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THE KOREAN WAR

MAX HASTINGS



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PAN BOOKS

**To
Charlotte**

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[Korea](#)

Foreword

In the past twenty years, the public fascination with military history has become a minor literary phenomenon on both sides of the Atlantic. It has centred overwhelmingly upon the Second World War. Indeed, at the extremities of the popular market, perceptions of the struggle between the Western Allies and the Germans long ago parted company with reality, and took on the mantle of fantasy borrowed a generation earlier by cowboys and indians. In the past decade, more surprisingly, Vietnam has also given birth to a major publishing industry. Some new books seek seriously to examine why the United States lost that war. Others, like the films they inspire, attempt to rewrite history, to present aspects of that sordid, doomed struggle in an heroic light.

How is it, then, that the other great mid-twentieth-century conflict with communism, Korea, remains so neglected? Popular awareness of the Korean War today centres upon the television comedy show *M.A.S.H.*, which dismays most veterans because it projects an image of Korea infinitely less savage than that which they recall. The United Nations suffered 142,000 casualties in the war to save South Korea from communist domination. The Koreans themselves lost at least a million people. United States losses in three years were only narrowly outstripped by those suffered in Vietnam over more than ten. Korea cost the British three times as many dead as the Falklands War. Chinese casualties remain uncertain, perhaps even in Peking, but they run into many hundreds of thousands. Since 1945, only the Cuban missile crisis has created a greater risk of nuclear war between East and West. As some recent scholarly researchers have pointed out, notable among them Dr Rosemary Foot in her fascinating *The Wrong War*, in Korea the American military displayed a far greater private enthusiasm for using atomic weapons against the Chinese than the Western world perceived, even a generation later. Korea remains the only conflict since 1945 in which the armies of two great powers – for surely China's size confers that title – have met on the battlefield.

Many Westerners were happy to forget Korea for a generation after the war ended, soured by the taste of costly stalemate, robbed of any hint of glory. Yet consider the extraordinary cast of American characters that came together to determine the fate of that barren Asian peninsula: Truman and Acheson, Marshall and MacArthur, Ridgway and Bradley. Then add the succession of great military dramas – the destruction of Task Force Smith, the defence of the Pusan Perimeter, Inchon, the drive to the Yalu, the shattering winter advance of the Chinese. A host of lesser epics followed, which may be allowed to include the stand of the British 29 Brigade on the Imjin in April 1951, an action relatively minor in scale, yet the ferocity of which caught the imagination of the world. The fascination of Korea centres, more than anything, upon the battlefield confrontation between the armies of China and the United States. But the tragedy of the Korean people, the principal sufferers in the three-year struggle across their land, deserves far greater attention than it has been granted.

Above all, perhaps, Korea merits close consideration as a military rehearsal for the subsequent disaster in Vietnam. So many of the ingredients of the Indochina tragedy were already visible a decade

or two earlier in Korea: the political difficulty of sustaining an unpopular and autocratic regime; the problems of creating a credible local army in a corrupt society; the fateful cost of underestimating the power of an Asian communist army. For all the undoubted benefits of air superiority and close support, Korea vividly displayed the difficulties of using air power effectively against a primitive economy, a peasant army. The war also demonstrated the problem of deploying a highly mechanised Western army in broken country, against a lightly equipped foe. Many of the American professional soldiers who served under MacArthur or Ridgway did so later under Westmoreland or Abrams. When they reminisce about the campaigns of 1950–53, it is striking how frequently slips of the tongue cause them to substitute ‘Vietnam’ for ‘Korea’ in their conversation.

Yet because it proved possible finally to stabilise the battle in Korea on terms which allowed the United Nations – or more realistically, the United States – to deploy its vast firepower from fixed positions, to defeat the advance of the massed communist armies, many of the lessons of Korea were misunderstood, or not learned at all. For instance, Pentagon studies showed during Korea, just as they had during World War II, that it was America’s lower socio-economic groups which bore the chief burden of fighting the war, and above all of filling the ranks of the infantry. Yet the same phenomenon would recur in Vietnam, and the serious shortcomings of the American footsoldier – the man at the tip of the spear – would once more have critical consequences. In Korea, the communists enjoyed the opportunity to learn a great deal about the limits of Western patience, the difficulties of maintaining popular enthusiasm for an uncertain cause in a democracy. By the time the armistice was signed at Panmunjom in August 1953, after a mere three years of hostilities, the Western Allies had become desperate to extricate themselves from a thankless war that offered so little prospect of glory or clear-cut victory. Yet in Korea, the communists had provided the most ruthlessly simple *casus belli*, the most incontrovertible provocation by aggression, to be offered to the West at any period between 1945 and this time of writing.

As in my past books, I have sought to explore the Korean War through a combination of personal interviews with surviving participants, and archival research in London and Washington. In the course of writing it, I have met more than two hundred American, Canadian, British, and Korean veterans of the conflict. Perhaps the most exciting aspect of my research has been the opportunity to talk to Chinese veterans, granted to me in 1985 through the good offices of the Peking Institute of Strategic Studies, and the help of the late and much-lamented Colonel Jonathan Alford of the International Institute of Strategic Studies in London. One of the possibilities that first attracted me to the project was that, in the new mood of *détente* between China and the West, it might be possible to gain some access to a Peking perspective upon the Korean War. After months of discussion and correspondence this indeed proved to be so.

There are no German or Japanese triumphal museums commemorating World War II. It is an eerie experience for a Westerner to walk through the great halls of the Peking Military Museum, gazing upon the trophies of captured British Bren guns and regimental flashes, American .50 calibre machine guns, helmets and aircraft remains. Yet if my visit was a measure of how much has changed between China and the West, it was also a reminder of how much remains the same. There is still a great display given over to America’s supposed 1952 ‘bacteriological warfare campaign’ against North Korea. China claims to have inflicted 1,090,000 casualties on the US armed forces in Korea, a figure one assumes was arrived at by adding a few thousands to the total Chinese casualties claimed by the US. I spent some fascinating days and nights in Peking and Shanghai, listening to Chinese veterans describing their battlefield experience in Korea. Yet it must be said that none deviated for a moment from strict Party orthodoxy in describing their enthusiasm for the war, and satisfaction with the manner in which it was conducted. There is no comparison with the experience of interviewing British and American veterans, whose views reflect such a wide and forthright range of opinion. In Peking,

senior officers gave me some fascinating explanations of Chinese behaviour. At their Command and Staff College, I gained some glimpses of the PLA's military perspective upon various battles. But there remains, of course, no opportunity to check official assertions against archives or written evidence. In a totalitarian state, such as China remains, it is debatable whether even those at the summit of power can discover the historical truth about events in the recent past, even should they wish to do so. In the same fashion, when Mr Gorbachev claims in a speech that the Soviet Union won the Second World War effectively unaided, it seems rash to assume that he is perpetrating a conscious untruth. It may yet be that he, like the vast majority of his people, simply does not know any better.

During my researches in Korea, I must acknowledge an important debt to the US Commander-in-Chief there, General Paul Livsey, who also served during the war as a young platoon commander; to British and American officers who provided me with facilities to visit key locations such as Panmunjom and Gloucester Hill; and above all, to Brigadier Brian Burditt, who stayed on in Korea after the end of his tour of duty as British Military Attaché, to act as my mentor and guide, and to arrange some fascinating interviews with Korean veterans of the war. I made a decision from the outset to make no approaches to Pyongyang while writing the book. If truth remains an elusive commodity in China, in North Korea it is entirely displaced by fantasy. It seems impossible to gain any worthwhile insights into the North Korean view of the war, as long as Kim Il Sung presides over a society in which the private possession of a bicycle is considered a threat to national security.

General Sir Anthony Farrar-Hockley was himself writing the British official history of the Korean War while I was working on my own book. With characteristic generosity, he arranged for me to have access to some of the key official files in his care. He himself remains, of course, one of the most fascinating witnesses of the Korean drama. Not only was he awarded the DSO for his performance as adjutant of the Gloucesters in their stand on the Imjin in April 1951, but he returned from two years' Chinese captivity with a reputation for indomitable courage and determination. His official history will clarify much about British participation in the war, and no doubt add new revelations. He was good enough to read this narrative in proof, though naturally he bears no responsibility for my errors or judgements.

In Britain and the United States, I interviewed as wide a cross-section as possible of officers and men of all three services. I did not seek meetings with a handful of the most senior officers who survive, because of their great age. From past experience, I have found that very elderly veterans have long ago said and written all that they wish about their great campaigns. To discuss these again merely starts a conversational train running upon familiar railway lines. It becomes fraudulent to acknowledge their assistance, because it is so seldom that they wish to say anything of substance. After thirty-five years, with very rare exceptions the most helpful witnesses about the conduct of a campaign are those who held regimental and battalion commands, and staff officers who served under the principal commanders, whose memories are often remarkable. I shall always cherish the four-hour word portrait of MacArthur's headquarters at the Dai Ichi drawn for me by that great and wholly delightful American soldier who served there in 1950, Colonel Fred Ladd. Likewise, I am much indebted to Brigadier-General Ed Simmons, USMC, who is not only director of the Marine Corps Museum in Washington, but also a veteran of the Chosin campaign, and an uncommonly shrewd critic of the Korean experience.

This book, like those I have written upon other campaigns, does not purport to be a comprehensive history. The most scholarly account of pre-war Korea is that of Bruce Cumings. Even after twenty-five years, the British author David Rees' *Korea: The Limited War* remains the best-written overall narrative, above all about the American political aspects. More recently, Joseph Goulden has uncovered many new American archival sources for his *Korea: The Untold Story*. Dr Rosemary Foot of the University of Sussex, another distinguished researcher of the period, was characteristically

generous in discussing with me her own reflections and sources about the political dimensions of the war. ~~To all these authors and books, I acknowledge my indebtedness for important lines of thought. I have not attempted to emulate them. I have written relatively little about aspects of the Korean conflict, such as MacArthur's dismissal, which have been exhaustively discussed elsewhere. Instead, I have sought to paint a portrait of the war, focusing upon some human and military aspects less familiar to readers on both sides of the Atlantic. Because I am an Englishman, I have devoted more space to the experience of British servicemen in Korea than their proportionate contribution to the struggle justifies. But it seems reasonable to suggest that a British officer's or private soldier's recollection of the experience of fighting the Chinese is no less valid, as a contribution to understanding what the war was like, than that of an American, a Canadian, an Australian, a Frenchman. The ranks attributed to officers and men in the text are those they held at the dates concerned. I have retained old-fashioned spellings of Chinese names, which are likely to be more familiar to Western readers than the newer versions.~~

In one important respect, I must be numbered among the revisionists. Many writers about Korea in the fifties, not to mention politicians and voters, looked back on the war with bitter distaste for the long stalemate, the growing tensions between allies that it generated, and the inconclusive truce that brought it to an end. Misgivings about Western wars in Asia were intensified by the long misery of Vietnam. Yet whatever obvious criticisms must be made of MacArthur's excesses, of the West's handling of Peking, of the conduct of the first winter campaign, I remain convinced of the rightness of the American commitment to Korea in June 1950. The regimes of Syngman Rhee and his successors possessed massive shortcomings. Yet who can doubt, looking at Korea today, that the people of the South enjoy incomparably more fulfilling lives than those of the inhabitants of the North? Civil libertarians may justly remark that the freedom of the South's thirty-five million people remains relative. Yet few would deny that relative freedom, to pursue personal prosperity or private professions, remains preferable to absolute tyranny. North Korea is still among the most wretched, ruthless, restrictive, impenitent Stalinist societies in the world. South Korea is one of the most dynamic industrial societies even Asia has spawned in the past generation. The 1950–53 Korean War, which confirmed the shape of the two Koreas as they are today, remains one of the most significant, compelling clashes of arms in this century. Those who experienced it have long been irked by a sense of the world's neglect of what they endured, and of what they achieved. I hope this book will make at least a modest contribution towards remedying the omission.

Max Hastings
Guilsborough Lodge
Northamptonshire
January 1988

PROLOGUE: TASK FORCE SMITH

In the early hours of 5 July 1950, 403 bewildered, damp, disorientated Americans sat in their hastily dug foxholes on three Korean hills, looking down upon the main road between Suwon and Osan. The men of 1/21st Infantry had been in the country just four days, since the big C-54 transports flew them from Itasuki in Japan to the southern airfield at Pusan. Ever since, they had been moving north in fits and starts – by train and truck, sleeping in sidings and schoolhouses, amid great throngs of refugees crowding roads and stations. Some men were sick from the local water; Lieutenant Fox was injured on the train before they heard their first shot fired, by an inglorious stray cinder from the engine blowing into his eye. All of them were savaged by mosquitoes. They learnt that Korea stank – literally – of the human manure with which the nation's farmers fertilised their rice paddies. They watched earnest roadside rendezvous between their own officers and the smattering of US generals in the country. General William Dean, commanding the 24th Division, told the 1/21st commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles 'Brad' Smith: 'I'm sorry – I just don't have much information to give you.'

They knew that the communist North Koreans had invaded the anti-communist South on 25 June, and had been striking ruthlessly southwards ever since, meeting little opposition from Syngman Rhee's shattered army. They were told that they themselves would be taking up defensive positions somewhere in the path of the enemy, as far north as possible. But after years of occupation duty in Japan, the notion of battle, of injury and sudden death, seemed infinitely remote. Their unit, like all those of the Japan occupation army, was badly under-strength and poorly equipped. Their own A and D Companies, together with many of their supporting elements, were still at sea between Japan and Pusan. On the night of 4 July, they were ordered to take up a blocking position on the Suwon road, some fifty miles south of the capital, Seoul, which was already in communist hands. In a country of mountains, the paths open to a modern army were few and obvious. The enemy sweeping south must make for Osan. The 1/21st, the first unit of the United States Army available to be committed to battle in Korea, must do what it could to meet them. 'They looked like a bunch of boy scouts,' said Colonel George Masters, one of the men who watched the battalion moving to the front. 'I said to Brad Smith "You're facing tried combat soldiers out there." There was nothing he could answer.'¹

They moved forward, as most soldiers move forward to battle in most wars, in drizzle and darkness. The South Korean drivers of some of the commandeered vehicles flatly refused to go further towards the battlefield, so the Americans drove themselves. They unloaded from their trucks behind the hills that Colonel Smith had briefly reconnoitred that day, and began to climb, by platoons, through the rock and scrub amid much tired, muffled cursing and clanking of equipment. Their officers were as confused as the men, for they had been told to expect to meet a South Korean army unit to which to anchor their own positions. In reality, there was no one on the hill. Smith's company commanders

deployed their men as best they could, and ordered them to start digging. At once, for the first time, Americans discovered the difficulty of hewing shelter from the unyielding Korean hillsides. For some hours, working clumsily in their poncho capes in the rain, they scraped among the rocks. Below them on the road, signallers laid telephone lines to their single battery of supporting 105mm howitzers, a thousand yards to the rear. A few truckloads of ammunition were offloaded by the roadside, but no one thought to insist that this was lugged up the hills in the dark to the company positions. Then, for an uneasy hour or two, most of the Americans above the road lay beside their weapons and packs, sodden clothes clinging clammy to their bodies, and slept.

Blinking and shuffling in the first light of dawn, the men of Task Force Smith – the grandiose title their little force had been granted in a Tokyo map room – looked down from their positions. They were just south of Suwon airfield, three miles north of the little town of Osan. They began to pick out familiar faces: ‘Brad’ Smith himself, a slightly built West Pointer of thirty-four with a competent record in the Pacific in World War II; his executive officer, ‘Mother’ Martain, now demanding some changes in positions chosen in darkness. Major Floyd Martain was a New Yorker who had served in the National Guard from 1926 until he was called to active duty in 1940, then spent the war in Alaska. Unkind spirits considered Martain something of a fussy old woman, hence his nickname. Yet he also earned it by looking after his men, many of whom felt a real affection for him. Corporal Ezra Burke was the son of a Mississippi sawmiller who was drafted in time to see a little action at the tail end of the Pacific campaign, then stayed on to share the heady pleasures of Japan occupation duty. Burke was one of many Southerners in the unit, young men whose home towns in the late forties could offer neither a pay check nor a lifestyle as attractive as that of MacArthur’s army. Now, as a medical orderly, Corporal Burke and his team were laying out their field kits in a hollow behind the battalion position. They had ‘figured to be a week in Korea, settle the gook thing, then back to Japan’. Now, uneasy, they were less confident of this timetable.

Lieutenant Carl Bernard, a twenty-four-year-old Texan, had served as an enlisted Marine in World War II. Quickly bored by civilian life when it ended, he enlisted in the 82nd Airborne Division, and was commissioned into the 24th Division in 1949. When the Korean crisis broke, as one of the few Airborne-qualified officers in the division, he spent some days at the airfield in Japan, supervising the loading of the transports. Now, he was put in command of 2 Platoon of B Company, where he knew nobody, after rejoining the battalion a few hours earlier.

Corporal Robert Fountain of the Communications Platoon watched Colonel Smith scanning the black smoke columns on the horizon through binoculars, his shoulders draped in an army blanket against the rain. The colonel looked like an Indian chieftain, thought Fountain. He himself, a nineteen-year-old farmboy from Macon, Georgia, was chiefly concerned whether the telephone lines would hold up. They had been unwound, used, spliced, rewound repeatedly on manoeuvres in Japan. Yet they were now the battalion’s principal means of communication, with so many of the radios rendered unserviceable by the rain. Fountain had found the experiences of the past few days deeply bewildering. With his parents divorced and jobs hard to come by, he joined the army at sixteen because he could think of nothing else to do. He had never thought much about fighting. For himself, like many of the men, the flight to Korea was a first-ever trip in an aeroplane. In the days since, they had been strafed by presumed North Korean Yaks, which they later discovered were Australian Mustangs. They had watched an ammunition train explode, and a South Korean officer without explanation force one of his own men to his knees and shoot him in the back of the neck. There had been scares of enemy tanks which turned into friendly caterpillar tractors. Fountain and his comrades had left Japan under the impression that they would be away only five days: ‘When the gooks hear who we are, they’ll quit and go home.’ They left clothes, possessions, money in their barrack rooms. Yet now the vainglory of the departure had faded. Fountain ate a can of cold C-rations, and asked if anybody had any water left in

his canteen. He felt cold, wet and confused.

A few minutes after 7 a.m., Sergeant Loren Chambers of B Company called to his platoon commander: 'Hey, look over there, Lieutenant. Can you believe it?' Advancing towards them down the open plain from Suwon was a column of eight green-painted tanks. Lieutenant Day asked what they were. 'Those are T-34 tanks, sir,' answered the sergeant, 'and I don't think they're going to be friendly towards us.' All along the crest line, men chattered excitedly as they peered forward at this first glimpse of the enemy. Officers hastened forward to confirm the threat. Captain Dashner, B Company Commander, said: 'Let's get some artillery on them.'² The Forward Observation Officer of the 58th Field Artillery Battalion cranked his handset. A few moments later, rounds began to gush into the paddy fields around the road. But still the tanks came on. The guns of the 58th possessed negligible armour-piercing capability.

Lieutenant Philip Day and one of the battalion's two 75mm recoilless rifle sections manhandled their clumsy weapon to a position overlooking the road, and fired. Inexpert, they had sited on a forward slope. The round did no visible damage to the enemy, but the ferocious backblast slammed into the hill, provoking an eruption of mud which deluged the crew and jammed the gun. Urgently, they began to strip and clear it.

At the roadside, Lieutenant Ollie Connors clutched one of the unit's principal anti-tank weapons, a hand-held 2.36-inch bazooka. In 1945, the serious defect of the bazooka rocket was well known – its inability to penetrate most tanks' main armour. Yet even now, five years later, the new and more powerful 3.5-inch rocket launcher had not been issued to MacArthur's Far East army. As the first T-34 clattered towards the narrow pass between the American positions, Connors put up his bazooka and fired. There was an explosion on the tank hull. But the T-34, probably the outstanding tank of World War II and still a formidable weapon, did not check. It roared on through the pass, and down the road towards the American gunline. As its successors followed, with remarkable courage Connors fired again and again at close range, twenty-two rockets in all. One tank stopped, appearing to have thrown a track. But it continued to fire with both its main armament and coaxial machine gun. The others disappeared towards Osan, to be followed a few minutes later by another armoured platoon. A single 105mm gun possessed a few rounds of armour-piercing ammunition. One of these halted another T-34, which halted and caught fire. A crewman emerged from the turret firing a burp gun as he came. The communist's first burst, before he was shot down, granted one of the gunners the unhappy distinction of becoming the first American soldier to die by enemy action in Korea. Lieutenant Day's recoilless rifle began to fire again, but its flash made it an easy target. An 85mm tank shell disabled the gun, and left Day reeling from blast, blood pouring out of his ears. Between 7 and 9.30 a.m. some thirty North Korean tanks drove through Task Force Smith's 'blocking position', killing or wounding some twenty of the defenders by shell and machine-gun fire. The Americans could think of nothing to do to stop them.

Around 11 a.m., a long column of trucks led by three more tanks appeared on the road from the north. They halted bumper to bumper, and began to disgorge North Korean infantry who scattered east and west into the paddies beside the road. Some of the mustard-coloured tunics began to advance steadily towards the Americans amid desultory mortar and small-arms fire. Others worked patiently around the flanks. Since Task Force Smith occupied only a four-hundred-yard front, and no other American infantry units were deployed for many miles behind them, it was immediately obvious that this action must eventually end in only one fashion. As the hours passed, communist fire intensified and American casualties mounted. Colonel Smith called C Company's officers, west of the road, to the Company Command Post. The entire force would now consolidate in a circular perimeter on the east side, he said. The 150 or so men of Charlie Company left their positions platoon by platoon, filed down to the road, clambered up among the scrub on the other side, and began to hack foxholes and

fields of fire for themselves as best they could.

Smith's choices were not enviable. His unit was achieving very little where it stood. But if he chose to withdraw immediately from the position, put his men into their surviving trucks, and head south, sooner or later the column was likely to meet the communist tanks that had gone before them. He would gain little, with his small force, by abandoning the high ground to launch a counterattack against the enemy infantry. Yet if they remained in place, they could expect neither reinforcement nor relief. Here was an extraordinary situation. This was 1950, when vast economic wealth, possession of the atomic bomb and the legacy of victory in the Second World War caused America to be perceived as the greatest power the world had ever seen, mightier than the Roman Empire at its zenith, or the British a century before. Yet now, on a hill in Korea, the first representatives of United States military power to meet communist aggression on the battlefield were the men of a mere under-strength infantry battalion which faced annihilation as a military unit. Not all the B-29s on the airfields of the United States, nor the army divisions in Europe, the fleets at sea from the Taiwan Strait to the Mediterranean, could mitigate the absolute loneliness and vulnerability of Task Force Smith. Those in Tokyo or Washington who supposed that the mere symbolic commitment of this token of American military might would suffice to frighten the North Koreans into retreat were confounded. Subsequent interrogation of North Korean officers suggested that the encounter between their 4th Division and Task Force Smith provided Pyongyang with its first inkling of American intervention, which had not been anticipated. Neither side on the Osan road was troubled by political implications. The communists were using mortars now, to some effect. American small-arms ammunition was growing short, as men stumbled up the slippery paths worn into the mud to the forward positions, dragging crates and steel boxes. Among the boulders below the position, the wounded lay in widening rows, the medics toiling among them, hampered by lack of whole blood. Captain Richard Dashner, the Texan World War II veteran commanding C Company, said abruptly to Major Martain: 'We've got to get out of here.' Lieutenant Berthoff, commanding Headquarter Company, agreed. At first, Smith said there would be no immediate pull-back. But as the fire from the flanks intensified, he changed his mind. 'I guess we'll have to,' he told his officers. Then he added unhappily: 'This is a decision I'll probably regret the rest of my days.' C Company was to go first. Within minutes, the first of its men were slipping down the rear of the position and into the paddy fields beyond, stumbling and cursing at the stench and the enemy fire. There was no question of escaping along the road, open and vulnerable to raking machine guns as far as the eye could see. They could only scramble through the fields, balancing precariously on the intervening dykes, down the farm tracks as fast and as best they could, until they met friendly forces.

It was during the withdrawal of Task Force Smith that its imperfections as a fighting unit became apparent. There is no more testing military manoeuvre than disengagement in the face of the enemy. The Americans were softened by years of inadequate training and military neglect, bewildered by the shock of combat, dismayed by the readiness with which the communists had overwhelmed them, and the isolation in which they found themselves. As men saw others leaving the hills, they hastened to join them, fearful of being left behind. 'It was every man for himself,' said Lieutenant Day. 'When we moved out, we began taking more and more casualties . . . Guys fell around me. Mortar rounds hit here and there. One of my young guys got it in the middle. My platoon sergeant, Harvey Vann, ran over to him. I followed. "No way he's gonna live, Lieutenant." Oh, Jesus, the guy was moaning and groaning. There wasn't much I could do but pat him on the head and say, "Hang in there." Another of the platoon sergeants got it in the throat. He began spitting blood. I thought sure . . . For the rest of the day he held his throat together with his hands. He survived, too.'³ The retreating Americans abandoned arms, equipment; sometimes even helmets, boots, personal weapons. Cohesion quickly vanished. The debris of retreat lay strewn behind them as they went. In ones and twos and handfuls, they scrambled

southwards through the fields.

~~C Company, first off the positions, fared better than B in holding its men together. Captain Dashne~~ reached Taejon after two days' hard marching with more than half his men still under command. Floyd Martain and the little team in the Battalion Command Post struggled to burn their confidential papers, but found them too wet to catch light. They dug a hole and buried them, then started walking, following the railroad tracks south. After some hours, Martain's little group saw some trucks, and hastily took cover. Then, to their overwhelming relief, they found that these were American vehicles, carrying some gunners – who had blown up their pieces rather than attempt to get them out, an action which infuriated some officers – and Colonel Smith himself. After a night of nerve-racking hide-and-seek with enemy tanks as they crossed country, they reached positions of the 34th Infantry at Ansong. Corporal Robert Fountain never heard any order to withdraw – he simply saw men streaming past him who glanced an answer to his shouted question about what was happening: 'We're pulling back.' Fountain joined them. He scrambled past an American sitting upright against a dyke wall, stone dead. Suddenly, he found himself face to face with two baled-out North Korean tank crewmen. The next man shot one, Fountain killed the other as he ran towards a house. Then the American stumbled away through the waterlogged paddies amid machine-gun fire from the positions the battalion had abandoned. In a wood, he met a group of sixteen other Americans. He took out a knife and cut off the tops of his combat boots so that he could get the water out. Two sergeants organised the group. They set off again, attempting to carry the wounded among them. One man, a Japanese-American, was shot in the stomach. When they reached a deserted village, they left him there, dying. Fountain found a turnip root and ate it. They walked on through the darkness for many hours, following a group of South Korean soldiers they encountered. They reached a Korean command post in a schoolhouse where they slept for a while. Then somebody shouted: 'Tanks coming!' They piled into a truck, and drove for some miles until the truck blundered into a ditch and stayed there. They began walking again, and eventually found themselves in the lines of the 34th Infantry.

Lieutenant Carl Bernard was still on the hill with his platoon of B Company when he sensed the fire from the other American positions slackening, and sent a runner to find out what was going on. The man returned a few minutes later in some consternation to report 'They've all gone!' Command and control frankly collapsed in the last stages of the action. Bernard, wounded in face and hands by grenade fragments, hastily led his men to beat their own retreat. At the base of the hill they found the medical orderlies still coping with a large group of wounded. They took with them such men as could walk, and left the remainder to be taken prisoner. The lieutenant divided the survivors of his platoon into two groups, sending one with a private soldier who had been a scout, and taking the other himself. He had no compass, but in an abandoned schoolhouse he found a child's atlas. He tore out the page showing Korea, and used it to navigate. In the hours that followed, his group survived a series of close encounters with enemy tanks. Bernard bartered a gold Longines watch that he had won playing poker on the boat from San Francisco for an old Korean's handcart, on which to push a wounded NCO.

Ezra Burke came off the hill with four of his medical team, two stretcher cases, and one walking wounded. As they staggered onwards with their burdens, they kept halting and glancing back, hoping to have outdistanced their pursuers. But all that afternoon, they could see files of North Koreans padding remorsefully behind them. At last, they decided to split. Burke headed south-westward with two others. They were soaking wet, exhausted, and above all desperately anxious to be reunited with their unit and their officers, with anyone who could tell them where to go and what to do. They huddled miserably together through the hours of darkness, and at first light began to walk again. On a hill above Pyontaek, they met Lieutenant Bernard and his seven-strong group, and continued south with them. Thenceforward, they hid most of the day, and walked by night. Starving, they risked creeping into a village and bartering possessions with a momma-san for a few potatoes. They met two Korean

soldiers, with whom they walked for a time. Then a South Korean lieutenant who talked to them declared his conviction that the men were communists. The two ran off across a rice paddy. Burke fired at them with a carbine and missed. Bernard caught them with a BAR just before they reached a wood.

They reached American positions on 10 July, five days after the battle at Osan, utterly exhausted, their feet agonisingly swollen. The next day Burke was found to be suffering from a kidney stone, and was evacuated by air from Taejon to Osaka. Carl Bernard spent some painful hours in a field hospital where the grenade fragments were picked out of his face and hands. Then he slept the sleep of utter exhaustion for an entire day.

Most of Task Force Smith trickled back to American positions in something like this fashion in the week that followed their little action at Osan. 185 men of the battalion mustered after the battle. Some made their way to the American lines after epic adventures, like Sergeant William F. Smith, who escaped by fishing boat a fortnight later. Lieutenant Connors received a Silver Star for his brave endeavours with the bazooka by the roadside on 5 July. The official figures showed that Task Force Smith had suffered 155 casualties in the action at Osan. By the time they returned, they discovered that any shortcomings in their own unit's performance on 5 July had already been outstripped by far less honourable, indeed positively shameful, humiliations suffered by other elements of the American 24th Division in its first days of war, as the North Korean invaders swept all before them on their bloody procession south down the peninsula. And all this flowed, inexorably, from the sudden decision of the United States to commit itself to the least expected of wars, in the least predicted of places, under the most unfavourable possible military conditions. Had the men of Task Force Smith, on the road south of Suwon, known that they were striking the first armed blow for that new force in world order, the United Nations, it might have made their confused, unhappy, almost pathetic little battle on 5 July seem more dignified. On the other hand, it might have made it appear more incomprehensible than ever.

1 » ORIGINS OF A TRAGEDY

Seldom in the course of history has a nation been as rapidly propelled as Korea from obscurity to a central place in the world's affairs. The first significant modern contact between 'The Land of the Morning Calm' and the West took place one morning in September 1945, when an advance party of the American army, in full battle gear, landed at the western harbour of Inchon, to be met by a delegation of Japanese officials in top hats and tail coats. This was the inauguration of Operation Black List Forty, the United States' occupation of South Korea.

These first American officers found the city of Inchon, fearful and uncertain of its future, shuttered and closed. After a hunt through the streets, glimpsing occasional faces peering curiously at their liberators from windows and corners, they came upon a solitary Chinese restaurant bearing the sign 'Welcome US'. Then, from the moment the Americans boarded the train for Seoul, they met uninhibited rejoicing. A little crowd of Koreans stood by the tracks in every village they passed, waving gleeful flags. At Seoul railway station, the group had planned to take a truck to their objective, the city post office. Instead, on their arrival, they decided to walk. To their bewilderment, they found themselves at the centre of a vast throng of cheering, milling, exultant Koreans, cramming the streets and sidewalks, hanging from buildings, standing on carts. The Americans were at a loss. They had arrived without any conception of what the end of the Japanese war meant to the people of this obscure peninsula.¹

Throughout its history until the end of the nineteenth century, Korea was an overwhelmingly rural society which sought successfully to maintain its isolation from the outside world. Ruled since 1392 by the Yi Dynasty, it suffered two major invasions from Japan in the sixteenth century. When the Japanese departed, Korea returned to its harsh traditional existence, frozen in winter and baked in summer, its ruling families feuding among each other from generation to generation. By the Confucian convention that regarded foreign policy as an extension of family relations, Korea admitted an historic loyalty to China, 'the elder brother nation'. Until 1876, her near neighbour Japan was regarded as a friendly equal. But early that January, in an early surge of the expansionism that was to dominate Japanese history for the next seventy years, Tokyo dispatched a military expedition to Korea 'to establish a treaty of friendship and commerce'. On 26 February, after a brief and ineffectual resistance, the Koreans signed. They granted the Japanese open ports, their citizens extra-territorial rights.

The embittered Koreans sought advice from their other neighbours about the best means of undoing this humiliating surrender. The Chinese advised that they should come to an arrangement with one of the Western powers 'in order to check the poison with an antidote'; they suggested the Americans, who had shown no signs of possessing territorial ambitions on the Asian mainland. On 22 May 1882, Korea signed a treaty of 'amity and commerce' with the United States. In the words of a leading

American historian of the period, this 'set Korea adrift on an ocean of intrigue which it was quite helpless to control'. The infuriated Japanese now engaged themselves increasingly closely in Korea's internal power struggles. The British took an interest, for they were eager to maintain China's standing as Korea's 'elder brother', to counter Russian influence in the Far East. By 1893, Korea had signed a succession of trade treaties with every major European power. The Japanese were perfectly clear about their objective. Their foreign minister declared openly that Korea 'should be made a part of the Japanese map'. Tokyo hesitated only about how to achieve this without a confrontation with one or another great power.

The Chinese solved the problem. Peking's increasingly heavy-handed meddling in Korea's affairs, asserting claims to some measure of authority over Seoul, provoked a wave of anti-Chinese feeling, and a corresponding surge of enthusiasm for the Japanese, who could now claim popular support from at least a faction within Korea. In 1894, Japan seized her opportunity, and landed an army in Korea to force the issue. The government in Seoul, confused and panicky, asked Peking to send its own troops to help suppress a rebellion. The Japanese responded by dispatching a contingent of marines direct to the capital. The Korean government, by now hopelessly out of its depth, begged that all the foreign troops should depart. But the Japanese scented victory. They reinforced their army.

The last years of Korea's notional independence took on a Gilbertian absurdity. The nation's leaders, artless in the business of diplomacy and modern power politics, squirmed and floundered in the net that was inexorably closing around them. The Chinese recognised their military inability to confront the Japanese in Korea. Tokyo's grasp on Korea's internal government tightened until, in 1896, the King tried to escape thralldom by taking refuge at the Russian Legation in Seoul. From this sanctuary, he issued orders for the execution of all his pro-Japanese ministers. The Japanese temporarily backed down.

In the next seven years, Moscow and Tokyo competed for power and concessions in Seoul. The devastating Japanese victory at Tsushima, a few miles off Pusan, decided the outcome. In February 1904, the Japanese moved a large army into Korea. In November the following year, the nation became a Japanese protectorate. In a characteristic exercise of the colonial cynicism of the period, the British accepted Japanese support for their rule in India in exchange for blessing Tokyo's takeover of Korea. Whitehall acknowledged Japan's right 'to take such measures of guidance, control, and protection in Corea [sic] as she may deem proper and necessary', to promote her 'paramount political, military and economic interests'.

Korean independence thus became a dead letter. In the years that followed, a steady stream of Japanese officials and immigrants moved into the country. Japanese education, roads, railways, sanitation were introduced. Yet none of these gained the slightest gratitude from the fiercely nationalistic Koreans. Armed resistance grew steadily in the hands of a strange alliance of Confucian scholars, traditional bandits, Christians, and peasants with local grievances against the colonial power. The anti-Japanese guerrilla army rose to a peak of an estimated 70,000 men in 1908. Thereafter, ruthless Japanese repression broke it down. Korea became an armed camp, in which mass executions and wholesale imprisonment were commonplace, and all dissent forbidden. On 22 August 1910, the Korean emperor signed away all his rights of sovereignty. The Japanese introduced their own titles of nobility, and imposed their own military government. For the next thirty-five years, despite persistent armed resistance from mountain bands of nationalists, many of them communist, the Japanese maintained their ruthless, detested rule in Korea, which also became an important base for their expansion north into Manchuria in the nineteen thirties.

Yet despite the decline of China into a society of competing warlords, and the preoccupation of Russia with her own revolution, even before the Second World War it was apparent that Korea's geographical position, as the nearest meeting place of three great nations, would make her a

permanent focus of tension and competition. The American Tyler Dennett wrote presciently in 1945, months before the Far Eastern war ended:

Many of the international factors which led to the fall of Korea are either unchanged from what they were half a century ago, or are likely to recur the moment peace is restored to the East. Japan's hunger for power will have been extinguished for a period, but not for ever. In another generation probably Japan will again be a very important influence in the Pacific. Meanwhile the Russian interest in the peninsula is likely to remain what it was forty years ago. Quite possibly that factor will be more important than ever before. The Chinese also may be expected to continue their traditional concern in the affairs of that area.²

And now, suddenly, the war was over, and the Japanese empire was in the hands of the broker's men. Koreans found themselves freed from Japanese domination, looking for fulfilment of the promise of the leaders of the Grand Alliance in the 1943 Cairo Declaration – that Korea should become free and independent 'in due course'.

The American decision to land troops to play a part in the occupation of Korea was taken only at the very end of the war. The Japanese colony had been excluded from the complex 1943–45 negotiations about occupation zones between the partners of the Grand Alliance. The Americans had always been enamoured of the concept of 'trusteeship' for Korea, along with Indochina and some other colonial possessions in the Far East. They liked the idea of a period during which a committee of Great Powers – in this case, China, the US and USSR – would 'prepare and educate' the dependent peoples for self-government and 'protect them from exploitation'. This concept never found much favour among the British or French, mindful of their own empires. And as the war progressed, concern about the future internal structure of Korea was overtaken by deepening alarm about the external forces that might determine this. As early as November 1943, a State Department sub-committee expressed fears that when the Soviets entered the Far East war, they might seize the opportunity to include Korea in their sphere of influence:

Korea may appear to offer a tempting opportunity to apply the Soviet conception of the proper treatment of colonial peoples, to strengthen enormously the economic resources of the Soviet Far East, to acquire ice-free ports, and to occupy a dominating strategic position in relation both to China and to Japan . . . A Soviet occupation of Korea would create an entirely new strategic situation in the Far East, and its repercussions within China and Japan might be far reaching.³

As the American historian Bruce Cumings has aptly pointed out, 'what created "an entirely new strategic situation in the Far East" was not that Russia was interested in Korea – it had been for decades – but that the United States was interested'.⁴ Yet by the time of the Potsdam Conference of July 1945, the United States military were overwhelmingly preoccupied with the perceived difficulty of mounting an invasion of mainland Japan. They regarded the Japanese armies still deployed in Korea and Manchuria as a tough nut for the Red Army to crack, and were only too happy to leave the problem, and the expected casualties, to the Russians. The Pentagon had anyway adopted a consistent view that Korea was of no long-term strategic interest to the United States.

Yet three weeks later, the American view of Korea had altered dramatically. The explosion of the two atomic bombs on Japan on 6 and 9 August brought Japan to the brink of surrender. The Red Army was sweeping through Manchuria without meeting important resistance. Suddenly, Washington's view of both the desirability and feasibility of denying a substantial part of Korea to the Soviets was transformed. Late on the night of 10 August 1945, barely twenty-four hours after the dropping of the Nagasaki bomb, the State-War-Navy Co-ordinating Committee reached a hasty, unilateral decision that the United States should participate in the occupation of Korea. The two officers drafting orders for the committee pored over their small-scale wall map of the Far East, and observed that the 38th parallel ran broadly across the middle of the country. South of this line lay the capital, the best of the agriculture and light industry, and more than half the population. Some members of the committee – including Dean Rusk, a future Secretary of State – pointed out that if the Russians chose to reject this

proposal, the Red Army sweeping south through Manchuria could overrun all Korea before the first Americans could be landed at Inchon. In these weeks, when the first uncertain skirmishes of the Cold War were being fought, the sudden American proposal for the divided occupation of Korea represented an important test of Soviet intentions in the Far East.

To the relief of the Committee in Washington, the Russians readily accepted the 38th Parallel as the limit of their advance. Almost a month before the first Americans could be landed in South Korea, the Red Army reached the new divide – and halted there. It is worth remark that, if Moscow had declined the American plan and occupied all Korea, it is unlikely that the Americans could or would have forced a major diplomatic issue. To neither side, at this period, did the peninsula seem to possess any inherent value, except as a testing ground of mutual intentions. The struggle for political control of China herself was beginning in earnest. Beside the fates and boundaries of great nations that were not being decided, Korea counted for little. Stalin was content to settle for half. At no time in the five years that followed did the Russians show any desire to stake Moscow's power and prestige upon a direct contest with the Americans for the extension of Soviet influence south of the Parallel.

Thus it was, late in August 1945, that the unhappy men of the US XXIV Corps – some veterans of months of desperate fighting in the Pacific, others green replacements fresh from training camps – found themselves under orders to embark not for home, as they so desperately wished, but for unknown Korea. They were given little information to guide their behaviour once they got there. The commander, General John R. Hodge, received only a confusing succession of signals at his headquarters on Okinawa. On 14 August, General Stilwell told him that the occupation could be considered 'semi-friendly' – in other words, that he need regard as hostile only a small minority of collaborators. At the end of the month the Supreme Commander, General MacArthur himself, decreed that the Koreans should be treated as 'liberated people'. From Washington, the Secretary of State for War and the Navy Coordinating Committee dispatched a hasty directive to Okinawa, ordering Hodge to 'create a government in harmony with US policies'. But what were US policies towards Korea? Since the State Department knew little more about the country than that its nationalists hungered for unity and independence, they had little to tell Hodge. As a straightforward military man, the general determined to approach the problem in a straightforward, no-nonsense fashion. On 4 September, he briefed his own officers to regard Korea as 'an enemy of the United States', subject to the terms of the Japanese surrender. On 8 September, when the American occupation convoy was still twenty miles off from Inchon in the Yellow Sea, its ships encountered three neatly dressed figures in a small boat, who presented themselves to the general as representatives of 'the Korean Government'. Hodge sent them packing. He did likewise with every other Korean he met on his arrival who laid claim to a political mandate. XXIV Corps's intention was to seize and maintain control of the country. The US Army, understandably, wished to avoid precipitating entanglement with any of the scores of competing local political factions who already, in those first days, were struggling to build a power-base amid the ruins of the Japanese empire.

The fourteen-strong advance party who were the first Americans to reach Seoul were fascinated and bemused by what they found: a city of horse-drawn carts, with only the occasional charcoal-powered motor vehicle. They saw three Europeans in a shop, and hastened to greet them, to discover that they were part of the little local Turkish community, who spoke no English. They met White Russians, refugees in Korea since 1920, who demanded somewhat tactlessly: '*Sprechen sie Deutsch?*' The first English-speaker they met was a local Japanese who had lived in the United States before the war. His wife, like all the Japanese community eager to ingratiate herself with the new rulers, pressed on them a cake and two pounds of real butter – the first they had seen for months. That night, they slept on the floor of Seoul Post Office. The next morning, they transferred their headquarters to the Banda Hotel.

In the days that followed, the major units of XXIV Corps disembarked at Inchon, and dispersed by

truck and train around the country, to take up positions from Pusan to the 38th Parallel. General Hodge and his staff were initially bewildered by the clamour of unknown Koreans competing for their political attention, and the disorders in the provinces which threatened to escalate into serious rioting if the situation was not controlled. There was also the difficulty that no Korean they encountered appeared to speak English, and the only Korean-speaker on the staff, one Commander Williams of the US Navy, was insufficiently fluent to conduct negotiations.

Amid all this confusion and uncertainty, the occupiers could identify only one local stabilising force upon whom they could rely: the Japanese. In those first days, the Japanese made themselves indispensable to Hodge and his men. One of the American commander's first acts was to confirm Japanese colonial officials in their positions, for the time being. Japanese remained the principal language of communication. Japanese soldiers and police retained chief responsibility for maintaining law and order. As early as 11 September, MacArthur signalled instructions to Hodge that Japanese officials must at once be removed from office. But even when this process began to take place, many retained their influence for weeks as unofficial advisers to the Americans.

Within days of the first euphoric encounter between the liberators and the liberated, patriotic Koreans were affronted by the open camaraderie between Japanese and American officers, the respect shown by former enemies to each other, in contrast to the thinly veiled contempt offered to the Koreans. 'It does seem that from the beginning many Americans simply liked the Japanese better than the Koreans,' the foremost American historian of this period has written. 'The Japanese were viewed as cooperative, orderly and docile, while the Koreans were seen as headstrong, unruly, and obstreperous.'⁶ The Americans knew nothing, or chose to ignore what they did know, of the ruthless behaviour of the Japanese in the three weeks between their official surrender and the coming of XXIV Corps – the looting of warehouses, the systematic ruin of the economy by printing debased currency, the sale of every available immovable asset.

To a later generation, familiar with the dreadful brutality of the Japanese in the Second World War, it may seem extraordinary that Americans could so readily make common cause with their late enemies; as strange as the conduct of Allied intelligence organisations in Europe, which befriended and recruited former Nazi war criminals and Gestapo agents. Yet the strongest influence of war upon most of those who endure it is to blur their belief in absolute moral values, and to foster a sense of common experience with those who have shared it, even a barbarous enemy. There was a vast sense of relief among the men of the armies who still survived in 1945, an instinctive reluctance for more killing, even in the cause of just revenge. There was also a rapidly growing suspicion for some prominent American soldiers – Patton notable among them – that they might have been fighting the wrong enemy for these four years. McCarthyism was yet unborn. But a sense of the evil of communism was very strong, and already outweighed in the minds of some men their revulsion towards Nazism, or Japanese imperialism. In Tokyo, the American Supreme Commander himself was already setting an extraordinary example of post-war reconciliation with the defeated enemy. In Seoul in the autumn of 1945, General Hodge and his colleagues found it much more comfortable to deal with the impeccable correctness of fellow-soldiers, albeit recent enemies, than with the anarchic rivalries of the Koreans. The senior officers of XXIV Corps possessed no training or expertise of any kind for exercising civilian government – they were merely professional military men, obliged to improvise as they went along. In the light of subsequent events, their blunders and political clumsiness have attracted the unfavourable attention of history. But it is only just to observe that at this period, many of the same mistakes were being made by their counterparts in Allied armies all over the world.

Hodge's State Department political adviser, H. Merrell Benninghoff, reported to Washington on 15 September:

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