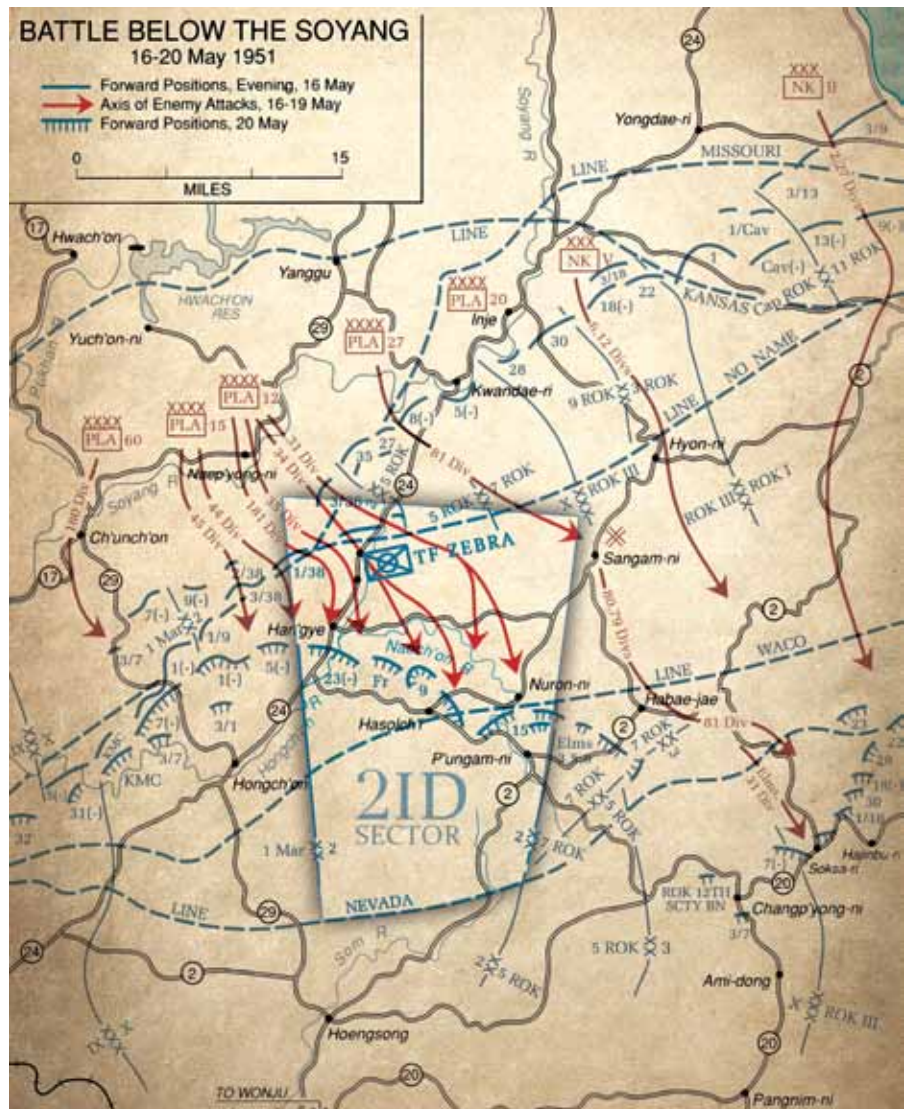


The Chinese Spring Offensive in April 1951 pushed the Eighth Army off Line KANSAS and threatened Seoul. The 2nd Infantry Division and their attached 1st Ranger Company were in the thick of the defensive fight.

**W**hen the Chinese launched their spring offensive in April 1951, the Eighth U.S. Army defensive Line KANSAS stretched from Seoul to the east coast. The U.S. X Corps and Republic of Korea (ROK) III Corps were positioned in the eastern part. The major Chinese objective was to isolate and destroy the six divisions of the ROK III Corps. Three Chinese Armies, the 12th, 15th, and 60th and the North Korean 45th and 12th Divisions hit the ROK III Corps hard, forcing it to pull back, exposing the X Corps flank.<sup>1</sup> The heaviest blows in X Corps fell on the right flank held by the ROK 5th Infantry Division. The 5th gave way in the face of the enemy onslaught, which triggered the withdrawal of the U.S. 7th Infantry Division in the center as well as the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division (2nd ID) on the left.

Attached to the 2nd ID, the 1st Ranger Infantry Company (Airborne) found itself in the chaotic battles around Chaun-ni on 16–19 May 1951. These actions rendered the 1st Ranger Company combat ineffective and took Staff Sergeant (SSG) Edmund J. Dubrueil out of the war. SSG Dubrueil joined 1st Ranger Company as a replacement following the battle at Chipyong-ni in February 1951. Dubrueil enlisted in the Army in 1948 and he completed Ranger training at Fort Benning, GA in January 1951. An infantry heavy weapons specialist, he was assigned to Second Platoon.<sup>2</sup>

Since its arrival in Korea in December 1950, the 1st Ranger Company enjoyed





a solid working relationship with the 2nd ID. Major General (MG) Clark L. Rufner supported the need for the Rangers and made every effort to capitalize on their special capabilities.<sup>3</sup> 1st Company raided several enemy installations, including an attack on 4 February on the headquarters of the North Korean *12th Corps* nine miles in the enemy rear.<sup>4</sup> Later, at Chipyong-ni, the 1st Company acquitted themselves well in the first major defeat of Chinese forces. There the Ranger's First Platoon, as part of an *ad hoc* task force containing the 2nd Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment, had driven the enemy off a key hilltop and re-established the main defensive line.<sup>5</sup> Three months after the battle of Chipyong-ni, the

1st Ranger Company was fighting alongside the 23rd Regiment again, this time as part of Task Force ZEBRA.

Originally formed by the 2nd ID on 25 April, at the onset of the Chinese offensive, Task Force ZEBRA was led by Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Elbridge L. Brubaker, and made up of the 72nd Tank Battalion (less one company), the 2nd Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment, the 1st Ranger Company, the Ivanhoe Security Force (a rear area security company of ROK troops), and the ROK 3rd Battalion, 36th Infantry Regiment. It was a formidable fighting force with considerable firepower.

On 16 May, the Task Force was arrayed along a two-mile wide defensive position astride the Hongh'on River and Highway 24. The U.S. 38th Infantry Regiment was on the task force left and the ROK 5th Division on its right. A French infantry battalion was in reserve to the rear at



1st Lieutenant Andrew J. Adams receives the Silver Star from Brigadier General George C. Stewart, Assistant Division Commander, 2nd Infantry Division. The first Ranger unit deployed to Korea in December 1950, the 1st Company enjoyed a close relationship with the 2nd Division until the Ranger companies were disbanded in June 1951.

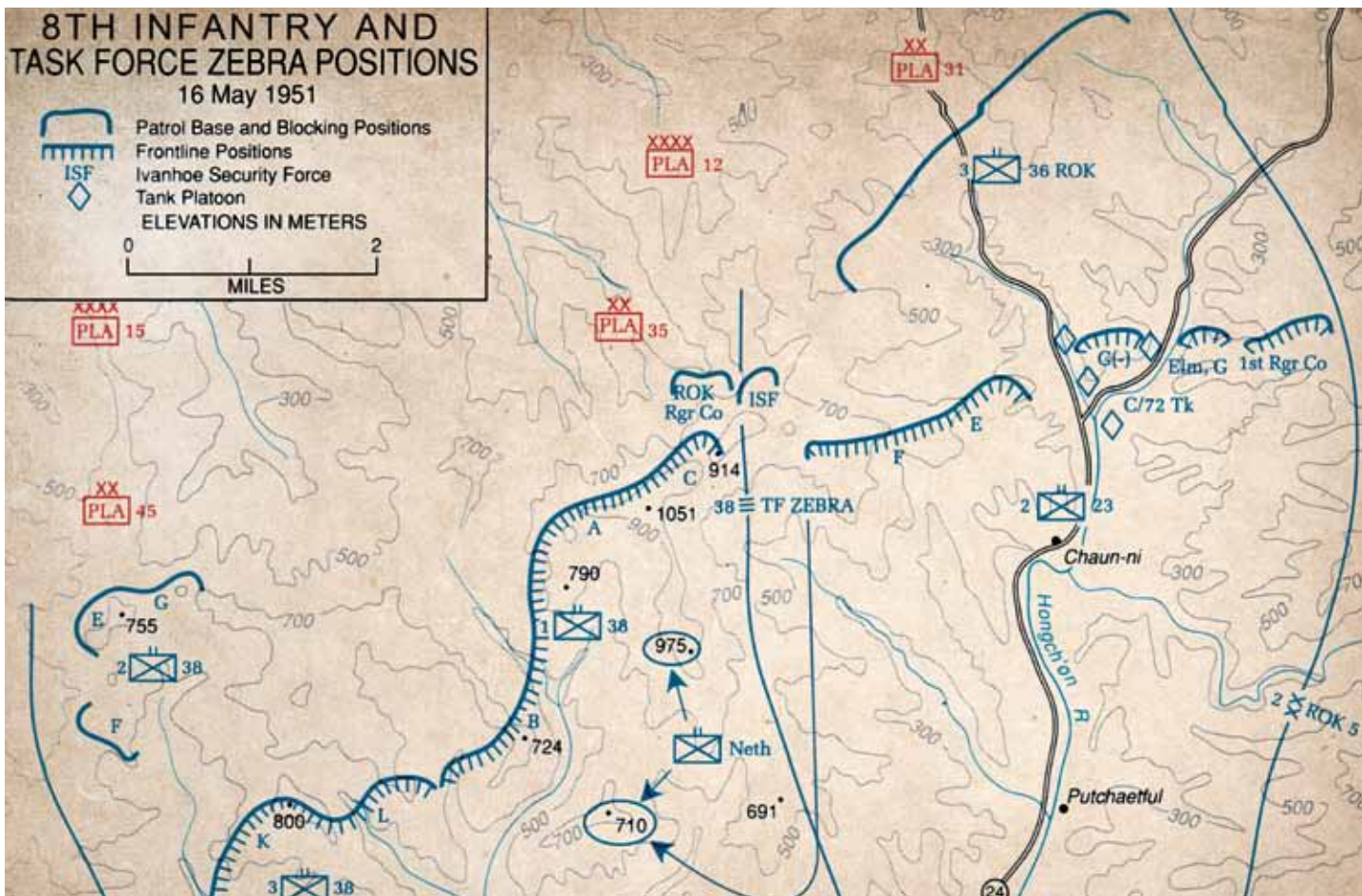


Troops of the 2nd Infantry Division move to occupy new positions near Yanggu. The hard-fighting 2nd Division was a mainstay of the U.S. X Corps.

The 1st Ranger Company conducted a successful raid on the headquarters of the North Korean *12th Corps*. The Rangers moved nine miles into the enemy rear, raided the headquarters and returned to friendly lines.







The Rangers moved south when Task Force ZEBRA was repositioned south to Han'gye. Prior to arriving they were sent to attack west to Hill 710, where the company suffered severe losses.

Han'gye. Two key hills, 975 and 710, were occupied by a battalion of Dutch infantry and overlooked Highway 24 in Task Force ZEBRA's area.<sup>6</sup> When three Chinese divisions crashed into the allied lines on 16 May, the situation rapidly became critical.

The 2nd ID was on the X Corps right (eastern) flank. On the division's right the ROK 5th Division was along the boundary between the U.S. X Corps and ROK III Corps. When the Chinese attacked, the already tenuous connection between the 2nd ID and the ROK 5th Division disappeared as the South Koreans fell back, exposing the American division's flank. Constant probing attacks by the Chinese by-passed the TF ZEBRA position, eventually forcing MG Ruffner to reposition the task force further south in an effort to keep a cohesive defense together. Late on 18 May, with steady Chinese pressure threatening to envelope the 38th Infantry on their left, Task Force ZEBRA began to pull back. Eventually, the Rangers found themselves near Han'gye. In an effort to restore the defensive lines during the chaotic withdrawal of the allied units, Hill 710 became the Ranger Company objective.

The Rangers were trucked south about four miles to Han'gye where they dismounted and received orders to help relieve the Dutch on Hill 710. "We got on trucks going back to the rear," recalled SSG Edmund J. Dubrueil. "We hadn't gone very far when the trucks stopped and we got out. We could hear heavy gunfire and we started



Soldiers of the 9th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division on the crest of Bloody Ridge. The "Manchus" fought a ferocious battle to seize the ridge in August 1951.

walking towards the fight."<sup>7</sup> In darkness the company moved northwest to join the battle.

"When we got there, the Dutch were pulling out," said Dubrueil. "We almost got shot by other Americans as we headed up. On the hill, we were mixed up with the Chinese. We got organized and we hit them very hard."<sup>8</sup> The Rangers drove the Chinese troops off the hill and began to set in their defensive positions. At dawn on the 19th, the enemy attacked in strength, forcing the Rangers off the hill.





An aerial view of a camp believed to be used to house UN POWs near Chiktong, North Korea. The barracks have no markings although Communist officials had agreed to mark POW camps.



UN and North Korean officers acknowledge receipt of transferred POWs at Freedom Village, Panmunjom. In Operation LITTLE SWITCH on 11 April 1953, 605 UN POWs were exchanged for 6,030 Communist prisoners.



An emaciated American POW receives new clothing at the transfer station, Freedom Village, Panmunjom.

“I was in a position with [SGT Roy] Evans and [SSG Gordon P.] Lewis. I got hit in the head with a grenade and got shrapnel in my boot,” said Dubrueil. “Lieutenant [Company Commander 1LT Alfred H.] Herman got hit by a sniper and [Paul J.] Lotti went to help him. He got hit too. Everyone was moving out at this point.”<sup>9</sup> The Rangers began to filter down off the hill. Dubrueil was assisting another Ranger who was badly wounded in the leg when he ran into two Chinese soldiers and was taken prisoner.

Of his initial time in captivity Dubrueil recounted, “I was first taken to a bunker. The Chinese soldiers had never seen an ID card and when I showed it to them, they saluted and gave it back. Then, with other POWs, we started walking north. We walked a lot.”<sup>10</sup> After temporary stops

at various camps, Dubrueil reached POW Camp #4. “It was a sergeant’s camp up near the Manchurian border. When I arrived, I was originally placed on a burial detail.”<sup>11</sup> Dubrueil remained at this camp until he was moved to what was known as Camp #1 during the winter of 1951-52.

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“Camp #1 was a mining camp and there it was very cold. I was very lucky when I got my hands on a pair of gloves,” he said. While in the camp, the Chinese tried to “educate” the prisoners. “The Chinese guards did try some indoctrination. I used the story that I was in M Company, 38th Regiment to conceal that I was a Ranger,” recalled Dubrueil.<sup>12</sup> He survived the brutal conditions in the mining camp and in August 1952, he was moved back to Camp #4. He would spend the remainder of the war there. As the armistice talks neared their end, conditions in the camps improved.

“I was in Camp #4 about a year to the day I was released. The camp had electricity and just before the war ended, we got Red Cross parcels and could write letters.” During his stay at Camp #1, Dubrueil was hospitalized with frostbite, beriberi and dysentery for the two months prior to his release. In the hospital he received rice and three hot meals a day. In August 1953 he was repatriated along with 3,600 other U.S. POWs in Operation BIG SWITCH.<sup>13</sup>

“We were trucked to P’yongyang. The Filipinos were running the exchange point and I went into a tent there. I got coffee and a nurse gave me a vitamin drink,” recalls Dubrueil of his repatriation. “We got on a



helicopter and flew to the evacuation point. I was given all my back pay as well as thirty-eight months of jump pay. We took a boat back to San Francisco and were debriefed on the ship.”<sup>14</sup> Edmund J. Dubrueil continued his Army career after his return from Korea, eventually retiring from Special Forces.

The battle at Hill 710 was the last major engagement for the 1st Ranger Company. After the battle, only sixty-two Rangers were fit for duty. Nine were captured, including CPT Charles L. Carrier, the Company Commander. Carrier endured eleven months of torture before being executed by his Communist captors. Along with the other Ranger companies in Korea, the 1st was disbanded in June 1951. The majority of the Rangers went to the 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team. Like the other five Ranger Companies in Korea, 1st Company fought with distinction until the changes in the battlefield environment precluded their effective deployment. ♣

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**Former U.S. POWs are escorted down the ramp of the Air Force C-124 that brought them to Tokyo, Japan. Those POWs in need of significant medical treatment were flown to Japan before travelling on to the United States.**

## Endnotes

- 1 Billy C. Mossman, *Ebb and Flow: November 1950 –July 1951* (Washington DC: Center of Military History, 2000), 445-447.
- 2 Edmund J. Dubrueil, 1st Ranger Company, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 2 October 2009, Fort Bragg, NC, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 3 EUSA Report, 1 February 1951, National Archives Record Group 319, Box 380, Entry 95, Washington DC.
- 4 David W. Hogan, Jr., *Raiders or Elite Infantry: The Changing Role of the U.S. Army Rangers from Dieppe to Grenada* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 118; Robert W. Black, *Rangers in Korea* (New York: Ivy Books, 1989), 63-67.
- 5 Russell A. Gugeler, *Combat Actions in Korea* (Washington DC: Center of Military History, 2000), 117-124; Mossman, *Ebb and Flow*, 285-291.
- 6 Mossman, *Ebb and Flow*, 448-449.
- 7 Dubrueil interview.
- 8 Dubrueil interview.
- 9 Dubrueil interview.
- 10 Dubrueil interview.
- 11 Dubrueil interview.
- 12 Dubrueil interview.
- 13 Walter G. Hermes, *Truce Tent and Fighting Front* (Washington DC: Center of Military History, 2005) Appendix B. **Operation BIG SWITCH in August 1953 was the largest prisoner of war exchange between the United Nations Command and the Communist forces. In April 1953 there was a limited exchange called Operation LITTLE SWITCH. The exchange of prisoners was a contentious issue during the armistice negotiations largely due to the Communist inflexibility on the matter of giving their soldiers a choice between repatriation and remaining in the south.**
- 14 Dubrueil interview.