

History of the NCO: The Second Korean Conflict

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The events that took place on the Korean peninsula, north of the Imjin River in the late sixties went virtually unnoticed by the western world. After the cease-fire was declared in 1953, bringing about the end to the three years of armed conflict which was the Korean War, the American public perceived the hostilities to be over after having paid the price of the lives of more than 30,000 Americans. But after the combat Soldiers returned home, a contingent of US troops remained in Korea to aid the Republic of Korea (ROK) Army in its vital defense against North Korea by the guarding the demilitarized zone (DMZ). The DMZ crossed the entire Korean peninsula and was guarded primarily by the ROK Army with the exception of an 18 mile sector for which the US Army held responsibility.

For the next thirteen years, American NCOs posted guards, conducted patrols, and otherwise led Soldiers in the successful defense of the Southern border during a most volatile cold-war era standoff with minimal incident. During this time however, over two thousand miles away, another standoff with a communist threat was escalating in a small Southeast Asian country called Vietnam. Just as the United States was focusing its military might to deter the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, the Republic of Korea sent 2 Divisions and a Marine Brigade to support the war in Vietnam. As the conflict continued to escalate, American troop levels dropped in the two American Divisions stationed in Korea in order to augment the Divisions serving in Vietnam. Meanwhile in Korea, with 2 ROK Divisions out of country and both the 2d Infantry Division and the 7th Infantry Division experiencing shortages in both manpower and materiel, North Korea had an opportunity that it could not refuse to exploit.

Only a month after South Korea's 9th Division deployed to Vietnam, 5 October, 1966, Kim Il Sung gave a speech before the Korean Worker's Party Convention in which he said, "*In the present situation, the US imperialists should be dealt blows and their forces dispersed to the*

maximum in Asia and Europe, Africa and Latin America. They should be bound hand and foot everywhere they are. All the socialist countries should oppose the aggression of US imperialism in Vietnam and render every possible support to the people of Vietnam. As the DRV is being attacked by the US imperialists, the socialist countries should fight more sharply against them.”

This speech was to be the precursor for a new advent of hostilities between the North and South on the Korean peninsula. The North's plan was to drive a wedge between the US and the people of South Korea. If the North could win the popular support of the people in the South, than a unified, communist Korea could be achievable if the US withdrew its troops. The timing could not have been better. With support for the war in Vietnam decreasing at home in the US and the existing strain on US Forces in Korea, carefully planned cross-border operations would only fan the flames of tension in the South.

The conditions set on the world stage primed North Korea for success in the South with only one obstacle which would prevent the accomplishment of that objective, the American Soldier. At each attempt to drive that proverbial wedge between the US and South Korea, the enemy was defeated. Whether in conventional combat, acts of sabotage, psychological operations, or veritable acts of terrorism, the training, dedication to duty, and genuine concern for the people of Korea possessed by the US Soldier stationed there overcame the enemy threat on all accounts. The first of these attacks was planned to coincide with the visit of President Lyndon Johnson, who was staying near Seoul on 2 November 1966. Eight Soldiers of the 1/23rd Infantry were ambushed while on patrol by North Koreans. Only one Soldier, PFC David Bisbee survived the attack by playing dead although he suffered 48 wounds from shrapnel. The heroism and dedication to duty that would eventually lead to the defeat of the North Korean aggression was exemplified best by Private Ernest Reynolds who was posthumously awarded the Congressional

Medal of Honor for his actions in that ambush. Having been in country for only three weeks, his actions were a direct credit to his personal courage coupled with the high standard of professional training received just weeks before at the US Army Infantry School at Fort Benning, GA. This attack was meant to be an embarrassment to both the US and South Korean Presidents instead, it served to strengthen not only the resolve of the US forces but the support of a pro-American Korean people as well.

Over 300 attacks occurred near that 18 mile stretch of land under US patrol between May of 1967 and January of 1968. After which time the Secretary of Defense designated the area between the DMZ and the Imjin River as a hostile fire zone as Soldiers were routinely engaging enemy force in combat. The Secretary's approval noted, *"The men serving along the demilitarized zone are no longer involved in Cold War operations. They are in every sense of the word involved in combat where vehicles are blown up by mines, patrols are ambushed, and psychological operations are conducted on a continuing basis."* Though the events taking place in Korea took a back page to the war in Vietnam, the conflict in Korea continued to escalate.

US forces, in an effort to deter cross border operations, erected a barrier defense along the 18 mile section of the DMZ. This barrier was comprised of a chain link fence standing 10 feet high topped with triple concertina wire, an anti-personnel minefield, and a combination of foxholes and guard tower in line connected by landline and radio. Vegetation was cleared along roads to the guard posts using Rome plows and defoliants (later claims of health complications caused by Agent Orange were substantiated by the Department of Veterans Affairs) to reduce cover and concealment for enemy troops. Even the implementation of these precautions was not without its cost. NCOs such as SFC Phillip Boudreaux, a Platoon Sergeant with B Company, 2nd Battalion, 31st Infantry who was leading Soldier back to Camp Casey from a work detail to clear

vegetation and repair a fence section, was ambushed and killed when North Koreans attacked with grenades and automatic weapons. The work detail, only some of which were armed with M-14s, fought back from defensive positions behind the overturned 2 ½ ton truck that had been driven by SFC Boudreaux just moments before. It was the actions of a Squad Leader, Sergeant Edwin Parpart Jr. that made the difference that day on the DMZ when he crawled from the convoy wreckage up the hill to an observation post to call for support. The work detail was able to defend their position until support arrived.

Concerns grew over the shortages in troop strength so at the request of President Park, who stated that he would withdraw his troops from Vietnam if the US did not take more definitive action to defend against North Korea, Special Forces teams from Okinawa as well as replacements previously bound for Vietnam were diverted to Korea; still, a shortage existed in the level of NCOs need for leadership. Soldiers who had displayed leadership potential were sent immediately to the Divisions NCO Academies to cultivate that potential and help fill the much needed NCO Ranks. Additionally, increased training was provided in light infantry tactics by both the 7th and 9th Infantry Divisions. NCOs continued to train the “Imjin Scouts”, a name given to those infantry Soldiers who patrolled north of the Imjin River, in specialized tactics that were unique to the local operations. Such was the dedication of the Imjin Scouts that those Soldiers who served (as much as 50 times a year) who patrolled the area North of the Imjin River were authorized to wear the Imjin Scout Patch. This patch called “the poor man’s CIB” was so named because the actions required for the award of the CIB on the DMZ were so much more stringent than in Vietnam that Soldiers joked that it usually came along with the award of the Purple Heart. Not until June of 2005 would the requirements for the award of the CIB for Korean service during that time period be the same as in Vietnam.

Because of the aggressive training techniques and the implementation of those learned skills, the attacks which peaked in 1968, in conjunction with the Tet Offensive in Vietnam ,at more than 700 sharply declined the following year to only about 100. Just as quickly as hostilities had flared up three years earlier did they die down in 1969. As a result of the extensive toll that the Vietnam War had taken upon US Troop levels, the 7th Infantry Division was withdrawn from Korea after 23 years of service. Though peace does not yet exist, attacks as they were seen in that period referred to as historians as “The Second Korean Conflict” have not again been seen. When all is counted since the 1953 cease fire agreement, more Americans have lost their lives in post-war Korea than in Operation Power Pack in 1965, Operation Urgent Fury in 1983, Operation Just Cause in 1989-90, and Operation Restore Hope in 1993.

Surviving members of that conflict recall for us cold nights on guard listening to North Korean exploitation of US Army Deserter Charles Jenkins trying to break the American morale and get them to leave to the north. Though they received little recognition for doing so, those brave Soldiers dedicated to making a difference, maintained the security of a nation and the freedom of its people by thwarting a communist aggressor during one of the most trying time in the history of the world.

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