

KOREA
60 YEARS AGO

The Korean War: It Started on a Sunday in June

By R. R. Keene

In the early morning hours of Sunday, 25 June 1950, Sergeant George V. Lampman and two other Marine security guards were the duty watchstanders at the U.S. Embassy in Seoul's Bando (Peninsula) Hotel.

In the June 2000 issue of *Leatherneck*, Lampman wrote in his article, "Without So Much As a Bloody Nose," that the embassy security phone began ringing at 0530 and he "started receiving inquiries from people asking, 'What's going on?'" Sgt Lampman had no idea.

At 0830, Jack James, a correspondent with United Press International, came in saying: "The North Koreans have crossed over the parallel in force." Watchstander Sgt Paul Dupras said, "So what? That is a common occurrence." James nodded in agreement, and then added the real kicker: "Yeah, but this time they've got tanks."

As always, with hindsight, it seemed bound to happen. Korea—"The Land of the Morning Calm," "The Hermit Kingdom," and home to the mythical *Arirang*

mountain pass storied in folk song—is ruggedly beautiful with similarly rugged and fascinating inhabitants believed to be descendants of Altaic-speaking tribes linked to the Mongolians who started populating the Korean Peninsula in the Bronze Age.

Since then, Korea, by virtue of its geography, often has been a pawn of war in that conquerors saw the nation—roughly the size of Minnesota—as a means to and not necessarily the object of their quests. Self-preservation drove Koreans to become a north Asia military power symbolized by their 15th- to 19th-century *Geobukseon*, or turtle ships.

As a nation, Korea preferred isolation and was loathe to welcome foreigners, often discouraging trade delegations with cannon. The United States, although a relative novice in Asia, had sent Marine expeditions to Korea three times since 1871 and, on the fourth mission in 1905, established a legation guard in Seoul. Eventually, with its turtle ships outdated and its military prowess fading, Korea was occupied and declared a Japanese protectorate in the 1905 Eulsa Treaty and

officially annexed in 1910. Japan exercised iron-fisted policies and sent Koreans as laborers throughout its ever-expanding empire.

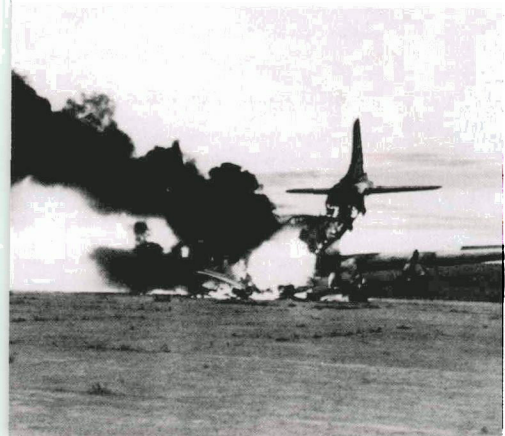
When Japan's Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere ended in total disaster and utter defeat in 1945, it left the 25,000,000 inhabitants of the Korean Peninsula, who could only endure, woefully unprepared to assume the mantle of their own independence.

The foreign powers, however, had their own ideas about how to deal with the Korean problem. As far back as 1943, it was determined at the *Cairo Conference* by American President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Nationalist China's Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek that Korea should be free and independent. At the Potsdam Conference of 1945, convened at the end of World War II in Europe, the 38th parallel was designated as the line dividing the country into Soviet and American occupation zones.

In 1948, the lower peninsula became the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Seoul was chosen as the capital, with Dr. Syng-

Below left: Initially, the North Korean onslaught appeared to be unstoppable as illustrated by this photo of a Douglas C-54 transport strafed by North Korean fighters on 28 June—the same day that Seoul and Kimp'o airfields fell and the South Korean government moved to Taejeon.

Below right: On 26 June, 10 P-51 Mustangs were transferred to the ROK and their pilots briefed by the Americans. (U.S. Army Signal Corps photo)



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Armed with antiquated bolt-action rifles and little else, ROK recruits moved north to battle on 5 July. They would have to learn fast, which they did once American and United Nations forces arrived, eventually becoming a modern fighting force.



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man Rhee as president. In June 1949, American occupation troops were withdrawn from South Korea. Only a cadre of advisors remained.

The north, or Democratic People's Republic of Korea as it came to be known, was another story. For decades since World War I, more than a million Koreans had found refuge from Japanese bondage on Russian or Chinese soil. The price of their self-imposed exile was indoctrination with communist principles and mandatory military training.

In 1948, the Soviets announced the withdrawal of their military forces, but not before providing the North Korean Prime Minister, Kim Il Sung, with a military perceived to be better equipped and better trained than the ROK forces, mentored by Americans to be strictly defensive. In June 1950, only one regiment of the four ROK divisions was near the North Korean border and a third of them were on leave helping with the harvest. Early in the morning of 25 June, scattered but heavy rain was falling along the 38th parallel. All was quiet. Kim Il Sung believed the time to reunify Korea under the red banner of communism was at hand.

Thus, on the morning of 25 June, calling it the "Fatherland Liberation War," Kim Il Sung ordered the attack. An armored division of Russian-made North

Korean T-34 medium tanks coughed diesel fuel and clamored at speeds of up to 30 kilometers an hour in advance of eight North Korean infantry divisions (231,000 men) moving south across the 38th parallel down the west end of the peninsula. The main thrust took the ancient invasion route down the Uijongbu Corridor to Seoul. Overhead, 150 Russian-made Yakovlev (Yak-9P) fighters, 110 attack bombers and 78 Yak trainer aircraft strafed Seoul and other strategic centers.

Marine historians Lynn Montross and Captain Nicholas A. Canzona, USMC wrote in their 1954 "Volume I: U.S. Marine Operations in Korea," "The Americans, who leaned backwards to avoid any suspicion of creating an instrument of offense [offensive] internecine warfare" had neither enough tanks nor aircraft to stop them. South Korean forces, approximately 65,000 combat troops with 33,000 support troops, began defecting en masse.

U.S. Ambassador John J. Muccio told Sgt Dupras to recall all 20 Marine embassy security guards. Marines quartered

in the Capitol Apartments were told to bring any weapons they had with them and that a jeep already was on the way.

The jeep was painted bright orange to distinguish it from Army vehicles. It caught

the attention of two Yak fighters, who made two strafing passes. Sgts Augustus E. "Gus" Siefken and Lampman, the jeep's only passengers, and their Korean driver all survived with only wounded pride.

The strafing of Seoul was blatantly indiscriminate, causing civilian casualties and panic. The streets became jammed as civilians fleeing south ran into young recruits of the Korean Army Second Division heading north from Taejon.

By midnight, Deputy Ambassador Everett F. Drumright reported that it was clear the North Korean advance to Seoul was unstoppable. The decision was made to evacuate American dependents.

Marines were sent to alert embassy families, and embassy vehicles "deadlined" in the embassy motor pool were destroyed to prevent their possible use by the invaders. The embassy staff screened and burned classified ma-



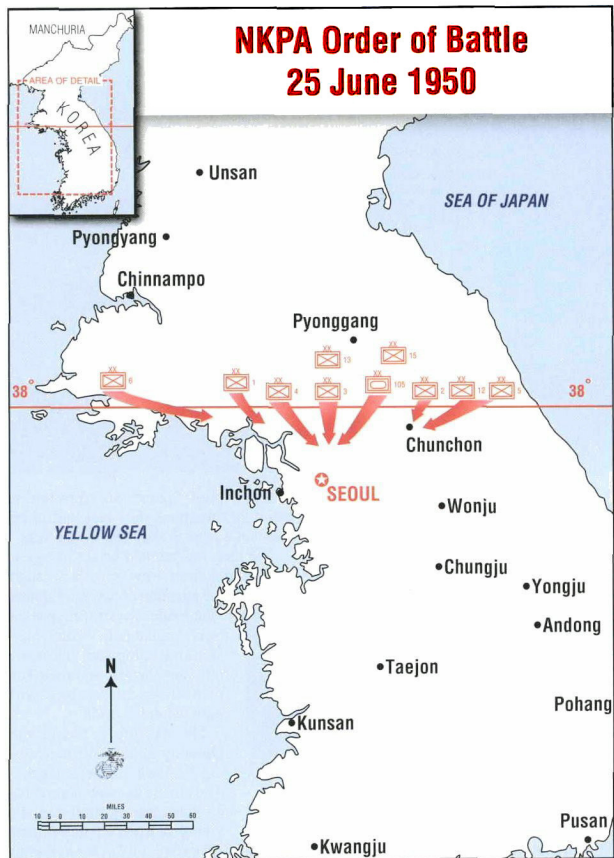
Syngman Rhee



Kim Il Sung

Right: President Truman (left) coordinates with his Secretary of State, Dean Acheson. Acheson, the elder statesman, served as Secretary of State from 1949 to 1953 and was decisive in shaping the Truman Doctrine, NATO Alliance and providing advice at the start of the Korean War.

Far right: The Potsdam Conference of victorious Allies in July 1945 brought the Soviet Union's commitment to entering the war against Japan. The result was a Soviet occupation of northern Korea and Korea's partition along the 38th parallel.



"guest" of the Emperor of Japan during World War II and let it be known that none of the Marines were going to be captured. In the end, they caught the last plane out of Kimpo. It was dangerously overloaded, and as it lumbered down the runway, Suitcases, boxes, bags and weapons were jettisoned, but they made it.

In the United States, Secretary of State Dean Acheson telephoned President Harry S. Truman, informing him, "The attack is in full force all along the parallel."

John Toland, in his book "In Mortal Combat, Korea, 1950 to 1953," wrote: "The President exclaimed, 'We've got to stop those sons-of-b----- no matter what!'"

On 27 June, the President met with his Vice President and 14 congressmen. After Dean Acheson presented a summary of the Korean crisis, the President announced: "I have ordered United States air and sea forces to give the Korean government troops cover and support." Toland wrote: "There was no criticism of the actions taken by the President."

Things started happening fast, perhaps too fast for the cumbersome bureaucracy of the Soviet Union. It is important to note that United Nations Secretary General Trygve Lie advised Soviet Union U.N. Ambassador Yakov A. Malik that it would be in the best interests of the Soviet Union to attend a meeting at the U.N. that afternoon.

Much to the relief of American Delegate to the Security Council Ernest Gross, Ambassador Malik replied, "No, I will not go there." (He was boycotting the presence of a Nationalist Chinese representative.) According to Toland, Gross recalled thinking that "for the first time in recorded history, a world organization [by

terial. The amount of material was enormous. The Marines used furnaces in the embassy basement, but it took eight Marines working around-the-clock until Tuesday, 27 June, to burn it all and destroy the code machines.

Meanwhile, other Marines ensured that a group of 682 women and children were taken to the port of Incheon and placed on board a Norwegian fertilizer hauler, *Reinholt*. They also escorted a bus of embassy employees to Kimpo aerodrome to be evacuated in several C-54 transports. The

last plane out was attacked by Yak fighters. Some of the few American P-51 Mustangs and F-82 Twin Mustangs knocked down one of the North Korean planes, and the rest scattered. Still, as always, there were others, including the Marines, who needed to get out.

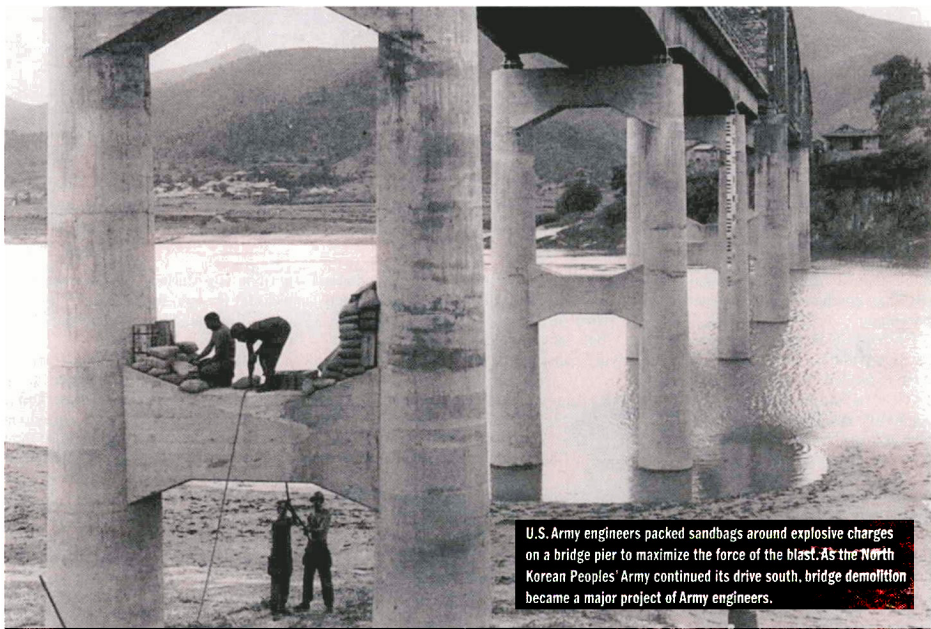
According to Lampman, the Marines figured to head south toward Pusan and then, if the situation warranted, start swimming. Master Sergeant John F. Runck, the Marine detachment noncommissioned officer in charge, had been a



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U.S. Army engineers packed sandbags around explosive charges on a bridge pier to maximize the force of the blast. As the North Korean Peoples' Army continued its drive south, bridge demolition became a major project of Army engineers.

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unanimous vote] had voted to use force to stop armed aggression."

General Clifton B. Cates was the 19th Commandant of the Marine Corps. A note penned on his desk calendar the day after the news of the invasion reached Washington, D.C., reads: "SecNav's [Secretary of the Navy] policy meeting called off. Nuts."

The next day he wrote: "Recommend

to CNO [Chief of Naval Operations] and SecNav that FMF [Fleet Marine Forces] be employed."

Then, on 3 July, he noted: "Attended JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff] meeting, orders for employment of FMF approved."

When the communists attacked Korean and U.S. forces on the peninsula, the United States Marine Corps had 74,279 leathernecks on active duty (97 percent

of authorized strength). The FMF that Gen Cates volunteered for Korea had a strength of 27,656, with 11,583 assigned to the First Marine Division (Reinforced) and First Marine Aircraft Wing of FMF Pacific.

In truth, all the armed services had taken heavy cuts in appropriations since WW II. Gen Cates pointed out that in reality, the Corps could muster not much



On their way to Korea, leathernecks of the 5th Marines, 1stMarDiv load the personnel transport USS *Henrico* (APA-45), pier side at San Diego. They are carrying the standard camouflage packs and wearing the leggings, which, because of the color, caused the North Koreans to call the Marines, "Yellow Legs," and they feared fighting the men who wore them. (USMC photo)

more than a regimental combat team (RCT) of combat-ready troops with supporting air.

On 2 July, General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, Commander in Chief Far East, requested immediate dispatch of a Marine RCT with supporting aviation elements to the Far East. There was considerable talk of forming an entire Marine division after mobilizing the Reserve. Gen. Cates prudently sent a warning order to the 1stMarDiv at Camp Pendleton, Calif., to get ready and prepare to go to war.

On 7 July, the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade was activated. Word went out to regular Marines everywhere: Get to Pendleton now!

Captain Francis I. "Ike" Fenton Jr., then-executive officer of Company B, 1st Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment, later told historians: "These men were shipped from the posts and stations by air, most of them arriving with just a handbag.

Their seabags were to be forwarded at a later date. They didn't have dog tags and had no health records to tell us how many shots they needed. Their clothing generally consisted of khaki only, although a few had greens.

"They had no weapons and their 782 equipment was incomplete. We had a problem of trying to organize these men into a platoon and getting them all squared away before our departure date."

But there was something else about these men, many of whom were veterans of the Pacific campaigns of World War II.

Author T. R. Fehrenback described them in his book "This Kind of War": "In 1950, a Marine Corps officer was still an officer and a sergeant behaved the way good sergeants behaved since the time of Caesar, expecting no nonsense, allowing none. And Marine leaders had never lost sight of their primary—their only—mission, which was

to fight. The Marine Corps was not made pleasant for men who served in it. It remained the same hard, brutal way of life it had always been.

"In 1950 ... these men walked with a certain confidence and swagger. They were only young men like those about them in Korea, but they were conscious of a standard to live up to, because they had had good training, and it had been impressed upon them that they were United States Marines."

The Korean War that started on 25 June 1950 took the lives of 5,528 Marines, and has never ended. There was a ritualized armistice declared at 1000, 27 July 1953 on the 38th parallel, which crosses the Korean Peninsula for 150 miles and is buffered in the center by a meandering 2½-mile-wide swath bristling with military hardware known as the Demilitarized Zone, the world's most fortified border.

It is fitting to remember it started 60 years ago this month.



Gen. Clifton B. Cates

Leatherneck—On the Web See additional photos on the beginning of the Korean War at www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck/KoreanWarBegins