

THE VETERAN'S VOICE



Ron Shepard

To this day, Ron Shepard does not know the reason why he was selected, among hundreds of soldiers in the 2nd battalion of the famed Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI) regiment, for a special honour that has now become part of the lore and legend of the PPCLI.

In a special ceremony convened on the battalion's parade grounds on 9 June 1956, Livingston Merchant,

Ambassador of the United States to Canada, stood before four Princess Pats and affixed a unique ribbon streamer to their "Ric-a-Dam-Doo". This is the regimental flag that was hand-made and given to the PPCLI by Princess Patricia (grand-daughter of Queen Victoria) during the First World War. As the dark blue streamer fluttered in the breeze, the words "Kapyong 1951" distinctly adorned its length.

The ambassador then placed a unique rectangular patch, of the same blue colour, on the upper sleeve of each of the four soldiers that stood before him. At the far left, representing all of the ranks of the PPCLI was Ron Shepard, standing straight-as-an-arrow at attention, the very image of a soldier's soldier.



The American Ambassador to Canada, Mr. Livingston Merchant formally presents the United States Presidential Unit Citation to the 2nd Battalion of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry in recognition for its bravery at the Battle of Kapyong fought in April 1951. Ron Shepard, far left.

The patch that was first placed on Corporal Shepard's shoulder that day is still worn today by every member of the 2nd battalion of the PPCLI. It is the insignia of the Presidential Unit Citation awarded by the President of the United States to those military units whose bravery and valour, as a whole, mark them out for special recognition.



In hearing Ron's story, one needs not wonder why he received this singular honour out of all of the men that day. To understand more about this outstanding Manitoban and the role played by the PPCLI in Korea, MSBA took a journey with Ron back to two days in April, 1951 to a besieged valley known as the Imjin, in what is now South Korea. To get there, we started right at the very beginning.

According to Ron,

"I grew up in England. When my parents decided to move to Canada, I stayed behind with my aunt to finish my school. When I finally graduated, I came over to join them. At that time, I was ready for university so I enrolled in the marine engineering program down in Windsor, Ontario. Well wouldn't you know it but the headlines of the Windsor Star newspaper said 'War Declared on Korea'. So the next day, myself and a group of 23 friends from the class all went down to sign up for duty. I think the marine engineering professor gave his lecture to an empty class on that day! This was in August of 1950."

Ron continued: *"From Windsor, we travelled over to Camp Wainwright in Alberta for training and then made our way to Fort Lewis in Washington state, where we were readied for final deployment. Seventy percent of the guys who had signed up to go over to Korea were World War Two vets and then there was us rookies, so we were well trained by those vets. In January 1951, we got a call that they needed twenty guys, so we boarded a ship called the Martin S and made our way over to Korea. We got there in February and then underwent further training from a Japanese ex-sergeant. His job was to prepare us for the particular conditions over in Asia. Once we had completed all training, I was assigned to the 6th platoon of B Company of the Princess Patricia's. It was then that they exchanged my regular infantry rifle for a Bren light machine gun. We knew then that this was it, we were entering the war."*



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Ron was just one of the approximate 26,000 Canadians who served in the Korean War between 1950 and 1953. When Canadians remember their country's commitment to defending freedom and democracy, many focus only upon the First and Second World War, and others even more recently on the war in Afghanistan. The war in Korea however, has gained far lesser attention than it rightfully deserves. For this reason, it has for too long been known as "the Forgotten War", even though a total of 516 Canadian servicemen and women lost their lives during that conflict.

The Korean conflict started in the tense years following the Second World War, when Korea was, as referred to at that time by senior leaders among the recently formed United Nations, as the first "domino". This referred to the unfortunate reality that, in the post-war order, communist forces led by the Soviet Union and China were attempting to expand their control and influence over as much territory as they could. Standing against such expansion however, were the democratic and free-market forces led by allied nations such as Canada, the United States, Britain, Australia and New Zealand, who made every attempt to prevent that from happening.

The thinking at that time was that if one "domino" or nation fell under communism, then others would surely follow. For the allied forces, it therefore became necessary to prevent this from happening at all costs. This included a return to war only five years after the end of the Second World War.

Ron Shepard was thrust right into the middle of this conflict.

"Once the machine gun was in my hand, there were a few actions that we saw between then and the start of the Battle at Kapyong which was in April, 1951. We were finally at a rest area and were playing soccer with the British Middlesex Regiment when we got the call to move up the lines to Hill 677 on April 23rd, the highest mountain in that part of Korea. We dug in on the mountainside but the CO (commanding officer) wanted us to move down the mountain into a spar pointing to the north, to confront the Chinese, who had already started attacking. On the 24th of April, the 3rd Royal Australian Regiment was attacked first and they got overrun, so the Americans came with tanks and removed their wounded. Then we also received word that the British Gloucester Regiment was overrun down in the Imjin Valley."

With the advance defences being entirely struck out, the time had then arrived for the PPCLI to meet its enemy.

"We could see the Chinese plain as could be, coming down the road and watching our position. They were trained by the Russians, so their tactics were a bit different than we were

used to. They came at us in four waves. First two waves have weapons. The waves behind them had no weapons. They picked up the weapons that were left by those who were dead or wounded in front of them. That was how they operated. They don't stop. Night-time came and at approximately 9:30 p.m. on 24th, the attack on our positions started and they fired two lanes of tracer rounds at us."

"I had the Bren gun and there were supposed to be 32 rounds in each magazine but I only had 28 rounds in each, so that the gun would not jam. I asked the second guy in my foxhole, Ken Marsh, 'how many magazines do I have left?' He told me I was down to the last one. I had just let off a good burst of ammunition, so I figured that I had only 14 rounds left. I asked him 'how many rounds do you have left?' And at that point, he only had 20. He had started off with 200 rounds. And so I said 'well, one of us has got to go out and go to the next trench' which was about 4 or 5 yards away, to see if they had any extra ammunition that we could have. And we could see the Chinese closing in because of the flares. I was trying to fire only one or two shots at a time but they were out there just as close as you are to me now. So it was a matter of 'take your pick'. One of us were looking at one flank and the other at the other. Meantime Ken was doing a sweep, in a horseshoe review, to ensure none of them came up and surprised us."

For Ron Shepard, his own part in the Battle at Kapyong ended shortly after.

"There were some companies where their commanding officers had no choice but to call in friendly artillery fire on their own positions in order to survive. I am not sure if ours was one of these but next thing I knew, I woke up in a hospital in a place called Sasebo Japan. A nurse was trying to take off my boot but I had shrapnel embedded in my ankle from the explosion that had occurred, and she was trying to take it off. It cut my ankle and caused the most intense pain, and so I came to after having been knocked unconscious and suffering a concussion at Kapyong. I was in an Indian Army field hospital. There was a Punjabi orderly who pleasantly asked me if I 'would like a cup of tea?' They afterwards transported me to the Canadian Headquarters in Japan and I was treated in an Australian military hospital. I was there in hospital for just a little while, before returning to Korea and stayed until the following February, when I finally came home."

For Ron Shepard, now in his 88th year in Winnipeg, the war is only a memory away. As he put it well, "those days are gone but they are still remembered".

"One of the things I'll never forget. Don't think any Korea vet can forget it. We did have three meals each day. But breakfast

was ham and lima beans. Then lunch was wieners and beans. For supper it was pork and beans. So really, it was the same thing day in, day out. That's it! I really came to detest those 'C-4 rations' slung out by the Americans. They were all canned back in 1942!"

Ron rubbed his hands together as he then shared,

"The only time we got fed decently was when we come off the line and got a shower and a shave and a good meal... One thing people ask me is, you never got to shower? And I tell them, you only have one water bottle. Some days, you hope you had some water the next day. Sometimes you went without. You couldn't gulp anything down. You had coffee in your pack but no water to make it. Rarely did we get roast beef sandwiches in the foxholes and dugouts. But next day it was beans again!"

One thing that Ron will especially never forget though— one memory that became his personal motivation for forging on in spite of the odds, came one terrible day before Kapyong. On this particular day, the PPCLI entered a village that had just been razed and attacked by Chinese soldiers.

"There was a lady and her baby lying in a gutter. Her clothes were still burning. And she was holding this baby. His skin was already blackened and the clothes had already been burnt off. And my commanding officer said to me 'remember that sight. Every time you have one of them Chinese soldiers in your sights, take 'em out for that lady. Do it for her and for her baby'. I always had that thought, every time I pulled that trigger. And to this day, I am not sorry. I would do it again if I had to. Sometimes I was so enraged that I took a flamethrower or a phosphorus round (intended to ignite straw buildings) and I put it into one of them."

Mr. Shepard continued, with great emotion

"It's hard to put the feeling into words. When you squeeze that trigger on a light machine gun and you see guys going down in front of you. The only justification for an infantryman is that if you didn't do it to them, they would do it to you. We do not and cannot tell our wives or our children these things. But every now and then, you wake up with these things before your eyes. They are there."

For Ron Shepard, just as the thought of a vulnerable child, defenceless and unprotected, had kept him in "the fight", so it was the image of a child that helped restore him upon return to Canada.

"Returning to civilian life was not easy. The only way they helped me to frame how I was supposed to behave in peace-time was to go from protecting other's children to protecting our children instead. From protector to parent, so to speak."

In closing, Ron Shepard therefore offered some reflections on the importance of our children today.

"I still love this country. I am very proud to be called a Canadian. That to me is the main thing. It is up to us, every man and woman, to help our children, especially our schools. I give our teachers a lot of credit for what they do. Helping kids realize what those who have gone before have given to them is important. Education belongs to everyone. As parents it is important to reinforce this."

Ron then continued, also sharing the importance of freedom and what that means.

"If there is one lesson that I would like to share with future generations it would be the word 'Freedom'. Canada is so committed not only to our own freedom and well-being but for other small countries that are being overrun. Canada has always stood alongside of other middle powers like Australia and New Zealand to stand up for freedom for others. This is the way our parents trained us. Education is and should be our number one priority. Learning about the facts of life means knowing about total freedom, for every person, of every race. This is what drives the Canadian Forces to protect others. And ours has been a volunteer armed force since 1945, which shows our resolve. Many children are coming into this nation from other countries. It is so important to share these values with those who are here and those who are also coming over."

In closing, Ron Shepard discussed the importance of freedom and its close connection to community engagement

"At least three to four times each year, we are invited to local high schools and we go down and talk to them about our experience in Korea. In speaking to the students about then and now, we emphasize freedom. Communities have to stay together. Not just one or two people who come out to community events and council meetings. Everyone! Go and talk to your elected official. That is what they are there for!"

Following his return to Canada in 1953, Ron Shepard enlisted in the airborne section of the PPCLI, undergoing jump training. Stationed in Germany from 1966 through to 1970, he was deployed on a United Nations peacekeeping mission to Cyprus in 1972 before coming back home to Winnipeg before embarking on a second tour to Germany for a further three years. Retiring with the rank of Warrant Officer in August, 1977, Ron Shepard earned the Canadian Forces Decoration for his 27 year career in the military.

He is now one of only three surviving local Princess Pats to have been present at the Battle of Kapyong.

"There used be 327 Korea vets and we would go to Shilo once a year for the anniversary of Kapyong. Now there are only ten of us who go. I am the youngest, so I am still here. There are only three veterans left who fought at Kapyong. Today, there are over 600,000 soldiers still stationed in Korea, mostly Americans, to maintain the peace. I am scared for Korea. I watch the American news every night and I am very scared for Korea. We made a significant sacrifice to keep South Korea free. Every Canadian should remember that."

Lest we forget

