

Jack Chambers POW Imjin River, Korea, 1951-3



Jack Chambers in April 2011

Knowing well the story of the 'Glorious Glosters in the Korean War, I had no evidence to believe that Tewkesbury men had been significantly involved. Happily there is no name on the War Memorial but I checked the Society's database - and found out that in 1953 the Town Council had decided to present a watch to returning POW, Jack Chambers. A notice in the Echo quickly yielded a phone call from his wife and a meeting was agreed at their home.

In April 2011 Jack Chambers will soon be celebrating his 80th birthday but, when he was captured, he was a 20-year-old Regular soldier with the 1st Gloucestershire Regiment.

Born in the summer of 1931, he was the son of Jack Chambers and Kathleen Bell who had married in 1926. Kathleen was not a local girl as Jack senior had joined the army as a drummer boy and served in pre-war India.

In World War II he joined the RAF, working with barrage balloons until he suffered an accident and was invalided out. He worked as a postman with the Post office when the telegram arrived informing him that he son was missing in battle. He passed out.

Jack junior was educated at Chance Street Council School and, after leaving at 14, he worked for Jim Attwood in the upholstery trade - later it became Chapmans. He was a member of the YMCA (but remembers that when he returned home after being freed he and his father were refused a drink as his flashes were not recognised at a time when squaddies from Ashchurch had been banned for bad behaviour!) However, he had to leave for National Service and, when the Korean War broke out in 1950, he was stationed in Colchester and volunteered to be a Regular - which meant a slightly higher rate of pay.¹

He arrived in Korea six months before the fateful battle of the Imjin River. He was in the 'Medium Machine Gun' platoon and had already experienced action in fighting for *Hill 327*, helping out the Americans who had failed against Chinese attacks. Jack recalls that the Chinese were difficult to fight because they dug trenches around the bottom of hill and stayed in bunkers. They could only be dislodged with hand grenades.

The deployment of UN forces meant that 29th Brigade with its four battalions had to cover a front of twelve miles. As a consequence, gaps between units had to be accepted because there was no possibility of forming a continuous line with the forces available. As a result, "Brigadier Brodie determined to deploy his men in separate unit positions, centred upon key hill features".

¹ Register 8 August 1953 p1

On the left flank, the Glosters were guarding a ford over the Imjin, known as "Gloster Crossing".² Jack's platoon, with close support from tanks, had embarked upon a long-range patrol other side of river but they saw nothing of the Chinese build-up of troops for the Spring Offensive against Seoul, 30 miles to the rear. This attack was designed to help recapture land lost by the North Koreans in the early stages of the war when the UN forces reached close enough to the Chinese border to cause the new Communist Republic of 1949 to enter the war.

Jack confirmed that there were three days of fighting - throwing grenades and firing their machine guns. The major problem was that they ran out of water and the guns became red-hot. They subsequently ran out of food water and ammunition. On Day 3, Col. Carne, the C.O. of the Glosters, sent a message that now "every man must look after himself". A Major Mike Harvey suggested an escape route: after stripping down the 'MMG' and jettisoning the parts, they set out on this desperate adventure.

However the soldiers ran into an ambush in an irrigation ditch by a Chinese machine gun. Jack recalls that they were faced with a choice between going left or right: Jack was unlucky and took the wrong turn while 40 others escaped the other way. He was now alone and pinned down by machine gun fire. However he feels he was lucky because the Chinese were in one of their "goody-goody periods"! He had to allow himself to be captured but was allowed to keep his grenades in pouches.

Initially POW camps were improvised in local villages. Eventually they were required to march north, walking 20 miles a night for 300 miles.³ He stresses that he suffered no mistreatment, although he would have been less confident had he been guarded by North Koreans. Chinese guards actually assisted stragglers.

When asked the name of his camp, Jack showed me two tattoos that he had chosen to have done by friends for "fun" - one had the name of the camp and the other was a portrait of himself!



Jack's Arm tattoos in 2011

The name of his POW Camp (sadly illegible)

A Portrait of Jack by a fellow soldier

The main deprivation was that they were not allowed Red Cross Parcels but they ate reasonably well, if monotonously, the same food as guards. Soldiers soon realised that for Europeans to escape was impossible but that officers felt the duty to try. Therefore, officers were

² Wikipedia

³ See Echo 21 April 2011 in which eyewitness Tony Eagles claimed they "marched by day".

segregated from their men in another camp. Punishment for attempting to escape was detention, during which time they were given pen and paper for them to write their "confession". The camp was then assembled and the escapee was forced to read out the confession: punishment was then considered over. He pointed out that his adjutant, Farrar-Hockley, escaped several times out of his concept of duty.⁴

Camp conditions were Spartan and cold especially in winter but a rudimentary central heating system from a kitchen below ground level. The only work required was to bring wood back for winter fuel - so "we were really working for ourselves". The Chinese organised a mini-intercamp Olympic Games. They were allowed to have concerts and the guards sent in dance band instruments; they made their own furniture. Once freed, he told the Register that he survived because he "kept fit".

When asked if attempts were made to 'brain-wash' him, he did point out that the group leader had to fetch study materials. They were supposed to learn to sing the Chinese National Anthem in Chinese but it was not very successful. Chinese interpreters were keener to improve their own English but they tricked the cook into thinking it was normal to greet people with "morning robin bastard". They were given the Shanghai News to read in English which was very "slanted to the Chinese".

Jack does agree that his c/o Col. Carne was picked on for special treatment and was kept in solitary confinement. The only injury Jack suffered was an accident via a sledgehammer. Whilst installing a fence picket, the hammerhead came off and hit Jack on the head. His comrades "thought he was dead" but he was treated by a doctor with "powder", leaving him with nothing worse than a headache. The only people for whom they lost respect were the Americans who were considered to have "no guts" and were prone to robbing each other.

Such was the way in which the POWs can come to accept their circumstances that they found it difficult to take it in that the war had ended - the Chinese could not understand why there was no reaction to the freedom announcement and it had to be explained to individuals.

Lorries were provided to transport them to a rail head further north where Americans gave them cigarettes but not food. They were repatriated to Panmunjom (where the Armistice had been signed on 27 July 1953) in a goods train where the exchange of prisoners demanded by the Armistice was precisely organised.

They were then flown to an island off Japan where motor boats were provided by the American as a "yankee treat" to ferry them to the mainland. They then sailed home which took about six weeks via Hong Kong (where they were treated to drinks) and Singapore where they were generously entertained by 'ex-pats'. Indeed the soldiers appreciated being waited upon during the voyage. They arrived at Southampton, ahead of schedule, so stayed out at sea for another night so that the relative would be ready to greet them! He was met by his mother, father & younger brother Keith who had joined army because his brother had been captured. They were then granted leave from September until January 1954.⁵

⁴ Wikipedia: Farrar-Hockley spent two years as a prisoner of war during which he made six escape attempts and underwent brutal interrogation. He was Mentioned in Dispatches for his conduct

⁵ 22 August 1953 p1



Two Photographs kept by Jack to commemorate his freedom

With his parents & brother Keith outside their "Cornish" House in Priors park

Jack stresses that this photograph was taken during celebrations in town!

Whilst in Tewkesbury, he was very well treated and never had to buy drinks. The Mayor did visit his home to bring the watch that the Town Council had decided to award him.⁶ However, out of consideration for him, it was very low key. Sadly he no longer has the watch.⁷ Neighbours also held a door-to-door collection and presented him with £75 in the YMCA. He did appreciate so much money.⁸ Mr. Attwood even offered him his job back but he preferred to stay in the army, partly because he would have had to buy himself out.

He remembers one other Tewkesbury veteran, Johnny Harris of Oldbury Road, who was wounded in the head and was one of last to be evacuated by helicopter. [He is still alive in 2011]

He reported back to Robinswood Barracks in Gloucester and was eventually sent out to Kenya to fight against the Mau Mau where he was less than impressed by the cruel and murderous treatment by the Mau Mau of their own kind.

He married Miss Cecilie Devine⁹ in 1957 and she accompanied him to Cyprus and Germany where one of their sons was born. He left the army as a Corporal in 1964 and worked for several companies over the years, including Lyons distribution in Green Lane and Warners Garage,

⁶ Jack cannot remember his name but T G Bannister was Mayor from 1952-1955.

⁷ Minutes Of The Town Council 17/08/1953 Council in Committee GRO: TBR-A1/17 John Dixon (30/10/2007)

⁸ In 1955, £75 0s 0d would have the same spending worth of 2010's £1,306.50 (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency/results.asp#mid)

⁹ ODTAA Cecilie Devine father Harry and Cecil Devine were petrol pump attendants under Mr Skingsley

Gloucester Road with Mike Warner. He eventually suffered ill health and was medically retired at 60. Although he did not need their help, he was at least visited by 'Combat Stress'.

Jack's recipe for survival is: "That was then and now is now". He will soon be 80 years of age and I felt very privileged to meet this modest soldier who was so willing to share his experiences of a Tewkesburian caught up in this most historically famous of campaigns.