

LESSONS LEARNED IN THE KOREAN CONFLICT

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IOAC 2-86 RN 70

After World War II, the inadequate training of American occupation troops produced a dramatic reduction of combat readiness in U.S. infantry units. Primarily at company level, and below, the post war years marked a period when conventional land warfare was de-emphasized by the Army. As America's conventional land forces entered a state of neglect, the combat power of U.S. infantry units became almost totally ineffective. Combat power, as defined in FM 100-5, is a combination of maneuver, firepower, protection and leadership.¹ Unfortunately, the inability of infantrymen to implement the dynamic elements of combat power led to disastrous results during the Korean Conflict.

After World War II, the global commitments of the United States had a direct effect on the force structure of the American military. The threat of aggressive Communist states, and the ensuing cold war, forced the United States into an era of internationalism.² President Truman and the newly formed joint chiefs were faced with maintaining a military force capable of containing communist aggression during a period of rapid demobilization, and budgetary constraints. Under considerable limitations, the United States adopted a policy of nuclear air retaliation in order to meet her global commitments.³ President Truman and the joint chiefs predicted that the large industrialized Communist states could be contained within their geographical boundaries under the threat of swift nuclear retaliation. In 1948 the United States began to build a large strategic Air Force to deliver the nuclear arsenal for the new

policy of "containment."⁴

The conventional land forces of the United States were largely ignored, and entered a state of extreme neglect. The Finletter Commission, directed by President Truman to investigate the survivability of America in the Air Age, concluded, "that by 1953 the United States could face the prospect of a Soviet nuclear attack, delivered without warning."⁵ The commission endorsed a seventy group Air Force substantially reinforced by long range bombers. There was little mention of Army forces.⁶ In Congress, many members concluded that "the United States could not match Soviet land power. That the Army should maintain only enough strength to continue occupation duties overseas, and to maintain a sustaining base in the United States."⁷

By 1950 the Army was the least prepared of all the service branches for the land war in Korea. The weakening effects of the nuclear air retaliatory policy on the Army were only compounded by rapid demobilization. In the first six months after the war the Army discharged nearly 4 million men, and over 4 million more over the next six.⁸ In addition to the rapid demobilization, President Truman and Congress concentrated a majority of the budget on social and economic programs.⁹

Unfortunately, America's policy of nuclear deterrence had little effect on agrarian based communists in North Korea. When the United States was forced to ensure the containment of communist aggression in July 1950, the Army was ill equipped, and under strengthened.¹⁰ The comparison of forces in Table 1 indicates how under strengthened the Army had become. Furthermore, the statistics for 1950 are not completely accurate. All the

TABLE 1

SUMMARY COMPARISON OF FORCES

Summary of Forces	30 JUNE 50 STRENGTH	30 JUNE 51 STRENGTH	CHANGE
MASDR UNITS			
DIVISIONS - TOTAL	<u>10</u>	<u>18</u>	<u>+8</u>
Infantry	7	14	+7
Armored	1	2	+1
Airborne	2	2	+1/3
REGIMENTS & RCTs - TOTAL			
	<u>11</u>	<u>18</u>	<u>+7</u>
Infantry	7	12	+5
Armored Cavalry Regiments	4	4	-
Airborne RCTs	-	2	+2
ANTI-AIRCRAFT BATTALIONS	56	100	+ 44
OTHER COMBAT BATTALIONS	44	139	+ 95
MILITARY END STRENGTH	591,487	1,631,600	+ 940,113

divisions depicted were understrengthened except in Europe.¹¹ Louis Johnson, Secretary of Defense, made a majority of the manpower cuts to combat support, and combat service support units. The Secretary was attempting to cut the "fat" from the Army. However, it was the "fat" that was essential for sustained combat.¹² "In a manpower heavy organization, the Army's third of the budget was used largely for maintenance, pay, and allowances at the expense of equipment modernization."¹³

The weakened state of the Army dramatically affected training. Young, inexperienced troops replaced the institutional knowledge of combat veterans, who had quickly returned to civilian life at the end of World War II. Rapid demobilization had robbed the Army of combat experienced soldiers. The young soldiers who had replaced these men in the past war years were inexperienced, and undisciplined. "The United States Army, since 1945, had, at the demand of the public been civilianized. The men in the ranks were enlistees, who when they took up the soldier, had not even tried to put aside the citizen."¹⁴ Training was neglected by the post war Army. During a period when conventional land forces were considered obsolete in the nuclear age, infantry units did not conduct any effective combat training.¹⁵ As a result, the "American youth, no better, no worse, than the norm, who though they wore the uniform were mentally, morally, and physically unfit for combat..."¹⁶

The evaluation of effective training was ultimately measured in the Korean Conflict. The inability of soldiers to apply combat power at the decisive point and time is usually a function

of training. During the Korean Conflict the untrained infantry soldiers of the United States Army were no exception. Their lack of combat power, namely maneuver, protection, firepower, and leadership is well documented on the battlefields of Korea. Maneuver is defined as "the employment of forces through movement supported by fire to achieve a position of advantage from which to destroy, or threaten destruction of the enemy."¹⁷ The ability to maneuver in Korea is strictly limited by simple topography. The country is extremely mountainous, with cold, harsh winters, and hot, humid summers. The United States infantry found that movement was easiest by the limited road networks.¹⁸ However, from a tactical standpoint, the high ground offered by a mountainous terrain was definitely a position of superior advantage.¹⁹

The North Koreans and Chinese consistently used the high ground, and off road terrain to their advantage.²⁰ The American infantryman "physically unhardened for foot marches, were roadbound. They defended on roads, attacked on roads, retreated on roads. If their vehicles didn't go, they did not go either."²¹

The U.S. infantrymen in Korea were extremely unfit for any strenuous foot movement. In the first two months of the war the temperatures soared to 120 degrees. In the extreme weather and mountainous terrain, where 70 percent of the hillsides have slopes exceeding 30 degrees, American casualties were predominantly caused by heat exhaustion.²² During foot movements along hills and ridges U.S. infantrymen, as one officer put it "dropped like flies."²³ The inability of infantrymen to maneuver

in Korea is directly related to the amount of physical training they received prior to combat. The physical limitations of the infantryman were not the only contributing factors to the degraded maneuver abilities of Army units. Terrain analysis on the part of unit leaders was also lacking. A study conducted by the Army in 1954 determined that a high percentage of unsuccessful patrols conducted in Korea were due to "a poor use of the terrain, and poor techniques in moving to the objective."²⁴ The improper use of terrain in Korea can be documented from platoon to regiment. For example, in November 1950, one regimental combat team was destroyed near the Chosin reservoir while moving on low ground with a dominating ridge paralleling its route.²⁵

It was determined that a common ineffective behavior among leaders was the inability to navigate, or use terrain properly. The study, conducted in 1954, concluded,

"The regularity of these deficiencies in terrain appreciation indicate weaknesses in our instructional methods. All tactical exercises, maneuvers, field problems and map exercises should include a terrain analysis requirement before any maneuvering or planning phase is conducted. In fact, some exercises should be devoted entirely to terrain study and tactical walks."²⁶

Infantrymen indicated their opinions through questionnaires. They consistently expressed the need for more physical conditioning, and mountain training prior to combat in Korea.²⁷

Similar in many ways to maneuver, protection is the second element of combat power. Protection is defined as the shielding

of the fighting force so that it can be applied at the decisive time and place. Protection is applied in two parts. First, by suppressing the enemy's firepower and maneuver the friendly force is reducing risk. Secondly, by ensuring good health and morale, and diminishing the effects of severe weather, protection is maintained.²⁸ As mentioned before, the effects of protection, and maneuver are similar in many respects. The inability of infantrymen to use the Korean terrain to its fullest tactical advantage was a serious shortcoming in the Army. Many infantrymen unnecessarily exposed themselves to the enemy direct fires through improper use of cover and concealment. Also, due to their poor overall physical conditioning the infantrymen's mobility was seriously hampered. The immobile state of the infantrymen in rugged terrain led to the piecemeal defeat of many units.²⁹ There are numerous cases of units left in isolation unable to retrograde because the Communist units would simply catch them on foot. Mobility at night was also nonexistent in the Army during the early years of the Korean War. The infantry rarely trained at night before the war. With their mobility limited to daylight operations, the infantrymen became identifiable targets for the North Korean, and CCF.³⁰ As noted in a report after the war,

Obviously, our training before 1950 was not keyed to night operation. Troops were reluctant to take part in night attacks and commanders and staff officers seldom planned an operation that required offensive unit actions after twilight. As a result, the enemy, operating at night with very little fire support,

outmaneuvered and outfought us.³¹

Many soldiers responded to their training in hasty fortification in a positive manner. Frequently, they stated the need for more extensive training in protective measures on the battlefield. As one soldier stated, "I hated to dig holes in basic, but when the rounds came in you could do it without even knowing you did it."³²

Protection is also associated with morale and esprit de corps. The limited training that was conducted by units prior to the Korean War did not help to advance the cohesiveness in units. From one study on infantrymen in Korea, it was determined that esprit de corps was the single most important factor in determining the effectiveness of a combat unit.³³ Unfortunately, the cohesive bonding in units was not realized until the troops were engaged in combat. It was further identified that esprit de corps and morale were enhanced by "combat effective units." Effective units were described by enlisted men, non commissioned officers, and officers as being well trained.³⁴

Of the four components in combat power, firepower is the most important, and decisive force in battle. The effects of firepower are used either to destroy the enemy or any tactical advantage he may possess. Based on the firepower available in small unit actions, the Korean War was primarily an infantry conflict. The terrain, tactics, and technology available in 1950 through 1953 earned the conflict the reputation of being a "rifleman's war."³⁵ However, the ill equipped and untrained infantryman in Korea usually lacked the necessary firepower at

critical moments in both offensive and defensive actions. The untimely absence of effective firepower can be attributed to poor maintenance, operational training, and marksmanship. The limited weapons training conducted by the peacetime army virtually negated the deadly effects of the infantry weapons. Particularly in the early days of the war, improper maintenance contributed to the diminished firepower of infantry units in Korea.³⁶ Studies recommended that "soldiers need more extensive training in cleaning their weapons ... under field conditions."³⁷

After the rout of Task Force Smith, the first American combat unit in Korea, a platoon sergeant checked his unit's weapons to determine why a large percentage of troops did not fire when contact was initiated.—The sergeant discovered that over a third of his platoon's weapons malfunctioned due to dirt, and improper assembly.³⁸ The failure to check, clean, and maintain weapons or equipment was the fourth most ineffective behavior described by a study conducted on infantrymen in Korea.³⁹ The combination of inadequate training and motivation in the care of weapons, directly affected the optimum firepower available in infantry units.

Firepower was also degraded by the failure of training to focus on marksmanship. "During World War II and the postwar period, there was a tendency in the Army to substitute volume of fire for marksmanship."⁴⁰ During the Korean War many infantry units did not place effective fire on the enemy. Effective by means of "the old 'shoot to kill' tradition."⁴¹ One study concluded that 67 percent of the men questioned said that they aimed, on the average, only one round out of an 8 round clip.⁴²

"One infantryman expressed a theory, apparently held by many, that the job of the M-1 carbine rifleman is primarily to pour out as much lead as possible to keep the enemy's head down."⁴³ The study also discovered that one third of the soldiers questioned never zeroed their weapon while stationed in Korea.⁴⁴ Although infantrymen indicated that weapons training was the most valuable skill they acquired, the lessons of rifle marksmanship were lost on the battlefields of Korea.⁴⁵

Although poor marksmanship with the M-1 carbine diminished the combat power of many infantry units, the inadequate training received by soldiers on heavier weapons also reduced the firepower needed at crucial moments in battle. Besides the M-1 carbine, many soldiers stated "the need for more diversified training in weapons, and general instruction in techniques of firing. Mortar training head the list ..."⁴⁶

The diversity of training would have been helpful, considering that over a third of all soldiers were required to operate more than one weapon in their units.⁴⁷ These weapons were commonly the 57 mm Recoilless Rifle, Browning Automatic Rifle, .30 caliber light machine gun, or 3.5 Rocket Launcher. Excluding riflemen, 48 percent of the men questioned stated that they had been insufficiently trained in the use of their assigned weapon.⁴⁸

One example of the poor training conducted in the States relates to the observations of a 57 mm RR section leader. "In 6 months only 1 out of 30 replacements received in his section had ever received previous training on the 57 mm RR."⁴⁹ Obviously,

the lack of overall training in weapons employment and maintenance critically hampered the effective firepower in many units.

The final element of combat power is leadership. Leadership is primarily the means "to inspire, and to motivate soldiers to do difficult things in trying circumstances."⁵⁰ It is arguable whether or not leadership can be taught to inexperienced junior officers. However, the technical and tactical competence necessary for leaders is definitely a learned skill. During the Korean Conflict, successful leaders inspired their subordinates, and were masters at applying maneuver, protection, and firepower. In a study conducted after the war, the most common ineffective behavior exhibited by leaders was "bugging out," and seeking, or refusing to leave a position of safety.⁵¹ All other observations of ineffective behavior dealt with tactics and supervision. The poor performance of many leaders would have been reduced with more realistic training prior to the war. The experience gained in combat training would have been an invaluable asset to many leaders.

Leaders also improperly applied the tenets of protection and maneuver. Map reading, terrain analysis, and maneuver. Map reading, terrain analysis, and route selection were all decidedly a common "ineffective behavior" in leaders.⁵² Also, the inability of leaders to accurately assess tactical situations, weakened their units' combat power.

Some small unit blunders in Korea can be attributed to widespread failure on the part of leaders to recognize the merits of maneuver combined with maximum fire

support and the necessity for finding and striking the enemy weak points.⁵³

Leadership also directly affected the application of firepower. Training of leaders in the employment of machine guns, recoilless rifles, and mortars was extremely weak. Furthermore, leaders directly affected the volume of fire in units. Well trained leaders expertly controlled the rate and distribution of fire. It was noted that "only 12 to 20 percent of the total number of men engaged in a fight ...participated actively in the firing ..."⁵⁴ It was further recommended that "training should stress the responsibility of junior officers, and NCOs building up, and maintaining a steady volume of fire."⁵⁵

The training of leaders prior to the Korean War was mediocre at best. The de-emphasis in conventional land forces had lulled the leaders into a false sense of security.

The combat power of the infantry in the Korean War was at times weak, and ineffective. After World War II, the awesome power of the nuclear age had convinced many that the Army was an obsolete entity. However, the limited war in Korea, unaffected by America's nuclear capabilities, was primarily a ground war. It was fought by an infantry ill equipped, and untrained. Understandably, many lessons were relearned by the United States. These lessons are applicable today. The basic techniques of cover and concealment. The importance of maintenance in the field. The employment of firepower, and the multi-dimensional aspects of leadership are still critical to the combat readiness of the Army.

Footnotes

¹Operations (Washington: Headquarters Department of the Army, FM 100-5, 1982), pp. 2-4, 2-5.

²Roy K. Flint, "The White Knight in Rusty Armor", Readings in the History of the United States Since 1877 (New York: USMA, 1979), p. 166.

³Ibid., pp. 151-155.

⁴Ibid., pp 150-154.

⁵Ibid., p. 155.

⁶Ibid., p. 155.

⁷Ibid., p. 155.

⁸Ibid., p. 150.

⁹Ibid., pp. 153-154.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 160-161.

¹¹Ibid., p. 160.

¹²Ibid., p. 160.

¹³Ibid., p. 160.

¹⁴T. R. Ferenback, This Kind of War (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1963), pp. 153-155.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 102.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 154.

¹⁷Operations, pp. 2-4, 2-5.

¹⁸Ferenback, p. 154.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 154.

²⁰Ibid., p. 155.

²¹Ibid., pp. 154-155.

²²Ibid., p. 153.

²³Ibid., p. 153.

²⁴Lessons from Korea (Georgia: United States Infantry School, 1954), p. 3.

- ²⁵Ibid., p. 5.
- ²⁶Ibid., p. 4.
- ²⁷Prediction of Combat Proficiency in Combat Infantrymen (Washington: Personnel Research Branch, Dept. of the Army, PRB 1093, 1955), pp. 3-5.
- ²⁸Operations, pp. 2-4.
- ²⁹Ferenback, p. 154.
- ³⁰Lessons from Korea, pp. 3-5.
- ³¹Ibid., p. 4.
- ³²Use of Infantry Weapons and Equipment in Korea (Maryland: Operations Research Office, the Johns Hopkins University, Technical Memorandum ORO-T-18, 1952), p. 18.
- ³³The Job of the Combat Infantryman (Maryland: Operations Research Office, The Johns Hopkins University, Technical Memorandum ORO-T-18, 1952), p. 55.
- ³⁴Ibid., p. 55.
- ³⁵Lessons from Korea, p. 3.
- ³⁶Ferenback, pp. 102-105.
- ³⁷Lessons from Korea, p. 4.
- ³⁸Ferenback, p. 130.
- ³⁹The Job of the Combat Infantryman, p. 53..
- ⁴⁰Lessons from Korea, p. 2.
- ⁴¹Ibid., p. 2.
- ⁴²Use of Infantry Weapons and Equipment in Korea, p. 54.
- ⁴³Ibid., p. 54.
- ⁴⁴Ibid., p. 56.
- ⁴⁵Lessons from Korea, p. 3.
- ⁴⁶Prediction of the Combat Proficiency of Infantrymen, p. 4.
- ⁴⁷Use of Weapons and Equipment in Korea, p. 58.
- ⁴⁸Ibid., p. 57.
- ⁴⁹Ibid., p. 57.

⁵⁰Operations, pp. 2-4.

⁵¹The Job of the Combat Infantryman, p. 53.

⁵²Ibid., p. 53.

⁵³Lessons from Korea, p. 3.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 3.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 3.

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