

Helicopters in the Korean War:

The Rescue of Virginia 1

by Kenn Finlayson

IN the world of special operations, combat search and rescue of troops requiring evacuation from behind enemy lines is one of the primary missions given to helicopter crews. The rescue of three Americans by Navy helicopters from behind North Korean lines in March 1951 is one of the earliest combat search and rescue missions on record. The rescue of Virginia 1 ended a star-crossed operation with the successful evacuation of three operatives, unfortunately at the expense of one helicopter and the internment of two Americans. Like the mission itself, the rescue was one of great bravery in the face of extreme odds.

One of the primary objectives of the Eighth Army staff in late 1950 was the interdiction of the enemy's southern supply lines. Two major rail networks supplied the Communist forces in the field: one ran from China through P'yongyang and down to Seoul, while the other ran from the Russian port of Vladivostok south along the east coast

to the port of Wonsan. At Wonsan, where the rail lines divided into the main Ch'orwan-Seoul line and had a secondary spur running from Ch'orwan to Ch'unch'on-Wonju. Movement along these rail lines needed to be stopped.

Aerial bombardment by United Nations (UN) aircraft took a significant toll on the movement of supplies from China on the P'yongyang-Seoul route, where long stretches of flat, open terrain provided ample opportunity for the destruction of the rail lines and roads. By January of 1951, only half the supplies and seven of ten replacements that left China were reaching the armies south of Seoul.¹ Air interdiction of the eastern route was markedly less successful.

On the Wonsan to Wonju corridor, steep, angular mountains and deep narrow valleys protected the rail and road networks from direct assault by the UN aircraft. North Korean and Chinese Army engineers were typically able to rapidly repair the small sections the aircraft could access, and the



The 2nd Platoon, 4th Ranger Company in Korea. Pucel and Watson, who volunteered for Virginia 1 came out of 2nd Platoon.



Allied bombardment of rail lines took a heavy toll on North Korean movement of supplies in the west. In the east, air interdiction was less effective.

flow of supplies was barely interrupted. More than 70 percent of supplies and nine out of ten replacements were able to move down the east coast routes to reinforce the frontline forces.² The Eighth Army planners looked for other vulnerable spots to try to slow down the flow of materials to the enemy.

The rail routes out of Wonsan ran through numerous tunnels as the rail line weaved among the mountains on its way south. Several of these tunnels were within striking distance of the coast. An early attempt at attacking the tunnels occurred when Republic of Korea (ROK) Marines accompanied by U.S. Navy underwater demolition team personnel landed south of Wonsan and detonated charges in a tunnel edging the coast. The team returned intact with two prisoners, but within two days a temporary rail line was in place, bypassing the blocked tunnel.³ A more remote, less easily repaired tunnel was the answer, and the tunnel at Hyon-ni, thirty miles inland, met the criteria. The mission to drop the tunnel fell to the Eighth Army G-3 Miscellaneous Division, where Colonel (COL) John H. McGee was in charge of training partisan forces for operations behind the North Korean lines.

An unexpected by-product of the North Korean and Chinese drive south following the Chinese entry into the war was the large number of anticommunist refugees that fled before the advancing armies. Despite living under Communist rule since 1945, many thousands of North Koreans took advantage of the dislocation and chaos of the war to make their way south. This large pool of manpower enabled the UN Far East Command to expand its ability to conduct clandestine operations behind enemy lines. The program grew from one of small, localized incursions to a comprehensive campaign of sabotage and raids throughout the Korean peninsula.

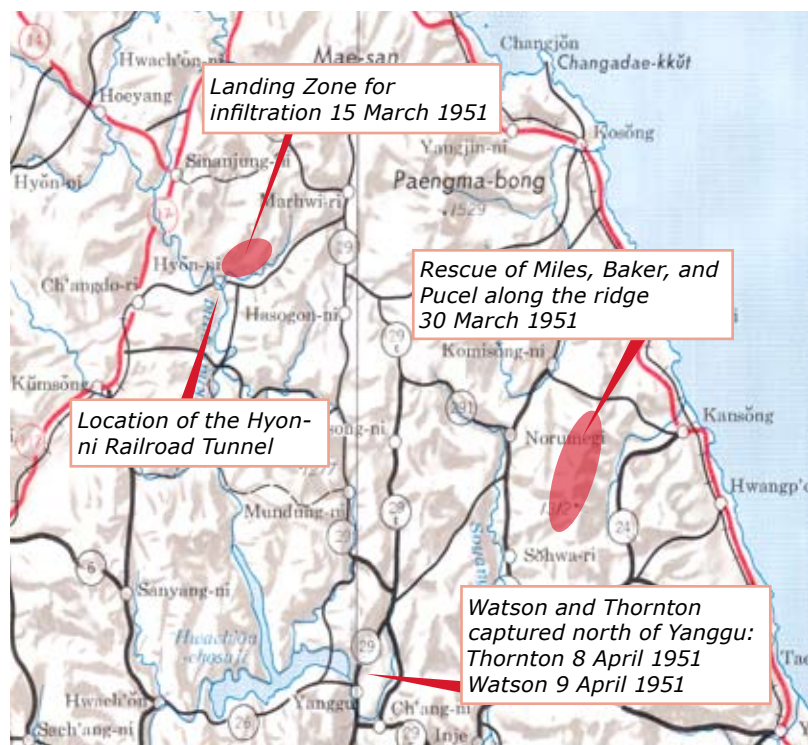
By July 1951, after six months of superhuman effort, McGee established an organization that ultimately employed several thousand partisans on both coasts. The 8086th Army Unit (8086th AU) fielded partisan forces on both coasts. Leopard Base, which supported fifteen partisan units called "Donkeys," was located on the western islands north of In'chon. The CIA-supported Task Force Kirkland operated offshore on the East Coast, near Wonsan. A third element, Baker Section, was responsible for training air-

borne partisan forces for sabotage behind the enemy lines, and it was to this element that McGee looked to support the sabotage of Hyon-ni Tunnel. Unfortunately, time for proper preparation for this complex mission did not exist.

On 25 January 1951, the Eighth Army initiated Operation THUNDERBOLT—a strong reconnaissance in force against the Chinese XIII Army Group arrayed in front of the UN forces south of Seoul. The operation was designed to push north as far as the Han River.⁴ By 3 February, the UN forces had progressed up to the south bank of the Han, where the advance halted short of trying to take the capital city of Seoul. A second phase pushed the advance in the eastern sector further north by mid-February. General Ridgway followed up the success of THUNDERBOLT with Operation KILLER, a methodical advance across a sixty-mile wide sector of the front east of Seoul between Yangp'yong and Ch'angdong-ni. This operation was designed to inflict the maximum number of casualties on the enemy.⁵ These operations depended on the Allies slowing the flow of supplies and reinforcements to the Communist forces and necessitated the immediate execution of the plan to sabotage Hyon-ni Tunnel. The plan went by the name Virginia 1.

The concept of Virginia 1 began with an airborne insertion of a team of American and ROK soldiers into the mountains south of Hyon-ni. The team would move up the ridgelines to a position above the railroad tunnel and, after a reconnaissance, set charges at each end of the tunnel, closing it to traffic from both ends. The exit route took the team thirty miles southeast towards the coast. The evacuation plan called for a pickup on the coast by boat. The alternative plan for pickup, code-named Dallas, called for aerial evacuation by Navy helicopters stationed on ships off the coast of Wonsan. The entire mission was supposed to be completed in thirty-six hours.

Colonel McGee realized that the partisan forces in training in Baker Section would not be ready to successfully execute a mission like the sabotage of the railroad tunnel. He turned to the ROK Army Officer Candidate School for volunteers with combat experience for his plan. Forty-four volunteers





Corporal Edward Pucel with other members of 4th Ranger Company prior to his volunteering to join Virginia 1.

were selected and the group was divided in half for training in sabotage and airborne operations. The Eighth Army G-3 selected 15 March 1951 as the execution date for the mission, leaving five weeks for Baker section to prepare the Koreans.⁶

Airborne training was conducted at K-3 Air Base in Kijaing on the outskirts of Pusan. McGee's Miscellaneous Section took over the former Eighth Army Ranger training facility and turned it into a site for airborne training. Former Ranger training cadres were retained as instructors, as all were airborne qualified. The training for the section sent to K-3 ended with the first training jump. The pilot miscalculated his approach and the drop zone control party underestimated the force of the winds. As a result, the jumpers landed among frozen rice paddies several hundred yards off the temporary airstrip that was the drop zone. As strong wind gusts blew the jumpers across the uneven ground, eleven suffered broken bones and nine more were seriously bruised. After this incident, this section's training was cancelled and twenty of the twenty-two men ultimately returned to the ROK Army officer candidate academy. Two remained and were later sent on other clandestine missions.⁷

After the debacle with the airborne training, it was determined that the second section would receive four weeks of intensive training in sabotage and demolitions at the center in Pusan and not conduct any airborne training. The director of the sabotage school was British Special Air Service Captain Ellery Anderson, a former Special Operations Executive operative in World War II. During that war, airborne training for partisans was reduced to a day of ground training and then the actual mission jump onto the objective. Anderson adopted a similar program for the ROK volunteers for Virginia 1.⁸

For Americans to lead the mission, COL McGee turned to the Army Ranger companies. The 4th U.S. Army Ranger Infantry Company provided four volunteers on 15 February 1951. The men were interviewed by COL McGee and accepted for the mission. The four men—Corporal (CPL) Martin Watson, CPL Edward Pucel, CPL William T. Miles, and Private First Class (PFC) Raymond E. Baker—possessed a wealth of experience.⁹ CPL Watson served with the Rangers in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy during World War II. Captured by the Germans at Monte Cassino, he earned a reputation as a difficult prisoner and an escape threat. Pucel was in the Office of Strategic Services and conducted clandestine operations behind the lines in Yugoslavia and Greece. Baker was a former World War II Marine and a specialist in amphibious landings. He had recently been reduced from sergeant for a fight with an infantry lieutenant. Miles' combat experience stemmed from his time in Korea. Miles and Pucel were demolitions specialists, Watson was a master of escape and evasion, and Baker was a communications expert.¹⁰

A talented team, the Americans reported on 5 March 1951 to the Eighth Army Aerial Delivery Detachment (an element of Baker Section) at K-3 in Pusan, and began receiving their in-briefings on the target area.¹¹ They finally linked up with their Korean counterparts when the ROK soldiers returned to K-3 on 13 March from their airborne training, only fifty-two hours before the time designated for execution of the mission.¹² The Rangers initially requested a pathfinder team to prepare the drop zone, but the Eighth Army planners felt this provided too much chance of a compromise, so the night jump would be executed on an unmarked drop zone in the middle of the Korean winter.

On 15 March 1951, the team loaded aboard a C-47 aircraft from the 21st Troop Carrier Squadron. The "Kyushu Gypsies" planned a circuitous route to the target located about 250 miles northeast of Pusan which took three hours to navigate. Due to the removal of the side cargo door for the airborne jump, the team was exposed to the sub-zero wind-chill for the entire flight. By the time they had to jump, the frozen Rangers and their airsick Korean counterparts were only too happy to exit the aircraft.

The team dropped over a mountain meadow misidentified as the drop zone, leaving it several miles away from the correct location. Further complicating its efforts to assemble, high winds scattered the jumpers over a wide area approximately eight miles from Hyon-ni. Miraculously, no one was injured on the jump, but the team was widely dispersed on both sides of the three thousand-foot mountains south of the objective.

The heavy cruiser USS St. Paul was the flagship of the UN Task Group off the coast.



A flight of twelve Corsairs from the USS Coral Sea provided close air support to Virginia 1.

Gale force winds battered the men as they struggled through deep snow to reach the designated rally point above Hyon-ni.

It took three days for the full team to finally assemble at the rally point. Frozen batteries in the radio prevented contact with the resupply aircraft circling overhead, and the poor visibility nullified the effectiveness of the recognition panels the men emplaced. Despite the difficulties of their situation, the men moved into position on the ridge above Hyon-ni and conducted an initial reconnaissance of the objective.

Dressed in North Korean winter uniforms and carrying Russian weapons, the reconnaissance team moved off the ridge and reconnoitered the tunnel. It quickly became obvious the mission could not be accomplished, as both ends of the tunnel were heavily defended. A Chinese railroad repair battalion was established in the vicinity of the tunnel and sandbagged bunkers guarded both ends. The reconnaissance team quickly returned to the rally point.¹³

Under Watson's leadership, the Virginia 1 team reviewed its options and decided to follow the planned evacuation route to the east coast. Along its route lay the railroad tunnel at Samdae-ri, which offered an inviting target. Movement towards the tunnel was laborious as the team moved through deep snow laden with heavy loads of explosives, radios, and batteries. The team reached the vicinity of Samdae-ri Tunnel on the 23rd, only to find this tunnel also fortified and in use as an air raid shelter. Faced with another impossible target, the team buried its explosives, set a 48-hour time-delay to detonate the cache, and moved on towards the coast for pickup.¹⁴ Despite the length of the mission, a rescue still awaited the team if it could make its way to the rendezvous point.

First Lieutenant Kingston Winget of Baker Section departed Pusan on 8 March aboard a British destroyer that steamed north to join the UN Task Group off the coast near Wonsan. On arrival he transferred to the HMS *Alacrity* and, beginning on the 17th, Winget and a crew spent each freezing night in a small boat bobbing off the beach in hopes of extracting Virginia 1.¹⁵

The Virginia 1 team moved south to intersect an east-west trail that would take it to its rendezvous at the coast. Over ten miles and two mountain ranges lay between the team and its pickup point, and it was still unable to establish radio contact. Nevertheless, the team made steady progress, and on the 25th it reached the top of the final pass on its way to the coast. It was here that a second severe Siberian storm rolled in and pinned the team in a small hut until the evening of the 27th.

The morning of the 28th saw a change in weather, with a south wind and steadily rising temperatures. The melt-



The Sikorsky HO3S was the Navy's primary helicopter during the early years for rescue missions in Korea.

ing snow and overflowing streams prevented cross-country movement, so CPL Miles set the radio batteries out to warm in the sun. On the 29th, he tried to establish radio contact and suddenly raised an airborne Forward Air Controller from the 7th Infantry Division located sixty miles to the south.¹⁶ The Division alerted all frontline units to be watching for Virginia 1 to pass through, and alerted Eighth Army of the contact. Four hours later, Captain Eugene Perry from Baker Section was over the area in a C-47 communicating with Miles.

The extended broadcast required to relay the team's location in code alerted the North Koreans to the presence of Virginia 1. Soon enemy units were moving in from both ends of the ridgeline, cutting the team off from the coast and the awaiting pickup boat. The rescue would have to come by air. On board the USS *St. Paul*, the flagship of the UN Task Group, the message came to execute contingency plan Dallas to rescue Virginia 1.

In early 1951, helicopters and pilots were a scarce commodity on the Korean peninsula. The Navy had six of the early Sikorsky HO3S model aircraft with the UN Task Group. Two of the aircraft were on the carrier *Coral Sea*, two on the *St. Paul*, one on Landing Ship Tank (LST) 799, and one on the Japanese-manned LST Q-007.¹⁷ At the time the call came to evacuate the Virginia 1 team, only three of the birds were available. The two carrier-based helicopters were held in readiness for the rescue of downed pilots, and one of the aircraft on the *St. Paul* was undergoing repairs. With only three helicopters available, three trips each were required to get the entire team out.

The Sikorsky HO3S helicopter was a mainstay in the post-war Navy, and was the primary rotary-wing aircraft in service during the Korean War. With a top speed of ninety miles per hour, three passengers could ride in the aircraft along with the lone pilot. A hydraulically operated hoist provided three hundred pounds of lifting capability using the "horse-collar" sling that was standard for air/sea rescues.¹⁸ However, the altitude of the pickup point and fuel weight restricted the pilots to carrying two Americans or three ROKs in each lift.

LST 799 cruised near the coast and became the launching point for the rescue. The helicopter from LST Q-007 landed



Corporal Martin Watson volunteered for Virginia 1. He was subsequently captured and spent the war in captivity.



The standard method of rescue utilized the horse-collar and hoist depicted in this photo.

on LST 799 on the evening of the 29th, and the third helicopter from the *St. Paul* joined them at dawn on the 30th. After refueling, the three helicopters lifted off at 7:45 A.M. for the twenty-mile trip to the pickup site on the ridge. The aircraft were joined en route by a flight of twelve F4U Corsairs from the USS *Coral Sea*, which provided air cover and close air support during the mission. Over the pickup site, a C-47 circled and the helicopters made radio contact. It was then that they learned that the team was under heavy attack on the ridge, and that the pilots had the option to abort the rescue attempt if they felt it was too risky.¹⁹ Following a short conversation among the pilots, they elected to continue.

Lieutenant Junior Grade John H. Thornton, the senior pilot, made the first run over the ridge, circling twice to pinpoint the team. The top of the ridge was roughly half the size of a football field and the sides fell away steeply, precluding a landing. Vicious air currents and updrafts swirled around the ridgeline, and on his first attempt Thornton was unable to hold a hover long enough to bring his hoist into operation.²⁰ He flew off the ridge into a valley and attempted to ride a thermal current up the ridge "like an escalator."²¹

The smooth ascent was abruptly interrupted when he flew through a force of five hundred North Koreans, who, despite the intense bombardment from the Corsairs, had worked their way up to the crest of the ridge. Small arms fire tore through Thornton's helicopter and as it reached the top of the ridge, the aircraft staggered and crashed onto the crest, rolling violently down the slope. Thornton jumped out of the left side window, sustaining broken ribs when the wheel hit him as the helicopter rolled down the slope.²²

Collecting his bearings, Thornton crawled down the slope to the helicopter and retrieved the horse collar and worked his way back up the slope to the team. The intensity of the small arms fire increased as the North Koreans pressed closer around Virginia 1 and its new arrival. At the top, Thornton found CPL Watson directing his team and talking on a portable radio. As Watson assembled his remaining men for extraction, Thornton directed the second helicopter over the site. A stinging run by the Corsairs raining napalm and cannon fire on the North Koreans temporarily held the enemy at bay, and the helicopter winched up Pucel and then Baker. With no more lift at the high altitude, the bird moved off the site and headed back for the LST with the two Rangers on board.²³

Once the second helicopter left the area, the remaining helicopter moved over the site and Thornton hooked up Miles in the collar. A fusillade of enemy fire broke out of the tree line as the North Koreans outflanked Virginia 1's defensive perimeter and poured bullets onto the men at the site. Miles was hit in the face and slumped in the collar. Rounds slammed into the hovering helicopter, disabling the winch. Unable to raise Miles on the cable, the pilot abruptly pulled up and headed off down the mountain with the wounded American still dangling on the cable. Flying away from the site, the pilot bravely landed the helicopter deep in enemy territory, unhooked the wounded Ranger and loaded him aboard. His daring act saved Miles' life and enabled him to pass on valuable intelligence gathered during the overland journey.²⁴

On the ridge, the North Koreans pressed home their attack and only Watson, Thornton, and five ROK soldiers were able to break out of the encirclement and escape the area. With their radio destroyed in the melee, they could not contact anyone for an alternate pickup. Eventually, the two Americans became separated from the ROKs, who may have felt their chances were better without the two Americans in tow. Two of the ROK soldiers did eventually reach the UN forces, but they were executed by the South Korean Army when it was learned that they had been captured and agreed to spy for the North.²⁵ After a week, Thornton and Watson also split up and attempted to work their way south to the UN lines separately.

After evading capture for ten days, Thornton was finally caught by the North Koreans about ten miles north of the UN front lines as he made his way along a ridgeline above the town of Yangu.²⁶ He endured three years of unremitting torture and abuse at various North Korean prison camps before being one of the last American prisoners of war released on 6 September 1953 during Operation BIG SWITCH.²⁷

The village of Yangu also proved the undoing for CPL Watson. Watson was captured less than five miles from the UN frontlines when he bumped into a North Korean patrol

after passing Yangu.²⁸ During his incarceration by the Germans in World War II, Watson proved an intractable prisoner, constantly attempting escape. The intervening years failed to mellow him in this regard, and the Ranger gained a reputation as the most obstinate of prisoners. As a captured intelligence agent, he suffered horrific torture as the North Koreans tried to break him. He ultimately survived three years as a prisoner of war and was the last American released over the Freedom Bridge during Operation BIG SWITCH.²⁹

Virginia 1's mission ultimately proved to be beyond the capabilities of the men of Baker Section. Complexity, lack of intelligence, adverse weather, and a constrained time schedule eventually overcame the bravery and endurance of the team. The heroic efforts of the Navy helicopter pilots did result in the rescue of three of the Americans and the valuable intelligence they had gathered. In spite of Virginia 1's difficulties, the value of helicopters in special operations was assured. ♣

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Lieutenant Junior Grade John H. Thornton survived three years as a POW after his helicopter was shot down during the attempted rescue of Virginia 1. He was repatriated during Operation BIG SWITCH. Thornton later received the Navy Cross.



Pucel and Miles on the USS St. Paul on return from the mission. The gunshot wound to Miles face is visible.

Endnotes

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- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid., 57.
- 14 Ibid., 59.
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- 22 Ibid., 70.
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- 25 Evanhoe, 61.
- 26 Thornton, 102.
- 27 Ibid., 255.
- 28 POW Debriefing Report, ID 950774—Watson, Martin R., RA 11033539, ARSOF Archives, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 29 Thornton, 258.