

KOREAN WAR

The Beginning¹

This is not an official history, very far from it--indeed it is not a history of any sort. Neither is it an *exposé*, laden with revelations of military ineptitude at all levels. It is simply a story--the long and true story--of a war and the men who fought it: a war as vicious, sordid, uncomfortable, bloody and wasteful as any in history.

This story is primarily concerned with the soldiers of many different nationalities who came to the aid of South Korea and the United States in a conflict which was the responsibility of every right-thinking and free person in the world. It was a war won by neither side. One victory was scored--a victory over Communism and all its vile tyranny (it also kept Japan solidly in the western sphere).

Korea is best known to its own people as *Chosen*, "land of the morning calm." The western name, *Korea*, was derived from the name of the Koryo dynasty of A.D. 935 to 1392; literally translated it means "land of high mountains with sparkling streams."

Extending from Manchuria and USSR, the peninsula of Korea is 525 miles long. At its narrowest it measures 121 miles--at its broadest, 200 miles. Dotted haphazardly along its 5,400 mile coastline are more than 3,000 small islands.

Geographical statistics will tell you that the climate of Korea is humid and "continental," that it has a pronounced rainy season, and relatively dry winters, that temperatures vary from 105° F. in summer to -40° F. in winter. What they will not tell you is about the blinding heat, the choking dust, the torrential rains, and the cold that turns the peninsula into a frozen wilderness.

The 38th parallel, which was to achieve such significance in the Korean War was, in fact, nothing more or less than an imaginary line and artificial barrier between north and south; a convenient way of dividing Korea into two sections following the end of the War with Japan.

The Japanese soldiers to the south of this line surrendered to the United States, those to the north, to the Russians. But it was by no means as simple as that: the 38th Parallel in effect became the iron curtain of Korea.

It sealed off north from south with preemptory thoroughness, paying no regard to the political inclinations of the inhabitants, if indeed they had any; the 38th parallel cut through provinces, counties and towns, and through rivers, mountain ranges, and railway lines. Of Korea's thirty million people, there were now nine million in the north and twenty-one million in the south.

The north was industrial and possessed most of the country's gold, wood, iron, copper and graphite, and nearly all of its hydroelectric power. All Korea's riches were in the north; the south was exclusively agricultural. For the peasants, with their primitive farming methods, life was an all-the-year-round struggle for existence barely above the poverty line.

In the west, in 1948, Russia established a land blockade against Western Berlin, and a gradually awakening America, helped by an exasperated Great Britain, flew 2,300,000 tons of food and coal into that city between 1 April 1948 and 10 September 1949.

But it was in the Far East that the Communist menace was most apparent. Red terrorism seemed to be gaining ground in Malaya; Mao Tse-tung defeated Chiang Kai-shek in China; there were 100,000 Russian soldiers in North Korea, and other Soviet troops were systematically overrunning Manchuria.

¹From: Tim Carew, *The Commonwealth at War*. Cassell, Plc, a division of Orion Publishing Group (London), publishers. 1967. All attempts to trace the copyright holder have been unsuccessful

In June 1950 the armies of South and North Korea peered warily at each other across the 38th parallel.

The soldiers of the two armies resembled one another in looks but in nothing else: the force below the Parallel was no match for the one above it, either in numbers, arms or experience. The South Koreans were about as ready for war as the United States had been at Pearl Harbor or Great Britain at Singapore.

On paper the South Korean Army looked impressive enough: it mustered 65,000 men [less than attended a good college football game in the U.S.] armed with weapons used by American soldiers and marines in the Second World War: M1 rifles, carbines, light and heavy machine guns, mortars and bazookas. But they had been conditioned by benign American occupation, and they had no tanks or air force [or navy].

The North Koreans had tanks and aeroplanes, in addition to 90,000 men trained by the infinitely more persuasive methods of the Russian ‘advisors.’

The South Koreans were outnumbered and outgunned – the biggest South Korean artillery pieces had a maximum range of 8,200 yards against the 14,000 yards of the guns of the North. The North, geared for war, had enormous reserves of ammunition and a vast fleet of fast and well-maintained vehicles; the South, seemingly prepared only for casual summer manoeuvres, had only enough ammunition for a few days and almost half their transport was unserviceable.

In Korea the night of 24 June 1950 was a foul one. It was the beginning of the summer monsoon, a three-month period of torrential downpours.

Just before dawn on 25 June 1950, the sodden soldiers on the slopes of the 38th parallel heard what they thought was thunder and saw flashes in the sky which they took for lightning. But the rumbling noise came from the artillery of the North Koreans and the flashes in the sky heralded the shells which were soon crashing into their positions.

Thus started the Korean War

As so often happens in war, the best are the first to die: so it was when the North Koreans launched a two-division attack with strong tank support on the Pyongyang-Seoul highway. The South Koreans fought back valiantly, but they were never seen with a chance – the American anti-tank guns and bazookas were little better than catapults against the Russian T-34 tanks. Squads of volunteers, displaying either extraordinary heroism or extraordinary stupidity, depending on one’s conception of war, climbed on to the turrets of the tanks and tried to drop hand grenades inside. They were probably as brave as any soldiers in any war before or since, but they did little to stop the steamroller advance. And soon, as Robert Leckie neatly phrased it in his book *The Korean War*, there were no more volunteers for suicide duty.”

On the second day of the war the South Korean Army began to fall apart as a cohesive military unit, although some of the less charitable military experts question whether it had ever been one in the first place. In the same breath they heap criticism on the United States for not building up military strength in the South on the same scale as the Russians in the North.

On this day of crushing defeat the deplorable staff work of the South Korean Army was mercilessly exposed.

The American Advisory Group, shouldering a burden which was rapidly becoming intolerable, did their best, although it did not amount to much: their advice was either ignored, misunderstood, or went unheard.

To add to the overall confusion there was another menace, the most beastly and tragic aspect of war: the civilian refugees. The roads and the bridges across the Han River were black with humanity.

Close to a thousand of them were to lose their lives on the bridges which crossed the Han River. By one of those appalling errors of judgment which had become almost commonplace in the South Korean Army, the bridges were blown at a time when the human traffic crossing them was at its thickest. This was tragedy enough, but there was worse to come: the greater part of the army was still north of the river when the bridges crumbled. Wantonly beleaguered on the wrong side of the Han River, the remnants of the South Korean Army were now in the direct path of the advancing forces from the North.

Russia took full advantage of the situation through the dubious medium of the Communist-controlled radio station at Pyongyang. A glib-tongued announcer told of the attempt by the 'bandit traitor Syngman Rhee' to invade North Korea, and with gathering malevolence went on to say that the 'righteous invasion' of Communist forces had been launched only as a counter-measure.

By the end of June 1950, the South Korean Army had been reduced to 22,000 men, although for the next fortnight stragglers continued to wander in.

The melancholy figures of killed, wounded and missing spoke for themselves – 44,000 men had been lost in addition to 30 per cent of the army's small arms and almost all of its transport and artillery. It was defeat, complete and utter, for South Korea and, indirectly, for the United States.

On the afternoon of 28 June, Seoul fell to the North Koreans, and the United States found they had another war on their hands.

If America was not caught exactly with her pants down, they were at best half-mast.

On Saturday 24 June 1950, at 9.26 p.m. Washington time, John J. Muccio, United States Ambassador in Korea, informed the State Department that the Communist attack appeared to constitute an all-out offensive against the Republic of Korea.

Secretary of State Dean Acheson, relaxing on his farm at Sandy Springs, Maryland, immediately telephoned President Truman who was at his home in Independence, Missouri.

At 2.20 p.m. on 25 June, as the first soldiers of the Korean War were dying, the Security Council of the United Nations assembled. By 6 p.m. the United States resolution calling for a cease-fire and North Korean withdrawal to the 38th parallel had been passed.

On 27 June the vote was taken on the American resolution that members of the United Nations 'furnish such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel the armed attack and to restore the international peace and security in the area.' Britain, France, Nationalist China, Cuba, Ecuador, and Norway voted for the resolution; Egypt and India abstained; and Communist Yugoslavia voted against it.

While forward elements of the North Korean Army were nosing into the outskirts of Seoul, General of the Army Douglas MacArthur was taking a look for himself. He flew to Korea and drove north as far as the Han River, beyond which the North Koreans were regrouping for the rush which would overrun the entire peninsula. It was MacArthur's somber report of the situation that finally put the United States into the war:

The only assurance for holding the present line and to regain later the lost ground is through introduction of United States combat forces into the Korean battle area . . .

This was it: there was now, clearly, no possible excuse for withholding the United Nations aid to South Korea any longer.

. . . It would be some sort of police action, a simple matter of showing the Stars and Stripes to a bunch of ragged-assed Commies who'd got a bit above themselves.

The North Koreans, however, were about to show them how wrong they were.

The race for Pusan had begun.

General MacArthur had done a good job in Japan – possibly too good: a new constitution which demoted the Emperor and denounced war had been drafted. Never in the world's history have there been more benevolent conquerors than the Americans in Japan.

For the American soldiers there was a profusion of bars, beer-halls, and dance-halls. Such military chores as marching, shining boots, and garbage detail were relics of a more austere past. And, of course, there were girls to suit every taste – geisha girls, taxi girls, hostesses, professional, and enthusiastic amateurs. The American G.I. had it made in every conceivable department.

For better or worse, these men were the 'United States ground combat forces' destined for the Korean War. It had to be them, because no others were immediately available – the nearest Marines, America's elite of fighting men, were in California.

In Japan, events in Korea had been regarded with casual disinterest. If there was going to be a war, then it would be a short and easy one.

The stage was set for tragedy. But the cast of thousands was very far from being ready. . . .

[On 25 July 1950, led by Fighter Squadron VF-781 Pacemakers from NAS Los Alamitos, California, Navy flight units began to be recalled to active duty.]

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