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**Koje Island:  
The 1952 Korean Hostage Crisis**

**William Roskey**

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THE 1952 KOREAN HOSTAGE CRISIS**

**by**

**William Roskey**

**The Institute of Land Warfare**

**ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY**

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## LAND WARFARE PAPER NO. 19, SEPTEMBER 1994

### **Koje Island: The 1952 Korean Hostage Crisis**

by William Roskey

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Mr. Roskey earned a B.S. in history from the University of the State of New York. He is currently working on a history of the Korean War.

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## FOREWORD

It could be something out of a novel or in the headlines of tomorrow's newspaper: In the Far East, an American general officer is kidnapped by terrorists who threaten to kill him unless the United States publicly "confesses" to crimes it hasn't committed. Another general on the scene begins cautious negotiations with the terrorist leaders, but his superiors set an ultimatum: If the hostage is not released, all talk will stop and an assault will be made on the terrorists' camp.

This actually happened in 1952. The terrorists were North Korean prisoners of war; the kidnapped general, Brigadier General Francis T. Dodd, was the commandant of the POW camp. By the time the dust had settled, both Dodd and Brigadier General Charles F. Colson (who negotiated Dodd's release) were reduced in rank to colonel. It was a major propaganda triumph for the North Koreans, who succeeded in extracting a written "confession" that was flashed around the world to the serious detriment of the United Nations Command, the U.S. Army, and the United States itself.

The following historical research paper analyzes the events that led to Dodd's kidnapping, how the crisis was handled by senior officers of the U.S. Army, and the aftermath.

The questions *Koje Island* asks and answers are difficult ones. Should terrorists who are also POWs be dealt with any differently than any other terrorists? What is considered to be proper conduct for an American military officer who is taken hostage by enemy POWs during wartime? Does he then become, for all intents and purposes, a POW himself, bound by the same code as other POWs? Is cooperation with the enemy to avoid possibly hundreds or even thousands of deaths on both sides acceptable? Is giving the enemy a propaganda victory the same as giving him a battlefield victory? Is a decision to cause the probable death of an American officer by not meeting terrorists' demands the same as a decision to expose those under one's command to deadly fire in conventional battle?

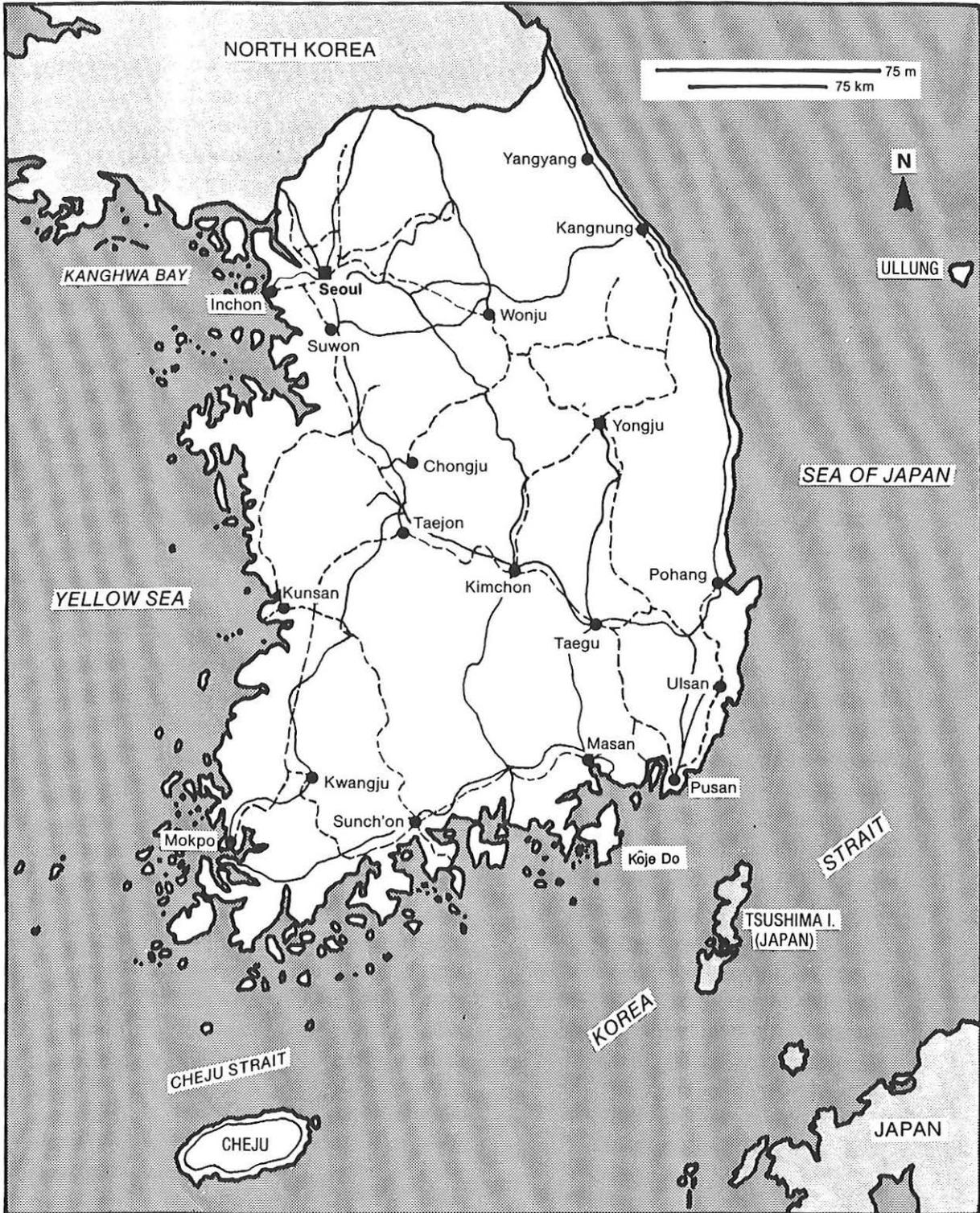
These are some of the questions that faced the principals in the Koje Island incident. Learning what happened on Koje Island will be especially useful for any soldier who may be taken hostage (whether or not during a war), or for someone in authority who may have to negotiate to obtain the release of hostages, or who may in some official capacity in the future, be responsible.



JACK N. MERRITT  
General, U.S. Army Retired  
President

September 1994

**SOUTH KOREA**



# KOJE ISLAND: THE 1952 KOREAN HOSTAGE CRISIS

## INTRODUCTION

General Mark Clark called it “the biggest flap of the war.”<sup>1</sup> It happened at a place which General Matthew B. Ridgway said “was itself hardly the ground a sane man would have chosen to erect camp sites.”<sup>2</sup> To General Paul F. Yount, one of the principals, the event that transpired there was a “comic opera,”<sup>3</sup> and to one of Koje Island’s commanding officers, the place was a “graveyard of commanders.”<sup>4</sup> Others spoke of it as “the end of the line,” and so it proved to be for two American general officers, Francis T. Dodd and Charles F. Colson.<sup>5</sup> The 1952 hostage crisis at United Nations Prisoner of War Camp No. 1 was to finish their careers; both men were reduced in rank to colonel.

Koje-do (the suffix *-do* in Korean means “island”) lies in the Korean Strait, a few miles southeast of Pusan. Few of its 150 square miles are level ground (thus Ridgway’s “sane man” remark) and, in 1951, it was the site of a small fishing community. The sprawling prisoner-of-war (POW) complex that the United Nations Command (UNC) erected on Koje Island produced nothing but problems from the beginning. For one thing, it was overcrowded; when the lid finally blew off in May 1952, it held approximately 150,000 North Korean and Chinese POWs and civilian internees in a camp designed and built to hold 38,400. Then there was the “personnel problem.”

Military historians, as well as General Ridgway, who was commander in chief of the Far East Command (FEC) when the Koje-do incident occurred, agree that the caliber of the U.S. Army and Republic of Korea (ROK) guards there was extremely low, and that this contributed to the problem.<sup>6</sup> In addition, there were often violent clashes between pro- and anticommunist prisoners and civilian internees and, as if all this weren’t enough, North Korean People’s Army (NKPA) chief of staff General Nam Il kept stirring the pot by infiltrating handpicked NKPA officers to foment yet more trouble in the form of riots, demonstrations, and murders of anticommunist prisoners and civilian internees.<sup>7</sup>

Violent incidents on Koje-do began as early as June 1951, when the inmates attacked a UNC work detail, leaving three dead and eight wounded. Demonstrations in August left eight dead and 21 wounded, and in September 1951, 15 prisoners were murdered by a “people’s court” consisting of their fellow prisoners. Shortly thereafter, three more were killed in riots in Compound 78, and troops were rushed in to save 200 prisoners whose lives were in danger. Colonel Albert C. Morgan, chief of staff of the 2nd Logistical Command (which was in charge of all UNC POW camps) wrote to General James A. Van Fleet, commander of the Eighth U.S. Army (EUSA), on 18 September 1951, asking for more guards and pointing out that protracted confinement, uncertainty over the future, and communist agitation had combined to produce increasing tension among the prisoners.

Van Fleet responded with a personal visit to Kojedo and with a reorganization of the camp's security forces. In October 1951, the 8137th Military Police Group was activated, with three assigned battalions and four escort guard companies.<sup>8</sup> The following month, one battalion of the 23rd Infantry Regiment was made available for duty on Kojedo; by December, more than 9,000 U.S. and South Korean troops were stationed there. This, however, was only 60 percent of what the 2nd Logistical Command had requested. Things only got worse, particularly once the UNC began screening the inmates of its POW compounds to identify who among the POWs were not enemy soldiers but simply people caught up in the flow of war who had done nothing more than be at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Among these people were South Koreans who had been impressed into the NKPA, hungry people who joined POW groups or who had broken into POW camps to be fed, and "innocent bystanders" who, although they'd been wearing civilian clothes, were picked up on the suspicion of being enemy soldiers despite little or no evidence against them. All who fell into one of these categories were to be reclassified as "civilian internees" and released; there were an estimated 38,000 of them on Kojedo. (This screening to identify civilian internees, which began in November 1951, is not to be confused with the screening for purposes of voluntary repatriation, which began in April 1952.)

A large and particularly savage rock fight between compounds broke out on 18 December, followed by riots and demonstrations which left 14 dead and 24 others injured or wounded. By now things were entirely out of hand, in no small way caused by some bizarre camp policies, among them:

- Each compound had its own metalworking shop, thoughtfully provided by a naive detaining power to assist the POWs "in developing vocational and technical skills to help them after their release."<sup>9</sup>
- The POWs were given gasoline to help them start their fires.<sup>10</sup>
- The gates and sally ports to the compounds were usually unlocked to make it more convenient for POW work details to leave and return.<sup>11</sup>
- No guard dared enter the compounds at night, where beatings and even murders committed by POWs went unpunished.<sup>12</sup> (Washington specifically prohibited the initiation of judicial action against any inmates.<sup>13</sup>)

On 18 February 1952, between 1,000 and 1,500 inmates of Compound 62 fought the 3rd Battalion of the 2nd Infantry Division's 27th Regiment, which was providing security for screening teams. Fifty-five inmates were killed outright, another 22 would later die of wounds they'd received, and another 140 had been wounded. (One American had been killed and 38 wounded.)

The communist press worldwide had a field day with this propagandist's dream — the slaughter of "innocent" captives. On 23 February 1952, the North Korean and Chi-

nese delegation at Panmunjom protested vociferously against “the sanguinary incident of barbarously massacring large numbers of our personnel” at Koje-do.<sup>14</sup> The communists skillfully managed the news, and they were richly rewarded with headlines around the world. “Thereafter,” says George Forty in *At War in Korea*, “the POWs were virtually masters of their compounds, while the guards could do no more than stay outside [the wire], under orders not to use force.”<sup>15</sup>

On 13 March 1952, another bloody clash erupted. As an anticommunist work detail was passing a procommunist compound, inmates began throwing rocks at both the detail and a ROK Army detachment unconnected with the detail, which was marching in front of it. Without orders, the ROKs retaliated with gunfire. Before they could be brought under control, they had killed ten prisoners outright. Two more later died of wounds. A South Korean civilian and an American officer, who had tried to stop the shooting were injured, and 26 inmates were wounded. At Panmunjom, the communists drew world attention to yet another UNC “barbarous massacre.”

On 8 April 1952, the UNC began screening POWs in order to determine who among them did not wish to return to North Korea or communist China, and the number of violent incidents only increased. On 10 April, when American medics entered Compound 95 to remove an injured man, a wave of screaming prisoners charged them and took them prisoner. General Dodd responded by sending in 100 unarmed ROKs to rescue them. In *The Korean War*, Max Hastings says:

One ROK soldier simply disappeared in the ensuing struggle. He was never seen again. Eventually, the guards on the perimeter tried to give their men inside covering fire. An American officer and several ROKs were wounded.<sup>16</sup>

Hastings also tells of another incident in which prisoners staged a mass rush on the gate of their compound. An American officer and two men fought them off with a jeep-mounted .30-caliber machine gun. Three inmates were killed and 60 wounded. Four ROK guards were also wounded.

By the end of the month, ten of the 17 compounds occupied by communist prisoners had been screened for the purpose of voluntary repatriation, but the remaining seven had violently resisted all screening attempts. On 13 April, Van Fleet told Ridgway that screening could take place in those compounds only by forcible entry and that there would be casualties. Then, after moving the 3rd Battalion of the 9th Infantry Regiment to Koje-do to reinforce the 38th Infantry Regiment, and after ordering the 1st Battalion of the 15th Infantry Regiment and the ROK 20th Regiment to Pusan to stand by, Van Fleet sent one last message to Ridgway.

On Monday, 28 April 1952, Van Fleet advised Ridgway that he would proceed with the screening of the last seven compounds shortly after Thursday, and that the prisoners in the ten compounds already screened would probably react violently when force was employed on the seven holdouts. That got results. The next day Ridgway asked the Joint

Chiefs of Staff (JCS) for permission to cancel the screening, citing the volatility of the situation. The solution, he suggested, was simple: The UNC would simply count everyone in the seven holdout compounds as prisoners who chose to be repatriated, thus obviating the need for any further screening. His request was quickly granted.

In his memoirs, Ridgway would later write:

Looking back in the light of later knowledge, one might say that it would have been better to use force at that moment and get the dirty job over with. There is no question that the job could have been accomplished, although not without the spilling of much blood. Perhaps if our intelligence had discovered then, as they did soon afterward, the existence of the intricate and far-ranging plot to organize and exploit the spirit of defiance in these camps, I might have taken a different stand. But I did not know then, nor do I know now, how far the Communist command might have gone in its readiness to sacrifice the lives of its own people in order to achieve a propaganda victory.<sup>17</sup>

There is some justification for Ridgway's characterization of what would happen in the following week as being primarily the consequences of an intelligence failure. Had Ridgway had foreknowledge of the events being planned, there can be little doubt that he "might have taken a different stand." In *Korea: The Untold Story of the War*, Joseph Goulden claims that "in late April ... intelligence agents received word of a Communist plan to try to seize ... General Dodd, and hold him hostage to force further UN concessions."<sup>18</sup>

In *From the Danube to the Yalu*, Mark Clark says that, after the crisis was over, he learned in April that "the Koje-do intelligence officer [had] reported that prisoner interrogation revealed that the Communists had issued orders for the prisoners to capture Allied personnel, particularly officers."<sup>19</sup> It is unclear whether Ridgway or any of the other principals in this sad tale ever received such a report. If they did, it may have been the impetus for a subsequent inspection of Koje-do by the FEC's provost marshal, Colonel Robert T. Chaplin, later that week.

At the beginning of May, Chaplin told Ridgway that there was a dangerous lack of control at Koje-do. The inmates were even refusing to bring in their own food and supplies. On 5 May 1952, Ridgway sent what he called "a sharp reminder" to Van Fleet, telling him "of the need to maintain proper control, no matter that the screening process had been abandoned."<sup>20</sup> Later the same day, only two days before Dodd's kidnapping, Van Fleet replied that there was no cause for "undue anxiety."<sup>21</sup>

Later investigations would reveal that the prisoners had been planning Dodd's capture for some time — not that it required much planning. The gates of the compounds were usually unlocked, and Dodd often went up to the wire to speak with POW leaders, to listen to their grievances and to answer their questions. Dodd was usually unarmed. Furthermore, the standing orders for the UNC guards, which were dictated by fallout

from the disturbances of 18 February, 13 March and 10 April, prohibited the practice of keeping rounds in the chambers of their weapons. The guards were also told that they could fire only in self-defense or in grave emergency. Finally, the prisoners had had some prior successes in kidnapping. They had kidnapped some UNC soldiers to draw attention to their grievances. The hostages had always been released unharmed after the camp authorities had listened to the complaints. Clearly, kidnapping Dodd under these circumstances was not difficult and didn't even involve much risk.

On the evening of 6 May, a returning work detail from Compound 76 refused to enter the compound until its members had spoken to Lieutenant Colonel Wilbur R. Raven, the commanding officer of the 94th Military Police Battalion. When Raven appeared, the prisoners complained that guards had beaten some of the inmates. His promise to investigate the matter seemed to mollify them somewhat, but they nonetheless asked to speak to General Dodd. When Raven was noncommittal about Dodd's seeing them, the prisoners offered an inducement: If Dodd would come to speak with them tomorrow, they would allow themselves to be registered and fingerprinted. Since Dodd had just been ordered to complete an accurate roster identifying all POWs and since, despite Ridgway's 5 May "sharp reminder" to Van Fleet, Van Fleet's instructions to Dodd were to "go easy" on the prisoners, just to keep them quiet because an armistice was imminent, Dodd needed all the cooperation he could get.<sup>22</sup>

#### **DAY ONE: "We capture Dodd"**

Raven spoke to the inmates again the next day. Just as he was finishing hearing all the usual grievances, Dodd drove up in his jeep. It was now a few minutes after 1400. When Dodd joined Raven at the wire, the POWs suddenly came alive with scores of questions. Questions about food, clothing, what was happening at Panmunjom, and many others. Dodd continued to talk to the inmates through the wire, just as he'd often done before. The only thing separating Dodd and Raven from them was the unlocked gate of a sally port, but the POWs were attentive and respectful. "Would the general and the colonel like to come in and sit down with us so that we could continue our discussion more comfortably?" A large crowd had gathered on the other side of the wire, but it seemed peaceable. Nevertheless, Raven refused immediately. He'd already been burned once; he'd been one of the UNC soldiers seized and held hostage by the POWs before, and although he, like the others, had ultimately been released unharmed, he did not care to repeat the experience.

Dodd was less blunt than Raven, but he too declined the invitation. The talk continued and the POWs were as good as gold. "Perhaps," Dodd may well have thought, "Van Fleet is right. An armistice is just around the corner. If I can just keep these people quiet and work with them, just hang on a while longer ... if I can just prevent any further bloodshed. These people have already agreed to identify themselves and agreed to be fingerprinted. Perhaps," he may well have thought, "the worst is past."

The talk continued, with the POWs seemingly hanging on Dodd's every word. It was a hot day. "Would the general care to step in and sit down in some shade? We have much more to ask ... ." Dodd again politely but firmly refused the smiling invitation. A few moments later, one of the ubiquitous work details passed through the sally port, leaving the outer door wide open. Then, in a flash (one account says a whistle was blown), the prisoners ran through it and pounced on Dodd and Raven. As they began to drag them back into the compound, Raven saved himself by grabbing hold of a post and hanging on for dear life until some guards ran to the rescue. Using fixed bayonets, they forced the prisoners back into the compound. Raven was saved, but it was too late for Dodd. Using blankets draped over the inner fence to mask their movements, the POWs hustled Dodd off to a specially prepared tent and immediately posted a large sign:

WE CAPTURE DODD. AS LONG AS OUR DEMAND WILL BE SOLVED, HIS SAFETY IS SECURED. IF THERE HAPPEN BRUTAL ACTS SUCH AS SHOOTING, HIS LIFE IS DANGER.

The time was 1515. In a note to the outside delivered shortly thereafter, Dodd said that he was all right and, apparently confident that he could persuade his captors to release him in the next couple of hours, asked that no troops be sent to his rescue until after 1700. Word of the kidnapping was flashed to Dodd's immediate superior, Brigadier General Paul F. Yount, commander of the 2nd Logistical Command. Yount, in turn, alerted Van Fleet, whose first action was to forbid Yount to use force without the prior approval of Eighth Army. After passing on Van Fleet's injunction against the use of force, Yount then sent his chief of staff, Colonel William H. Craig, to Koje-do to assume command. Yount's specific instructions to Craig were clear:

We are to talk them out. Obviously if somebody makes a mass break we most certainly will resist. ... But **unless they attempt such a thing, under no circumstances use fire to get them out** [emphasis added]. Wait them out. One thing above all, approach it calmly. If we get them excited only God knows what will happen.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, behind the wire, Dodd was working hard to defuse the situation. A field phone was installed in the tent where he was being held, and Dodd suggested that prisoner representatives from all compounds be sent to Compound 76 so he could discuss their demands.

As the sun went down, things were fairly quiet, considering the turn of events. In Compound 76, Dodd was meeting with 43 representatives of the 17 compounds, the surrounding UNC troops were on alert, and Colonel Craig was trying to figure out how to obey Yount's unequivocal instructions ("We are to talk them out. ... Wait them out") and get Dodd out quickly at the same time.

Across the Korea Strait, General Mark W. Clark was having dinner with the Ridgways at Maeda House. Ordered to replace Ridgway as commander in chief, FEC, and as commander in chief, UNC, Clark had arrived in Japan that morning. Ridgway, in turn,

was to replace General Dwight D. Eisenhower as Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) NATO, and Eisenhower was on his way back to the United States to begin a political campaign that would make him commander in chief of all U.S. forces world wide. Ridgway spoke of many things during and after dinner, but at no time did he mention what was transpiring at Koje-do. Clark says that it was because Ridgway himself didn't know at the time. He believed that was because, despite the fact that Dodd had been captured at 1515 that afternoon, those in the chain of command below Ridgway were reluctant to tell him. "Everybody," says Clark, "knew that once word reached Tokyo there would be the devil to pay."<sup>24</sup>

Neither Dodd nor the POWs made any contact with the world waiting outside the wire that night except for a brief phone call in which Dodd told Craig that he was being treated well and requested that no force be used at this point. The POWs were even relaxed enough to knock off their talks with Dodd for the day and invite him to a show put on by the inmates of Compound 76.<sup>25</sup>

#### **DAY TWO: "Wayne, we've got a little situation"**

Early the next morning, Ridgway and Clark boarded a plane for Korea. The night before, Ridgway had asked Clark to come along, saying that he wanted to say goodbye to his field commanders and to introduce them to Clark. Once aloft, Ridgway turned to Clark and said, "Wayne, we've got a little situation over in Korea where it's reported some prisoners have taken in one of the camp commanders, General Dodd, and are holding him as a hostage. We'll have to get into that situation when we arrive at Eighth Army headquarters and find out what the score is." Clark later said that this was the first time he "had ever heard of Koje or the critical prisoner-of-war problem that existed behind our lines."<sup>26</sup> "Clark's reflexive reaction," reported Goulden, "was to 'let them keep that dumb son of a bitch Dodd, and then go in and level the place.'" <sup>27</sup> Probably fortunately for Dodd, Clark would not replace Ridgway for a few days.

Ridgway says that when he and Clark got to Eighth Army Headquarters, Van Fleet told them that "he planned to negotiate with the POWs for Dodd's release. This," said Ridgway, "would mean a forty-eight-hour delay at least and to me such a delay, with its implication of defeat, was wholly unacceptable. But I knew that every move we made would have its effect upon the truce negotiations, so I felt I should consult with Admiral [Charles Turner] Joy, our chief negotiator, before issuing any orders."<sup>28</sup>

As Ridgway and Clark took off for Seoul, Colonel Craig sent for trained machine gun crews, grenades, and gas masks. Behind the wire, the POWs' representatives presented General Dodd with a list of initial demands, none of which was particularly earthshaking or displayed any imagination. Their major demands were official recognition of their "association," two jeeps for intracompound travel, and phone lines to be installed between compounds. They also wanted some office supplies (including desks, chairs, fountain pens, and mimeograph machines) and a few other minor items. Although he had no

authority to do so, Dodd agreed to most of the demands. Had the UNC agreed to all of these demands on this, the morning of 8 May 1952, perhaps the whole Koje-do incident would have ended there and then. But it was not to be.

In Seoul, Ridgway and Clark were conferring with Admiral Joy, who, Ridgway said, “wholeheartedly agreed with me that any temporizing would be accepted by the Communists as a sign of surrender. He, too, felt that we should demand immediate release of Dodd and back that demand by use of force.” After hearing that Joy’s opinion was in agreement with his own, Ridgway, in writing, ordered Van Fleet “to establish order in the prison camps **immediately** [emphasis added] and to maintain it thereafter, using what ever force was required, even tanks.”<sup>29</sup>

This was clear enough, and Van Fleet moved swiftly to comply. He had the 3rd Battalion of the 9th Infantry Regiment aboard an LST (Landing Ship Tank) bound for Koje-do almost instantly. He also had ROK Navy picket boats ring the island, and U.S. Navy, Marine and Air Force planes put on alert. He also sent the 2nd Infantry’s 38th Regiment and Baker Company of the 64th Medium Tank Battalion, 3rd Infantry Division to Koje-do. Next, he sent Brigadier General Charles F. Colson, I Corps chief of staff, to take command of Koje-do. Finally, Van Fleet gave General Yount instructions as unequivocal as those Ridgway had given him:

- First, send an official written demand to Compound 76 demanding Dodd’s immediate release. Make it clear that Dodd is no longer in command and is not authorized to make any decisions.
- If Dodd is not released, set a time limit and warn the prisoners that they will be held responsible for Dodd’s safety when force is used.
- When the deadline expires, enter the compound by force, free Dodd, and gain full control.<sup>30</sup>

After a fairly fruitful morning session behind the wire on Koje-do, the prisoners’ representatives decided it was time to return to their respective compounds to report their progress. The problem was that Yount refused to let them leave Compound 76. It was late in the afternoon when Van Fleet overruled him, and by the time they’d made their trips and reconvened in Compound 76, it was evening. Meanwhile, Colson arrived on Koje-do after Yount had briefed him on Van Fleet’s three-step solution to the crisis.

### **DAY THREE: “Inhuman massacre and murderous barbarity”**

With first light on 9 May, General Colson wasted no time in implementing Van Fleet’s explicit orders as relayed to him by General Yount: He sent the prisoners in Compound 76 the first official written demand to release Dodd. As the morning hours ticked by with no response, Colson wasn’t idle. He used the 38th Regiment to reinforce the guards on

all the compounds, setting up automatic weapons in pairs at strategic locations. He also ordered Lieutenant Colonel William J. Kernan, commanding officer of the 38th, to make plans for forcible entry into Compound 76 at 1000 the following day. Kernan was told to use whatever means were necessary — tanks and/or other armored vehicles, flamethrowers, .50-caliber multiple mounts, tear gas, riot guns, whatever it would take to effectuate Dodd's release and restore order.

Colson also told the POW spokesman, NKPA Senior Colonel Lee Hak Ku (the highest ranking communist officer captured in the war), that henceforth there would be no more shuttling back and forth between compounds by the POW representatives, a stance that Yount had taken the day before but which had been overruled by Van Fleet. Clearly disturbed by the change in atmosphere and the all too apparent preparations for combat on the other side of the wire, the POW leaders had Dodd get on the phone and ask Colson to restore this privilege, promising that Dodd would be freed without harm after the meeting if all went well.

In his first, if not his most serious mistake, Colson relented and allowed them to get together. It was an easy mistake to make. The POWs were now scared and they showed it. Colson certainly had all the force necessary to overpower them at his disposal; they knew it and he knew it. Permitting them one last meeting to save face could do no apparent harm. Besides, that company of medium tanks would not arrive until nightfall (the tanks had to travel 200 miles to get to Pusan and they had to be loaded aboard LSTs for the trip to Koje-do), and Colson did not intend to move in without them. This was why he set 1000 the following morning as the time his troops would enter the compound, and this was the situation when he allowed the prisoners' representatives to convene for what he no doubt expected to be one last meeting. It is important to note that, although the 10 May deadline was Colson's idea, both General Yount and Major General Orlando Mood, Eighth Army chief of staff, knew of it and agreed.<sup>31</sup>

When the prisoners' representatives got together again, they decided to conduct a criminal "trial" of Dodd, charging him with 19 counts of death and/or injury to inmates in previous incidents. At midday, six hours after the first written demand to free Dodd, Colson sent in a second written demand. After a delay, Lee Hak Ku responded by announcing that they would not release Dodd, that Dodd had already confessed to "inhuman massacre and murderous barbarity" against the prisoners.<sup>32</sup> Recognizing Colson as the new camp commandant, Lee invited him to join Dodd, himself, and the other prisoners' representatives in the compound so they could all sit down and discuss things. Colson declined the invitation.

Van Fleet flew in shortly after lunch to assess the situation himself and to pass on Ridgway's orders. First, there would be no press or photo coverage of the uprising. Second, Colson was to give the nonbelligerent POWs every opportunity to surrender peaceably. Van Fleet then expressed his own opinion that U.S. troops should not enter the compound until firepower from the outside had forced obedience and had driven the prisoners into the small adjacent compounds that had been constructed to contain them.

If necessary, Van Fleet said, he was prepared to permit the POWs to have their association, and to give them the equipment and intracompound communications they requested, **but**, he said, Colson had the full authority to use whatever force was necessary to free Dodd and to secure proper control and discipline. Van Fleet said the details of the operation and its timing were up to Colson, but that there was to be no more talking after 1000 on Saturday.

At dusk, Dodd phoned Colson to ask that the deadline be set forward two hours, from 1000 the following morning to 1200, because his captors needed more time to conclude his trial. Colson immediately bucked the request up to Eighth Army, and the unequivocal reply bounced back just as fast: No extension. Colson passed the word to Dodd. Dodd put down the phone and relayed the word to his waiting captors, who then walked out and looked at what was happening outside the wire. They saw approximately 11,000 heavily armed UNC troops, most of them combat veterans, staring back with grim determination.

The somewhat shaken POWs went back inside and told Dodd to get Colson on the phone again and tell him that, although they had originally planned to conduct meetings for ten full days, they would do their best to complete all business by 1000 on Saturday. As darkness fell, so did a heavy rain. The rain beat down steadily all night, and during the night the long-awaited tanks arrived — twenty of them, five equipped with flamethrowers.

#### **DAY FOUR: “Immediate ceasing the barbarous behavior”**

The hard rain that had begun the evening before came down all night and into the early morning hours of 10 May. The U.S. Army troops ringing the compounds hunched under ponchos until the rain stopped shortly before dawn. As the sun rose and silently burned through a dense morning fog, the twenty M-46 Patton medium tanks that had joined the infantry during the night slowly became visible, like huge predatory beasts rising from a primordial swamp. Their snouts, imposing 90mm guns, were leveled at the POWs.

Now Colson sent in a final written demand. There was nothing for it but to go in at 1000 if the prisoners did not surrender Dodd. The communists had already won a victory of sorts; even if they freed Dodd now, sooner or later, despite the news blackout, the world would hear of Dodd’s capture and of the concessions the UNC had made. But there was no reason that this should cause anything more than a fleeting moment of embarrassment. Then too, no one had been hurt, not yet anyway. The UNC could realistically still hope for a bloodless end to the crisis and, with some prudent damage control, avoid a major propaganda defeat. The communists had to surrender Dodd by 1000; they had to quit while they were ahead. What else could they do?

They could try one last roll of the dice, tanks or no tanks, and that’s precisely what they did.

They responded to Colson's last written demand with one of their own, which read as follows:

1. Immediate ceasing the barbarous behavior, insults, torture, forcible protest with blood writing, threatening, confinement, mass murdering, gun and machine gun shooting, using poison gas, germ weapons, experiment object of A-Bomb, by your command. You should guarantee PW's human rights and individual life with the base on the International Law.
2. Immediate stopping the so-called illegal and unreasonable volunteer repatriation of NKPA and CPVA {Chinese People's Volunteer Army} PW's.
3. Immediate ceasing the forcible investigation (Screening) which thousands of PW's of NKPA and CPVA be rearmed and falled in slavery, permanently and illegally.
4. Immediate recognition of the P.W. Representative Group (Commission) consisted of NKPA and CPVA PWs and close cooperation to it by your command. This Representative Group will turn in Brigadier General Dodd, USA, on your hand after we receive satisfactory declaration to resolve the above items by your command. We will await your warm and sincere answer.<sup>33</sup>

As Colson stood frowning over the prisoners' message, he received a report from his intelligence officer that the other 16 compounds were ready to stage a mass breakout as soon as the assault on Compound 76 was launched. In addition, the villages near the POW complex had just been discovered to have been deserted, lending credence to the intelligence report. Now, with the hands of his wristwatch moving inexorably toward 1000, Colson hesitated. He carefully reread the prisoners' demands several times, then called Yount. Why not respond to the accusations by simply saying that they weren't true? As for recognition of the POW association, Colson was prepared to do so, but he had no authority in the matter of screening. If Yount could obtain authority to stop nominal screening, Colson said, then he thought he could persuade the prisoners to release Dodd.

It sounded good to Yount, who then got General Mood on the phone. Mood agreed that nominal screening could be dropped. There was no doubt about it, the situation had taken a turn for the worse, but Colson still hoped to resolve the situation bloodlessly. The problem was that the prisoners demanded that Colson's reply be in writing, and by the time all these events had transpired, there wasn't enough time to translate his reply into Korean before the 1000 deadline. Colson let the 1000 deadline slip by as his translator labored over the following response:

1. With reference to your item 1 of that message, I am forced to tell you that we are not and have not committed any of the offenses which you allege. I can assure you that we will continue in that policy and the prisoners of war can expect humane treatment in this camp.

2. Reference your item two regarding voluntary repatriation of NKPA and CPVA PW, that is a matter which is being discussed at Panmunjom, and over which I have no control or influence.
3. Regarding your item three pertaining to forcible investigation (screening), I can inform you that after General Dodd's release, unharmed, there will be no more forcible screening of PW's in this camp, nor will any attempt be made at nominal screening.
4. Reference your item four, we have no objection to the organization of a PW representative group or commission consisting of NKPA and CPVA PW, and are willing to work out the details of such an organization as soon as practicable after General Dodd's release.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, it was translated and Colson had it delivered to Compound 76, along with the message that the new deadline for freeing Dodd was 1200. Although Van Fleet had explicitly told Colson the afternoon before that under no circumstances should the deadline be extended beyond 1000, and although Eighth Army had refused a two-hour extension when Colson had requested it the evening before, Colson now extended the deadline on his own authority. It was contrary to express orders, but Colson probably felt justified because it was not now the prisoners who were holding things up but Colson himself, or to be more precise, his translator.

The 1200 deadline passed, then Colson received a phone call from the captive general. Dodd said that the POWs refused to accept Colson's reply. He told Colson that there had been incidents of prisoners being killed and that Colson's reply denied this. The problems with Colson's reply, Dodd said, were semantical, but until these problems were cleared up, the communists would not release him. "Then," said Bevin Alexander in *Korea: The First War We Lost*, "an astonishing thing happened: with the POW leaders sitting beside him, Dodd passed on their and his own suggestions to Colson to rewrite his reply in a form acceptable to the communists; Dodd even offered to write in the changes the prisoners considered mandatory."<sup>35</sup>

Later on in the afternoon, Colson sent his second written response into Compound 76, and this too was rejected by the communists. The haggling over "acceptable" language was to last for the rest of the day and into the night.

Finally, in the early evening, the third note Colson and Dodd framed met with the communists' approval — "as indeed it might have," wrote an embittered Ridgway, "for in the first paragraph the former camp commander pleaded guilty to one of the worst charges trumped up by the leaders of the POWs."<sup>36</sup> The reply read as follows:

1. With reference to your item 1 of that message, I do admit that there has [sic] been instances of bloodshed where many PW have been killed and wounded by UN Forces. I can assure in the future that PW can expect humane treatment in

this camp according to the principles of International Law. I will do all within my power to eliminate further violence and bloodshed. If such incidents happen in the future, I will be responsible.

2. Reference your item 2 regarding voluntary repatriation of Korean Peoples Army and Chinese Peoples Volunteer Army PW, that is a matter which is being discussed at Panmunjom. I have no control or influence over the decisions at the peace conference.
3. Regarding your item 3 pertaining to forcible investigation (screening), I can inform you that after General Dodd's release, unharmed, there will be no more forcible screening or any rearming of PW in this camp, nor will any attempt be made at nominal screening.
4. Reference your item 4, we approve the organization of a PW representative group or commission consisting of Korean Peoples Army and Chinese Peoples Volunteer Army, PW, according to the details agreed to by Gen Dodd and approved by me.<sup>37</sup>

The POWs wanted Dodd to stay overnight so they could conduct a ceremony honoring him Sunday morning. In recognition of his services, they planned to literally deck him with flowers and to escort him to the gate. But Colson had had enough; Dodd was to be released immediately. Finally, at 2130 on 10 May 1952, Dodd walked out of Compound 76. No blood had been shed on either side and Dodd was free, but the troubles for Generals Dodd and Colson were just beginning.

#### **DENOUEMENT: "Under great duress"**

At 0800 the following morning, Ridgway turned command of both the FEC and UNC over to Mark Clark and left Japan a few hours later, bound for his new assignment as commander in chief of NATO. In a statement released to the press that afternoon, Clark explained what had transpired on Koje-do. His statement included the full text of the note listing the inmates' demands, as well as the full text of the confession Colson had signed. Clark said that the latter had been signed "under great duress at a time when the life of General Dodd was at stake," that "the communist demands were unadulterated blackmail and any commitments made by General Colson as a result of such demands should be interpreted accordingly."<sup>38</sup> Dodd met with the press and read a brief account of his three-day ordeal, concluding with the statement that "the demands made by the POWs are inconsequential and the concessions granted by the camp authorities were of minor importance."<sup>39</sup> Van Fleet also discounted the damage done by the confession.<sup>40</sup>

But these efforts at damage control were fruitless. The communists fully exploited Colson's confession on a global scale. *The Forgotten War: America in Korea, 1950-1953* contains Clay Blair's apt assessment of the extent of the damage. He saw the

incident as “humiliating the United States and Eighth Army and raising serious questions worldwide over the validity of the voluntary repatriation doctrine.”<sup>41</sup> The communists had taken what could have, would have, and should have been a stunning U.S. and UNC propaganda victory and turned it into a dismal defeat.

On 12 May, at the 2nd Logistical Command headquarters in Pusan, General Yount established a board to investigate the actions taken by both Dodd and Colson. Although Van Fleet had discounted the damage done by the “confession,” when the board found both Colson and Dodd blameless on 15 May, he wasn’t pleased. The next day, in a message to Clark, he recommended administrative action against Dodd and an administrative reprimand for Colson. For his part, Clark believed that enormous damage had been done, saying, “It is beyond my comprehension how the board could have arrived at such conclusions in the face of the obviously poor judgment displayed by both of these officers.”<sup>42</sup> He proposed that both Dodd and Colson be reduced in rank to colonel. Clark also proposed that Yount be given an administrative reprimand for failing to catch several particularly damaging phrases in the confession. The Department of the Army approved Clark’s recommendations, as did the JCS and President Truman.

Because “Monday morning quarterbacks” make no errors, to maintain the humility essential for learning from the mistakes of others we must remember that we have more time to analyze the available options, more information, greater perspective, and infinitely more detachment than did Dodd and Colson. Clearly, both men were simply doing the best they could to avert bloodshed on both sides. It must be remembered that it was not only Dodd’s life that hung in the balance, but also the lives of pro- and anticommunist POWs and civilian internees and of U.S. and ROK Army troops.

Both men had every reason to believe that a forcible entry of Compound 76 would result in many casualties. In fact, as we’ve seen, the intelligence report that Colson received the day he signed the confession forecast a mass breakout of all compounds if any assault on Compound 76 was launched. And the 6,500 inmates of Compound 76 were well armed. That was confirmed a month later, when Brigadier General Haydon L. “Bull” Boatner sent six tanks and the 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team into the compound. The paratroopers confiscated a number of weapons, including 3,000 metal-tipped spears, 1,000 Molotov cocktails, and 4,500 knives.<sup>43</sup> Boatner restored order quickly, with the casualties totaling 31 dead and 139 wounded inmates and one dead and 14 wounded Americans — far fewer casualties than one might expect, given the circumstances.

Few will suggest that standing in either Dodd’s or Colson’s boots would have been easy, yet some of the decisions they made seem so patently wrong that we can’t imagine what they were thinking. First, there is the matter of camp security. Even though we’ve seen that Van Fleet is reported to have told Dodd to “go easy” on the prisoners, just to keep them quiet because an armistice was imminent, that would hardly justify Dodd’s failure to take even basic security measures — things like ordering that all gates be kept locked, for example — during the two and a half months he spent as camp commander

before he was taken hostage. And he had certainly been there long enough to realize that, since the inmates had kidnapped and kept UNC soldiers hostage before, as in the case of Lieutenant Colonel Raven, going to talk with them unarmed and without an armed guard, with only an unlocked gate as a barrier, was not a wise practice. In fact, even if the prisoners hadn't kidnapped anyone previously, Dodd's action displays a woeful lack of common sense.

Then there's Colson's delay in acting. Although Colson had had the means to forcibly end POW resistance before the tanks arrived, we, like Van Fleet, can understand his decision to wait until they did. Employment of the tanks would almost certainly help to minimize UNC casualties. Colson may have thought that just the sight of twenty tanks ringing Compound 76 might make the POWs back off. It didn't, but it had certainly been worth a try. In the early afternoon of 9 May, Van Fleet had approved waiting for the tanks but reminded Colson that he was in charge and was cleared to effect a forcible entry of Compound 76 at any time of his choosing.

However, Van Fleet had also said that if the POWs had not released Dodd by 1000 on 10 May, all talking must end and a forcible entry of Compound 76 be effected. We know about the problem in failing to obtain timely translations of the documents that passed between Colson and Compound 76 that day, but when all is said and done, the fact remains that, when 1000 came and Colson did not act, he was in direct violation of an explicit order given to him personally by the commanding general of the Eighth Army the afternoon of the day before. Later, at dusk on 9 May, Colson had requested a two-hour extension of the 1000 deadline, but Eighth Army had refused.

Finally, there is the matter of the "confession." Despite Clark's public statement that the confession had been extracted through "unadulterated blackmail" and "should be interpreted accordingly," despite Van Fleet's similar assessment, and despite the fact that, on 15 May, the JCS told Clark to say that the confession had "no validity whatsoever" because it was obtained under "duress involving the physical threat to the life of a UN officer," Colson's superiors, from Van Fleet up to and including President Truman, said by their actions that they considered signing a worthless document with "no validity whatsoever" a serious offense indeed.<sup>44</sup> No matter that refusal to sign would result in the death of an American general officer, and no matter the very real possibility that that death would trigger a bloody breakout of scores of thousands of POWs.

By Van Fleet's recommending administrative action against Dodd and an administrative reprimand for Colson, by Clark's recommending that both men be reduced in rank and that Yount be given an administrative reprimand, and by the Department of the Army's, the JCS', and President Truman's approval of Clark's recommendations, the chain of command sent a crystal-clear message: Signing a document that seriously damages the image of the United States in the eyes of the world merely in order to prevent bloodshed is not an acceptable course of action for an American officer.

Ridgway later set forth his thoughts on the whole sad mess:

I felt that Dodd, like every other professional soldier, had accepted the risk of violent death when he chose his profession. A great many men had already given their lives to back up our government's refusal to confess uncommitted offenses to the Communists or to compromise our stand on repatriation. In wartime a general's life is no more precious than the life of a common soldier. Each is asked to risk his life every day to protect the safety, the freedom, and the honor of his country. If, in order to save an officer's life, we abandoned the cause for which enlisted men had died, we would be guilty of betraying the men whose lives had been placed in our care.<sup>45</sup>

Clark's view was equally succinct, not only in the "let them keep that dumb son of a bitch Dodd, and then go in and level the place" reaction reported by Goulden, but in his memoirs: "You don't negotiate with prisoners of war, particularly fanatical Communist PWs who consider themselves combatants despite capture."<sup>46</sup>

Most military historians are of like mind, as the following sampling illustrates. First there is Walter Hermes, representing the U.S. Army's Office of the Chief of Military History:

Better security procedures, locks on the gates, a screen of guards between Dodd and the prisoners during the talks, might have prevented the kidnapping, but Dodd was careless in this respect and placed too much confidence in the prisoners' sincerity and good faith. ...

During the last day of negotiations Dodd's role as intermediary became more vital. Given a new lease on life by the postponement of action, he labored zealously to help work out a formula that the prisoners would accept. Under these circumstances, the concessions that he urged upon Colson tended to favor the Communist position of the controversial items. The pressure of time and of translation added to confusion. It is evident that the Communists knew what they wanted and that Dodd and Colson were more interested in preventing casualties than they were in denying political and propaganda advantages to the enemy. ...

As it turned out, Colson traded Dodd's life for a propaganda weapon that was far more valuable to the Communists than the lives of their prisoners of war.<sup>47</sup>

Bevin Alexander remarks:

For an American general officer, whatever the circumstances, to admit mistreatment, killing and wounding of prisoners, and to promise in the future to give prisoners humane treatment was a political disaster. ... The Reds, in world opinion, threatened to push the Americans off the moral high ground they had taken when Truman decided against forcible repatriation. Now the issue was no longer clear.<sup>48</sup>

In *A Short History of the Korean War*, James L. Stokesbury says that Dodd "was more concerned with alleviating tensions and less with maintaining discipline than he should have been," and that —

there was absolutely no doubt as to who had scored the points. The Communists' aim in the matter had been to discredit the screening process ... and they had to a certain extent done so. How much that mattered in any long run is problematical. What they had really demonstrated was their ability and willingness to use the Americans' desire to be fair, and above all their desire to be seen to be fair, to make fools of them.<sup>49</sup>

Probably the most charitable (and perhaps the most accurate) assessment of Dodd and Colson is to be found in *The Harper Encyclopedia of Military History*, where historians R. Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy characterize General Dodd as "naive" and General Colson as "unwitting that he was abetting a Communist propaganda coup."<sup>50</sup>

The Kojedo incident has taught us what boundaries an American officer may not cross in negotiating with terrorists, no matter that the terrorists may be in custody. But there is another lesson no less important. Kojedo changed forever the way in which Americans look upon prisoners of war, and not just about the advisability of locking the gates. Until then, the concept of using POWs to play an active part in war was totally foreign to Americans. Traditionally, when Americans had been captured, both they and their countrymen had considered them to be pieces that were removed from the board. True, they were expected to escape at the first opportunity, but this was only so they could rejoin their units and continue to fight in the "official" war as armed and uniformed combatants. For the most part, the enemies the United States had fought in previous wars held the same view. But Korea was an entirely different ball game, and Mark Clark's frustration comes through loud and clear:

[Before reporting to Japan to relieve Ridgway] I hadn't bothered to ask anyone in Washington about the POWs because my experience had been with old-fashioned wars in which prisoners were people who had to be fed, housed, clothed and guarded, nothing more. Never had I experienced a situation in which prisoners remained combatants and carried out orders smuggled to them from the enemy high command. In North Africa and Italy we captured hundreds of thousands of Germans and Italians and they all conformed to the provisions of the Geneva Convention, which establishes the whole modern concept of a prisoner's rights and obligations in captivity. He may try to escape, but while under restraint he **must** [emphasis in original] obey his captors or suffer the consequences. He cannot be forced to reveal military information. He must be treated humanely, fed, housed and clothed as well as possible.

The Communists, making their own rules as they went along, didn't see it that way.<sup>51</sup>

Many others have made the same observation, among them Stephen Pease, who said in *Psywar: Psychological Warfare in Korea, 1950-1953*, "The NKPA and CCF {Chinese Communist Force} considered the prisons extensions of the battlefield."<sup>52</sup> As we have seen in the second half of the twentieth century, communist regimes have considered their own troops held in enemy prison camps to be still very much on the playing board, ready not only to escape but to perform terrorist acts and to provoke pitched battles

with well-armed troops of the detaining power if ordered to do so. They have considered any American POWs they have held to be on the board as well. Exploiting American POWs for purposes of propaganda has, in both Korea and Vietnam, seemed many times to be a bigger priority than attempting to extract intelligence information from them. This is an extremely ugly fact of life, but it's one for which we must be prepared.

## CONCLUSION

Was the punishment meted out to Dodd and Colson excessive or lenient? That is a matter of opinion. No one seriously criticized the loyalty, courage or integrity of either man. Even those who were angriest about their actions, as for example, Mark Clark, spoke in terms of "poor judgment." Few will disagree with Clark; Kojedo could never have become such a stunning propaganda victory for the communists and such a humiliating defeat for the UNC and the United States had there not been a linked series of errors of judgment, from the lack of proper security precautions to the actual signing of the "confession." It could be argued that the mistakes made by Dodd and by Colson could have been made by any number of American officers. After all, there was no precedent in the history of American arms for what transpired on that rocky little island on those four May days in 1952.

While there was no exact precedent, there was a standard of conduct the United States requires of all its soldiers who become POWs. Although the Code of Conduct as we know it wasn't promulgated until 1955, the prohibition against making any "oral or written statements disloyal to {America} and its allies *or harmful to their cause* (emphasis added)" should have gone without saying. In fact, to many it did. A number of American soldiers in North Korea POW camps were resisting signing "confessions" to germ warfare and other war crimes despite death threats, savage beatings, and physical torture. To have held general officers to a lesser standard would have been unconscionable.

Where Dodd and Colson went wrong was their failure to realize that Dodd was, for all intents and purposes, a POW, bound by the same requirements as any other POW. Instead, both men seemed to view themselves as some kind of junior statesmen hammering out a peace treaty — junior statesmen to whom the greatest good was not a victory, but the avoidance of bloodshed. The message of Kojedo is not that professional soldiers should not be concerned with minimizing or avoiding bloodshed, but that this cannot be their primary concern.

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