

SILVER STAR LOST

BERNARD J. FARNAN



My name is Bernard (Ben) J. Farnan. I am a first generation American, my parents having emigrated from Ireland. I know the Emerald Isles must be beautiful but for me to have been born in the United States of America was a privilege for which I shall forever be grateful.

I had a good childhood, growing up in Glen Cove, N.Y. where I was born. I went to public schools there and participated in sports, particularly baseball, basketball and football. After graduating, I worked alongside my mason father as a bricklayer and cement finisher and continued my interest in football. In fact, I had just finished the playoffs of my semi-pro football season when I was drafted in November of 1951.

Several us were sent to Fort Knox, Kentucky, for basic training. Fort Knox was the main base for the Army's armored forces. Our training there emphasized reconnaissance missions along with standard infantry operations.

We shipped out in June of 1952 and upon arrival in Korea, our unit was assigned to the 3rd Reconnaissance Company (Scout Section) of the Third Infantry Division. Sometime in September of that year we were attached to the 65th Infantry Regiment, a Puerto Rican National Guard outfit, now part of the division. The 65th was having some problems and seemed to be in need of assistance.

On September 18th, 1952, our Scout Section was to set up an ambush at the base of Outpost Kelly located in the Yonchon area of North Korea. A buddy of mine, an American Indian, was selected

from my platoon to go on this assignment. He was somewhat concerned as he was scheduled to rotate home in two weeks. I volunteered to replace him as he was truly a "short-timer." I know he was very grateful.

We moved out at dusk through a safe-lane in the MLR that had been marked as a pathway out to the valley. We were all decked out for battle - blacked out faces, taped dog tags, camouflage on our helmets, extra ammo, etc. We waited for the chaplain who made it a practice to say a few words on our behalf before we headed out. On this particular evening, we were greeted instead by a rabbi. This was a first for us but he graciously bestowed an ecumenical blessing on our group for which we were very thankful.

We crossed the LD and headed for our objective. The silence was broken a little later when one of my buddies (who came from the deep, deep south) turned to me and whispered, "Ben, what the hell is a rabbi?" Knowing his background, I told him that since I was a New Yorker I knew all about rabbis so, "trust me, we were in good hands." That pacified him and we continued on our way.

As darkness settled we set up in a skirmish line at the base of Hill Kelly. Between 2000 and 2100 hours we would occasionally get showered with rocks and dirt rolling down from above. Suddenly, the bugles and horns began to blare as Kelly was surrounded and under attack by the Chinese. Flares lit up the sky and the blasts of burp guns and small arms fire filled the air. Our artillery began dropping pre-planned concentrations with the shells screaming in over our heads and slamming into the Chinese troops.

While this was taking place, our squad was hit from our left flank. Our NCO in charge became disoriented and unceremoniously left us. Two ROK soldiers in our squad left as well. Not a good situation. Now I was in charge.

I led what was left of the squad into a deep ravine that had a fair amount of water caused by run off from the mountains and high terrain on our right flank. I placed the remainder of the squad on both

sides of the gully hoping that we were pretty well concealed. Unfortunately, I was wrong - a grenade came bouncing into our midst. I was blown back against the bank but the waist deep water absorbed most of the explosion and shrapnel. One of the guys got a sliver in his upper lip and a large piece ripped the burlap cover on my helmet and dented it as well.

I realized that we had to move again to escape the Chinese patrol. We scrambled to another area that provided more concealment with bushes and reeds in the area. To our good fortune, the Chinese left and I asked another close buddy, Jim Wheelles, to assist me in finding our way back to the MLR the following morning.

Jim took point and I took rear guard position and we made our way back safely with no further incidents. We learned that we were the only patrol in the valley that night and we had been given up for dead. We were happy to report that such was not the case but the men defending OP Kelly did not fare as well. There were few survivors of that engagement.

I did tell Arnold, my Georgia pal, that I was right - the rabbi had done a good job for us and saw our squad to safety. I do believe Arnold was truly grateful. We all were!

Jim Wheelles and I were written up for the Bronze Star, the Army's fourth highest award for valor. (When our son was born, we named him Kelly in honor of those brave men who fought and died on OP Kelly.)

A month later, we were moved to the Chorwon Valley area, I believe near Kumhwa. The date sticks in my mind - 28th of October 1952. Our mission was to help retake Iron Horse Mountain, also known as Jackson Heights. It seems that a battalion of the 65th Infantry Regiment refused to assault the Chinese positions and 97 Puerto Ricans were placed under arrest and court martialed for disobeying a direct order. Much later I learned that there was considerable dispute about the fairness of the charges.

We moved into our positions at nightfall. Severe fighting was in full progress on the mountain. Somehow, I heard moans coming from directly in front of my position - apparently in the middle of a minefield. There was a very thick fog throughout the night and visibility was much impeded. As the fog began to thin, I shimmied up a thin sapling to get a better view. I was able to see a figure sprawled on the ground obviously in pain.

I notified my platoon leader. Jim Wheelles and a buddy, Henry Davis, joined me as we made our way toward the wounded man. He was one of the 65th Infantry guys and was laying in a slight depression made by the detonated mine. It appeared that one leg was partially blown off and he was surely in shock. Time, for him, was running out.

The fog began to lift and the sun was rising. I noticed that the very thin trip wires in the minefield (just at grass level) stood out distinctly because of the shimmering dewdrops dripping from them. Like tiny birds on a telephone wire. I told our Captain that I would go in and make pronounced footprints so that Henry could follow me hopefully without any danger. Of course, if I were to step on a buried mine that game would be over.

The rabbi must have still been with us for I reached the wounded man safely and Henry followed with a stretcher. We followed our foot steps back out and a MASH chopper evacuated him. I don't know to this day if he survived - I pray that he did. For that episode, I was recommended for the Silver Star and Henry, for the Bronze. But my records were later destroyed in a fire at the St. Louis, Missouri, records center so I never received the awards.

Some fifty years later I began searching and located Jim in Alaska and another buddy in South Carolina. The Military Historian in my city became interested in my story and wrote of it in local papers, which created some helpful interest for my cause. My buddies produced eyewitness affidavits and Congressman Peter King has taken up my quest. Whether or not I receive the Silver and Bronze Star is of no great importance to me - but I would like for my

children and grandchildren to see them and hold them. I would like them to know that men and women of our military are brave and selfless and many have sacrificed their lives so that others could live in peace. And I am certain that the people of South Korea will never forget what our allies and we did for their fledgling nation.

- BERNARD J. FARNAN



Ben Farnan's family and 50th Anniversary in 2006.