

# HARD ROAD TO PAKCHON

IN THEIR FIRST DUTY, THE AUSTRALIANS OF 3RAR PROVED THEIR METTLE ALONGSIDE THEIR BRITISH COMRADES.

By Michael Kelly

At the time the Korean War began, the 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR), was the only Australian infantry battalion remaining as part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan. The battalion had been preparing to leave for Australia and was operating at under half of its established strength: just three understrength rifle companies and battalion headquarters.

When 3RAR was committed to Korea on 26 July 1950, the men were elated, but there was much that needed to be done to make the battalion ready for war. As

reinforcements began arriving at the end of August, Major Bruce Ferguson allocated them to their companies and dealt with the influx of weapons, vehicles and equipment. The reinforcements were drawn from both 1 and 2RAR and from volunteers, known as K Force, many of whom had served during the Second World War. The last draft of reinforcements arrived in Japan on 10 September, with the battalion's new commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Green.

Among those who welcomed Green were Ferguson and Captain Ben O'Dowd. Both had served with Green during the Second World War: Ferguson in the 2/2nd Battalion, and O'Dowd in the 2/11th Battalion. During the Wewak campaign, for which Green was awarded a Distinguished Service Order, Green had been responsible for O'Dowd's battlefield commission. Ferguson and O'Dowd had stayed in the army and



c. 29 October 1950, near Chongju. The men of 3RAR's Medium Machine Gun (MMG) Platoon are under enemy fire and awaiting their chance to engage enemy targets on the opposite ridge. AWM H0BJ1649



were among 3RAR's original officers. Two weeks of intensive training followed Green's arrival. By the time the men embarked from Kure, they had started to work well as a unit. On the morning of 28 September the US troopship *Aiken Victory*, carrying 3RAR, docked at Pusan.

Two days later at Taegu, the men paraded before Brigadier Aubrey Coad, who welcomed the Australians to the 27th British Infantry Brigade. He spoke of the deeds of the 1st Battalion, the Argyll and Sutherland Highland Regiment, known as the Jocks, and of the 1st Battalion, the Middlesex Regiment, known as the Diehards, so far in Korea. He told the men of 3RAR that he had "always admired Australian soldiers" and he officially changed the brigade's name to the 27th British Commonwealth Brigade (27th BCB) to reflect its new antipodean element. According to O'Dowd, the men took an immediate liking to Coad; noting his height and florid nose, they gave him the nicknames "Plonky" and "Penfolds" and later "the grey-headed old bastard".

3RAR conducted patrolling and mopping up operations north of Taegu in early October, and suffered its first casualties. A universal carrier driven by Private Ken Sketchley, and carrying Captain Ken Hummerston, entered an unmarked minefield and detonated a mine, killing both men instantly. It was a rude awakening to the realities of war for the uninitiated in 3RAR.

Two days later, the brigade was ordered back to Taegu to be transferred by air to Kimpo, near Seoul. While the men waited at the airfield, they watched the transport aircraft coming in. During the landing of a C119 "Flying Boxcar", a rending metal sound was heard, followed by the aircraft's twin tail booms ripping off and dragging along the tarmac until the aircraft stopped. This caused the grounding of all C119s while the accident was investigated. Despite this, US Air Force and Marines aircraft had lifted 3RAR and the Argylls to Kimpo by 5 pm; the Middlesex were flown in the following morning. Coad took his three battalion commanders by road with the brigade's transport.

#### TO SARIWON AND YONGJU

The 27th BCB left Seoul on 9 October and joined the US 1st Cavalry Division, commanded by General Hobart Gay, at Kaesong. The same day the 1st Cavalry began their advance into North Korea, followed two days later by the 27th BCB. Owing to lack of transport and decent intelligence, the brigade initially advanced slowly, but by the evening of the 16th, Coad's men had reached Sohung.

The rapid advance by the US 8th Army and Republic of Korea (ROK) formations had cut off a number of North Korean Peoples' Army (NKPA) divisions. Sariwon was an important thoroughfare and staging area for the North Koreans, so capturing the town would cut off a large number of enemy troops and stop them from mounting a serious defence of Pyongyang. The morning of the 17th, the Argylls led the advance towards Sariwon with their lead company mounted on US tanks. The Argylls made excellent progress until about 6 kilometres from Sariwon, when they came under fire from North Korean troops. After a sharp, one-sided fight, the Argylls entered Sariwon and began to clear the town.

With the Argylls in Sariwon, 3RAR drove through and formed a road block 8 kilometres north of the town. With night falling, Green deployed the men into all-round defensive positions. At the rear of the battalion's perimeter, Ferguson

waited for the ration vehicles coming out of Sariwon – but it was NKPA troops that were encountered in the gloom. Shots were fired and the North Koreans scattered into fire positions.

During the tense stand-off, Ferguson radioed Green for reinforcements. Green sent B Company, commanded by Major George Thirlwell, and several US Sherman tanks to assist. Ferguson took Thirlwell up on the back deck of one of the tanks, and through an interpreter told the NKPA troops they were surrounded and had two minutes to surrender or be destroyed. Ferguson later recalled that it was indeed the longest two minutes of his life, but the North Koreans did surrender. By morning, 3RAR had taken 1,982 North Korean prisoners.

Green and his men had another surprise that night when a convoy of the US 7th Cavalry, with a further 1,700 North Korean prisoners, arrived from the direction that Green had planned to advance the next morning – so there was unlikely to be large-scale organised resistance before Pyongyang. The next morning the men of the 27th BCB were sorely disappointed when General Gay personally sidelined the brigade so that the US 1st Cavalry could be the first

**Far left:** 30 September 1950. Lieutenant Colonel Charles Green introduces officers of 3RAR to Brigadier Aubrey Coad at Taegu. AWM 146906

**Left:** 7 November 1950, Pakchon. Lieutenant Alf Argent, 3RAR's intelligence officer, and Lieutenant Colonel Bruce Ferguson, commanding officer of 3RAR, confer over an operations map of the area. AWM 146988

**Below:** c. 12 October 1950. The men of the 3RAR are formed up and ready to cross the 38th parallel into North Korea. AWM H0BJ1484



to the enemy capital. The Australians watched the American troops roll past in their trucks, throwing up clouds of choking dust. Pyongyang was entered by the 1st Cavalry and the ROK 1st and 7th Divisions on 20 October.

In an attempt to cut off and destroy retreating NKPA formations, the American 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team (187th RCT) was dropped north of the enemy capital that afternoon. As the Airborne troops moved south the following morning, they encountered the North Korean 239th Regiment, left behind as a delaying force. The Americans were soon hard-pressed and called for assistance. The 27th BCB, tasked with rescuing the beleaguered paratroopers, moved through Pyongyang during the morning and advanced north. By the evening of the 21st, the Argylls had advanced to the hills outside the town of Yongju, where they encountered elements of the NKPA 239th Regiment. By nightfall, the Argylls held the high ground south of Yongju.

#### APPLE ORCHARD AND SINANJU

The next morning, the Argylls advanced into the town and began clearing each house of enemy troops, and linked up with elements of the 187th RCT. With C Company on Sherman tanks leading, 3RAR advanced through Yongju and took the road towards Suncheon. At 9 am, C Company came under fire from an apple orchard (see *WarTime* Issue 56 for a full account). Green organised a swift attack off the march. Over the following hours, C Company defeated a numerically superior and dug-in enemy force, killing 150 North Korean soldiers and capturing a further 239. Seven Australians had been wounded. The quick decisions and decisive actions of Green, his officers, NCOs and men gave 3RAR an outstanding victory. The Middlesex then pushed through 3RAR to link up with the American paratroopers.

The following day, the Middlesex Battalion led the 27th BCB advance to Sinanju on the Chongchon River. With winter fast approaching, the men had begun to feel the cold, especially at night. The cold was also causing problems with the brigade's transport. The rapid advance had outdistanced the lines of supply, and vehicles were breaking down from a lack

of maintenance and the unavailability of spare parts.

The bridges at Sinanju and the nearby town of Anju had been blown and the 27th BCB spent the night at Sinanju. The following morning the Middlesex Battalion crossed the Chongchon River in assault boats that had been brought up during the night. They advanced three kilometres north and stopped on high ground overlooking the road and rail approaches to Sinanju. The rest of the 27th BCB made its way to Anju, where it found the road bridge had been repaired during the night of 23–24 October. The advancing traffic was so heavy that Coad's men could not cross the bridge until around midday on the 25th. 3RAR then led the advance towards Pakchon, some 15 kilometres further north.

### THE BRIDGE AT KUJIN

At 4 pm, B Company, 3RAR, reached Kujin, a town 3 kilometres south of Pakchon and astride the Taeryong River. Here a substantial concrete bridge crossed the river; the central span had been demolished, but it was found that large portions of it could be used to navigate between the two sections of the bridge. Lieutenant Alan "Alby" Morrison took two sections from his platoon across the bridge. On the opposite bank the Australians were approached by a group of North Korean soldiers wanting to surrender, but other North Koreans nearby opened fire on both parties. An American observation aircraft radioed the Australians to let them know that nearby high ground contained two companies of NKPA troops. Morrison took 10 prisoners and withdrew back across the bridge.

Green called in an airstrike on the North Koreans, which arrived at 5.15 pm in the form of F-80 Shooting Stars. Dusk was coming on, so only one strike was possible. To keep harassing the enemy on the other side of the river, Green ordered mortar and artillery fire. He then sent D Company to Pakchon to clear out any enemy troops: the company returned an hour later with 225 North Korean prisoners. To stop the enemy from reinforcing the troops on the opposite side of the river, Green ordered A and B Companies across the bridge to establish defensive positions 400 metres from

**Right:** Brigadier Aubrey Coad (centre) and Lieutenant Colonel Charles Green return from a forward reconnaissance near Chongju during the morning of 29 October 1950. AWM H0BJ1648

**Below:** c. 26 October 1950, Kujin. A wounded 3RAR soldier is lowered from the "broken bridge" across the Taeryong River. AWM H0BJ1646

the river. The rest of the battalion was deployed to compass points around Kujin.

After sporadic contacts, at 10.30 pm the men of B Company came under accurate fire from the North Koreans, killing two Australians and wounding three. At 11 pm, artillery and mortar fire broke up an enemy attack before it began. The fighting continued through the night, but at 4 am the North Koreans attacked the Australian positions with support from two T-34 tanks. The attack on B Company was driven off, though one T-34 got to within 10 metres before halting. A Company was approached by a T-34, two Russian-made Gaz jeeps, a motorcycle, and about 60 enemy soldiers. The Australians held their fire until they could bring their weapons to bear on the entire enemy party. When they opened fire, the enemy column was devastated. Surviving infantry retreated, leaving all the vehicles except for the tank, which extricated itself.

A problem for Regimental Medical Officer Captain Bryan Gandevia was the evacuation of the wounded during the night from the west bank of the river. The stretcher-bearers' solution was to bring the wounded out to the broken bridge span, then lower the stretchers 6 metres to a boat, which was pulled by ropes to the east



bank. Sergeant Tom Murray exposed himself constantly to enemy fire while directing the evacuation of casualties. When the last casualty was being evacuated, the boat was dashed against a bridge pylon and sank. Murray stripped off his outer layer of clothing and plunged into the icy river and brought the casualty safely to the east bank. He was awarded a George Medal for his bravery and leadership that night. The action had cost 3RAR eight men killed and a further 22 wounded. The NKPA had suffered 100 killed and 50 taken prisoner.

During the morning of 25 October airstrikes were called in to harass enemy positions to the west of A and B Companies. By mid-morning, the rest of the battalion had crossed the bridge and held firm. On the 26th, the Argylls crossed the Taeryong and that afternoon, the Middlesex pushed through and led the advance towards Chongju, the brigade's final objective.

### TO CHONGJU

With enemy resistance becoming heavier, Coad ordered his brigade to advance with more caution. The Middlesex encountered NKPA troops supported by armour, but with armour support of their own, the Middlesex fought a determined battle, routing the North Koreans. The next day, the Argylls continued the advance, bringing the 27th BCB to within 6 kilometres of Chongju. In front of the town was the Talchon River, on the east bank of which was a wooded ridgeline, a natural defensive barrier.

Green's men led the brigade advance the following morning. At 10 am, spotter aircraft warned the Australians that the ridgeline before them was held by North Korean infantry, and armour was dug in. Green halted the advance and called for airstrikes. Over the next four hours, 8 airstrikes knocked out seven T-34 tanks and two self-propelled guns, and killed a number of infantry. At 2.30 pm, Green launched D Company, supported by Sherman tanks, against enemy positions south of the road. Though one of the American tanks was knocked out, the ridge was captured. In a feat of individual bravery, Private

John Stafford knocked out a T-34 by shooting his bren gun at its auxiliary petrol tank, igniting the ammunition; he was later awarded the US Silver Star. By mid-afternoon, D Company had captured the high ground.

A Company began their attack on NKPA positions to the north of the road around dusk, without supporting armour, as the tanks were out of ammunition. The company met heavy resistance, but captured the high ground in an hour and knocked out three T-34s in the process. During the night A and D Companies both held off determined counter-attacks. After midnight the battlefield became relatively quiet. In the morning, 150 North Korean dead were counted; 3RAR had lost 9 men killed and 30 wounded. During subsequent clearing operations, 12 more enemy soldiers were killed and 10 taken prisoner.

The Argylls took Chongju the following day, while 3RAR conducted clearing operations on the east bank of the river. The US 21st Regimental Combat Team (21st RCT) passed through the 27th British Commonwealth Brigade and continued the advance towards the Yalu, Coad's men becoming the divisional reserve. That afternoon 3RAR set up defensive positions in the hills overlooking Chongju, with headquarters on the reverse slope of a hill. Green, exhausted after the events of the previous three weeks, went to sleep in his tent.



Just after 6 pm a North Korean self-propelled gun fired six shells into 3RAR's positions. Five shells exploded in the open ground; the sixth hit a tree and exploded, spraying shrapnel. One piece tore into the tent where Green was sleeping and hit him in the stomach. Captain Gandevia administered morphine to the grievously wounded Green, who was evacuated by road to the 8063rd Mobile Army Surgical Hospital at Anju, where he underwent an operation on 31 October. He regained consciousness, but died from his wounds in the evening of 1 November. Major Ferguson took command of the battalion shortly after Green had been wounded. He gave his first orders group at 8 am the next day; at 1 pm, he was advised that Lieutenant Colonel Walsh would take command.

#### CHINA ENTERS THE WAR

On 1 November 3RAR received intelligence reports that Chinese troops had been encountered in the east of the country. The US 21st RCT withdrew through 3RAR's positions during the day to defensive positions on the Chongchon River. Major Ferguson took an advance party to Pakchon to reconnoitre positions for 3RAR to move to. That evening the battalion received news of Green's death. The men were devastated at the loss of their leader. The following evening 3RAR withdrew to positions 1600 metres west of Pakchon; 24 hours

later the 27th BCB had concentrated in the Pakchon area.

During the night of 4–5 November, Chinese and North Korean forces attacked the US 24th Division, forcing one regiment back two kilometres. A US Army artillery battery to the south of Pakchon was hit during the morning and the Argylls were sent to assist. Though the battery was saved, it was soon realised that the Chinese were trying to cut the road further south and trap the 27th BCB. The Argylls attacked a Chinese force holding a ridgeline a kilometre east of the road; one company briefly captured the high ground, but were forced to withdraw by Chinese counter-attacks.

At 11 am, 3RAR crossed the Taeryong River and prepared to attack the ridgeline that had been reoccupied by the Chinese. As the battalion formed up to attack, they came under Chinese mortar fire. An airstrike was called in before the assault, and the men were heartened to see the Mustangs of No.77 Squadron, RAAF, provide that support. It was one of only two occasions when the Australian squadron supported an Australian battalion during the war. (See page 48.)

Walsh sent A and B companies against the Chinese positions on the hills; the men had to cross 450 metres of open ground to begin their attack. After several hours of close fighting, A and B companies captured their objectives, and D Company was sent forward to occupy another position adjacent to B Company. C Company and Battalion Headquarters remained in positions astride the road. At 8 pm Chinese mortar rounds landed among C Company and Battalion headquarters as the Chinese attacked A and B Companies. In what can only be considered a loss of nerve, Walsh ordered the companies on the hill to withdraw.

By this time A Company was fighting a hand-to-hand battle and had sustained further casualties beyond those already suffered earlier in the day. Lieutenant Algy Clark, the acting company commander, ordered his men to withdraw. A Company bravely fought their way out of their positions and were still in contact as they moved downhill. When Coad found out that 3RAR was withdrawing, he went forward to assess the situation; O'Dowd

briefed him on what was occurring. Coad ordered the hills reoccupied and asked O'Dowd to have Walsh attend Brigade Headquarters the next morning.

Orders to retake the hills came too late for A and B Companies to act. As it was, A Company had been rendered ineffective as a fighting unit and B Company was too far down the hill to go back in the dark and re-engage the Chinese, who had again occupied the high ground. Only D Company, who had not been in contact at all, turned around and reoccupied their positions. After midnight, the Chinese ceased their attacks. As the sun rose on 6 November, the men of 3RAR saw parties of Chinese troops withdrawing back up the valleys. The previous day had cost 3RAR 12 men killed and 64 wounded. Walsh was relieved of command by Coad that morning and Ferguson was placed back in command of 3RAR. He was promoted to lieutenant colonel and formally made 3RAR's commanding officer on 10 November.

#### THE FIRE BRIGADE

The following weeks were relatively quiet for 3RAR, with much of their activity restricted to patrol work. A Company, now under the command of Captain O'Dowd, was brought back up to strength during this period. On 24 November, MacArthur ordered a general advance to the Yalu. However, the Chinese launched their second offensive a day later, driving

**Far left:** 5 November 1950, Pakchon. Sergeant Tom Murray GM, a stretcher-bearer and 3RAR's drum major, tends the wounds of Private Gerry O'Connell of A Company, wounded in both legs by shrapnel. AWM 146958

**Middle:** c. November 1950. Two unidentified members of 3RAR clearing a village, possibly Pakchon. AWM H0BJ1662

**Right:** 3RAR's headquarters camp at Uijongbu, Christmas Day, 1950. Lieutenant Colonel Bruce Ferguson's specially made command post vehicle, known to the men as "Pandora's Box", is in the background. AWM P01813.470

the US and ROK forces before them. What followed came to be termed "the big bug-out". From 27 November to 11 December the 27th BCB lived up to their "fire brigade" nickname. The Diggers, Jocks, and Diehards fought several holding actions as US and ROK formations retreated through their positions. It was a very difficult time for the brigade; Coad was evacuated on 7 December because of ill health, but returned a fortnight later.

On 23 December, the men of the 27th British Commonwealth Brigade were to be awarded a South Korean citation by President Syngman Rhee. The parade was called off though, when it was learned that General Walton Walker, the General Officer Commanding the US Eighth Army, had been killed in a vehicle accident en route to the ceremony. Two days later, the battalion celebrated Christmas. It was a festive time for the battalion, and the cooks worked extremely hard to provide their comrades with an outstanding Christmas dinner. New Year's Eve was relatively quiet for 3RAR, but as the clock struck midnight the distant thunder of guns heralded 1951 and the start of a new Chinese offensive. The Australians would be on the move again the next day. ♦

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Kelly is a historian with a special interest in the Korean War. He works in the Military History Section of the Australian War Memorial.