

Heartbreak Ridge

Ben Lancaster was within two months of graduation when the North Korean People's Army invaded its neighbor to the south on June 25, 1950. The initial phase of the Korean War was a rout, as South Korean and American forces rapidly retreated to a small defensive perimeter around the port city of Pusan on the Korean peninsula's southeast corner. The United Nations, led by the United States, would eventually contribute forces from its member countries and restore the inter-Korean border. In the summer of 1950, one of the soldiers that would help do so was still completing his studies at Clemson College.



Benjamin Sims Lancaster was a textile manufacturing major from Jonesville. An honors student, Lancaster was a member of the *The Tiger* staff, helping to turn out the campus newspaper. As an ROTC cadet, Lancaster worked his way up the chain of command, finishing his time on campus as a first lieutenant and platoon leader in Company C, 2nd Battalion. Upon graduating in August 1950, Lancaster, according to his classmate Clearance Sperry, was given a choice. He could choose active duty with the Army in Germany or he could go to Korea and fight. Lancaster chose to fight.

By October 1951, First Lieutenant Lancaster was serving with Company B of the 72nd Medium Tank Battalion, part of the 2nd Infantry Division. A lot had happened in Korea over the past



sixteen months. United Nations forces had staged a bold amphibious landing at Inchon in September 1950 which had outflanked North Korean forces in the south. The invaders had been driven north, all the way to the North Korean border with China. Then, in the autumn of 1950, the Chinese had intervened and pushed the UN armies back across the 38th parallel into South Korea. Over the following months, the frontlines gradually stabilized generally along the pre-war border, but still the fighting continued.

The 2nd Infantry Division was battling Chinese forces north of the 38th parallel near Chorwon, in an area known as Heartbreak Ridge. On October 10, Lancaster's 72nd Tank Battalion attacked through a valley on the west side of the ridge, smashing into the village of Mundung-Ni, surprising and

expelling the Chinese forces there. The Chinese responded with mortar and anti-tank fire. Lancaster's tank took a mortar round directly through an open hatch, killing him and two others. Enemy action in the area prevented the recovery of the remains of Lancaster and his crew mates.

Lieutenant Lancaster was awarded the Purple Heart, Korean Service Medal, United Nations Service Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Korean Presidential Unit Citation, and the Republic of Korea War Service Medal. He is memorialized in the Courts of the Missing, National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific. There is also a memorial marker for him at Littlejohn Cemetery in Jonesville.



“Ben was a good soldier,” Clearance Sperry recalled. “I remember him as a brave soldier. The world lost a fine person.”