

NZ DA Address at Gapyeong Ceremony 23 April 2021

Kia ora tatou. Anyong haseyo yorabun.

Of all the exceptional actions of NZ forces in the Korean war, the Battle of Gapyeong was the only engagement recognised formally with a Korean Presidential Citation, this was granted to 16 Field Regiment, Royal New Zealand Artillery. The Battle only lasted a few days, but it was an intense and critical one for UN Forces, and it was the first real test of intense battle for the Kiwi gunners. The continuous accurate artillery fire from 16 Field, 70 years ago hitting the Chinese swarming in the valleys and up these hills was critical to the success of the Commonwealth Brigade stopping the offensive.

On the 22 April 1951 just before midnight the 60th Chinese Infantry Division, some 10,000 strong, attacked just north of here. The attack caught the UN forces by surprise and orders were given to form a new defensive line. 16 Field Regiment was already located in the Gapyeong River valley with two of their three batteries forward firing in support of the South Korean 6th Division.

During the night of 22nd/23rd April the NZ gunners and the Middlesex Battalion held their ground until ordered to withdraw to a position just South of here. The withdraw of our forward batteries amidst the confusion of the hasty UN withdrawal is a story in itself.

The Chinese then infiltrated in and around the 3RAR infantry battalion defensive positions here, even to the kiwi gun lines behind, and they repeatedly attacked the Australian companies. Among the numerous Aussie fatalities, one NZ Forward Observer was killed (2LT Fielden) and his two signallers wounded.

On the evening of 24 April, the Australians were ordered to withdraw and the Chinese switched their attention to the Canadians on Hill 677. The Kiwi gunners stayed in the thick of the fighting all through the night and the following day. In one 35 minute action in support of the Canadians, the Regiment fired 1,500 rounds of 25 pounder ammunition, and the following night another 10,000 rounds.

During the battle Chinese lost about 1000 men killed and 5000 wounded. The Commonwealth Brigade including the US Sherman tanks in support of us, suffered 125 casualties, 45 killed.

The Chinese 5th offensive was blunted, and the approach to Seoul was denied but it would be several weeks before UN Forces completely recaptured this ground.

NZ was one of the first countries to answer the UN call to support the defence of Korea. Our frigates were able to sail here quickly in July 1950 but the Army units known as Kayforce were specifically raised and trained for deployment from a public call for volunteers. One of the young kiwis who answered the "call to arms" was my uncle Cyril Instone. He left his carpentry apprenticeship in Invercargill and six months later arrived on our first troopship The Ormonde at Busan on New Years Eve 1950. By the time he was fighting here in April 1951 Uncle Cyril was a sergeant in 163 Battery. After his service he returned to Southland, got married, raised a family, owned a successful clothing business in the rural Southland town of Wyndham and lived well into his old age.

Where we are today is not just a monument to the famous Battle of Kapyong, it is a national monument that stands as testimony to all those who fought and fell in the Korean theatre.

We remember them all, and we definitely remember the 45 kiwis who lost their lives in this War.

Kiaora/Nga Mihi

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