

Backgrounder: The Historic Battle of Kapyong (April 23-25, 1951)

In the Korean War (1950-1953), more than 26,000 Canadians served in Korea and risked their lives for the cause of peace and freedom. Another 7,000 served in peacekeeping duties after the signing of the armistice on July 27, 1953.

In addition to an infantry brigade, the 26,000 Canadian volunteers included some 3,600 sailors who served on nine destroyers of the Royal Canadian Navy, a squadron of Royal Canadian Air Force transport plane personnel, 40 RCAF nurses who served with the U.S. Air Force, and 16 RCAF exchange pilots who flew saber jet fighters with the U.S. Air Force.

Some of the heaviest fighting our brave soldiers experienced in the Korean War took place during the Battle of Kapyong (today spelled *Gapyeong*).

The Battle of Kapyong (April 23-25, 1951) was one of Canada's greatest military achievements of the Korean War. Although vastly outnumbered by the Chinese and North Korean field armies, our 2nd Battalion of Princess Patricia Canadian Light Infantry (2PPCLI), the 3rd Battalion of Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR), The United Kingdom's 1st Battalion Middlesex Regiment, and the 16th Field Regiment of Royal New Zealand Artillery (16 RNZA) serving together as the 27th British Commonwealth Brigade, thwarted a massive enemy offensive in the Kapyong River Valley that was aimed at capturing the capital of Seoul.

The Canadians held the west side of the valley, on four large hills dominated by Hill 667, which was assigned to D Company. The Australians held a similarly strategic group of hills on the eastern side of the valley. After 24 hours of terrible battle on their side of the valley, in which casualties were extremely high, the Australians, virtually out of ammunition, medicine and food, were forced to make a fighting withdrawal. This left the isolated 2nd Patricias to check the enemy advance.

The Canadian soldiers, many of them very young, resigned that they would probably die in battle. Their commanding officer, LCol James Stone, was steadfast that there would be no withdrawals. Soldiers began requesting to serve alongside others who were their close friends, thinking they likely would not survive, but would fight to the end.

The Canadians did fight fiercely, first on a small feature held by B Company that was closest to the Kapyong River, then on the towering heights of Hill 667. When his B Company platoon was overrun, Sergeant Roy Ulmer, out of ammunition, turned and threw his bayonet mounted Enfield rifle like a spear at the rushing enemy. Private Wayne Mitchell, a slight built fellow from Victoria, B.C. although wounded three times, remained alone and defended the position with a light machinegun.

The enemy then attacked D Company out of the west. Knowing what was at stake should they fail, and with one of his platoons soon overrun, Captain J. G. 'Wally' Mills, in command of D Company, called artillery fire onto his own position. The artillery and mortar fire were directed by Lieutenant Michael Levy, whose 10 platoon was under attack from three compass points.

The Canadians fought outnumbered throughout the night (April 24-25), checking the enemy advance, and thwarting their ultimate goal of capturing the capital of Seoul, which is not very far south of Kapyong.

The Canadians never wavered. They maintained the position of the Commonwealth Brigade, and their heroic efforts stopped the Chinese and North Korean offensive.

Their commander, LCol Stone later wrote:

“In the annals of the history of the Korean War it will be said that the Second Battalion, Princess Patricias did not give an inch although attacked by overwhelming numbers with a front crumbling all around them.

“Cut off and with everything else pulling back, the Second Patricias was the only battalion holding in the 8th Army front.

“By their determination, steadfastness and courage above the normal devotion to duty, precious time was saved and an orderly withdrawal of 9 Corps was possible.”

The 2nd Patricias, along with the Royal Australian Regiment and A Company, 72nd U.S. Heavy Tank Battalion, were awarded the U.S. Presidential Unit Citation for their valour and heroic defence at Kapyong. No other Canadian Unit has been awarded this honour before, or since.

The legacy of heroism and sacrifice at Kapyong remains a source of pride for the PPCLI Regiment to this day. The soldiers of the 2nd Battalion still wear the insignia of the U.S. Presidential citation on the sleeve of their tunics.