

Korea, dead of winter... on a Hill named WhoTheHellKnows

by James Lloyd Davis

Dug in near the top a hill that had no real name, just a number... even what number of hill it was doesn't matter, or when, but no sooner than I'd set up in a foxhole on the ridge line, the Reds began their offensive. A very big push. Not just an attack against the hill I was on, it was a major push all up and down the line. Entirely unexpected, it was the biggest offensive drive the enemy made that winter... and it very nearly broke our resistance. First, they hit us with artillery for about an hour, during which time I laid flat in the bottom of my shallow hole, reinforced with no more than a single line of sandbags and at the front, dirt bags actually. There was no real sand to be had... only dirt that turned to mud at the slightest provocation. There'd been snow and a hard freeze, so the dirt which had turned to mud in a previous thaw, then turned hard in a freeze and then again white with drifting snow.

Laying out under an artillery barrage is like jumping across a chasm so wide and so deep, you don't know whether you'll ever reach the other side, and if you don't? You're dead. The noise is as chaotic as the effect is deadly. Explosive rounds can lacerate your insides with a punch that will knock you off your feet or lift you in the air like a puppet on strings, literally heavenward. Fragmentation shells can cut you in half, dismember and kill. Any sane man might break, start screaming halfway through it.

Artillery scared the bejesus out of me and most everyone else for good reason.

A close hit, what they lovingly call a 'near miss' that does not kill you, will leave you deaf as well as wounded in any one of a hundred ways. A direct hit? They'd never find the pieces. If a heavy barrage

Available online at [«http://fictionaut.com/stories/james-lloyd-davis/korea-dead-of-winter-on-a-hill-named-whothehellknows»](http://fictionaut.com/stories/james-lloyd-davis/korea-dead-of-winter-on-a-hill-named-whothehellknows)

Copyright © 2019 James Lloyd Davis. All rights reserved.

doesn't kill or maim you, it shakes your confidence to say the very least, so they literally softened us up before they came over.

Quick as it started, the shelling stopped, just went dead silent for about five minutes. It was so quiet on that hillside, I swear I could hear birds, even though I hadn't seen a bird in weeks. Silence like that gives you the creeps as it is, but you knew they were coming, so the silence got under your skin like a cold draft that always finds its way through the warmest coat.

Then there were bugles.

Yes, bugles, loud, a tinny sort of din from numerous horns in the distance. The Reds always blew on these horns when they charged, just like the cavalry did in those John Wayne movies where the troopers charge in on horseback to save the day. As soon as we heard the first notes, thousands of Chinese troops jumped up from their holes and trenches and swarmed down the side of their hill, which from a distance made them appear as great armies of ants on the move. Little green dots in the distance, dark spots on a white landscape of fresh fallen snow, thousands, all coming our way and fast.

My spotter'd left to get some cigarettes just before the artillery attack. Never returned, so I figured he'd bought the farm. I got to work right away with my rifle.

With the aid of my scope, I picked out what looked to be officers and laid them all down one by one as I found them. Everybody on our hill was firing clip after clip, such that I'd pick out a target through the scope and before I could pull the trigger, he'd fall under some other GI's bullet. We all laid fire down on those Reds like madmen, but they kept coming, never even slowed. They'd only leap over the bodies of their comrades who fell in front of them, barely lost momentum as they came on like some massive human tidal wave.

When they reached the bottom of our hill, they would pause just long enough to raise their rifles and shoot back at us, but we were dug in so deep, their volleys couldn't make a dent. Not that it really

mattered, finally, because they were coming on like maniacs, bayonets fixed, screaming like legions of demons from hell.

If that sounds overly dramatic, I'm here to tell you it's not even close to what we experienced. It's utterly terrifying to witness a swarm of men who are coming to kill you, especially when they won't even slow down... no matter what you throw at them. It's enough to give any man, even the brave ones, an overwhelming desire to stand up, turn, and run away.

A bunch of guys in a trench below my position did exactly that. As the Reds got closer, they stood up out of their holes and ran back up the hill toward me. Two of these were shot dead on the lip of my foxhole, fell right in on top of me. First one, then the other. I tried to get out from under them, but their bodies were already heavy with death. All I managed to do was twist around so that I was on my back. But by then, you could hear the Reds approaching. Heard some of our own guys scream when they were shot or bayoneted. Couldn't see anything yet, but I could hear the enemy was close. I tried again to get up, but the two dead guys had me pinned good and any minute, I expected to see some Chinaman standing over me with a gun.

Scared?

I was terrified.

Then it got quiet and I heard sporadic shots near and far, like you'd expect if our guys had all bugged out and the Reds were combing our trenches, killing the wounded. I thought about my options, decided the only chance I had to survive was to play dead. Let me tell you, though, it's damned difficult to try and play dead when you're shivering no less from the cold than from sheer terror. What happened next plays out in my head like a film in slow motion... with me talking to myself, a captive narrator in the eerie frame.

My head was giving orders to my limbs and my lungs, telling them to be still and my mind started blanking by degrees, turning off my movements like throwing a line of switches on a wall. My thoughts? They fluttered off and away like doves scattering in a

field, disturbed by a hunter's footfall, exploding into a mass of wings, making those chirping, whispery, penny-whistle pigeon sounds as they fled.

Playing dead was a lot like dying might be... if you can imagine it. My eyes were open and I feigned death as well as ever a man has played the part of a corpse.

Before I was completely prepared to accept his presence, a Chinese soldier stepped over me and it was an incredible effort just to avoid following him with my eyes. I don't know how I managed to keep from blinking when he turned and fired a shot into the back of one of the men on top of me. I cannot explain how I kept from screaming when he stuck his bayonet in the other man's throat.

I could see the blade go in like a knife through butter. No hesitation but all the way through, emerging in the back all red with gore.

He looked down at me then, studied my face, stared directly into my eyes, and to this day I sincerely believe I could read his thoughts, not in Chinese or in English, but in some other kind of language, maybe the one we all had before the Tower of Babel and the great confusion of tongues with which we were all cursed by God.

I knew he was thinking exactly this: "Bullet in the brain or bayonet to the throat?"

