



### **Andrew Salmon *To the Last Round* Aurum Press £25**

This is an admirable book. The interest of the author- a journalist living in Seoul – was sparked when he attended a reunion visit of veterans to the battle sites on the Imjin River. The resulting book, the result of years of meticulous and inspired research, gives a vivid, moving and fascinating description of the actions of the British 29 Brigade, as part of the UN Force, which in April 1951, held up the advance of Marshal Peng's Chinese offensive with 300,000 troops.

The author sketches in the political and military background, assuming wisely that the modern reader may not be familiar with it. The result is a detailed description which is easy to follow, and which brings vividly alive the actions and sufferings of the units which, while ill-prepared, were subjected to overwhelming military attacks, more severe than any since the Second World War. Peng's offensive against the UN Forces, employed more divisions than the Russians had at Stalingrad, or the British at El Alamein. 29 Brigade, made up of the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, the Royal Ulster Rifles, the Gloucestershire Regiment and 45 Field Regiment Royal Artillery – together with an excellent Belgian battalion - were the key factor in the whole defensive position. Included in these units were some young National Servicemen and some veterans of the Second World War, including Brigadier Tom Brodie, an ex Chindit, and some who had served on D - Day and at Arnhem – all confirmed that the most intense fighting they had known was on the Imjin River.

The background to the Chinese offensive was the victory of Mao Tse Tung over Chiang Kai Shek in 1949, and the rapid advances and dramatic retreats to the Yalu River during 1950. This was an early round of the struggle in Malaya, in Korea, in French-Indo-China and Vietnam, between communism and the west.

In the early weeks of 1951, the rival forces lay close to the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel – where the war began and ended. General Ridgway, who had made a dramatic improvement to the fortunes of the UN Forces, then replaced MacArthur - sacked by Truman over the question of bombing China. Every unit in 29 Brigade fought valiantly, and received the highest praise, but there remained an enduring controversy over the media hype given to “The Glorious Glosters”, which rankled with the Fusiliers, the Ulster Rifles and the Irish Hussars. The author handles this issue with commendable balance, and gives equal attention to the fighting of all the units, faced as they were by a totally new tactical situation. Every unit faced wave after wave of Chinese attacks, which continued despite horrendous casualties. The British units used their Bren guns, Stens, and Lee Enfield rifles, but these were ill-suited to a totally new type of infantry fighting.

On 22 April 1951, 29 Brigade had taken up positions above the Imjin River, and it was recorded that it was a beautiful spring day, though with reports of large scale Chinese movements. The initial attack by six Chinese divisions fell on the Glosters. Throughout that day and for the following days and nights, constant unrelenting attacks, accompanied by weird bugle calls and whistles were thrown against the Glosters, the Ulster rifles, the Northumberland Fusiliers, the Irish Hussars and other British units. By 24<sup>th</sup> April, 29 Brigade were still intact, but the Glosters, fighting desperately around Hill 235, and in spite of promises of a relief column, were totally cut off and reduced to about 400 men. Then Colonel



*The author of this article retains the copyright of the material. No part of this article may be reproduced or distributed in any form other than for private use without the express permission of the author. Permission may be sought via the [BCMh Newsletter Editor](#)*

Page 2 / 2

Carne, who was to receive the V.C., gave his final order “*Every man to make his own way back*”. Small groups tried to break out but were quickly captured. The M.O. stayed with the wounded and went in to captivity. The horror and vividness of all these actions is stressed by the quotations and thoughts of the men who took part and whom the author interviewed.

When the Glosters were overrun, the rest of 29 Brigade – the Fusiliers, the Ulster Rifles and the Irish Hussars, had to attempt that most difficult and desperate manoeuvre – to withdraw in the face of an overwhelming enemy. Suffering appalling casualties they moved slowly down Route 11. The Brigade lost over 1000 men.

Many men of 29 Brigade were taken in to captivity – all traumatised and many wounded. They were marched to the so-called camps in North Korea, finding little hostility from their Chinese guards, but much from the North Koreans. They suffered months and years of harsh treatment, and attempts at communist indoctrination, and many died. They had been rapidly bundled in to action in 1950, but U.N. action to rescue them from captivity was less urgent. The first prisoner exchange did not take place until April 1953, and the armistice followed in July 1953, on the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel, where it all began.

Andrew Salmon trawled through voluminous and varied sources, and interviewed dozens of veterans to produce an outstanding book, which shows that 29 Brigade made a critical contribution to frustrating the Chinese communist’s greatest offensive, and so influenced the outcome of the Korean War.

**David Rooney**