

IN THEATER

25 JULY 1950: THREE COMBAT FORCES

by Troy J. Sacquety

When war came to the Korean peninsula, only the North was prepared to wage the struggle to unify the two Koreas. Although designed from the start to be a defensive force, the South Korean Army was ill-prepared for the task. Likewise, the U.S.—which had not even acknowledged the possibility of war—was caught flatfooted.

NORTH KOREA

Unlike either the United States or South Korea, North Korea had been preparing for war since 1946. Details on its armed forces at the time are spotty. The ground forces were separated into two “branches.” The first was a heavily indoctrinated 50,000-man internal security force that included an 18,600-man Border Constabulary organized into five brigades, most of which were as well-equipped as the regular infantry forces.¹ The second branch was the North Korean People’s Army (NKPA).

Although estimates vary widely (as high as 223,038), most sources in June 1950 report that the NKPA fielded nearly 117,000 troops (in addition to the Border Constabulary) in the invasion force.² These soldiers were organized into two Corps consisting of seven assault infantry divisions, an armored brigade, three reserve divisions, a separate infantry regiment, and a motorcycle reconnaissance regiment.³ At full strength the NKPA infantry divisions—organized on the Soviet model—stood at eleven thousand men with an integral artillery regiment and SU-76 self-propelled gun, medical, signal, anti-tank, engineer, and training battalions.

Despite the discrepancies in troop levels and unit organization, however, sources do not disagree that the North Korean troops were better trained than their counterparts. Many North Korean soldiers were combat veterans, having served in WWII and after in the Japanese, Soviet, and Chinese Armies. The number of soldiers with prior service in the Chinese Communist Forces’ war against the Nationalist Chinese and Japanese in WWII was estimated at a third of all North Korean forces.⁴ In addition, Soviet advisors served at the division level.⁵ The North Koreans were also better armed and possessed heavier weapons than the Allies.

Chief among the heavy weapons for which the Allies had few counters was the Soviet-produced T-34/85 tank. Widely considered one of the best tanks of WWII, the T-34/85’s thick

U.S. troops pass a disabled Soviet-produced T-34/85 tank. As one of the most successful tank designs in WWII, the T-34/85 outclassed American armor early in the war.



North Korean units relied on the SU-76 as a self-propelled artillery platform. A very successful Russian vehicle from WWII, the SU-76 mounted a 76 mm gun.



The South Korean Army was not prepared to meet the onslaught from the North. With only light weapons—in this case WWII Japanese rifles—the South Koreans could not match the firepower of North Korean units.



armor and 85 mm gun meant that the Allies did not have an equal on the peninsula to counter the approximately 150 North Korean ones.⁶ The NKPA also had heavier artillery with longer ranges. Additionally, their Air Force possessed at least forty Yak-9 and Yak-3 fighters and seventy Il-10 light bombers (all propeller-driven Soviet-produced WWII aircraft) for which the ROK had no counters.⁷ The capability advantages of the NKPA were clearly demonstrated in the early days of the war.

SOUTH KOREA

Like the U.S. Army advisors and the Far East Command, the Republic of Korea Army (ROKA) was also surprised by the North Korean invasion. However, in contrast to the U.S. Army, it was rapidly building up, not cutting capabilities. The ROKA dated to November 1945, originating as a police constabulary. Both South Korea and the United States recognized that a constabulary was an inadequate defense force. In 1948, efforts were made to transform the paramilitary police forces into an army modeled on current U.S. structure. A large pool of former soldiers who had served with the Chinese or Japanese in WWII were available as recruits. By June 1950, the ROKA had rapidly transformed into a ninety-eight thousand-man force organized into eight infantry divisions and a cavalry regiment.⁸ However, only four of the infantry divisions were at their full ten thousand-man authorization. Three of these full-strength divisions, and one understrength one, were deployed along the 38th Parallel. The remainder performed security duties or fought North Korean sponsored guerrillas in the countryside.⁹ In contrast to the North Koreans, the ROKA had neither tanks nor long-range artillery. And, aside from a few training and liaison aircraft, the South Korean Air Force had nothing to oppose the fighter and bomber assets of North Korea.

UNITED STATES

In 1950, the U.S. Army was a hollow shell of the force that helped win WWII; Its wartime eighty-nine divisions had been reduced to ten that were underequipped and understrength.¹⁰ With a field strength of 591,000 men, the U.S. Army was nearly 40,000 men short of its authorized

levels. Still, this ten division force had worldwide commitments.¹¹ In the divisions each regiment had two battalions and these had two companies each (one short at each level). This meant that the regiments had less than half their combat power.¹² For instance, on 6 August, the 3rd Infantry Division at Fort Benning, GA had 5,179 personnel of its authorized 18,894; some companies just had 43 of 311 authorized personnel.¹³ Only the 1st Infantry Division in Germany and the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, NC were close to full strength. The Army National Guard (ARNG) manning was just as bad. Although it had 23 infantry and 2 armored divisions, 20 regimental combat teams, and 1,353 non-divisional units, with 324,000 men, it was short 25,000 troops.¹⁴ Most significantly, the ARNG had only forty-six percent of their assigned equipment and post-war cost-saving measures meant that each unit was authorized just half of their enlisted complement. Army budgets were appalling; in fiscal year 1948, the Ordnance Department requested \$750 million for procurement and distribution of munitions, maintenance of armament manufacturing plants, training, and research and development.¹⁵ It received a little over \$245 million. The other services had experienced post-war cuts.

The entire Marine Corps strength in 1950 was 74,279. They had just two understrength divisions. At 11,853 men, the First Marine Division at Camp Pendleton, CA, including its separate air wing was, number-wise, a reinforced regimental combat team.¹⁶ The Second Marine Division at Camp Lejeune, NC was not much better. Forces overseas were less operationally ready than stateside units.

The U.S. Army had 108,500 men in General (GEN) Douglas A. MacArthur's Far East Command (FECOM), responsible for 265,000 square miles of Asia and the Pacific. They were based in Japan, the Philippines, and the Marianas, an area whose climate varied from sub-Arctic to tropical. The majority of these troops were administrative. FECOM's main combat force, the Japan-



Eighth U.S. Army SSI

1st Cavalry Division SSI

7th Infantry Division SSI

24th Infantry Division SSI

25th Infantry Division SSI

2nd Infantry Division SSI

5th Regimental Combat Team SSI

based Eighth U.S. Army (EUSA), had the 1st Cavalry, and 7th, 24th, and 25th Infantry Divisions. All four were short 7,000 men of their authorized war-time strength of 18,900 men.¹⁷ In addition, they were woefully undertrained. Budget cuts, limited space for regimental-size exercises, and equipment shortages were major factors.¹⁸

FECOM had received no new military equipment since WWII, and had to rely on war resources from that conflict. That had its consequences. Most vehicles were simply worn out. Of eighteen thousand Jeeps in Eighth Army, only eight thousand were serviceable.¹⁹ Just M24 Chaffee light tanks remained because Japanese roads and bridges could not handle anything heavier. But, infantry divisions only had 14 percent of their complement. Artillery units had fewer batteries and the infantry was short heavy crew-served weapons and anti-tank munitions.²⁰ The strongest element was the U.S. Air Force. They had a significant presence in the Far East and could quickly react to contingencies.

Far East Air Forces (FEAF), led by Lieutenant General George E. Stratemeyer, had five fighter, two bomber, and one transport wing, with 1,172 aircraft.²¹ Of these aircraft, 553 were in operational units; 365 F-80s, 32 F-82s, 25 RF-80s, 26 B-26s, 22 B-29s, 6 RB-29s, 24 WB-29s, 26 C-54s, 23 SB-17s, and 4 SB-29s.²² The largest unit was the Fifth Air Force at Nagoya, Japan. Its main aircraft were F-80C fighter jets, F-82 night fighters, and B-26 light bombers. FEAF also had the Twentieth Air Force on Okinawa, with B-29 medium bombers and photo-reconnaissance planes, as well as F-80C and F-82 fighters. The Thirteenth Air Force in the



Developed as a light tank in WWII, the M24 was the only tank available to American forces when the North Koreans launched their invasion. It was no match for the T-34/85.



The F-80C was the most numerous fighter present in the Far East Air Force (FEAF) when the war began. Because of its short range, light bomb load, and a lack of replacements, many F-80C squadrons soon converted to the more durable and longer range WWII-era F-51, which the U.S. Air Force had in plentiful numbers.

Disposition of FEAF Tactical Units

2 July 1950

ITAZUKE

8 FTR BMR GP
35 FB SQ
36 FB SQ
80 FB SQ
9 FTR BMR SQ
4 FTR (AW) SQ
68 FTR (AW) SQ
339 FTR (AW) SQ (-1 FLT)

ASHIYA

8 FTR BMR SQ
FLT D 3 RESCUE SQ

IWAKUNI

3 BOMB GP
8 B SQ
13 B SQ
77 RAAF SQ

YOKOTA

35 FTR INTCP GP
39 FI SQ
40 FI SQ
41 FI SQ
8 TAC RCN SQ (PJ)
512 RCN SQ
339 FTR (AW) SQ (1 FLT)
FLT B 3 RESCUE SQ

TACHIKAWA

374 TROOP CARRIER GP
6 TC SQ
21 TC SQ

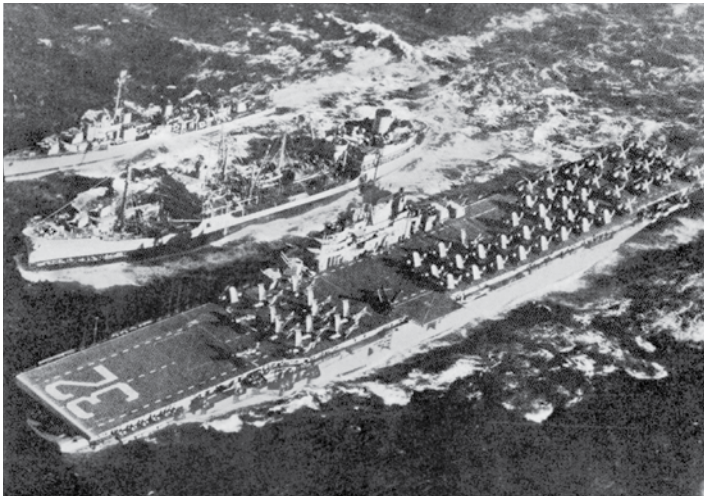
JOHNSON

FLT A 3 RESCUE SQ

MISAWA

49 FTR BMR GP
7 FB SQ
FLT C 3 RESCUE SQ





Although much reduced since WWII, the U.S. Navy quickly reacted to the emergency and provided air and shore bombardment support to the allied forces.

Philippines was equipped with F-80C, C-54, and RB-17 aircraft. All were supported by the Tokyo-based Far East Air Material Command.²³ In contrast, the U.S. Navy in the Far East was “largely a housekeeping command.”²⁴ Two Task Forces served in Japanese waters. Task Force 96, with one cruiser, four destroyers, a British patrol frigate, one submarine, and ten mine sweepers represented the naval combat capability. Task Force 90, with an amphibious command ship, an amphibious transport, an amphibious cargo ship, a Landing Ship, Tank (LST), and a tugboat, had recently arrived to train EUSA infantry regiments in amphibious warfare. The Seventh Fleet operated out of the Philippines, but postwar cuts reduced it to one aircraft carrier, one heavy cruiser, and eight destroyers.²⁵ The Japanese had a fleet of twelve freighters and thirty-nine LSTs in the Shipping Control Authority for the Japanese Merchant Marine (SCAJAP). These vessels were leftovers from the postwar repatriation of ex-soldiers and civilians to Japan and the return of “guest” laborers in Japan to their home countries. This maritime lift would prove invaluable. [see Troy J. Sacquety, *History in the Raw* (Veritas Vol. 5, No. 3, 2009), 58-62.]

Although U.S. ground units were not prepared for the major combat operations needed to stem the NKPA onslaught, GEN MacArthur filled his combat forces from theater garrison and staff elements and rushed the 24th, 25th, and 1st Cavalry Divisions to Korea, while asking for stateside reinforcements. The Department of the Army soon sent the 2nd Infantry Division from Fort Lewis, WA, and 5th Regimental Combat Team from Hawaii. The U.S. Marine Corps created the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade, with USMC Aircraft Group 33 at Camp Pendleton. Its 6,534 men arrived at Pusan on 2 August.²⁶ Despite this operational condition, American units enabled the ROKA to withdrawal into the Pusan Perimeter. But weakened, the combined forces needed help to hold against the better armed and larger NKPA. The defensive perimeter around Pusan was tenuous but there was little GEN MacArthur could do until United Nations reinforcements and heavier weapons arrived.²⁷ ▲

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Endnotes

- Roy E. Appleman, *South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu (June–November 1950)* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2000), 8, 11.
- Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 10. Rottman places the number at 223,080 but offers no sources to back the claim (page 162). Schnabel acknowledges that the ROK estimate was 161,000 including 34,000 from the Border Constabulary (page 39).
- James F. Schnabel, *Policy and Direction: The First Year* (Washington DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1992), 39.
- Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 9.
- Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 7.
- Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 7.
- Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 12. Both the Yak-9 and Il-10 were Soviet aircraft that had seen service in WWII. The number of Soviet aircraft available to the North Koreans is a matter of dispute.
- Of these, 65,000 were combat troops and 33,000 headquarters and service troops.
- Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 16.
- Shelby L. Stanton, *World War II Order of Battle* (New York: Galahad Books, 1984), 3. In addition, the Japanese destroyed the Philippine Division in 1942 and the 2nd Cavalry Division was inactivated.
- Schnabel, *Policy and Direction*, 43-45.
- Gordon L. Rottman, *Korean War Order of Battle: United States, United Nations, and Communist Ground, Naval, and Air Forces, 1950-1953* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2002), 3.
- Glenn C. Cowert, *Miracle in Korea: The Evacuation of X Corps from the Hungnam Beachhead* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 27-28.
- Rottman, *Korean War Order of Battle*, 3-5.
- Schnabel, *Policy and Direction*, 46.
- Charles R. Smith, ed., *U.S. Marines in the Korean War* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Marine Corps, 2007), 11. Found online at http://www.tecom.usmc.mil/HD/PDF_Files/Pubs/Korea/Korean%20War%20Books.pdf, accessed 29 March 2010.
- Schnabel, *Policy and Direction*, 43-45.
- Rottman, *Korean War Order of Battle*, 3-5.
- Schnabel, *Policy and Direction*, 43-45.
- Schnabel, *Policy and Direction*, 54. Rottman, *Korean War Order of Battle*, 3.
- James A. Field, Jr, *History of United States Naval Operations: Korea* (Washington D.C.: Department of the Navy, 1962), found online at <http://www.history.navy.mil/books/field/ch3b.htm#top>, accessed 29 March 2010.
- Robert F. Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea 1950-1953* (Washington D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1983), 58. Found online at http://www.airforcehistory.hq.af.mil/Publications/fulltext/usaf_in_korea.pdf, accessed 29 March 2010. RB-29s were for photo-reconnaissance, SB-29s for air-sea rescue, and WB-29s were for weather monitoring.
- Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea*, 2-4.
- Field, Jr, *History of United States Naval Operations: Korea*.
- Field, Jr, *History of United States Naval Operations: Korea*.
- Rottman, *Korean War Order of Battle*, 63. Because of post-war downsizing, each of the Marine battalions had two companies instead of three.
- Jonathan M. House, *Towards Combined Arms Warfare: A Survey of 20th Century Tactics, Doctrine, and Organization* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1984), 148; Rottman, *Korean War Order of Battle*, 3-5.