

COLD

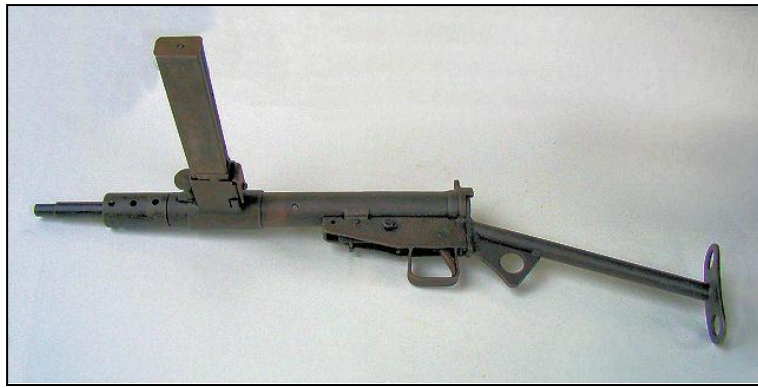
"Wake up son, its four o'clock - we've got a job" The huge hand of our Maori New Zealand Sergeant shakes my shoulder under the shapeless heap of my home made bunk. Still fast asleep, a deep sleep that follows weeks of hard graft. I am huddled under my two sleeping bags and parka, I grunt, yawn; stick my head out from under the covers, the cold bites the lips and cheeks. It's going to be another bloody cold day. The Korean winter is quite predictable, three very cold days, followed by three bitterly cold days blown by the north east wind blowing in from Manchuria. It's probably going to minus 30 today. I am, like most of my comrades, a reluctant 19 year old National Service man attached to the 1st. Royal Tank Regiment in Korea in 1952.



World map with Gt Britain an Korea shown in red

Gingerly, I stick my hand out and light the candle, the quivering flame exposes the squalor of the inside of our basha dug into the hillside, it's lined with old ration boxes and corrugated iron. The rats dive for cover under the next bed and disappear. Within arms reach is our lifeline, the drip-feed fire: this consists of an ammunition box, a fuel pipe from a 50 gallon drum of high octane tank fuel and a chimney of 20- pounder shell cases rising up through a hole in the roof. As I turn the juice on and drop a match into the flash pan, a comforting roar follows. We usually get through fifty gallons every three days. After a few minutes, the first part of the chimney glows red hot and the air has lost some of its fierce bite.

I reluctantly get up to get dressed, I have a good scratch. Thank goodness it's out of the line tomorrow, back to the shower unit and a good delouse. I'm already wearing socks, long johns, and battledress trousers, string vest, shirt and jumper that I have slept in, I put on my outer clothes, Combat jacket, windproof trousers, followed by balaclava, three pairs of gloves another pair of socks furry hat, and then my parka.



Sten Gun

Image courtesy of Grzegorz Pietrzak, source Wikipedia

Switching off the petrol, I grab my Sten gun, spare magazine and tool box, blow out the candle, step outside and stand still to let my eyes become accustomed to the darkness. It is a clear moonlight night with an icy wind blowing hard from the north. Everything seems still, but there are flashes, with angry grumbles from artillery in the distance, and the occasional staccato burst from machine guns in the valley.

To my left, I can hear the steady hum from the charging engine in our armoured recovery vehicle. I move towards it and am challenged by a figure from the shadows.

"Halt! Goal," it hisses.

I stop abruptly and whisper "Post", the current password. "You bloody fool it's me".

"Hi Jaycee, I'm f****ing freezing". It's Alan Campbell, my long term mate on stag duty. "Christ! Its f****ing colder than an Eskimo's tit out here". I wonder what his Mum would say as the profanities roll off his tongue, if she could hear him now.

I am bursting, I must go. I stand at the empty shell case, which is stuck into the ground for the purpose. As I relieve myself the steam rises and new festoons of icicles immediately grow, on the frostbitten ground, I stamp my feet to keep warm. Although I'm wearing two pairs of socks, and special cold weather boots which are on trial for the Yanks, the icy cold seeps up and creeps into my toes. A Vickers machine gun opens up to my left from higher up the hill, using tracers, soon these become fainter, and harder to see as the East becomes lighter. The wind drops and, as it becomes lighter, the frogs start their dawn chorus. I look beyond the barbed wire at the Great War scene I'm moved to see the sun rise, the sky grows light, and against the ugliness of war, I witness the beauty of dawn breaking in the Land of the Morning Calm.

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