Hot Chow

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Abstract

I had been standing in the line for over four hours before I could see what was happening in front of the mess tent...
where the water had splashed up on them and revealed queer little creamy patches under the blue film which covered his body. He threw down the baron cob, frightening a sparrow which had been dusting itself in the sand between the cobblestones, and sang a childish song into the muck at his feet.

Down the street a way a tiny girl reached above her head to spin the crank of the cast-iron water hydrant across from the charcoal stove. Her mother beat a small wad of clothes against the cobblestones that had been washed clean below the hydrant. She arranged them into a long bunch, lifted them over her head, and then brought them whacking down onto the stones again. Up, down, up, down, up, down. A steady rhythm, pounding, pounding, with the virtuoso squeak of the spinner crank on the pump.

A butcher down the street sang out in a strong voice trying to attract the people to his shop. Parts of several carcasses dangled in the sun in his open shop and flies buzzed hungrily around them. Two small boys played tug-o-war with an old ox tail on the floor. Their melodious laughter drifted through the singing of the flies and was lost into the songs in the street.

"... and ever as they sang, methought the voice of angels from Heaven in answer rang."


Hot Chow

I HAD been standing in the line for over four hours before I could see what was happening in front of the mess tent. My jaws ached in anticipation. The very thought of hot chow, the first for three weeks! I swallowed and swallowed saliva. There were men running in and out of the tent bringing hot steaming containers to the serving line.
Hungry men crowded the counter, extending canteen cups, mess kits, cardboard boxes... anything that would hold food. They wore dirty parkas and clumsy shoe-pacs. Like animals... that's what. Some of them had their hoods down revealing their shaggy, matted hair and beards.

I looked down at myself. The same. I held my C-ration box up to see that my plastic spoon was still in it. Got to have something to eat with. The line inched forward and I took a step with my ice-block feet. Moving again made me think of the cold. It was around zero... a good deal warmer than the Reservoir where we had come from. I guess it hit thirty below up there a couple of times.

Thinking of hot chow made me think of all the other nice things of being evacuated. Leaving Wonsan would mean a warm place to sleep, dry, clean clothes. I'd shave (when was the last time?)... and get a haircut (the last had been in September and this was December). But hot chow, that was what I wanted now!! (Thanksgiving was the last, three weeks ago.)

The only men talking in the line were a group of five or six behind me. They had been talking most of the time since we had gotten into the line at six that morning... mostly complaining. Their tent had been cold and they hadn't slept well the night before. One chow hall for the whole division even if it was down to less than two thirds strength. The cold. The long line.

Tom and I didn't have anything to do but listen to them. That's my buddy, Tom. He's a wireman in my company. We came over together. Mostly we just stood but once in a while we had to look... to compare, just curious I guess.

The men behind us were replacements, hadn't made it in time to help us out of the Chosin Reservoir. I guess the quickest way to tell a new man is his rifle. They all carry them like the men behind us did. The front was a long way off but all those guys behind us had nice clean, oiled M-1's. Some even had little plastic bags over the muzzles to keep snow out. They shifted the rifles from shoulder to shoulder to ease the cutting straps.

We were just about to the chow counter when one of these new guys came over to Tom. "Say, Mac, how was it
up there? Did you give those gooks hell?” He hitched his rifle up.

Tom just kind of looked at this guy, kind of tired like. After while he said, “Yeah,” and looked down at the ground.

“Geeze, I wish we had gotten here sooner! I never shot a gook before. Must really be something,” the new man said, emphasizing each sentence with a serious nod of his clean-shaven face, causing his new helmet to jiggle a bit. He turned to look at his friends who were watching. “I know it was tough, but I wish I had been there. I’d love to sit up on one of those mountains with a machine gun when those gooks were coming.” He turned to glance at Tom and jerked his head back to make sure his audience was still watching. “Yeah, I’d just hold that trigger down and watch them fall! Ah . . . ah . . . ah . . . ah . . . ah,” he said, swinging his hands back and forth as if he were holding the handle of a machine gun. “That must really be great.”

Tom looked at me, his face absolutely blank, and after a moment turned his back to the new man and looked at the ground.

The new man looked confused for a second, then turned to his friends blustering, “Well, God damn, what does he think he is, a hero or something?” A murmur came from his group and I didn’t care what they were saying.

About this time we got to the counter. I could see that we were getting pancakes. I crowded up against Tom and held out my C-ration box. A man behind the counter speared a pile of cakes . . . looked like about twelve . . . and dropped the whole works into my box. Geeeeeeeze! I was just standing there looking when someone said, “Let’s go, Mac,” and another man behind the counter dropped about a quarter of a pound of what looked like real butter on my pancakes and the man next to him sloshed syrup over them till a little ran out of one corner of the box. Wow!

Tom and I found an empty place on the ground by a water trailer and sat down. I got down first and noticed that Tom was acting kind of stiff and sore . . . sort of favoring one leg. I had noticed his limping for the last three or four days but just thought it was frostbite. Most everyone had that. When I reached up to help Tom sit down I saw the hole in his trousers, right on his left thigh.
"What the hell is it, Tom . . . that hole?" I asked looking at him, hoping it wasn’t what I thought it was.

"Got hit," he said, no expression in his voice. He grunted to a sitting position with his left leg stretched out in front of him.

"Why didn’t you turn in?"

"I did. A corpsman put a dressing on it," he said.

"Let’s see."

He pulled up the trouser carefully till I saw the blackened blood on the bandage.

He started to pull his trouser leg down but I reached over and lifted the edge of the dressing. It was red all around the hole . . . right on the fleshy part of the thigh. The skin around it was dark colored nearest the hole.

"Damn," I said, sitting back up, "Why didn’t they evacuate you?"

"I didn’t go back when they told me. I could still walk and my arms were O.K. for holding that rifle and squeezing off a round."

We sat there just looking at each other, even forgetting about the hot chow. Suddenly he remembered. "Come on buddy, it’s getting cold!" He picked up his spoon to begin wolfing down food. I did too . . . didn’t even start tasting it till it was half gone.

I heard a loud voice from around the corner of the water wagon and out of the corner of my eye I could see a new shoe-pac. I just kept shoveling in the hot pancakes while the voice said, "Jesus Christ, pancakes all the way over on the ship and what do we get here?"

—Martin Overholt, F.T. & S., Sr.

I parked the car and started toward the house. My heart was pounding harder now, and my chest ached. My shirt was soaked under my arms; the breeze made it feel cold. I kicked at a small stick; I wished I could have kicked myself. How could I tell him? Why couldn’t I have been more