

CHONUI-CHOCHIWON MASSACRE - Charles Lake' Account, as reported by Merry Helm, 24th IDA Historian.

Preface by Merry Helm, 24th IDA Historian, who took Mr. Lake's story and transcribed as below.

The 21st Infantry Regiment receives a great deal of credit for its role as the first ground unit to engage the enemy in Korea, and Task Force Smith has deservedly earned a hallowed spot in the 24th Division's history for its seven-hour delaying mission at Osan July 5.

What is often overlooked, however, are the massive losses the 21st suffered at Chonui and Chochiwon during the days that followed. Of 695 casualties suffered July 10-12, the heaviest hit was the 3rd Battalion, including the loss of their commander Colonel Carl "Cliff" Jensen and other key officers, after a nearly perfect ambush that came out of heavy early morning fog on the twelfth.

A massive number of men were killed or captured that morning, particularly in King Company. With so few survivors left to reconstruct what happened, the story was never fully told except for several written accounts by survivors of Love Company.

What follows is a first-hand account by Charles Lake, who was one of the lucky few who escaped the Chochiwon disaster. Mr. Lake was a member of ill-fated King Company and graciously allowed me to interview him on March 26. After studying the existing command reports, I have added a few clarifying notes to his narrative in parentheses.

The following is Charles Lake's story as told to me. Merry Helm, Historian.

The Charles Lake Story

I grew up in Ogdensburg, New York, way up by the Canadian border. I joined the Army in 1948 and took my basic training at Fort Dix. I was sent to Japan to the 24th Infantry Division around Thanksgiving.

We went over by boat, a very large boat. We entered at Yokohama and stayed there until we were sent down to Kumamoto, way at the end of the islands, the furthest south of any Army outfits. We were there until the Korean War broke out.

We landed in Korea on July 4, 1950, in Pusan, and we stayed in what was like a big school yard. It was 190 degrees in the shade the day we landed at Pusan, and four hours later, monsoon weather worked in. It started to rain so hard you couldn't see your hand in front of you. You'd go up to get your food – the mess hall was outside – and your mess kit would be full of water before you'd get served.

That continued all the way up to July 10th or 11th. We had all kinds of storms before that. Our 3rd Battalion was the first battalion that made a frontal assault in the war.

There were men from the 1st Battalion trapped up there (members of Task Force A at Chonui). We relieved them – kind of broke up the encirclement, because they were surrounded. They came out, and they joined up with their own battalion.

On that attack, we lost four men I knew. The 1st Battalion didn't come back down the main road like they were supposed to. (Task Force A got out through the hills.) Our orders, from the time we left Japan until we got into the war, was each battalion would take a licking and retreat to set up a defensive position, and the next battalion, which would be the 3rd Battalion, was supposed to take their licking and go back like that, you know?

But that didn't happen. The 1st Battalion apparently didn't follow those orders – that's the orders we had, and we were all told the same thing way back. On the 10th, we were way up north (at Chonui), and we had to come back during the night.

But the enemy must have been all around us, because when we got back to our defensive positions, some of the North Koreans were in some of our

foxhole positions (particularly King Company positions), and they killed each other.

I was with the 3rd Platoon, and our initial orders had been to stay across the river on this big hill. Our first casualties were from Australian airplanes, they strafed us, and we retreated off the hill. We had to – the enemy came up and chased us off, but they had help from our airplanes.

Well, we made it across the river, but we had to go back and attack the hill. Our company, Company K, our 3rd Platoon were the first soldiers to make a frontal assault in Korea.

It maybe doesn't seem interesting, but it's always missed in the history books. During the night when we had to go back to our positions, the 3rd Platoon couldn't go back to their positions, so we stayed in the battalion area.

I was probably 50 feet from Colonel Jensen. Colonel Jensen was a good man. He was a good officer, I know that much. Mostly all the soldiers liked him. I wasn't around him that much, but I know he was a good officer. He just seemed like a great soldier.

When I woke up in the morning, a bunch of bugles were blowing – that's what the enemy did back then – and there was a lot of firing. Tank firing, machine guns and everything. It was awful foggy. You couldn't see a foot in front of you. The fog raised a little bit, and I could see Colonel Jensen and some of the other officers. He was giving orders, and he says to me and a couple others, "You men take that high ground up there," and he pointed north up the hill – it was all hills anyway – and up we went.

But that's the last I saw of him. I know he didn't survive. There were three of us from K Company, and there were two or three from L Company and I Company also in this defensive position. It was just the most terrible thing – that's how the enemy got us. Nobody knew anything, and we didn't have nothing to fight with.

Even my M-1 would only fire one bullet at a time. Our machine guns didn't work, the BARs were never automatic, and we didn't have no mortars. Heavy Mortar Company was just north of us, and most of them got killed.

I was only 17 years old, and I was more scared than anything else. It became like it was every man for themselves. Us men who went up this hill, we set up a defensive position, and we fired down into what we could see was enemy, but it was just chaotic. It was terrible, terrible, terrible.

Anyway, we got chased off that position, and we went down to the road – we could see the road going down south, and there was a truck down there. They were putting wounded on it, and we went down and got on, and everybody was headed south. That was the last I ever seen of that battalion.

The reason I'm telling this is because we lost 690 men. You probably read the story of the 29th Regiment that got all shot up. I read the story a hundred times, and it was just like what happened to us. But we were the first – they came after us.

But the story of our battalion has never been told.

There were four tanks – I seen the tanks, and they were shooting right up into our position. Over the years, I've tried to find different men. Some were captured, and we found a bunch of them with their hands tied and killed. They were murdered right there.

And some were taken prisoner, and they died in camps. Some of the other soldiers from L Company and some from I Company survived, and they knew most of them, but most of the men from my company, I couldn't tell you.

We were put in with the 1st Battalion, and we moved down to the Kum River. But when we got relieved and went to the Taejon Airport, we had a head count. There were only about 30-some men left from K Company, and from the whole battalion, I daresay it was under a hundred. (Army historian Roy Appleman reports that by July 12, the 21st Regiment was

down to roughly 325 men. Only 64 men from the 3rd Battalion were still able to fight.)

None of this story has been told, and I wanted to talk about it. That's why they call it a forgotten war, right? I just wanted to tell about how all my friends were murdered, because that's what most of them were.

When I escaped, we were down in Chochiwon in the village, and Colonel Stephens comes. (Colonel Stephens had spent the night of July 9-10 in a foxhole at the front with Task Force A, comprised mostly of men from A and D Companies under Captain Charles Alkire.) He was in clean uniform, and he formed us all up and said, "We're gonna go back up and get any stragglers. We'll see what we can do."

Well, we went maybe only half a mile and quit, because of fire coming in, and we just backed up.

The book reads that he had the rest of the regiment on the main road to where the battle was at Chochiwon – the main road of Korea right there. It said the 1st Battalion was there. But when I escaped from that battle, I came down that road, and there was nothing.

The story that's in the books, that isn't true. Because there was no 1st Battalion or any other men on that road. They were on some other position – we always said it was the upper road. But they were supposed to come to us down our road.

So, everything just went haywire. But that's why our 3rd Battalion was massacred – because of that. But none of this has ever been told, and this is the Gospel truth.

Our orders they gave to us at the beginning when we were forming at Kumamoto – the goal, what our orders would be, and how it was going to go – they gave it to us on the boat. They gave us orientation, how it was going to be, and not to forget.

My sergeant and squad leaders were there. The company commander, the 1st Sergeant told us what they were gonna do. We were supposed to go

north and set up a defensive position, and the 1st Battalion, when they got hit at Osan, they were supposed to come down the main road and pass through us.

And then, as they say, the enemy would give us a licking – that's what you'd have to say, because we took a licking. Then we were to fall back through the 1st Battalion, like jumping, but it never happened.

The 1st Battalion went down that other road for some reason. But they tell it different. I'm not trying to put any blame on anybody, but what you read on paper isn't like they say.

When I came down when I escaped – we didn't run away, we were just following everybody else – we jumped on the truck. People were walking down south, because we couldn't do anything. We could never fight as it was. We didn't have nothing. If you ever found anybody else, they could tell you. Men from L Company who survived it could tell you the same thing. L Company got terribly beat up, too. Lots of them were murdered.

In all the books, there's very little about the 3rd Battalion. If something's mentioned, it's very little. One paragraph or whatever. And whatever's been told was told by the officers or the non-coms from the 1st Battalion, because they had more survivors. But they wouldn't have any recognition of what went on in K Company. That's what the story is about – the K Company massacre.