

Only One River To Cross: An Australian Soldier Behind Enemy Lines in Korea

A.M. Harris

Reviewed by Jim Shelton

The river in the title immediately makes one curious as to 'which River'? Some veterans of the Korean War (1950-1953) who know the author, Sergeant 'Jack' Harris, may be aware of the answer. However few veterans will be familiar with the full story which Dr Harris has related. This is a personal account and although the author concentrates on the part he played in the Korean War, he gives a brief summary of his busy life. This includes how he became a Doctor of Philosophy.

The book is well written with good maps, interesting photographs and an excellent Foreword by his then platoon commander, David Butler, now a retired major general. Harris has written frankly and several brutal episodes are covered. Concerning his frankness, this is his story and the reader can understand the man better for his honesty. It must be added that he was a very good soldier who was awarded the Military Medal. The brutal parts are necessary to explain the motives of several of his Korean agents. The Korean agents appear because Harris did two tours of duty in Korea, one as an infantry platoon sergeant and the second on the Intelligence side, training and deploying agents behind the North Korean lines.

Sergeant Harris arrived in Korea from Japan on 28 September 1950 with the Third Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR). His description of 3RAR's first month in Korea is brilliant, with a first rate account of the 'Apple Orchard' battle. Shortly after the 'Apple Orchard', he goes on what could be described as a Harris escapade. He is wounded, which ends his infantry days.

The reviewer began to wonder what 'fired up' this man, and Harris partly answers this by describing his youth. He did not have an easy life but as David Butler wrote, he had 'determination to be involved in all that is going on and by his desire to extend himself'. With the minimum of schooling he later took every opportunity to improve his education, thanks partly to the Army. This included learning Japanese and later Chinese, and the latter skill enabled him to return to Korea in 1953. Through his own efforts he assumed control of some Korean agents and he went behind Chinese lines with them in a Chinese uniform.

The main thrust of the book is his intelligence operations behind enemy lines, and this is where the River Samichon comes into the story. There is nothing romantic about these operations. The stress and physical effort involved show the incredible determination of Harris and his Korean agents. He includes an account of a remarkable plan to rescue the Commanding Officer of the British Gloucester Regiment, Lieutenant Colonel J.P. Carne, VC, from a prisoner of war camp in North Korea. The plan was never implemented but

it gave Harris the theme for one of the books of fiction he wrote in later years.

In modern jargon the types of in-theatre agent-running operations undertaken by Jack Harris are termed 'human intelligence' (humint) activities. In Korea (and later Malaya, Borneo, Vietnam and New Guinea) Australian doctrine, command structures and operational procedures

were robust enough to allow the successful conduct of battlefield or other tactical-level humint operations by specialist intelligence units of the military force deployed. I understand this degree of flexibility no longer applies. In East Timor for example, the defence force was severely circumscribed, even regarding low-level humint operations inside East Timorese territory, because bureaucratic fiat specified that this could apparently only be done by the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS). One can understand why ASIS has this sole responsibility at the strategic level, but they are hardly likely to be able to devote sufficient resources to the task of battlefield humint collection. Moreover, as the success of Jack Harris and others shows, to stop deployed military forces from undertaking low-level humint activities to satisfy their own intelligence needs, including force protection, within their designated operational area, is simply a triumph of bureaucratic narrow-mindedness over commonsense and long experience.

Harris also touches briefly on the many tasks he undertook in his varied life in Australia and overseas. He acknowledges the value of his friendships with many people, from his grandmother to such fine soldiers as Reg Bandy and Don Parsons. The reviewer uses the word 'friendships' rather than 'guidance from' – Harris is too strong a character to be guided – but he certainly benefited from appreciating the good qualities and skill of his mentors and friends.

His comments on political matters in Australia during World War II and his remarks about General MacArthur may not satisfy every reader. However his description of life during the Depression is masterly. He makes many personal observations, such as his distress over 'the mangled horse with the soft, brown eyes'. These remarks tell us a lot about this brave man. This is a book to read about the determination of a man, about several dangerous sequences of events during the Korean War and in the end about a man who is proud of having been an Australian Army Sergeant – and rightly so. ♦

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