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“Our nation honors her sons and daughters who answered the call to defend a country they never knew and a people they never met.”

Korean War Veterans Memorial plaque inscription

In the spring of 2008, while accompanying professional staff members from the Senate Armed Services Committee and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on a three-day trip to Pyongyang, North Korea, I visited what the North Koreans call “The Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum.” In addition to being called a “running dog” by an absurdly short tour guide wearing an equally absurdly large hat, I gained a glimpse of a competing narrative of the Korean War – from the perspective of the adversary.

Nothing I knew of the war’s origins or conduct was reflected in the North Korean museum. Their museum was a shrine to a competing – and utterly contrived – narrative. Yet, I suppose, the displays and associated interpretive materials were there for a purpose – to legitimize the North Korean narrative of a “victorious liberation.” I was not convinced!

The Korean War was a three-year conflict in which some 1.8 million Americans served, and in which over 36,000 died. Among the forces of the “sending states” – the nations whose forces participated in combat and support operations – another 5,000 fell. Australia, Belgium, Canada, Colombia, Ethiopia, France, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, and the United Kingdom sent combat forces. Five additional states – Denmark, India, Italy, Norway, and West Germany – provided medical or humanitarian assistance. Over 7,000 Americans remain missing and unaccounted for from the conflict. There has been no official end to the war, and the Peninsula remains a region of continued tensions to this day. The war was the first limited war of the nuclear age, and it contains lessons for conventional and irregular warfare alike.

In June 1949, the last American occupation forces withdrew from Korea. In January of the following year, in a speech at the National Press Club, Secretary of State Acheson inadvertently created ambiguity over the U.S. commitment to the security of the South Korean state. By that summer, a North Korean invasion sparked a war.

The month of July marks several significant events in the history of the conflict.



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On July 5, 1950, the initial, battalion-sized, U.S. response force to the late-June invasion was overrun by a North Korean armored force many times its size. Despite individual bravery in the face of overwhelming odds, the fate of Task Force Smith has become a metaphor about being ready for war, especially when its coming might seem improbable.

Two days after Task Force Smith was overrun, on July 7, 1950, U.N. Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 84 authorized the United States to establish a unified command of U.N. member states. This resolution marked the first formal arrangement for collective security under the U.N. system.

In July of 1951, the first armistice negotiations began, and the war became one of “positions” and “outposts” rather than a war of maneuver.

By July of 1952, the war was one of constant defense against Chinese Communist attempts to penetrate the defensive lines along the 38th parallel.

The Korean Armistice Agreement, signed on July 27, 1953, ended active hostilities, and established the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) as the border between the two Koreas.

The Korean War saw the first large-scale operational use of helicopters for troop lift, the first jet-on-jet air combat, and the last large-scale amphibious assault. For all its conventional “firsts” and “lasts,” however, the Korean War remains especially useful for students of irregular warfare. It was the first war wherein what would become our modern understanding of irregular war became part of doctrine and became instantiated in major formations and their functions.

Army Field Manual (FM) 31-20: *Operations Against Guerrilla Forces* was first published during the Korean War. The Manual noted “guerilla warfare” can be used to describe all manner of irregular warfare. FM 31-21: *Organization and Conduct of Guerilla Warfare*, published in 1951, defined guerrillas as an “irregular force, organized on a military basis, supported chiefly by sympathetic elements of the population, and operating against established ... authority.” During Korea, irregular warfare became linked to Communist-inspired insurgencies – and the U.S. and others began to seriously consider what that might mean for warfare going forward.ⁱ

As Kenneth Finlayson notes in an article in *Veritas*, formerly the journal of *Army Special Operations History*, Korea can be viewed as “the catalyst for the revival of the Army’s special operations capability.” It was during Korea that the Army brought back the Rangers as company-sized units, stood up the 8240th Army Unit to train anti-Communist North Korean partisan



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forces, and revived both Psychological Warfare and Civil Affairs capabilities. It was during Korea that the Army established the Psychological Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, North Carolina – on Smoke Bomb Hill, which is, today, the site of the Special Warfare Center and CISA’s JSOMA campus.ⁱⁱ

Entire generations of American servicemembers, special, conventional and strategic alike, continue to examine the possibilities of war on the Peninsula, and remain aware the Armistice was not an end to the war – only a marker of the cessation of active hostilities. President Eisenhower, commenting on the Armistice, noted “...one thought that must discipline our emotions and steady our resolution...is this: We have won an armistice on a single battleground – not peace in the world. We may not now relax our guard nor cease our quest.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The battle for legitimacy and for control of the narrative on the Korean Peninsula continues – the battleground remains contested, and we would be well served to both note and internalize the lessons of “the Forgotten War.” My understanding of the War will be forever shaped by my three days in Pyongyang, my peek into the pervasive and concocted narrative of those who continue to threaten peace on the Peninsula, and my continued fascination with how to mobilize and fight, alongside partners and allies, a war that seemed improbable – until it burst onto the world stage.

As we mark the anniversary of the Armistice, we should also recognize the generations of Americans, alongside the partners and allies who fought in Korea and who continue to sustain the Armistice today. It is fitting that CISA's classrooms include students and alumni from ten of the nations that committed combat forces to Korea, as well as two additional states that supported the United Nations effort – an enduring reminder that the security of the Korean Peninsula has been, and remains, a shared responsibility.

Gregg P. Olson, Chancellor

ⁱ https://arsof-history.org/articles/v19n1_history_of_irregular_warfare_page_1.html

ⁱⁱ https://arsof-history.org/articles/v7n1_standing_start_page_1.html



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