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Korean Artic Warfare; did we learn our lessons?

SGM Gonzalez Ricardo

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

L03 Class 58

SGM(R) Osvarado Vasquez

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ABSTRACT

When American troops arrived in Korea, they encountered two fierce enemies, the North Korean Army and the effects of a brutal winter. Ten percent of all casualties during the war succumbed to weather conditions. Adaptability, lack of training and deficiencies in equipment issue caused many unnecessary injuries and loss of combat readiness.

Today the Army is equipped with state of the art equipment designed to test the most strenuous circumstances. Even though this training is currently in use during on-going conflicts, U.S. Forces still have a test of time and readiness ahead should we engage in a full Artic operation.

During the Korean War winters, U.S. Military Forces experienced poorly trained troops and lacked operational readiness (e.g. suitable equipment, experience, availability and training) to face an Arctic War. Arctic conditions became a challenge, as equipment was not suitable or available. Limited training opportunities failed to get troops fully knowledgeable and adapted to arctic warfare and survival.

The Korean War begins on June 25, 1950 as a civil war between separate factions; North Korea gathered the support of Russia and China while the United States along with the United Nations rendered support to South Korea. The war ended on July 27, 1953.

The equipment used in Korea was standard issue cold weather gear that included field jacket with hood, wool long johns, wool uniform shirt and trousers; two fatigue jackets, two fatigue trousers, sleeping bag and the “artic shoe-pac”.

The condition of the equipment was not suitable for cold weather operations; many cases confirm that cold weather issue was not available or issued such was the case with gloves; many men only had work gloves that did not offer the protection necessary. This caused the particular problem of cuts around where fingernails join the skin; this condition gave soldiers a severe risk of infection.

The "shoe-pac" was the replacement for the conventional black boot; it was a rubberized and airtight cold weather shoe with moisture collecting interchangeable sole. Even though the “shoe-pac” provided a vast improvement over the traditional boot, it did not prove to be suitable for infantry operations; foot conditions accounted for 95% of the severe frostbite cases.

Every man was required to change his socks daily to guard against trench foot; in addition, the company aidmen inspected the feet of all members of the unit everyday. It is essential to point out that even though foot inspections were a norm in rear operations; this was

not the case with the troops on the front, where most of the cold weather injuries occurred.

During the Korean War, the equipment was sub-standard; many recollections depict conventional clothing, boots and parkas without liners that would not withhold their effectiveness in temperatures not far below freezing; temperatures in Korea often ranged from 30 to 100 degrees below zero.

Another adversary that soldiers encountered dealt with the warming tents. Warming tents were composed of a potbelly stove and coffee for temporary relief. Soldiers always had the weapon by their side in fear of an eminent attack and therefore, when a soldier entered the warming tent the equipment would collect moisture from the heat, when the soldier steps back out, literally in seconds the weapon to include the chamber are completely frozen. The weapon's life and serviceability during the war was consistent with the amount of moisture and lubricant inside the chamber, one common problem with moisture is that the first round would go off but the following round would fail to engage due to icy conditions. In terms of operational readiness, this caused a great challenge for the troops.

The following quotes depict the conditions that soldiers had to endure during the Korean War.

“A check showed no errors in gun settings, however a shot landed on a ridge right in front of us, we quickly figured out that the powder's composure was not right, powder thermometers carried by each gun section confirmed that our assumption was correct. The thermometer read thirty-two degrees below zero”.

David Hackworth, the most decorated soldier of the war with eight purple hearts said, “At one time we lost a guy a day and guys were losing fingers and toes”. “To this day I tend to have serious pain in the cold weather”. These are some of the accounts that soldiers have left in the

Adaptability was a key issue that determined the fate of hundreds of thousands of soldiers during the Korean War. The issue of cold weather injuries became so great during 1950 that it prompted the initiation of a cold weather injury center at the Osaka Army Hospital. By 1951, the problem of cold weather injuries became worst and the center began to credit geographical belonging; soldiers from warmer states fared worst than the ones from colder states, race; blacks had less tolerance than whites and lower enlisted suffered more perhaps because of a lack of personal discipline.

One adaptation and technique that saved soldiers from frostbite were freeze-drying, a process by which soldiers would wait to have the moisture collected by the sock freeze so that later it could be shaken off, according to the soldiers, this process got rid of 90 % of the moisture.

The best training and adaptation scenario that the U.S. Army possesses is located at Ft. Wainwright, Alaska, here temperatures often fall below -50 degrees. With the wind-chill factor, it is not rare for temperatures to reach minus -70 degrees. These extreme temperatures obviously present challenges for maintaining personnel and equipment. Here soldiers learn how to maneuver and operate in arctic conditions. One, good old fashioned, tactic against the cold, used in Korea and in today's operations is dressing in layers in order to minimize overheating and dehydration. However, today's training consists of several simple to do tasks that were not in place during the Korean War. Soldiers learn that it takes less energy to heat water from a canteen cup than to melt snow in their mouth. Soldiers also learn to keep canteens close to the body to keep the water from freezing. Students become aware of the importance and danger of fuel spills as they can produce frostbite instantly when in contact with skin.

Another training aspect that leaders continuously learn is identification, first aid and

prevention of symptoms such as hypothermia, chilblain, immersion foot, frostbite and dehydration. Easy to remember acronyms such as C.O.L.D. E. R reminds soldiers to C: keep clothing clean, O: avoid overheating, L: wear clothing loose and in layers, D: keep clothing as dry as possible, E: examine clothing for holes, tears, and broken fasteners, R: Repair or replace damaged clothing.

A vast improvement from the Korean War days is that during training, soldiers receive vapor-barrier boots that are warm to 40 degrees below zero, polypropylene top and bottom artic mittens with trigger fingers, triple layered sleeping bags, stoves with non-freezing fuels and insulated tents is the standard issue

Through a combination of lessons learned, advanced technology and a broader sense of awareness, the Army has taken a proactive course of action in order not to have unnecessary casualties due to cold weather operations. Even though Kosovo and Afghanistan have tested the Army's ability to respond to cold weather operations, U.S. Forces still have a test ahead if called upon to engage in artic weather operations. U.S. Forces will be able to determine the success in the battlefield by employment of advanced technology, training and adaptation to a highly demanding climate.