

The Korean War 1950-1953

The Korean peninsula measures 600 miles from North to South and varies between 120 to 350 miles wide; rather like an inverted Britain without Wales. To the North across the Yalu River lies Manchuria. The Russian port of Vladivostok is but 90 miles from its NE boundary. Across the Straights to the South is Japan. A mountainous range traverses the length of the peninsular with 8,000ft peaks in the North. From 1910 Korea was a Japanese colony. At the Cairo Conference in 1943 the Western allies pledged to make Korea a free and independent state but when the Soviet Union belatedly entered the war against Japan, an arbitrary line was drawn across the waist of the peninsular at the 38th parallel of latitude to denote the demarcation between US and Russian forces to facilitate the Japanese surrender. When the Iron Curtain rang down around the communist block this artificial boundary divided Korea into the Peoples Democratic Republic in the North, a Soviet satellite and the Republic of Korea (RoK) in the South, a protégée of the United States. The North Korean Peoples Army (NKPA) was armed and trained on the Soviet model and the RoK forces were but lightly equipped. After a succession of border incidents the NKPA launched an invasion of South Korea with eight Divisions, spearheaded with T34 tanks on 25 June 1950. In a short time the NKVA had swept the few remaining RoK and US Army forces into the South East corner of the peninsular where they were invested in the Pusan perimeter. Meanwhile the US achieved the *"uniting for peace"* resolution in the United Nations General Assembly, which Russia was boycotting at the time, and member nations began contributing land, sea and air forces to restore the integrity of South Korea. The US General Douglas MacArthur, victor of the war against Japan and the *"Sun God"* of the US occupation Forces, was appointed Supreme Commander. The British Pacific Fleet was committed to the UN and the Commonwealth Army forces gathered with battalions of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and the Middlesex Regiment shipped up from Hong Kong in the cruiser HMS *Ceylon* and the aircraft carrier HMS *Unicorn* to join the 3rd Battalion Australian Army to form the Commonwealth 27 Brigade by 29

August. The nucleus of a small raiding force to operate with the US Navy was flown out in great secrecy by BOAC to form 41 Independent Commando RM to be joined by a reinforcement draft diverted from Malaya. The Commonwealth Navies maintained two aircraft carriers, with Fleet Air Arm ground attack squadrons, two cruisers and eight destroyers in Korean waters throughout the war. Eventually the Commonwealth provided a Division with full supporting arms. Many of the troops were World War II reservists recalled to the Colours and National Servicemen. In total 17 nations contributed combat forces and four gave medical support but by far the largest contributors were the United States and the South Koreans themselves. With an act of true generalship MacArthur withdrew the US Marine Brigade from the defence of the Pusan bridgehead; formed the Marine Division at sea and made an amphibious landing at Inchon, half way up the West coast on 15 September. Simultaneously the 8th Army broke out of the bridgehead. Resistance collapsed and the NKPA withdrew. The UN resolution had been fulfilled. Not content MacArthur ignored Chinese threats that they would not stand idly by while their communist neighbour was occupied and diplomatic reports of a massive Chinese Army assembling in Manchuria and ordered UN forces to cross the 38th parallel in pursuit. 10 Corps including the US Marine Division re-embarked and was shipped round to Wonsan on the East Coast.

The 8th Army, which included the Commonwealth 27 Brigade (to be joined by 29 Brigade on 4 December) and the RoK 1st Division pushed north from Seoul and by 19 October had captured Pyongyang, the North Korean capital. By 25 October the RoKs had reached the Yalu River. On the East side the RoK Capital Division pushed on up the coast and the 1st US Marine Division was ordered to strike 70 miles North West into the mountains towards the Chosin Reservoir. In late October sharp attacks by Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) were identified which then ceased. With hindsight it is clear that that the CCF was busily infiltrating behind the UN Forces. The Chinese soldier was hardy and experienced,

armed with an assortment of rifles and sub machine guns carrying 80 rounds of ammunition and four days rations. He wore a yellow and white reversible quilted uniform and crepe soled canvas shoes. Inured to hardship, indoctrinated with communism and courageous to the point of being suicidal he made a formidable enemy. This peasant army hid by day and made long marches by night. On 28 November the Chinese entered the war by attacking the over extended UN Forces and were amazed with the ease by which they drove them South of Seoul. The 1st Marine Division, with which the author was serving, withdrew in good order from the Chosin Reservoir with air support from six US Navy aircraft carriers. By January 1951 the CCF had reinforced to 15 Armies, the NKVA to 57 Divisions and identified which UN Forces were prepared to stand and fight: the USMC, US Paratroops, Turks, French and the British Commonwealth Division. This comprised 27 and 29 Brigades, a reinforced Canadian Brigade and an Indian Field Ambulance. The Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders readily accepted Maj. Gen Cassels as the Divisional Commander. The Division became part of US 1st Corps. President Truman had the political courage to recall General MacArthur who had been urging the use of nuclear weapons. He was succeeded by General Matthew Ridgway who made other command changes and 8th Army pushed forward cautiously with massive fire support re-capturing Seoul and reaching the 38th parallel. In April the Chinese began their spring offensive and on 25th the battle of the Imjin River began during which the Glosters achieved fame and the 8th Army was pushed back 20 miles. On 15/20 May 20 CCF and 9 NKVA Divisions attacked the central front concentrating on the RoK 3rd Corps which gave way. On the East Coast RoK 1st Corps under a good General rode with the punch and held firm. The Communists suffered 17 thousand killed and as many captured. The UN advanced and dug in deep defences with thousands of mines and vast fields of wire. The USSR advised an armistice. Gen Ridgway offered a meeting and ordered all UN offensives to stop which was just what the communists wanted to enable them to reinforce and re-supply their Iron Triangle. Peace talks began on 10 July 1951 with incompatible agendas, the communists showing

an inexhaustible capacity for diatribe, dialectic and propaganda which dragged on for months through 1952 until 27 July 1953 when the Armistice was signed at Panmunjom. Eventually the Commonwealth committed 28 Battalions in rotation, five Regiments of Artillery and six regiments of tanks.

The lot of the UN Prisoners of War (PoWs) while this was going on became dire. The North Koreans used the PoWs as forced labour and sadistic guards revelled in inflicting misery. Sick and wounded were left to die on forced marches. The Chinese were relatively more humane and claimed a *"lenient policy"*. PoWs were offered political redemption: endless dreary lectures on dreary dialect or *"brainwashing"*. Lack of response or active resistance was met with beatings, starvation, deprivation of medical treatment and prolonged solitary confinement in barbaric conditions. Most PoWs suffered from acute dysentery to which the Chinese and Koreans seemed impervious. Some British PoWs had already endured imprisonment in WW II. 977 British PoWs died in captivity. Of over 5,000 US PoWs only 3,746 survived. As the Chinese realised the importance of the PoWs from the peace talks conditions in the camps improved slightly. The PoW question turned on the ability of individuals to choose whether they should be repatriated or transferred to neutral state which was finally agreed.

What had all this achieved? World communism had been confronted and rebuffed at the cost to the US, which despatched over 5.7m men, of 33,629 killed, 103,289 wounded and 5,000 missing; to the RoK of over 415,000 killed, 429,000 wounded and over 12,000 missing. The Commonwealth lost 1,800 killed and 4,817 wounded. Britain, which was also winning an anti communist war in Malaya and was still on food rationing at home saw the individual's meat ration reduced to 4ozs per week. Our modest balance of payments surplus of £307m in 1950 plunged to a £369m deficit and, as was said at the time, our economic miracle was shattered on the hills above the Imjin and along the Rhine.

Peter Thomas

