

The Hills Went Boom!



A Novel By

Hank Acker

Acker/The Hills Went Boom

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Chapter One

January 1952, Hung bong, North Korea

The roar of the explosions was overwhelming, terrifying and deafening.

The six startled US Marines, each a newly minted Recon demolition man, looked at each other trying not to show any surprise or fear.

Equally terrifying and violent was the concussion, all of the men reacted clown-like, swaying and hopping sideways, foolishly looking at the huge plume of dust, rock and dirt they had just dislodged.

Covered completely with debris, their utility uniforms stiffened and went from green to ash gray. Weapons suffered the same effect of being coated with the ash of the explosion. The heat and force of the exploding C2 plastic explosive made a plaster of the debris and the surrounding ice and snow while exiting the mouth of the tunnel.

The next sound anyone heard was that of the mission leader, Corporal Jim Cunningham, yelling out the names of each of his demolition team. "Hayes, Cook, Morgan, Longo, Grazioso, Ormond, Sound off dammit. Doc, go check 'em out."

So went Recon Unit One's mission number one, their part of the Korean War had officially begun.

This was the first experience in a war zone for all of the members of this newly formed Recon unit of the United States Marine Corp. Each of the six looked at the others while holding his breath for fear of losing control of his bladder. The blast pushed their gut so hard that the urge to pee was fierce.

Navy corpsman Otto Schmidt went from man-to-man and gave his "thumbs up" to Cunningham. This was war and they were now in middle of it. Aarogah, Semper Fi. Oh shit.

Reflecting back in his mind, Cunningham thought not one single day of the yearlong training, had prepared them for this moment. All of their demolition training explosions had been kind of fun and under controlled circumstances. Kind of exciting but this one was truly breath taking, outstanding yet scary.

From the beginning of this first tour of combat to the actual explosion itself, it had been surreal. Each member of this team had gone through the first mission in his head,

each having a different point of view, expectation and fear. No one wanted to be the one who screwed something up.

“So make sure you check and double-check every item on your checklist and your partners stuff too,” yelled our “Gunny,” when we were getting ourselves prepared to go on this mission.

Trained, tough and cocky each marine knew what the “order of the day” was and wanted to get on with the mission.

“Gather your gear, check your weapons, check radios, distribute the ammo, grenades and smoke markers. Divvy up the rations and extra toilet paper.” The “Gunny”, Gunnery Sergeant Paul “Pappy” Papushka, seemed to be everywhere at once, grizzled and tough he had seen lots of action in the South Pacific in WW II. His instructions required no comment or agreement. Privates, privates first class, corporals and sergeants too just said “Yes Gunnery Sergeant” and kept on doing whatever he had told them to do.

Next on the checklist, each team member had to requisition the explosives and parachutes. It amused some of the group that they had to request, on paper with the commanding officers signature, the equipment needed to do the job. Their job was to jump out of an airplane into the bad guys’ backyard and blow things up and do it again and again.

Just more of the UN and US headquarters red tape, BS and SNAFU. Bet the gooks don’t have to go through all this crap, or do they?

The Recon teams each slept in tents with twelve guys, twelve cases of grenades of all types, all kinds of ammunition of every size and caliber, bazookas and a flamethrower. Yet each jumper had to request his parachutes and cases of explosives just like school kids in the library, and sign for them too.

Neither the parachutes nor the plastic explosives would ever be returned to the quartermaster, whether the mission was a success or failure.

So why sweat the inventory?

The Mission

Mission specifics had been issued and discussed numerous times and while the nature of the assignment was extremely confidential the number of departments and units involved made it virtually impossible to keep it a real secret. The US Army oversaw the whole plan in concert with the Army of the Republic of Korea and the United Nations Joint Operations Commission (JOC).

The JOC had the final word, “go or no go” as to what, when, where and how these missions were to be conducted.

USMC Reconnaissance units existed in a limited form until the Korean War. They like many other small units were either dismantled or reduced in size, scope and mission with the end of World War II. The second “War to end all Wars.”

The Korean conflict saw the need for USMC Recon services again, which led to a focused recruitment program and another rise in their numbers. There was a great need for intelligence on North Korean and Chinese forces and the USMC Amphibious Recon Company was called to make amphibious landings in Northern Korea and report back their findings and also perform small raids against rail lines and tunnels.

Some of these missions took place in excess of 100 miles north, of the recently concocted Demilitarized Zone or DMZ, in North Korean territory. Reconnaissance team members operated closely with US Navy Underwater Demolition Teams during some of their missions.

Some amphibious landings along both of the northern shorelines of North Korea were essential in slowing the advance of the Chinese Communist and North Korean Armies. These clandestine Recon raids successfully interrupted the use of the rail system in the north continuously.

Amphibious assaults by these Recon units proved to be very time consuming for gathering information. Each unit of 12 members had to lug their equipment and support materiel into the targeted area. Adding a new dimension to these missions by the use of parachute teams flying in troop carrier aircraft could get to the target area quickly and accomplish more.

The problem with this new method was, getting the teams out after gathering whatever intelligence they had gained. A combined effort using the US Navy Frigate fleet with the Marine Reconnaissance units was deemed a significant improvement.

The US Marine Corps was selected as the implementers of these new assignments; the US Air Force was assigned to take the Marines to the drop zone in Air Force C-119 cargo and troop carrier aircraft. The US Navy provided each jump team with a Navy corpsman, who had successfully completed two weeks of jump training and who would remain unarmed but permanently detached from the Navy to the Marine Corps. He was a team member until relieved of his assignment.

The Army, Navy and Marines each had spotter aircraft to verify the success of the missions by over-flying the zone of activity using map coordinates and grid locators. Low-level aerial photos were taken of the target area for further evaluation and reference.

Each Recon team, after completing the demolition part of a mission and before leaving the targeted area, were to set up a low-frequency homing beacon so aircraft such as these could locate the target site.

Every escape and evacuation plan was unique to each mission and required even more units involved and yet secrecy was a major emphasis for each unit.

The general plan for all of the missions was to locate and verify the coordinates of tunnels that the Japanese had used during their thirty-five year occupation of Korea, previously known as Choson. The purpose and ultimate use of the tunnels were varied; some were for the construction of aircraft and weapons. Others were for food storage and some provided safety from air attacks and others were used for internment, to house prisoners captured by the Japanese in other war zones.

According to most of the Korean locals, Japanese prisoners, along with slaves and the undesirables from many Japanese conquered nations, hewed these tunnels out of solid rock. Recons' job was to locate, verify the site coordinates, the size and configuration of the tunnels and determine what purpose they may have served.

In most cases the ultimate job assignment would be to destroy the tunnels by using C2 and the newly developed C3 plastic explosives carried in via an airdrop. The US Air Force developed a two-pass system. The Recon unit would jump only when the aircraft cargo master confirmed the first or cargo drop was successful. Then the Marines would jump when the plane was back over the target area.

The C series of plastic explosives, developed for WW II Army engineers and Seabees, are stable, with no detonator inserted, and do not explode on impact. Even when parachuted from an airplane from a thousand feet or hit directly with a hammer. Most airborne jumps and cargo drops were made from between nine hundred to eleven hundred feet altitude to minimize the team's exposure to possible local ground fire or detection. This altitude left just enough time for the cargo chutes to open as well as the chutes the marines were wearing. Not too close, not too far.

Some of the civilian North Korean population did not support the United Nations effort of freeing the people and the merging of the two Korea's. Of course no one told the Recon teams this until after the civilians had fired on and injured some US and UN troops.

Evacuation

The time had come to evacuate the tunnel site.

This was the fifth day of this patrol, one day getting in, one day of reconnaissance and two days of setting the explosives in the tunnel complex. Today was the day of reckoning; the igniters would be set off in a series of explosions starting at the deepest end of this multi-chambered tunnel.

Mapping the tunnel had taken a lot longer than expected. There was more to these tunnels than just someone had dug a hole in the ground. These were massive projects, designed for "who knows what" but prior intelligence did not cover any of what the unit discovered. The total patrol time was set up to be seven days; they had already used up four and a half days and were not done yet.

The WW 2 era plastic explosives, just like the team members, did not like the frigid North Korean weather. Some of the explosives crumbled like poorly made clay bricks, some of it refused to stay stuck on the cold-damp rock surface of the tunnel. The team did what they could with what they had and made a mental note to not take any of the older explosives on the next patrol or mission.

But first things first as they say. Let's get this thing blown up and sealed and get our butts out of here.

The two sniper scouts had, for the most part, an uneventful time of it, until the explosion. They each were half-frozen from being on watch since the beginning of this

mission. Both were startled and shaken. They were prepared for an enemy assault or rifle activity, but not having the ground they lay on raised up a couple of feet.

After gathering their wits about themselves they scrambled to the tunnel entrance to see what had happened and laughed at how the six demolition guys looked covered in frozen soot.

Being certain that no one was injured, Doc had OK'd the six demo guys. The squad leader, Corporal James Cunningham, shook his head and told the six to get ready to "move out" while he set up the radio beacon with the help of his radioman PFC Murphy.

The unit had at least a twelve to fifteen mile hike to get to the recovery site and be transported by boat back to the Recon units base of operation. It was going to be a long afternoon and night. Luckily not one of the twelve-person team was injured.

Some were just embarrassed.

Before Cunningham and Murphy could set up the beacon, a US Army Grasshopper spotter plane made a pass over the site. The sound of the engine of this little airplane surprised the hell out of the entire team. The US Army pilot had been forewarned of their activity and was to be ready to lend assistance if tactical support was necessary. Tactical support meant either field artillery or low-flying aircraft strafing and bombing support or both. Neither would be needed this time.

The pilot used his handy-talkie to contact the unit on the ground and reported several smoking exits on the hill above the tunnel. After a quick inspection, the exits turned out to be air vents carved out of the hill and into the tunnels to provide outside fresh air for anyone using the tunnels.

Another hour lost checking those vents out, Corporal Cunningham was becoming antsy. Those air vents were very cleverly disguised. Not one of the demolition team noticed them while in the tunnel. Then again it was not something the team members were looking for.

As the mission and patrol leader he made a mental note of that point for the missions to come.

Extraction

The Recon unit would travel mostly in radio silence, except for the handy-talkie, which had a lousy range on the ground but seemed pretty effective in this situation. The pilot was going to do a fly over again and take notes for later use. The Recon unit waited until he completed his fly over and then mustered up to get out of the area.

The corporal figured they could travel for about an hour or so and split into two six-person groups and grab a K Ration break. Need to make a note of that too, seven days on K rations is not very good. There has to be something better. No smoke allowed, no fires or any kind and no cigarette smoking either.

Six of the unit would watch for gooks and six would eat. PFC Bruce Strong was the team BAR man and he would eat first and then take the highest point with the best view, the two snipers would split up, each with one group of five.

Both snipers were PFC Sniper-Scouts, a new designation in the Marine Corps, and very good with their Springfield '03's. Neither man used a scope. Mario Ortega was a marksman back in high school and naturally gravitated to this sniper assignment. His equal, Charlie (Mel) Ott was a city boy but found shooting came as natural as strolling down Broadway. Mel didn't know where he would use these skills after the war, but that could be a long way off.

Chow break was uneventful except for the constant complaining about the age of the rations, some were dated July 1944. This was January 1952 in the frozen north of the Korean peninsula. The group wanted hot chow, not jungle rations.

The exit route would have been fine in summertime but this was the dead of winter, literally. The route was treacherous in the ice and snow and the wind; good God, the wind was awful. It was biting and swirling, kicking up chunks of ice-like snow. The unit was going to have to requisition arctic weather gear if more of these missions were to continue this far north.

There is a limit on how much "extra" can be transported on one of these missions. Extra stuff meant extra weight and having to deal with any excess when it was time to pack up and leave. Leaving stuff was not an option; it was either taken with you during extraction or destroyed and rendered useless.

One of the niceties of working in the tunnels was they were warmer than outside. The ice that had formed on the mouth of this tunnel's entrance soon became dripping

water inside. Cpl Cunningham had made mental notes of this for the “after action report” that would be filed as soon as the unit reported back to HQ. Jim had never written an AAR report, but Jim was sure the Gunny would help him.

At the next rest break he would ask each of the members for their input. It was always better to see things through many eyes as opposed to only his. Jim really wanted to make this patrol and mission a success. He had been a Corporal for a lot longer than he felt he should be and getting into Recon was going to be his “ticket” to sergeant and higher.

Jim reminded himself to bring a pad and pencil to make notes on the next mission. Memories were not always reliable.

The exit route, mapped out by a team of HQ staff members, seemed simple enough on paper, but in reality it was way off. Compass readings and the map coordinates did not agree with the planned route. Cunningham had no one to check with. He was in charge.

Instinctively he knew the unit was heading in the right general direction but that wasn't good enough. This unit had to meet the Navy extraction team at precisely the right coordinates, no excuses and no second chances. The Recon unit had enough time to try a couple of different routes through the mountains, but there was only one exact spot and time frame to meet the Navy.

The window of opportunity was just two hours long.

Map reading and orienteering training at the Marine training center, Twenty-nine Palms, was much different than trying to extract a group of Marines over ice and snow covered trails. Luckily the weather was clear and the stars gave him good sightings for knowing where the team was, it was just a matter of having all the information jive.

This team had successfully completed every challenge the recon training had thrown at them; this mission would be no different. Keep following the rules and it will be all right. So far no enemy troops of any type had been seen and Cunningham wanted it to stay that way.

More than five hours had passed without incident, the silence was eerie. The corporal had expected to hear the sound of surf by this time. “Be patient” he told himself. As he started to ask if anyone heard anything, a familiar voice said...

“Hey, no sweat, there's the marker,” point man Hayes, whispered. “Pass it on.” Tony, next in line, gave the good news to Cunningham.

The closer the unit got to the coastline the colder it seemed to get. The Wonson Reservoir was about 60 miles south of this operation and Cunningham remembered all the stories of the 1950 Marines evacuating that area and humping to the Hungnam harbor for the lift out of Korea. We don't want to repeat that bit of history, ever.

The Sea of Japan which was just in front of them on the other side of this sheltered cove, seemed cold and unfriendly. Except for the blinking signal from some type of boat bobbing close to the shore.

Using flashlight communications, the radiomen quickly identified the signals as coming from the US Navy. Authentication works two ways. The Navy crew was not anxious to take on some North Korean patrol posing as friendlies and getting caught in a trap. “Who won last year's World Series?” was always a good way to be certain either group was “talking” to an American. Each team member knew that the NY Yankees had clobbered the NY Giants in six games in the 1951 World Series. It was “Jolting” Joe DiMaggio's last season as a Yankee and Mickey Mantle's first.

Cunningham split the unit back into two groups of six. Schmidt, the Navy corpsman, Strong and his BAR and himself would be in the second group. Just in case of problems and the need for a medic. He was never sure where to place “Doc” since he was unarmed and carrying a bulkier load than anyone else. Medical supplies were not exactly lightweight stuff and Doc had not used any of his supplies. Thankfully.

At five count intervals the first group headed for the beach and the waiting boat. The first Marine to reach the boat found it to be an LCVP landing craft. Its ramp was down and bobbing in the shallow water Cook stepped onto the ramp suspiciously and was met by two sailors in life jackets who grabbed his armpits and propelled him into the craft. “Welcome aboard, Marine.” Five seconds later Longo came aboard. He followed Cook to the deepest part of the landing craft. Since there were only twelve team members there would be plenty of room, these landing craft were built to hold 36 fully loaded assault personnel.

The Sea of Japan

In less than 10 minutes everyone was on board the landing craft and the Navy coxswain put the boat into reverse and slowly backed away from the shoreline. The ramp was quickly raised and they were on their way, not knowing to what or where. The LCVP's officially named "Landing Craft Vehicle and Personnel" are not built for speed, top speed was about 12mph, but it is for transporting troops to beaches from large troop carrier ships or returning to these mother ships for more troops. The crafts flat-like bottom did not make it a very sea worthy vessel.

Nothing like that was in sight, so just how are we going to go a couple of hundred miles back to our base of operations. In this slow moving little landing craft?

They headed out to sea after the driver turned the craft around 180 degrees. The Navy guys passed out coffee and rolls to each man of the unit. "My God it tasted good. Black coffee and hard rolls with jelly in the middle." Ten minutes later one of the landing craft crew let the marines know that the LCVP was headed for a US Navy Patrol Frigate. The Frigate was holding in deeper water to avoid the shallow coastal waters. The Marines would meet up with the vessel shortly.

An LCVP crewmember explained the process of getting out of one of these vessels while in the open sea. "The landing craft will pull alongside of the Frigate and each of you will climb onto the landing craft's top rear deck."

"Crap." Came a voice from the assembled Marines.

"And catch the trailing ladder on the side of the Patrol Frigate." He droned on.

"More crap." Another voice echoed.

"Deck hands will be there to help." The sailor continued his instructions.

"Like Hell," Morgan grunted.

"Do not take your gear, packs or weapons," ignoring the unseen faces below.

"Are you shittin' me" yet another voice from the dark bowels of the LCVP?

"They will be lifted aboard when the landing craft is snatched from the water and deposited on the after-deck of the ship." The sailor's job was to inform, not debate.

"Marines don't give up their weapons to anyone, anytime, anywhere. Got it," yelled PFC Longo from the belly of the landing craft.

"Take that up with the Chief Master at Arms," yelled back the boatswain's mate from the drivers seat. "We just deliver the messages."

“Sling arms,” shouted Cunningham. “Secure for disembarking.” Each Marine was to shoulder his weapon and secure it in the prescribed manner. The same as going over the side of a troop transport, when executing an amphibious landing. The M1 rifle or the Springfield, lies across the back at a 45-degree angle and won’t slip off because your head and helmet are in the way. The weapon is totally useless in this position, but it won’t fall off either, and that is the point. No one was going to take the weapon from you while it is on your body in that position.

Everyone had taken the ammunition clip out of the weapon and put it in their ammo belt. Better safe than shoot somebody by mistake. The ammo belt was put with the gear they could not bring aboard.

Cunningham checked his watch. It had been almost an hour and a half since they got on this landing craft. “Where is this Navy Friggit?”

Friggit, that was one awful name for any kind of a ship.

To answer his unasked question, the boatswain’s mate yelled down from his perch on the upper deck of the landing craft that the vessel was in sight. Now comes the fun part continued Cunningham’s thoughts. I got these guys through our first assignment and now we are all going to fall into the icy cold water of the Sea of Japan and die. Damn.

The moment of truth arrived sooner than expected.

Chapter Two

The Patrol Frigate 166, USS Olympia

The LCVP pulled alongside of the Patrol Frigate Olympia; hull number PF166 smoothly and with a little bump. "He drives this thing better than I do my '39 Ford Coupe," commented Longo. Instructions came from the frigate.

A bullhorn roared into the quiet night. "Tie off a line fore and aft of the landing craft." Two heavy ropes thrown from the deck, appeared on the floor of the landing craft, the Marines all moved to the outer edges of the small craft's interior, not wanting to get in the Navy's way. The two lines were secured to something on the upper side of the LCVP and the little craft stopped bobbing. Instead it mimicked the motion of the larger ship. Even though the frigate was small by Navy standards, it looked big to the Marines hunkered in the bowels of this little boat. A ladder, literally a regular ladder, was pushed into the craft and one of the on-deck sailors slid on down into the assembled Marines. "That was really slick," commented Hayes.

The newly arrived seaman held the bottom of the ladder and told each of the Recon team to climb up, one at a time, using two hands. No kidding. When you get to the deck level, clear a path as quickly as possible, then the next man will do the same. Corporal Cunningham volunteered to be last. Hayes went first and was on the frigate's deck quickly and hustled out of the way by a Navy deck hand. Schmidt went next. The corpsman made it up in no time flat. From there on it was pretty routine and Cunningham jumped aboard, it took less than ten minutes to complete the boarding. It turned out that the ship's crew had practiced this exercise three times a day for the past week; they got real good at it.

Once on board the Olympia the Marines were hustled inside a cabin alongside where the ladder had been. It was warm, smelled of food, coffee and cigarettes. "My God, the Navy had the life." A Chief Petty Officer took charge and told us to remove all gear and weapons and secure them in the corner of this room. All any one had on them was a canteen and some ammo pouches and their M1 Garand rifle. He acknowledged we can keep our weapons, but they had to be unloaded and all ammunition and grenades had to be in a secured area. No exceptions.

This was a US Navy warship and no loose munitions were tolerated. The Chief continued his instructions. "Any explosives would be under the supervision of the Chief Master at Arms and his storage area is two decks below this one." Once the weapons,

ammo, grenades, bayonets and smoke markers had been dealt with, the rifles were stacked in groups of four, butts down, barrels up and checked for safeties "on". Standard Operating Procedures for transporting a rifle or carbine in a wet or dirty area was for a new, dry prophylactic (rubber) be put over the muzzle, and forward sight of the weapon. So they did.

The grimy, tired and smelly Recon team were getting more hungry the longer they stood in this room, actually it was the ships officers wardroom. For this occasion the ships captain deemed it necessary to use it to welcome the ships visitors. "The ship had limited meeting space and accommodations must be made in such circumstances," drawled the Chief. This space was normally "off limits" to him and the rest of the crew. "This was officers' country." The next instruction surprised every one of the team. He told them to take off all their clothes including underwear and socks. Keep your boots. The Navy would provide them dungarees, tee shirts, underwear and socks until the "utilities" and other stuff they were wearing could be laundered and returned.

Every Soldier, Sailor, Marine and Airman has their name or the first letter of their last name and the last four digits of his service number printed inside of each and every piece of clothing so nothing would get lost or "go missing."

"Now for some chow. Follow the mess cook outside the port hatch", the Chief said, while pointing in the direction of the gray painted door. "Be careful on the ladders," he added quickly. "One of the ship's officers will be responsible for your weapons. His name is Ensign Sparrow." Almost in unison everyone looked at Cpl. Cunningham who shrugged his shoulders and said, "Let's eat."

And eat they did, this little boat had a real cook and baker, sailors, called mess men, were assigned to do the cleanup and stuff. Not like the Marine Corps, all, except non-commissioned enlisted personnel, drew "mess cooking" for thirty days at a clip; you helped in the prepping, cooking, serving, cleanup and disposal of all garbage and trash. The arrangements on this PF166 looked pretty darned good.

The cook made eggs, "any way you want 'em" and steak, with toast, muffins and juice. Coffee, real coffee, not the crap that is in the K or C ration packs. And jelly, lots of jelly. They also had oleomargarine, a substitute for butter. It's greasy and tastes oily, but better than nothing and a lot better than they had been used to. The Chief joined them

during the meal to announce that sailors had given up their bunks so the Marines could sleep in some comfort for the twenty-four or more hours they would be on-board. Wow, real bunks and real sheets, "Thanks."

Cunningham stood up and started applauding the crew of this US Navy vessel. The rest joined in enthusiastically. Looking around at each other in Navy blue dungarees and white tee shirts it all seemed unreal. One day they are blowing the hell out of a Korean mountain and a couple of days later, here they are, safe and sound and enjoying the hospitality of the US Navy. Jeez, what a war.

The Captain of the ship had told the ship's crew not to ask questions of the Marines, since their missions are classified "Top Secret" but each of the crew was anxious to find out what these Marines were "up to."

It is weird on board a Navy ship. Bells ring all the time, and someone is "piping" through the loudspeaker system all hours of the day and night. The Marines were so tired most only heard one or two of the messages. When they were awakened it was broad daylight and the ship was a beehive of activity. All were advised to stay put until someone paged them to report on deck. "No problem mate."

Then came a knock on the door "Come on in, it's open." A navy seaman came in with their utilities, laundered and folded so neatly they looked as though they had been pressed. They were stacked by serial number in a large canvas bag on wheels, the kind seen in hospitals. Amazing.

Even the previously soot covered ones were clean. The seaman left the basket and told the Marines, "Drop the navy dungarees and tee shirts in the basket. When everybody finished changing clothes, someone will pick it up later."

The unit heard all kinds of announcements pertaining to work aboard the ship. "Secure from this work party, secure from this and that job, secure from loading the landing craft." That caught their attention. All of their gear had been left in the landing craft when they came aboard last night. What was happening to it, each had their own concern or interest, but they were told to wait, so wait they would.

Soon the loudspeaker in their compartment blasted out. "All Marines report to the fantail to gather your gear." "All" assumed the message meant "Doc" too; they left the compartment and headed for the rear of the ship. What a surprise they got, the LCVP

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