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KOREAN WAR - THE FIRST DAYS OF THE GROUND 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 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?

During the period 15-24 June 1950 the North Korean Command moved all Regular Army divisions to the close vicinity of the 38th Parallel and deployed them along their respective planned lines of departure for the attack on South Korea. The attack units included 7 infantry divisions, 1 armored brigade, 1 separate infantry regiment, 1 motorcycle regiment and 1 Border Constabulary brigade. This force numbered approximately 90,000 men supported by 150 T34 tanks. The attack into South Korea commenced at 0400 hours, 25 June 1950.

By 26 June, General Douglas MacArthur, the Far East Commander, had reported to the Joint Chiefs of Staff that South Korean forces were in danger of collapse. In response to this report, President Truman authorized him to use the Far East naval and air forces in support of the Republic of Korea and, on 29 June, to employ naval and air forces against military targets in North Korea. However, regardless of American air strikes against North Korea, communication lines and troop columns, and despite naval surface attack against their coastal installations and shipping, the invaders drove the Republic of Korea Army down the peninsula.

Reports coming into the Pentagon from the Far East during the morning of 29 June described the situation in Korea as so bad that Secretary of Defense Louis A. Johnson telephoned the President. In a meeting that afternoon the President approved a new directive greatly broadening the authority of the Far East commander in meeting the Korea crisis. Among other authorities, the directive authorized General MacArthur to employ Army combat and service troops to ensure the retention of a port and air base in South Korea; on 30 June the use of ground forces was expanded to include deployment of a regimental combat team to reinforce the South Korean Army and to send two divisions to Korea from Japan.

Armed with Presidential authority, General MacArthur sent ground troops into the fight as fast as he could move them. On 30 June 1950, he ordered the 24th Division from Japan to Korea, retaining the unit, for the time being, under his personal control.

He ordered a small task force from the division flown into Korea ahead of the main body to engage the North Korean Army as quickly as possible, sacrificing security for speed. Because it would go by air, he restricted its size to two rifle companies, some antitank teams, and a battery of light artillery.

The small delaying force (Task Force Smith)—part of the 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry—landed at Pusan Airfield on the southeast tip of Korea on 1 and 2 July, with Lt. Col. Charles B. Smith in command. The artillery battery originally called for had been replaced by two 4.2-inch mortar platoons.

The other regiments of the 24th Division—the 34th and 19th Infantry, and the remainder of the 21st Infantry, plus supporting units—moved to Korea rapidly. By 5 July, most of the division was there.

Colonel Smith's delaying force was sent forward to engage the enemy on sight. South of Seoul, the capital, in the vicinity of Osan, the task force dug hasty positions on the night of 4 July and awaited the approaching North Koreans. Shortly after 0800 on 5 July, the North Koreans appeared.

They struck the task force with infantry and about thirty Russian-made T-34 tanks. The Americans stood until they expended their ammunition, then abandoned the field, suffering heavy losses in the process. Their weapons had proved to be almost useless against the enemy armor. Without reserves and with open flanks, the task force remnants withdrew to avoid being surrounded and destroyed.

The pattern of this first engagement was repeated during the following days. All combat elements of the 24th Division closed with the enemy along the main axis of his advance, but the North Korean firepower and greater strength overwhelmed these units at every stand. The men and officers of the 24th Division fought bravely, but their small numbers and inferior weapons left no choice but retreat or annihilation.

It had been hoped that the 34th Infantry could delay the North Korean advance. But between 5 and 8 July the regiment, thrown into a fight for which it was unprepared, was cut to pieces. Weak in numbers, completely outgunned, unable to protect its flanks, and short of ammunition the 34th retreated in some disorder, suffering extremely heavy casualties.

The 21st Infantry held at their assigned positions for three days, slowed two enemy divisions, but, after losing heavily in men and equipment, had to give way on 12 July.

MacArthur's Estimates

The understrength American division so hastily deployed to Korea was unable to stop the North Korean drive. MacArthur's early estimates fell short in appraising the ultimate necessary force, but not in their appreciation of the caliber of the enemy and the seriousness of the threat.

General MacArthur progressively revised upward his estimate of the strength he would need to defeat the North Koreans. Late in June, he implied that two American divisions could restore order. But by 7 July his views had changed materially. He told the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "It is now apparent that we are confronted in Korea with an aggressive and well-trained professional army equipped with tanks and perhaps other ground material quite equal to, and in some categories, superior to that available here."

North Korean armor had proven extremely effective. In their first engagement, U.S. troops could not stop enemy tanks. The 2.36 inch rocket launcher, an American antitank weapon of World War II, proved dangerously disappointing against the enemy's heavily armored Russian tanks. The launcher was ineffective against the front and side armor, and American infantrymen quickly lost all confidence in it.

Direct fire by artillery was of little help after the pitifully few 105-mm. antitank rounds available at the guns were exhausted. Regular high-explosive projectiles, which composed the bulk of artillery ammunition carried by batteries, would not penetrate armor deeply enough. Enemy tank tactics were described as excellent and unusually effective despite terrain which confined tanks mainly to roads.

The 24th Division Commander warned that the North Korean soldier was a dangerous foe. "I am convinced," he told General MacArthur, "that the North Korean Army, the North Korean soldier and his status of training and the quality of his equipment have been underestimated."

General MacArthur re-emphasized his growing respect for the North Korean Army. He credited the North Korean Army and its employment as being as good "as any seen at any time in the last war." Enemy infantry was first class. "To date," he admitted, "our efforts against his armor and mechanized forces have been ineffective."

On 5 July General MacArthur had ordered the 25th Infantry Division into combat, and by 9 July its first regimental combat team had cleared Japan for Korea. The 1st Cavalry Division was by this time also preparing for an amphibious landing on the east coast of Korea. In order to bring these two divisions and the 24th Division to some semblance of effective fighting strength, MacArthur stripped the remaining Far East Command combat force, the 7th Division, of trained officers and men.

While this cannibalization of the 7th fell far short of building up the other units to a satisfactory strength, it left the 7th Division a skeleton, temporarily useless for combat.

The extension of Eighth Army's area of responsibility to include Korea introduced the unique situation of an army fighting on one land mass with responsibility for its own logistical support, including port operation and procurement of supply, while administering occupied territory on another land mass several hundred miles away.

Although General MacArthur had hoped to save the 1st Cavalry Division for a later amphibious operation, he yielded to battlefield necessity and sent that unit to Korea in mid-July.

The Build-up

The years of military privation since World War II had left their mark on the ground forces of the United States. Not only were they equipped with outmoded, worn weapons and equipment, but their numbers were scant. Both Army and Marine troops had spread thin in their efforts to perform their interim missions.

Aside from scattered elements in the Pacific, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Army's leaders had only the understrength General Reserve in the United States from which to draw immediately for fighting men to throw into Korea.

Additional ground strength could be developed through Selective Service and through the call-up of Reserve Component forces, but these methods would take time. Thus, when General MacArthur, reacting to North Korean victories, impatiently demanded his due, the nation's military leaders faced a dilemma of considerable complexity and prime importance. The very safety of the nation stood, at times, in the balance.

Replacements

The sources of replacements within the Far East quickly dried up. Men were taken from administrative and noncombatant duties and sent to the combat units. In the United States, every installation was combed for individuals who could be shipped quickly to Korea.

General MacArthur first asked for 5,000 combat and 425 service replacements. On 1 July, he asked that these troops be added to the normal number shipped to his command each month, stipulating that they be qualified and experienced, for they were "going directly into the combat zone in Korea for an indefinite period." Approximately 7,350 replacements reached Japan in July 1950.

Department of Army officials showed General MacArthur the bottom of the replacement barrel on 30 July. All the men and officers eligible for overseas assignment were being shipped to the Far East Command, except for slightly more than a thousand to other joint commands.

Despite Presidential approval for the recall of 25,000 enlisted reservists, a severe shortage of replacements still existed. Individual replacements from the Enlisted Reserve Corps would not be available in quantity for at least two months. All of these men would have to go to General Reserve units.

The extensive levies placed upon the General Reserve to furnish replacements had cut the operating capabilities of the emergency force to a dangerous level. For the immediate future, at least, the Army had done about as much as it could do. It could promise only the most austere replacement support to General MacArthur.

Bringing Divisions to Strength

Another significant effort involved the build-up of MacArthur's divisions from understrength, unbalanced peacetime divisions to fully manned, properly constituted fighting divisions. With only two battalions in each regiment, American forces in Korea could not employ normal tactical maneuvers based on the full firepower and the flexibility of a triangular organization. Nor could they guarantee flank protection.

General MacArthur appealed to the Department of the Army on 8 July saying, "In order to provide balanced means for tactical maneuver, fire power, and sustaining operations, it is urgently required that infantry divisions operating in this theater be immediately expanded to full war strength in personnel and equipment." The gravity of his concern prompted a second appeal two days later. "I am sure that the Joint Chiefs of Staff realize," he said, "that the division now in action in Korea, and the other two divisions soon to be committed are at neither war strength nor at full authorized peace strength."

The acute shortage of infantry, artillery and service support units in the General Reserve in the United States turned these relatively modest demands into a problem of major proportions. In marshaling organized combat units to fill out the divisions in Korea and Japan, the Department of the Army stripped battalions, companies and batteries from the General Reserve. It pulled trained noncommissioned officers from other units and formed provisional cadres for General MacArthur's command. These drastic procedures not only vitiated the combat readiness of the remaining units, but greatly reduced the mobilization base for a later build-up of the Army General Reserve.

The main considerations in selecting infantry battalions for Korea were early arrival and combat effectiveness. Army authorities could have sent eleven cadres for new infantry battalions, but new battalions, even with full cadres and basic-trainee fillers, needed six months to become combat ready. The General Reserve held only eighteen battalions of infantry at this time.

The removal of battalions from the General Reserve would reduce the training and mobilization base in the United States by one-sixth. Since it would require from twelve to fourteen months to rebuild these combat units, the Army's ability to carry out emergency missions would be nullified for at least one year.

Eleven artillery batteries were scheduled to reach Korea at about 60 percent strength and at an estimated combat effectiveness of 40 percent. The field artillery mobilization base was cut about 30 percent by these transfers to Korea, and the ability of the Army to support other operations with artillery was cut in half for a full year.

On 2 July General MacArthur had pointed out that he must have more armored units since his four heavy tank battalions were skeletons with only one company apiece. The need for combat soldiers remained paramount. Of the service troops sent to Japan as replacements in July, for example, 60 percent were assigned to front-line fighting troops upon arrival in Korea. The filler units and reinforcing units which the Department of the Army had managed to scrape together for General MacArthur in the first month of the campaign represented the maximum force which the United States was able to furnish.

On 7 July the Joint Chiefs of Staff decided that the Army should send General Reserve units to meet MacArthur's additional requirements. The issue was so important in terms of worldwide commitments that the decision was elevated to the President, who approved. The 2d Infantry Division, 3 tank battalions, 4 antiaircraft battalions, a regimental combat team, engineer brigade and maintenance company were ordered to prepare for movement.

Department of the Army officials told the Far East commander on 21 July that they were in no position even to consider his request for another army of four divisions for the present. Before any decision could be made on that request, American defense officials would have to determine just how far they were going in rebuilding the General Reserve. Then they would have to see if sending additional forces to Korea was as important to national security as having them available for deployment elsewhere in the world.

Sources

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