

Norfolks still live with memories of forgotten war

For many young National Servicemen it was a war that was also a rites of passage – 60 years on, **Steve Snelling** talks to veterans of a forgotten Cold War conflict in Korea.

The haunting scene still has a chilling familiarity. It features a hill in Korea and a night erupting into sudden and lethal violence. A trench, barely visible in the darkness, is spitting bullets and grenades. And in the crazy melee that follows men are stumbling and cursing and running, ghostly images of a forgotten war Tony Towell remembers only too well.

For a moment he is lost in thought as though still trying to make sense of the 60-year-old confusion of a close-quarter combat gone wrong.

“The fire-fight was tremendous,” he says after a pause. “Took us by surprise. Almost as though they heard us coming, almost as though it were an ambush.”

The jarring memory is a recurring one he regularly revisits in his sleep.

“Hardly a night goes by,” he says, “when I don’t think back to that action...”

Tony was then just 20, a young subaltern in the 1st Battalion, the Royal Norfolk Regiment despatched to the Far East six decades ago as part of Britain’s commitment to an American-led, multinational force fighting under the banner of the United Nations to defend South Korea from communist invasion.

Some 65pc of the battalion were young conscripts, mostly aged 19 to 21. For many of them, apprentices and novice workers, Korea would not only prove a baptism of fire but would serve as a kind of rites of passage.

Typical of them was Ray Segon. An 18-year-old commercial artist in Norwich when he was told to report to Britannia Barracks in summer 1951, he remembers parading in civilian clothes to be told by an officer he was joining the finest regiment in the British Army.

“We were told we’d be joining the 1st battalion in Korea and added something along the lines of ‘those who do their training well will come back and those who don’t won’t.’”

Sixty years on, Tom Henson, then a 19-year-old National Service subaltern not long out of school, smiles as he describes his tour of duty in Korea as “my gap year, which was part of a gap of 2½ years between school and university”.

Of those leaving for the so-called ‘Land of the Morning Calm’ that autumn few had ever ventured out of Britain before and fewer still had the vaguest idea about the country to which they were bound.

To Bill Buller, a teenage carpenter and joiner, it was quite literally a journey into the unknown.

“I knew nothing about Korea, nothing at all,” he says.

He wasn’t alone. Jerry Willmott, then a 19-year-old junior non-commissioned officer, recalls: “When the Korean war started I had to look for Korea on the map. I can’t recall ever having heard of it before.”

Such ignorance was not confined to humble soldiers. Tony Towell, who had joined the Army straight from school and passed through Sandhurst before being commissioned into the Royal Norfolks, confesses to having known precious little about where they were being sent to fight.

“I read up a little, but the only piece of intelligence I seemed to gather was that there were no rabbits in Korea. Not much help really and, of course, we were trying to talk to the soldiers to explain why we were going there which was very difficult.”

In fact, they were to find themselves embroiled in the first major conflict of the Cold War, a struggle between communism and Western-style democracy played out amid the ragged and rugged hills straddling the 38th Parallel that divided North and South Korea.

By the time the Royal Norfolks took their places in the frontline in October 1951 the war between the Chinese-backed North and the UN-supported South had stagnated into a first world war-style stalemate with the opposing armies hunkered down in hilltop dugouts and trenches.

It was a grim stand-off with its own hardships and privations. Where the veterans of 1914-18 had to contend with mud and mire, the novice infantrymen overlooking the Sami-ch’on valley were forced to endure the snowbound misery of a Korean winter.

“It got cold about the beginning of November,” recalls John Denny, then a sergeant in charge of a section of machine guns and now a retired major living at Southwold. “And the cold just got worse. It was bitter. The temperatures plummeted. People reckoned it could get as low as 40 below and, while I don’t think it was quite that bad, the wind was biting. It was said to come down from Siberia and it certainly felt like it.”

Initially, it was an ordeal compounded by equipment and uniforms utterly ill-suited to the climate.

Former sergeant Tony Downes recalls: “During the winter conditions were so bad you had to relieve sentries every 30 minutes because if you didn’t they’d freeze.

“You were responsible for other people’s lives which made you grow up a bit...”



I can remember lifting people out of trenches with sheets of ice all down the fronts of their greatcoats.”

To touch exposed metal with bare hands was to risk losing your skin.

“It was so cold,” says Tony Towell, “that boiling water would become a solid block of ice by the time you’d finished shaving.”

In the face of such adversity, harsh lessons were quickly learned.

Tom Henson remembers how they soon discovered the need to burrow deeper.

“At first we just dug slit trenches, as we’d been taught to do in

England in places like Thetford, but these were totally inadequate. It wasn’t until we made contact with people who’d been out there longer, particularly Canadians, that we dug ourselves in a sensible fashion.”

Jerry Willmott considered it something of a miracle that men didn’t succumb to the sub-zero temperatures.

“It was beyond belief,” he says. “Given we were all so young and inexperienced, it seems quite unbelievable to me that we managed not only to survive but to carry out our normal functions.”

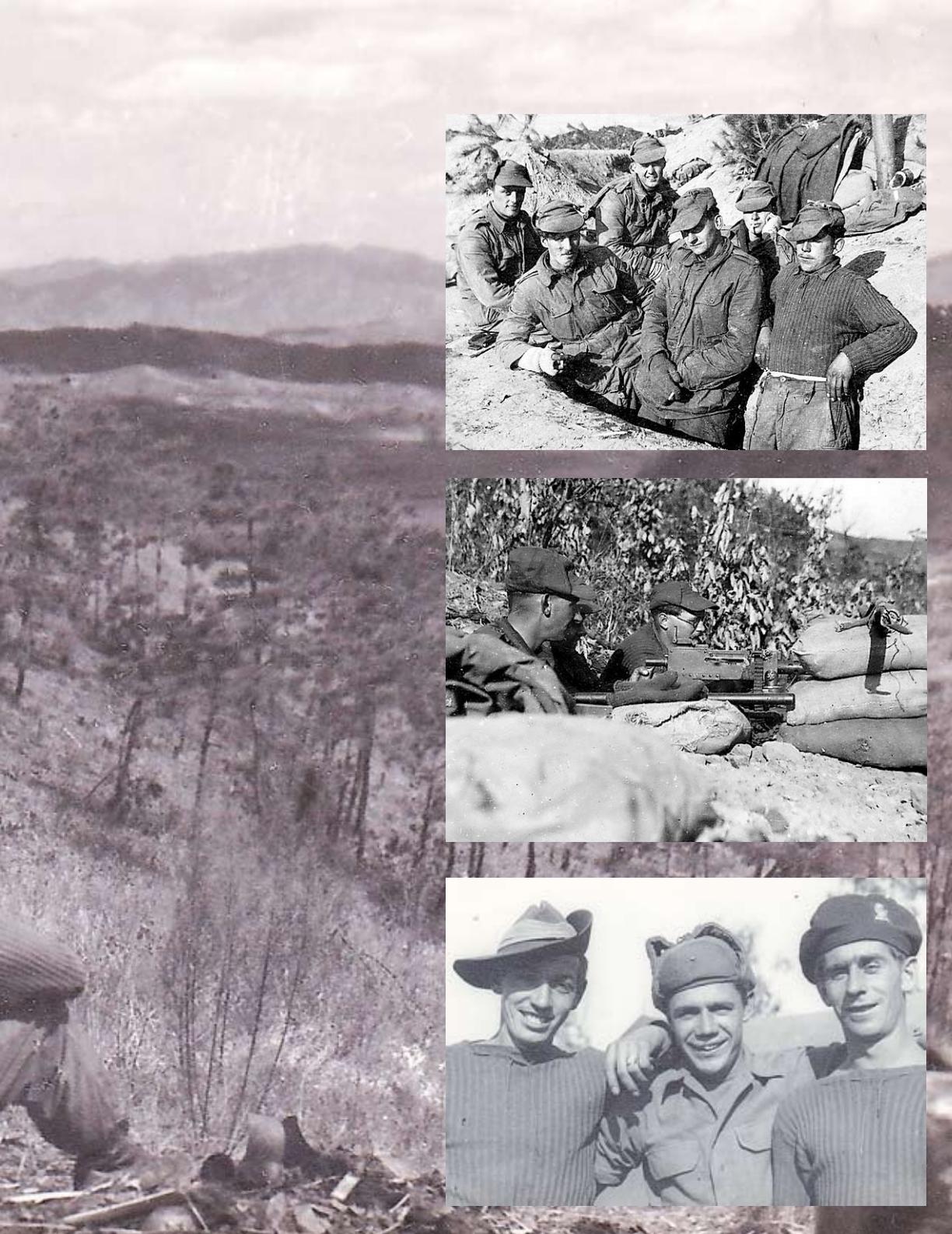
Those functions included some of the most perilous and unpopular of missions undertaken by the young Royal Norfolks – night-time patrols deep into no-man’s-land.

Designed to foster an aggressive spirit and establish supremacy over the Chinese units facing them, the incursions ranged from small ‘listening patrols’ sent out to silently spy on the enemy to fighting patrols whose role was to ‘shoot them up’ with ambushes and raids.

Such sorties, involving as they did ventures beyond the security of well-protected dugouts, were a test of leadership, personal courage and nerves.

Bill Buller remembers being “absolutely petrified” before going out, while Derek Danes recalls he “shook like a rat” on his first patrol and maintains that “anybody who says they didn’t do the same is a liar”.





Both, however, soon learned to control their natural fears.

"As soon as everything started up," says Bill, "you forgot all about your worries. You were too busy thinking about what you'd got to do."

Even officers, some of them as young if not younger than the men they were commanding, were not immune to anxiety.

"I was absolutely terrified," says Tony Towell, "but you couldn't show it. I pretended to be rather hearty about it all, telling people how we were going to succeed, what we were going to do, making sure everyone knew what was expected of them."

To that end, responsibility of command was a useful distraction.

Tom Henson explains: "If you've got a patrol of maybe 15 chaps, you're more concerned with getting them through it than with your own feelings. That's not bravado, that's just the way it is. The immediate concern is getting out there, avoiding the minefields, getting into your ambush position, or whatever place you're heading for, and thinking about the tactics you're going to adopt should you happen to bump the enemy or they bump you."

Which is precisely what happened one eventful night almost six months into their tour. Leading a 13-strong fighting patrol to carry out an ambush, he encountered a

larger Chinese force with much the same intention. A head-on clash in the pitch darkness developed into a fierce fire-fight during the course of which Tom led a charge that resulted in a hand-to-hand struggle in which at least one of his men was actually bitten.

Despite losing three men killed and six wounded, the survivors managed to hold on until a relief force reached them.

"The two factors that saved our lives," he recalls, "were the coolness of my wireless operator, Alf Tearle, and the accuracy of the machine-gun fire that he was able to bring down."

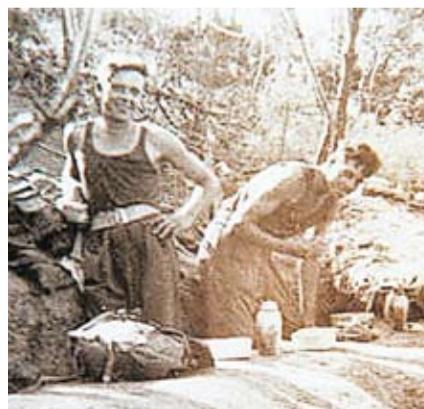
The sharp encounter resulted in an immediate award of the Military Cross to Tom, a rare enough honour but rarer still for National Service officers, and a mention in despatches for his wireless operator.

Such fierce actions were the exception rather than the rule, although few who took part in any of the numberless patrols that so characterised the battalion's time in Korea did not experience at least one hairy moment.

Having already helped extricate one patrol from a potentially disastrous brush with a Chinese force in the Sami-ch'on valley, Jerry Willmott spent his 20th birthday in no-man's-land being bracketed by heavy and sustained enemy shellfire.

"I remember thinking I wasn't going

Norfolks at war: Far left, Tom Henson - Korea was his 'gap year' as a 19-year-old National Service subaltern. Main picture, the scrubby slopes and rugged hills around the Sami-ch'on Valley were patrol country. Inset, top to bottom, trench warfare Korean-style; a Norfolk outpost ready for action; a variety of headgear worn by the National Servicemen in Korea. Above right, top to bottom, Tom Henson's platoon on the troopship heading off to war 60 years ago; Jerry Willmott on the right; and Norfolks dug in on a reverse slope in the Hill 355 area, 1952.



Progress was uneventful until the raiders neared the trench. Then, suddenly, as they made their final approach an explosion of firing broke out.

"The firepower was immense," recalls Tony. "I don't think any of us expected a fight of that kind of tenacity."

Heading forward, he found bewildered survivors, several of them wounded, still under fire from machine-guns and grenades.

"They were in a state of shock so we simply got everybody away we could find."

Some men, including Jonathan Wormald, were missing and, having reluctantly pulled back in the face of persistent mortar fire, Tony promptly returned with another patrol to search for them.

"I remember being unhappy because I felt I hadn't got everybody out," he says.

Dodging bullets and bombs, he had what he called a "scamper" through a smoke-screen in search of more survivors. His selfless efforts, spanning 16 tense and exhausting hours, resulted in the immediate award of a Military Cross, but 60 years on he says he still "can't help wondering whether I could have done better".

In fact, the missing men, both of them incapacitated with wounds, had been captured. Jonathan Wormald died and the other survived to be repatriated.

They were among well over 100 casualties sustained by the battalion. In all, by the time the Royal Norfolks departed in late September 1952, 37 men had been killed. During its year-long tour of Korea the lines had scarcely budged.

So was it all worth it? Most, like Derek Dane, believe it was.

"Of course, it's sad to lose friends, but we were fighting for a cause and we won and the South Korean people remain grateful for the sacrifice. They know that their country wouldn't have survived without the help of all the countries that came to their aid."

Some were less certain.

"Politically," says Tom Henson, "I think it was a waste of time and, economically, a waste of manpower. But, on a personal level, it was a good experience. I saw places I'd never seen before and it was, undoubtedly, character-building. You were responsible for other people's lives which made you grow up a bit."

Others were merely grateful to have survived the experience.

"I can't say I enjoyed it," says Ray Segon. "A lot of the time I was frightened. But I was fortunate. I came back, got married to the girl I'd known since I was a boy, had children and got the chance to travel... and there were a lot of chaps who weren't so lucky. They didn't even have the chance to get married or do any of those things because their lives were cut short before they'd hardly begun in a war few people have even heard of."

to see the next day, let alone my 21st birthday."

In many instances, the object of the patrols was to snatch a live Chinese prisoner for interrogation. And, as spring turned to summer, this ultimately vain pursuit developed into something of an obsession that might have seemed risible were it not so costly in lives.

Tom Henson recalls how his platoon were offered a crate of beer if they succeeded in capturing a Chinese soldier.

"I don't want to castigate our senior officers, but to imagine we were going to be motivated by a crate of beer for capturing a Chinaman was just a bit pathetic."

One such sortie that went badly awry cost the lives of three men and left 21 wounded, with one section suffering 48pc casualties. And it was another co-ordinated patrol operation with a similar purpose that still gives Tony Towell the creeps.

Mounted one night in May, 1952, it involved a staged advance by a 40-strong fighting patrol split into three sections that was planned to culminate in prisoner snatch from a Chinese trench on a hill opposite. Tom Henson commanded one group. Tony led another party whose job it was to cover the 10-man assault force led by Jonathan Wormald, a 20-year-old subaltern from Dereham.