



AUSA BACKGROUND BRIEF



No. 40

March 1992

THE U.S. ARMY BETWEEN WORLD WAR II AND THE KOREAN WAR

The material that follows was extracted from official history of the U.S. Army; see sources listed below. It is repeated here to remind the reader of the events following the allied victory in World War II which led to the rapid deterioration of the Army's capabilities to conduct immediate military operations. The reader should reflect on these historical events and lessons learned, and relate them to the course the Army may be forced to take in this period after the allied victory in the Cold War and Operation Desert Storm. Deja vu?

Part One: Postwar Military Policy and the Army

Demobilization

The United States did not return to its prewar isolationism after World War II. The balance of power in Europe and Asia and the safety of ocean distances east and west that made isolation possible had vanished, the balance upset by the war, the protection of oceans eliminated by advances in air transportation and weaponry.

A clear responsibility of U.S. membership in the United Nations was to maintain sufficient military power to permit an effective contribution to any U.N. force that might be necessary.

The immediate task was to demobilize the great war machine assembled during the war and, at the same time, maintain occupation troops in conquered and liberated territories.

The Army initially established as an over-all postwar goal a Regular and Reserve structure capable of mobilizing four million men within a year of any future outbreak of war; later it set the strength of the active ground and air forces at one and a half million.

Pressure for faster demobilization from an articulate public, Congress and the troops themselves upset the plans for an orderly demobilization. The Army, which felt the greatest pressure, responded by easing the eligibility requirement and releasing half its eight million troops by the end of 1945.

When the Army cut down the return of troops from abroad in order to meet its overseas responsibilities, a crescendo of protest greeted the move. The public cry diminished only after the Army more than halved its remaining strength during the first six months of 1946.

President Truman, determined to balance the national budget, meanwhile developed and through fiscal year 1950 employed a "remainder method" of calculating military budgets, subtracting all other expenditures from revenues before recommending a military appropriation. The dollar ceiling applied for fiscal year 1947 dictated a new maximum Army strength of just over one million.

By June 30, 1947, the Army was a volunteer body of 684,000 ground troops and 306,000 airmen. It was still a large peacetime Army, but shortages of capable maintenance troops resulted in a widespread deterioration of equipment, and remaining Army units, understrength and infused with briefly trained replacements, were only shadows of the efficient organizations they had been at the end of the war.

Throughout demobilization about half the Army's diminishing strength remained overseas, the bulk involved in the occupation of Germany and Japan. Another large force was in liberated Korea, along with a Soviet force, both armies having sent units to accept the surrender of Japanese troops stationed there and to occupy the country. The 38th parallel of north latitude crossing the peninsula at its waist was set as the boundary between forces as the two nations released Korea from forty years of Japanese rule, the Americans accepting the Japanese surrender south of the line, the Soviets above it.

In August 1948 the southern half of the peninsula elected a government under United Nations auspices and became the Republic of Korea (South Korea); declaring the U.N. project illegal, one month later the Soviets established a communist regime above the parallel, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea). Three months later, the Soviets announced the withdrawal of their occupation forces. The United States followed suit, withdrawing its troops by mid-1949 except for an advisory group left behind to help train the South Korean armed forces.

Policy of Containment and the Army

Although pursued as a program of economic assistance, the American policy of containment nonetheless needed military underwriting. Containment, first of all, was a defensive measure. The USSR, moreover, had not completely demobilized. On the contrary, it was maintaining over four million men under arms, keeping armament industries in high gear and rearming some of its satellites. Hence, containment needed the support of a military policy of deterrence, of military strategy and organizational structure possessing sufficient strength and balance to discourage any Soviet or Soviet-supported military aggression.

Postwar military policy, however, did not develop as a full response to the needs of containment. For one reason, mobilization in the event of war, not the maintenance of ready forces to prevent war, was the traditional and current trend of American peacetime military thinking.

The provision of trained strength with which to reinforce a nucleus of Regular forces at mobilization depended almost entirely upon the older system of using civilian components. This Reserve strength, like that of the Regular forces, was affected by limited funds.

The National Guard, with 325,000 members, included twenty-seven understrength divisions. The active strength of the Organized Reserve Corps, some 186,000, was vested mainly in a multitude of small combat support and service units, these, too, generally understrength.

Also inhibiting a response to the military needs of containment was the influence of World War II, above all, the advent of the atomic bomb. The tendency was to consider the American nuclear monopoly as the primary deterrent to direct Soviet military action and to think only in terms of total war. Obversely, the possibility of lesser conflicts in which the bomb would be neither politically nor militarily relevant was almost completely disregarded.

Budgetary limitations to a great extent governed the size of the armed forces. Louis A. Johnson, who became Secretary of Defense in March 1949, gave full support to a defense based primarily on strategic air power. Secretary Johnson reduced defense expenditures below even the restrictive ceiling in President Truman's recommendations. The Army, down to 591,000 members, had its combat strength vested in ten divisions and five regimental combat teams. The constabulary in Germany was equal to another division.

As evident in the strength reductions, mobilization strategy, and heavy reliance on the atomic bomb and strategic air power, the idea of deterring aggression through balanced ready forces had little place in the development of postwar military policy. While foreign policy was being adjusted to a new opponent and a new kind of conflict, military policy was being developed mainly with earlier enemies and an all-out war in mind.

The Army of 1950

As the Army underwent its postwar reduction, from 8 million men and 89 divisions in 1945 to 591,000 men and 10 divisions in 1950, it also underwent numerous structural changes.

The better Army troops at mid-1950 were among a large but diminishing group of World War II veterans. The need to obtain replacements quickly during demobilization, the distractions and relaxed atmosphere of occupation duty, and a postwar training program less demanding than that of the war years impeded the combat readiness of newer Army members.

Half the Army's major combat units were deployed overseas. Of the ten divisions, four infantry divisions were part of the Far East Command on occupation duty in Japan. Another infantry division was with the European Command in Germany. The remaining five were in the United States, constituting a General Reserve to meet emergency assignments.

All ten had undergone organizational changes, most of them prompted by the war experience. Under new tables of organization and equipment, the firepower and mobility of a division received

a boost through the addition of a tank battalion and an antiaircraft battalion and through a rise in the number of pieces in each artillery battery from four to six. At regimental level, the cannon and antitank companies of World War II days were dropped; the new tables added a tank company, 4.2-inch mortar company, and 57-mm. and 75-mm. recoilless rifles.

The postwar economies, however, had forced the Army to skeletonize its combat units. Nine of the 10 divisions were far understrength, infantry regiments had only 2 of the normal 3 battalions, most artillery battalions had only 2 of the normal 3 firing batteries, and organic armor was generally lacking.

No unit had its wartime complement of weapons, and those weapons on hand as well as other equipment were largely worn leftovers from World War II. None of the combat units, as a result, came anywhere near possessing the punch conceived under the new organizational design.

The deterioration in military readiness through mid-1950 proceeded in the face of a worsening trend in international events, especially from mid-1948 forward

Part Two: Status of the Pre-Korean War Army

It has become almost a truism that nations inevitably try to prepare for the war they have just won. Except for substituting the Soviet Union in the role of chief adversary the United States pursued a course between 1946 and 1950 that appeared to lend credence to this theory. American military planning in these years was shaped largely by World War II experience and the priority afforded to Europe over the Pacific and Far East.

In 1950 the defense of western Europe still held first claim on American military resources, and plans were devoted almost exclusively to general war. Broad national military policy called for meeting an all-out Russian attack with a strategic offensive in western Eurasia and a strategic defensive in the Far East.

Army Strength and Readiness—1950

In June 1950, the strength of the active Army stood at about 591,000 and included ten combat divisions.

The strength of the United States Army in 1950 was much less than American military leaders wished. But government economies in the aftermath of World War II allowed no increase. Training programs were hampered by lack of funds, and this, together with the absence of a sense of urgency, detracted from the combat readiness of Army forces in being.

Army Supply Status

The Army had sufficient stocks of most items of materiel and equipment to support its peacetime program. From the standpoint of war-readiness, the Army's supply position was much more serious. Army procurement after World War II was limited mainly to food, clothing and medical supplies. The shift of American industry away from military production forced the Army to operate almost exclusively with older and obsolescent equipment.

Nor was money available for new procurement. The Army computed its requirements carefully, basing them on minimum essentials, only to find that appropriations habitually fell far short of meeting them.

For the fiscal year 1948, for instance, the Ordnance Department estimated it would need \$750,000,000 to cover procurement of essential ammunition and equipment, storage and distribution of ordnance material, maintenance of stand-by plants and arsenals, training, and research and development. The Bureau of the Budget cut this figure to \$275,000,000 and Congress reduced the appropriation in final form to \$245,532,000.

Rapid demobilization had hurt the Army's maintenance program by reducing personnel and facilities to levels allowing proper storage and continuing maintenance on no more than a token basis. At the same time, replacement parts and assemblies became critical in many classes of equipment.

Machine guns and towed artillery were in plentiful supply, but heavy construction equipment, newly developed radios, self-propelled artillery, newer tanks and anti-aircraft guns were critically short. There were fewer than 900 serviceable light M-24 tanks in the United States, 2,557 unserviceable ones; 1,826 serviceable medium M4A3 tanks, 1,376 unserviceable ones. There were only 319 new M-46 General Patton tanks.

Development of new weapons and vehicles continued, but at a decelerated pace. New models being developed in the spring of 1950 would not be available for issue before the end of 1952. Other research projects indicated many desirable improvements in weapons and equipment, but funds were unavailable to complete development and production.

Ammunition stocks in the United States were far out of balance. Training activities, normal deterioration and transfers to foreign countries under military assistance programs had eaten away much of the stockpile remaining at the end of World War II, while economy budgets prevented significant new procurement. The result was a woefully inadequate reservoir of several types of ammunition.

In sum, the shortages of men and supplies combined with inadequate training to affect adversely the combat readiness of the Far East Command just as they hindered the effectiveness of the U.S. Army elsewhere.

Strategic Planning and Korea

The definitive write-off of Korea as an important strategic area came when the Joint Chiefs of Staff asserted that no military security guarantee should be extended to the Republic of Korea because such action would risk a major war in an area where Russia would have nearly all the natural advantages.

As a result, the President, on 4 April 1948, approved a policy that stated: "The United States should not become so irrevocably involved in the Korean situation that an action taken by any faction in Korea or by any other power in Korea could be considered a 'casus belli' for the United States." From that moment, Korea was of secondary importance to U.S. planners and policy makers.

General MacArthur had been relieved of his responsibility for defending Korea when the last American tactical units had been withdrawn from that country in 1949.

That Korea was considered of little strategic worth to the United States had scarcely been a matter of public knowledge until 12 January 1950, when Secretary of State Dean Acheson said so in a speech at the National Press Club in Washington. Outlining the defensive strategy in the Far East, he excluded Korea and Formosa from the American defensive perimeter.

In the light of Secretary Acheson's remarks, it appeared that the United States had no intention of fighting for South Korea. In the view of many observers, his statement was an invitation to Communist China, North Korea and Russia that they could invade the republic with impunity.

MacArthur's Forces

General MacArthur had commanded over 300,000 troops, including 42,000 in the Army Air Forces, in January 1947. Just one year later he had only 142,000. MacArthur warned of irreparable damage to United States national interests in the Far East unless his command was strengthened. In response, the Joint Chiefs of Staff informed MacArthur that all services were having trouble keeping up to authorized strength and that calculated risks in the allotment of manpower had to be accepted throughout the world. There was actually a further decline. MacArthur's authorized strength for the fiscal year beginning 1 July 1949 was to be only 120,000 men.

Insofar as combat strength was concerned, the Far East Command reached its lowest ebb in April 1948. The Eighth Army, upon which the combat effectiveness of the command depended, was authorized 87,215 men, but had an actual strength of only 45,561 and a combat strength of 26,494.

This combat strength was spread over five divisions and an antiaircraft artillery group, making attainment of any satisfactory degree of combat readiness very difficult; two regiments of the 25th Division had less than 250 men each.

The budget limitations and the low enlistment rate forced the Department of the Army to devise a troop program and troop list which could not be manned at 100 percent strength. This reduced overall personnel ceiling reflected manning levels which, in turn, caused unavoidable reductions either by paring the strength of all subordinate units or by eliminating certain units entirely.

Each of MacArthur's infantry divisions had only one tank company instead of a tank battalion, and one antiaircraft battery instead of an antiaircraft battalion. Each infantry regiment was short its tank company and lacked one infantry battalion; each of the divisional artillery battalions was short one firing battery.

Although MacArthur had managed to retain the 4-division structure of Eighth Army, he had to eliminate the normal corps headquarters and corps special troops (artillery, engineer, and so forth). Service elements of Eighth Army were so inadequate that over 150,000 Japanese personnel were being employed in roles normally performed by service troops.

MacArthur's combat forces in June 1950 comprised 4 under-strength infantry divisions (7th, 24th and 25th Infantry Divisions, and the 1st Cavalry Division) and 7 antiaircraft artillery battalions in Japan, 1 infantry regiment and 2 antiaircraft artillery battalions in Okinawa.

General MacArthur had registered frequent protests that his missions in the Far East required a minimum force of at least 5 full-strength infantry divisions, 23 antiaircraft artillery battalions, and 1 separate regimental combat team (RCT).

Each division had an authorized strength of 12,500 men as compared to its authorized war strength of 18,900 and none of the divisions was even up to its peacetime authorization. Each division was short of its war strength by nearly 7,000 men, 1,500 rifles, and 100 90-mm. antitank guns; 3 rifle battalions, 6 heavy tank companies, 3 105-mm. field artillery batteries, and 3 antiaircraft artillery batteries were missing from each division.

In terms of battle potential, the infantry division could lay down only 62 percent of their infantry firepower, 69 percent of their antiaircraft artillery firepower, and 14 percent of their tank firepower.

Until 1949 the primary responsibility of military units in the Far East Command was to carry out occupation duties. The situation was aggravated by constant under-strength and excessive turnover of personnel. This turnover amounted to 43 percent annually in the Far East Command.

Training in the rudimentary functions of the soldier was carried on as time and facilities permitted during the period from 1945 to 1949 with emphasis upon discipline, courtesy, and conduct. No serious effort was made in these years to maintain combat efficiency at battalion or higher level.

This situation changed markedly in April 1949 when General MacArthur issued a policy directive announcing that the stern rigidity which had characterized the occupation of Japan until that time was to be superseded by an attitude of "friendly protective guidance."

As a result of this change in policy, combat divisions of Eighth Army were progressively relieved of the majority of their purely occupational missions and directed to undertake an intensified program which would lead to the establishment of a cohesive and integrated naval, air, and ground fighting team.

Minimum proficiency levels to be attained were (1) company (battery) levels by 15 December 1949; (2) battalion (squadron or task force) level by 15 May 1950; (3) regimental (group or task force) level by 31 July 1950; (4) division (air force or task force) level by 31 December 1950; and (5) combined and joint operations training to include amphibious exercises concurrently with RCT and division-level training.

Troops were generally restricted in their training to small posts of regimental size. Divisions could not be concentrated and trained together.

The readiness of combat units within the Far East Command was not enhanced by the quality of enlisted personnel assigned from the zone of the interior. In April 1949, 43 percent of Army enlisted personnel in the Far East Command rated in Class IV and V on the Army General Classification Test.

Reports on the Eighth Army's divisions which were sent to the Department of the Army in May 1950 showed estimates ranging from 84 percent to 65 percent of full combat efficiency for the four divisions in Japan.

Supply Status

Equipment in the hands of MacArthur's troops was for the most part of World War II vintage.

An estimated 80 percent of the Army's 60-day reserve of armament equipment was unserviceable on 25 June 1950. The Far East Command had received no new vehicles, tanks, or other equipment since World War II. Almost 90 percent of the armament equipment and 75 percent of the automotive equipment in the hands of the four combat divisions on that date was derived from the rebuild program.

Some weapons such as medium tanks, 4.2-inch mortars and recoilless rifles could hardly be found in the command.

Eighth Army was authorized 226 recoilless rifles, but had only 21. Of 18,000 1/4-ton 4x4 vehicles in Eighth Army's stocks 10,000 were unserviceable, and of 13,780 1/2-ton 6x6 trucks only 4,441 were in running condition.

Total ammunition resources amounted to only 45 days' supply in the depots and a basic load of training ammunition in hands of units.

By mid-1950 American forces in the Far East had begun a gradual swing away from their primary concern with occupation duties and had started to look more closely to their combat skills.

This shift came about more because of the growing stability of occupied Japan than from any real fear that time was growing short.

But on the eve of the storm the command was flabby and soft, still hampered by an infectious lassitude, unready to respond swiftly and decisively to a full-scale military emergency.

Sources

U.S. Army in the Korean War - Policy and Direction: The First Year. Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, U.S. Army, 1972.

U.S. Army in the Korean War - South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu. Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1961.

###