

Saddles and Sabers: Valor in Korea: Kouma at Agok

by Dr. Jon H. Moilanen

MSG Ernest Kouma stood between President Harry Truman and Secretary of Defense George Marshall in Washington, DC, about to be awarded the Medal of Honor (MoH). He had demonstrated extraordinary valor and leadership as a tank commander along Korea's Naktong River in August 1950 near the small village of Agok.¹

What reflections must have occurred to him in those harried dark hours of close combat in his lone tank against massed, recurring North Korean infantry assaults?

Naktong Bulge and Pusan Perimeter

When the "72nd Tank" of 2nd Infantry Division arrived in Korea, American and Republic of Korea (RoK) forces defending the Pusan Perimeter were depleted and worn after two months of costly combat. Widespread defenses occupied hilly and mountainous terrain.

A large bow in the southern course of the Naktong River defined terrain about four miles by five miles that came to be known as the Naktong Bulge. The 2nd Infantry Division was employed into the Naktong Bulge in its first combat missions in Korea.

The defensive perimeter along the Naktong River reinforced this natural obstacle as a forward defense and provided depth for reserves to maneuver on the few connecting roads. The Pusan Perimeter protected a rail and road system connecting the Pusan port with Taegu to the northwest and Kyongju to the northeast. Miryang was a main hub along the western transportation and communication network. Protecting this network was essential to sustenance of the expanding Allied forces in the perimeter.²

The North Korean objective by late August 1950 was to penetrate Pusan Perimeter defenses and to secure the entire peninsula before enough United Nations reinforcements could arrive in Korea.³ The port of Pusan was vital to the survival of United Nations and South Korean forces on the peninsula as the only port occupied by Allied forces that could effectively disembark reinforcements.⁴



Figure 1. Pusan Perimeter. (Adapted by author from https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/s_korea_rel_95.pdf)

Enemy situation along Naktong Bulge

North Korean forces of course knew well the terrain east of the Naktong River – they had just withdrawn from it earlier in August. North Korean forces applied Soviet-taught tactics learned in previous combat: infiltration, flank assaults and mass attacks to penetrate defenses.⁵

Orders were to break through the river defenses, outflank and destroy enemy forces, and continue eastward to capture the Miryang area to cut off enemy withdrawal routes.⁶ Soldiers dressed as Korean civilians often intermingled with masses of refugees to surprise and assault U.S. and RoK forces.

Night combat offered the greatest opportunities of North Korean success to infiltrate and bypass isolated U.S. positions, outflank and assault, and destroy resistance. Night assaults commenced typically between 11 p.m. and midnight and continued until first light or soon afterward. Remaining close to U.S. positions usually prevented U.S. airpower and artillery from effectively targeting North Korean assaults.⁷

Tactical situation in 2nd Infantry Division

Task-organized for combat, 2nd Infantry Division attached tank companies to the division's infantry regiments. On Aug. 22, 72nd Tank Battalion closed in its assembly area near Miryang. Company A of 72nd Tank moved farther west toward Yongsan as an attachment to the division's 9th Infantry Regiment, with other elements of 72nd Battalion locating just southwest of Yongsan.⁸

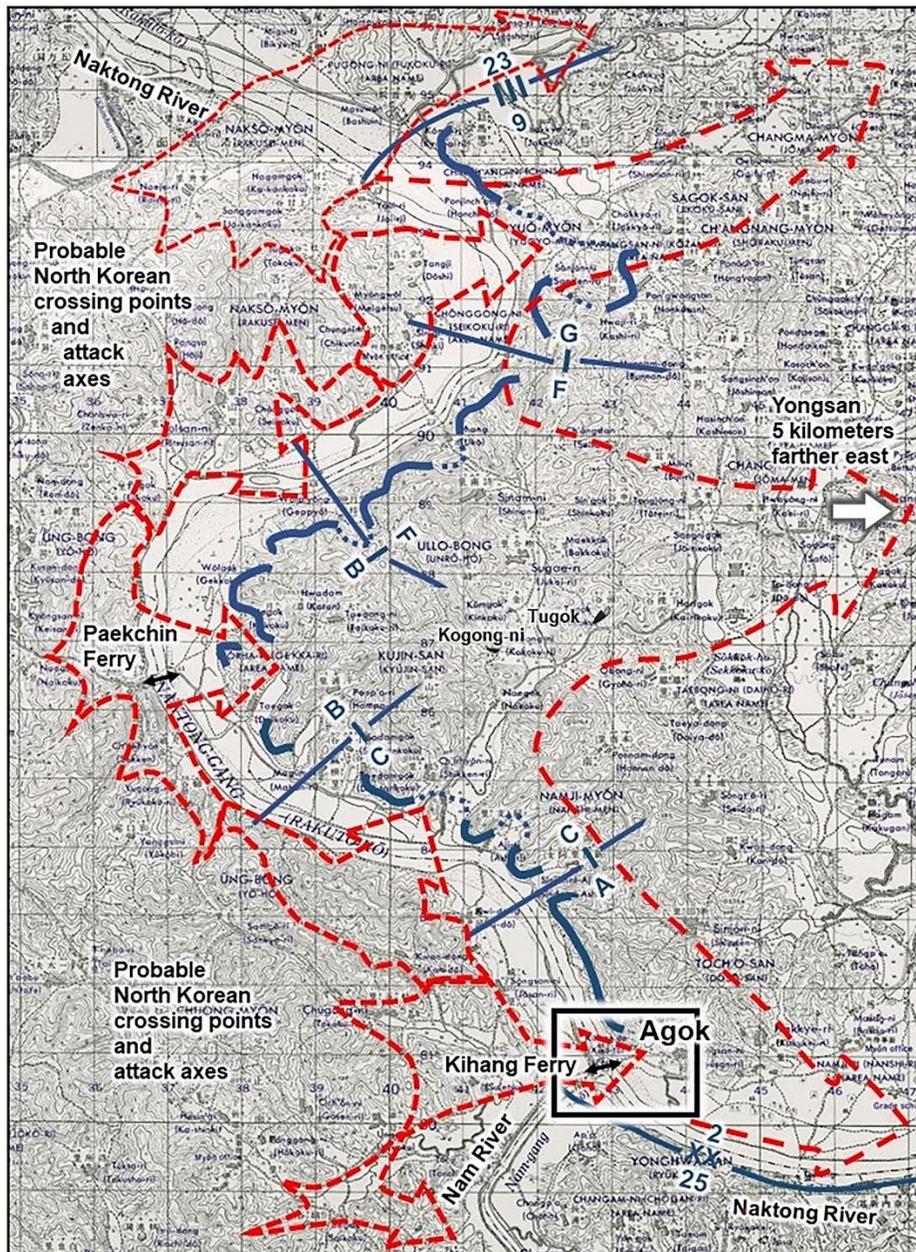


Figure 2. 9th Infantry Regiment sector in the Naktong Bulge. (Adapted by author from Map Sheet 6820 II, Namji-Ri, and Map Sheet 6820 I, Changnyong, copied 1945 by U.S. Army Map Service from earlier Imperial Japanese land surveys. See Perry-Castaneda Library map collection, University of Texas, <https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/>). Note: Roy E. Appleman's description of Agok in *South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu* suggests that the village had expanded close to the Kihang Ferry by 1950.

The division defended its sector in the Naktong Bulge with three infantry regiments abreast: 38th in the north, 23rd in the center, and 9th Regiment, rebounding from losses during its earlier August combat and one of its three battalions detached, southernmost along the division's sector.⁹ Two ferry sites crossed the Naktong River in the 9th Regiment sector. Other crossing points for wading or swimming across the river exceeded ability to adequately cover the approaches into the ridgelines.

Company A was at the interdivision boundary of 2nd Infantry Division and 25th Infantry Division. The boundary extended along the south side of the Naktong River, with 2nd Infantry Division responsible for the river.¹⁰ This natural obstacle limited effective coordination between Company A and Company F, 35th Infantry Regiment, as the northernmost unit of 25th Infantry Division.

Minimal time existed to improve defenses, while late summer heat and torrential rains took a toll on 9th Infantry soldier health and readiness.¹¹ Other factors affected psychological stamina, too. Humidity and changing weather produced fog, reducing visibility to mere meters. North Korean atrocities of murdering captured soldiers and accounts of units bypassed and attacked from all directions was unsettling to most soldiers.¹² Every soldier believed that a major North Korean attack would occur in the very near future.

Company A at Naktong River

The 9th Infantry's two battalions stretched more than 18,000 meters along the river ridges in a series of company or platoon positions, rather than in a cohesive regimental defense. The regiment fielded only a small reserve.¹³ Company A occupied about 2,500 meters overlooking the Naktong River in small ridgeline positions and squad observation posts on the river plain. Two medium tanks from Company A, 72nd Tank, and two anti-aircraft-artillery (AAA) vehicles from the division's AAA battalion were attached to the infantry company.



Figure 3. M26 Pershing tank team in position at a river plain. (Adapted by author from U.S. Army Center for Military History (CMH)'s *history Korea-1950*)

Company A infantrymen "dug in" defenses on the long finger-like ridge facing the Naktong River. At the southern end of this ridge, a hilly spine ended at Hilltop 94 and descended rapidly to the river bank near the village of Agok. Just south of Agok, an undeveloped road-trail skirted the north side of the Naktong River to the Kihang Ferry site. The Nam River converges into the Naktong River just south of this ferry site.¹⁴

"Dug-in" defense was a relative description. Extensive minefields, barbed-wire entanglements and sandbagged fighting positions were not yet the norm.¹⁵

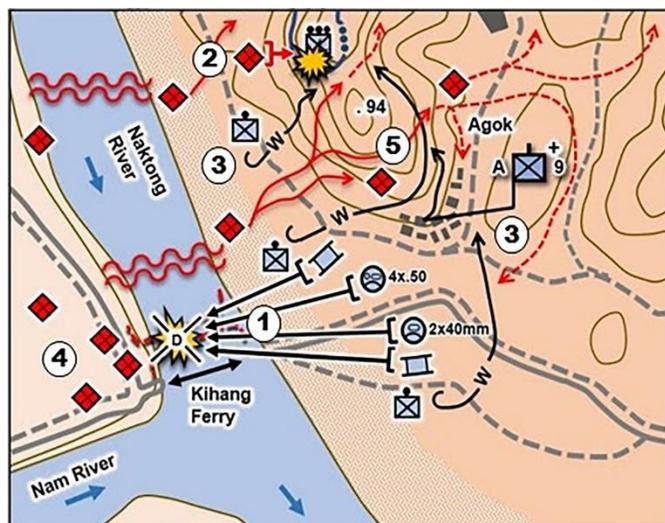
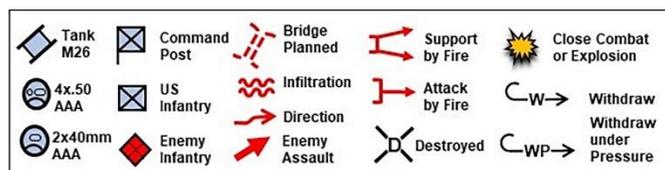


Figure 4b, North Korean bridging destroyed at ferry site: 1) Fog clears about 10:30 p.m. and roadblock team observes North Korean bridging effort. Kouma tank team and AAA weapons destroy bridging effort at ferry site. 2) Firefight erupts about 11 p.m. at Company A platoon position. Other platoon position does not receive North Korean assault. 3) Company A directs withdrawal of squad observation posts from river. Company A command post withdraws to ridgeline. 4) North Koreans continue river-crossing effort. 5) Infiltration teams continue eastward while other teams prepare to seize roadblock.
*(Author's visualization based on Roy E. Appleman, **South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu**)*



Legend for Figures 4a and 4b.

When the fog lifted suddenly at 10:30 p.m., North Korean soldiers were observed constructing a bridge at the ferry site. Immediately, all four armored vehicles opened fire on the bridge and enemy bridging party. Several minutes of tank cannon and machinegun fires collapsed the bridge and sank several pontoons. An eerie silence returned. The only recognizable sounds were barking dogs and the occasional explosion of a mortar round.

Meanwhile, North Korean soldiers had already infiltrated onto the ridgeline and among Company A fighting positions north of the ferry site. A brief firefight erupted about 11 p.m. with the blast of grenades and staccato of machinegun and small-arms fire. In Company C north of Company A, North Korean green flares burst overhead and whistles signaled an assault. The sudden assault with massed small-arms fire overran defenses, and most U.S. soldiers evaded to the south. A few Company C soldiers straggled into Company A positions, but others continued southeastward past Company A.²⁰

Soon after 11 p.m., Company A infantry squads received orders to return to fighting positions on the ridgeline. Soldiers at the ferry site passed Kouma's tanks and yelled that the infantry was withdrawing to the ridgeline as the company regrouped into a perimeter defense. Close combat erupted suddenly at the Kihang Ferry site.

In Kouma's own words:²¹ "The infantry had hardly left when I spotted seven men running toward me from the direction of where Able [Alpha] Company's [command post] formerly was located. I halted them and noticed that they were wearing the division patch. [The Indianhead of 2nd Infantry Division, which the newly augmented Koreans wore on their herringbone twill [uniforms], as did regular members of the division. Company A had some of these South Koreans.] One of them spoke excellent English. All seven

came next to my tank. ... Three of them crawled on the back deck of the tank and informed me that a large force had crossed the river farther down approaching my position and that most of Able Company were killed or captured. At the time I had the idea that they were part of 9th Infantry. During this time I was on top of the turret checking my 50-cal. machinegun. At a given signal they leaped from the tank and began throwing grenades on the tank, and about the same time a steady spray of machineguns and rifle fire began hitting the tanks and [antiaircraft] guns from the crest of the high bluff about 150 yards to my right. My gunner at once took them under fire as well as SFC Berry's [tank] and the [antiaircraft] guns. I got back in the turret and threw about seven or eight grenades over the house [at Agok] as well inside the house through the door which faced us."

Knowing the U.S. password to the security challenge, North Koreans maneuvered close to the roadblock to assault the position. Near the two tanks, the "quad-.50" crew was killed except for one soldier. The 40-millimeter gun crew withdrew into their vehicle with several men wounded. Infantrymen defended themselves at the ridgeline but were incapable of supporting Kouma and his wing tank. Actions in the dark were confused and deadly as grenade fragments and enemy fire wounded Kouma. He continued to fight in a close-combat struggle as North Korean soldiers attacked the tanks from all directions.

Kouma and the two tanks were now alone at the ferry site. They repositioned to ground with clear fields of fire in all directions. North Korean soldiers fought to within 20 yards of the tanks before being killed or retreating into the darkness. In their wake, they left many dead and wounded. Then at about 1:30 a.m., Kouma's wing tank withdrew to the east due to an overheating engine.

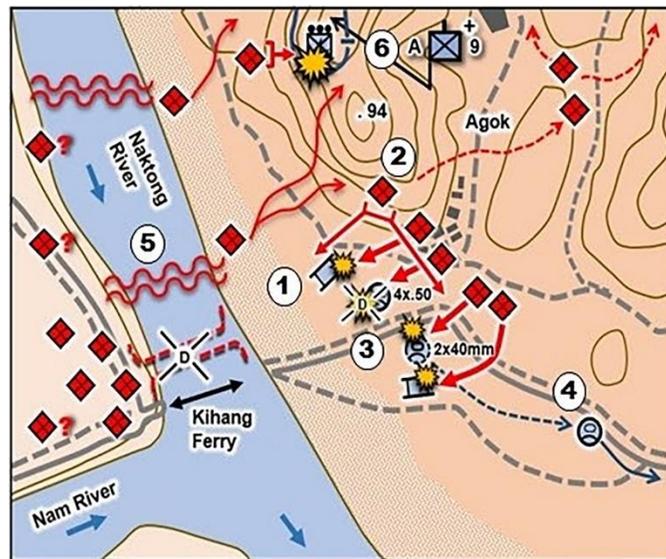


Figure 5a, North Korean assault roadblock defense: 1) Soon after 11:30 p.m., North Korean teams approach tanks and AAA vehicles from the rear and assault with small arms, machineguns and grenades. 2) Machinegun fire supports North Korean assaults from vantage point on ridgeline above Agok. 3) One AAA crew and vehicle are destroyed. 4) One AAA vehicle withdraws east with wounded soldiers and one killed in action. Kouma's tank team continued to defend river-crossing site. 5) North Koreans continue to infiltrate east and reinforce the general attack. 6) Company A sets in perimeter defense during the night of Aug. 31 and into Sept. 1. (Author's visualization based on Roy E. Appleman, *South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu*)

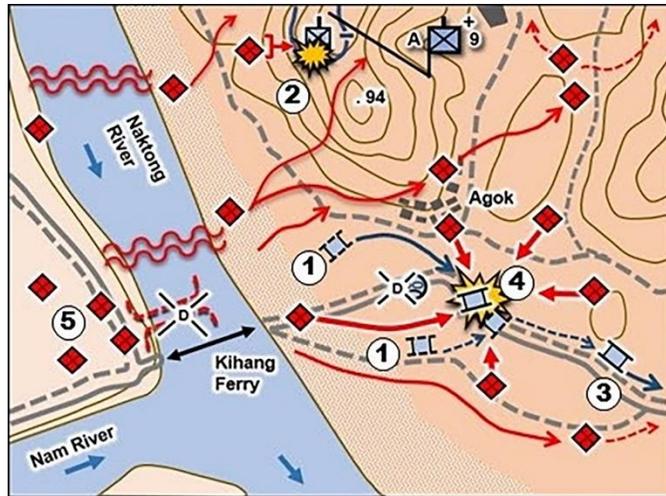


Figure 5b, Kouma fights alone to defend river-crossing site: 1) Kouma tank team repositions to engage 360 degrees vs. North Korean infantry assaults. 2) Company A defends in periodic perimeter fight / defense throughout the night. 3) At 1:30 a.m., Kouma’s wing tank reports engine overheating and withdraws east. 4) Kouma’s tank fights alone in night-long and recurring close combat against North Korean infantry assaults. Kouma degrades North Korean crossing efforts. About 7:30 a.m., Kouma withdraws to rearm / refuel. 5) North Koreans continue crossing efforts at ferry site. (Author’s visualization based on Roy E. Appleman, *South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu*)

Kouma and his tank were now truly alone. He and his tank crew fought throughout the night against dismounted assaults for more than nine continuous hours. He knew that no one else could stop or slow attacks along his axis.

During more than one fierce close assault, North Koreans surrounded his tank. Kouma leaped from his tank-turret hatch, charged the handle of his caliber .50 machinegun and fired point-blank into attacking soldiers. Having expended all his machinegun ammunition, he fired his pistol and threw grenades to protect his tank and crew.

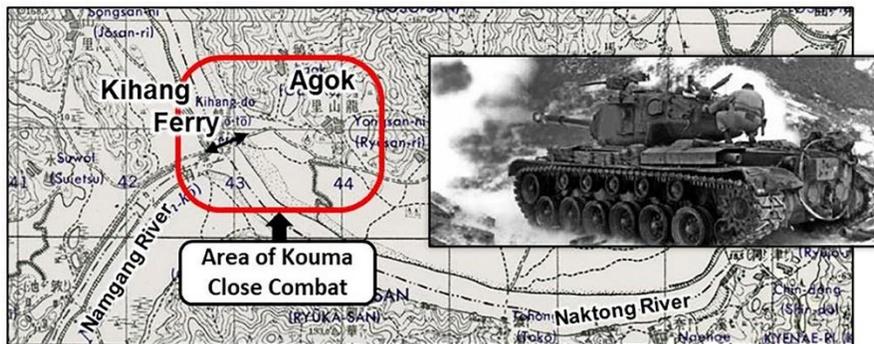


Figure 6. Kouma defends the Agok crossing site against nightlong North Korean assaults. (Author’s visualization based on Kouma and Naktong Bulge account)

By daylight Sept. 1, Kouma was still defending his position. The bodies of hundreds of dead and wounded North Korean soldiers littered the near bank of the Naktong near Agok. Organized assaults were destroyed at Agok.²² Of the probable 500 North Korean soldiers in the nighttime attack, Kouma’s actions are estimated to have killed some 250 North Korean soldiers.²³

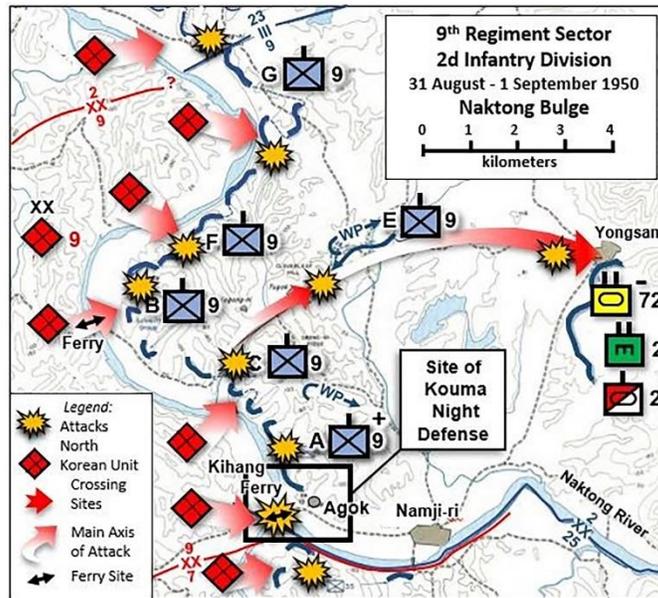


Figure 7. Tactical situation Aug. 31-Sept. 1, 1950. (Adapted by author from Roy E. Appleman, *South to the Nakdong, North to the Yalu, Map VI*)

With most of his ammunition expended, Kouma started back toward friendly lines about 7:30 a.m. through eight miles of hostile terrain to resupply his tank with ammunition and fuel, and to obtain medical treatment. Along his withdrawal route, his tank crew destroyed three machinegun positions.

When he arrived at his unit assembly area near Yongsan, he had expended all his tank's ammunition. Kouma, suffering from wounds, attempted to resupply his tank and return to the forward battle area.²⁴ While being evacuated for medical treatment, he again requested to return to the combat front.²⁵

North Korean attacks penetrated several miles east and effectively split 2nd Infantry Division in two.²⁶ Counterattacks from Sept. 3-5 blunted North Korean advances in the bulge. The U.S. Eighth Army counteroffensive commenced in September to push North Korean forces north out of South Korea.²⁷

Kouma after Agok

Kouma, a sergeant first class at Agok, was promoted to master sergeant. He declined a battlefield commission. After the MoH ceremony in 1951 with President Truman at Blair House in the nation's capital, Kouma performed recruiting duty in Nebraska, followed by tank gunnery and tactics instructor duty at Camp Irwin, CA. Subsequent duty assignments included armor units at Camp Carson, CO; in Germany; and at the Armor School at Fort Knox, KY. After another tour in Germany, Kouma returned stateside to Fort Knox.

His varied unit and worldwide experiences as a "tanker" before the Korean War included 14th Cavalry Regiment, Fort Riley, KS; participation in the Louisiana Maneuvers; M3 Stuart tank crewman; and M24 Chaffee tank commander in 9th Armored Division World War II actions in France, Belgium, Germany and Czechoslovakia. After World War II, he participated in occupation duty in South Korea and Japan with 25th Infantry Division, and by 1947 was at Fort Lewis, WA, in 2nd Infantry Division.

After 31 years as a Soldier and senior noncommissioned officer from 1940 to 1971, Kouma retired from active duty in the U.S. Army.²⁸ After retirement, he lived in Kentucky until his death in 1993 and is buried in the Fort Knox post cemetery.

Epilogue: leadership and decisive action in combat

Kouma demonstrated outstanding leadership and tactical savvy during his combat at the riverline near Agok. His story is one of the many “stories of incredible heroism, self-sacrifice and calm indifference to danger” occurring in defense along the Pusan Perimeter.²⁹

Kouma led by personal example at Agok. His professional judgment and critical decisions proved essential in the nighttime crisis of recurring assaults on his isolated tank. He exemplified leadership; Army leadership doctrine recognizes that “[w]ar is a lethal clash of wills and an inherently human endeavor that requires perseverance, sacrifice and tenacity. The mission, then and now, is to be ready to deploy, fight and win.”³⁰

Kouma prevailed in these harrowing conditions and commanded his tank and team with decisive commitment, resilience and skill.³¹ How did he command his tank crew and instill confidence inside the turret and hull during their recurring nighttime firefights? He fought successfully and brought his crew and tank back into friendly lines to fight again.

Kouma’s initiative and personal courage to defend rather than withdraw was understanding that his tank crew and that of the wing tank were the only means to slow North Korean assaults while U.S. infantry squads withdrew under pressure to their ridgeline fighting positions.³² He repositioned the two tanks to best employ their firepower in close combat. Beyond the destruction of the bridge and pontoons at the ferry site, he adapted to rapidly degrading conditions and near-overwhelming threats with appropriate, flexible and timely actions to continue the fight.³³

He excelled as an effective small-unit leader in synchronizing actions in time, space and purpose to mass maximum relative combat power at a decisive point.³⁴ Ten years of prior military experience and expertise during war and peace surely developed Kouma’s professional instincts, intuition and knowledge.³⁵ His decisive behavior with teammates provided purpose and motivation to execute combat-crew tasks and achieve the mission. Leadership focuses action.³⁶ High-risk and the urgent tactical situation at Agok required Kouma’s immediate and continued decisive leadership.

Kouma, a tank commander in Company A, 72nd Tank Battalion, distinguished himself by conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life and those under his command above and beyond the call of duty in action against the enemy at the Naktong River, RoK, Aug. 31-Sept. 1, 1950. Highlighted in the citation awarding Kouma’s MoH, his superlative leadership, heroism and intense devotion to duty reflect the highest credit on himself and uphold the esteemed professional ethic and traditions of the U.S. Army.³⁷



Figure 8. MSG Ernest Kouma.

Dr. Jon Moilanen, a retired colonel, was an armored-cavalry officer. Experiences in a 30-year Active Component career include command at troop, battalion and group echelon, as well as teaching at university undergraduate and military-college graduate levels. His assignments included dean of students and administration, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC), Fort Leavenworth, KS; director, U.S. Army School for Command Preparation (CGSC), Fort Leavenworth; commander, U.S. Army Readiness Group Snelling, Fort Snelling, MN; commander, 2nd Battalion, 72nd Armor, RoK; and regimental S-4, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, Fort Hood, TX. He served after active duty as a military-intelligence contractor and Department of the Army civilian intelligence specialist for U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command G-2 until “fully” retiring in early 2019. Military schooling includes Army War College, U.S. Army Logistics Development Course, CGSC, Armor Officer Advanced Course, Armor Officer Basic Course and Airborne School. COL Moilanen has a bachelor’s of arts degree in education from the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, a master’s of arts degree in education from the Indianan University of Pennsylvania and a doctor of education degree in adult, occupational and continuing education from Kansas State University.

Notes

¹ Katie Lange, “Medal of Honor Monday: Army [MSG] Ernest R. Kouma,” Washington, DC: DoD News, Aug. 31, 2020. Kouma was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his leadership and heroism during combat actions at Agok, South Korea, Aug. 31-Sept. 1, 1950. This valor award was upgraded to the MoH. Kouma received the MoH in a May 10, 1951, ceremony from President Truman. Retrieved from <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/Features/Story/Article/2328104/medal-of-honor-monday-army-master-sgt-ernest-r-kouma/>.

² U.S. Military Academy (USMA) Department of History, *Confrontation in Asia: The Korean War*, West Point, New York: USMA, 1981.

³ Roy E. Appleman, *South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu*, Washington, DC: CMH, U.S. Army, 1992 (first printed 1961, CMH Publication 20-2-1).

⁴ USMA Department of History.

⁵ CMH, *Korea-1950* (CMH Publication 21-1), Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1952, facsimile reprinted 1997.

⁶ Appleman. Map VI, “The North Korean Offensive, U.S. 2nd Division Sector Aug. 31-Sept. 1, 1950.”

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War*, New York: Times Books, 1987.

¹⁰ Appleman.

¹¹ Ibid. Nonbattle casualties were high in all units, with heat exhaustion often a contributor. The 9th Regiment alone had more than 400 nonbattle casualties. Loss among officers was very heavy.

¹² T.R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War: The Classic Korean War History*, Washington, DC: Brassey’s, 1963 (first Brassey’s edition 1994).

¹³ Appleman. Company E and other divisional unit elements were to the rear of 9th Regiment frontline defensive positions.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Blair.

¹⁶ Fehrenbach. Also see Appleman.

¹⁷ Appleman.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid. The illustration of a tank-maintenance problem underscores a fundamental readiness issue during the early period of the Korean War. Arthur W. Connor Jr. in his *Parameters* (Summer 1992) article (“The Armor Debacle in Korea, 1950: Implications for Today”) notes that more than “60 percent of all tank casualties experienced by American forces were the result of mechanical breakdowns. ... Only 11.5 percent of the [total] losses [were] attributable to the enemy. Almost as many tanks, 11 percent, were lost to enemy mines.” James A. Huston, in the U.S. Army’s official logistics history *The Sinews of War*, states, “Much of the trouble in the early months seemed to have been the result of a shortage of well-trained men to handle organizational and field maintenance rather than defects in the design or materials of the equipment itself. ... Shortages or misuses of tank repairmen in infantry regiments was especially noticeable.” James F. Schnabel cites in the U.S. Army’s official history *Policy and Direction*, “Of the service troops sent to Japan as replacement in July [1950], for example, 60 percent were assigned to front-line fighting troops upon arrival in Korea.” This comment emphasizes the risk-taking and decision-making that accompanies the design and deployment of a force into combat without a balanced sustainment structure.

²⁰ Appleman.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Raymond E. Webb and Robert J. Winter, *72nd Tank Battalion in 1950-1952*, Tokyo: Toppan Printing, 1952. This unofficial history records the operations involving 72nd Tank Battalion in Korea 1950-1952. See also Department of the Army General Order 38, June 4, 1951, that awarded the MoH to Kouma.

²⁴ Congressional Medal of Honor Society, "Stories of Sacrifice," MoH citation; retrieved from <https://www.cmohs.org/recipients/ernest-r-kouma>.

²⁵ Webb and Winter.

²⁶ Appleman.

²⁷ CMH. Also see Appleman.

²⁸ SFC Robert L. Dycus and CPT Kevin L. Watson, "The MSG Kouma Tank-Gunnery Competition: MSG Ernest Kouma's [MoH]," *ARMOR*, May-June 1993.

²⁹ CMH.

³⁰ Army Doctrinal Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, Nov. 25, 2019.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Headquarters Department of the Army, General Order 38, June 4, 1951, "Award of Congressional [MoH] to Master Sergeant Kouma." Kouma was a sergeant first class during his combat actions at Agok in 1950. Retrieved from <https://www.cmohs.org/recipients/ernest-r-kouma>.

Acronym Quick-Scan

AAA – antiaircraft artillery

CGSC – Command and General Staff College

CMH – Center of Military History

MoH – (Congressional) Medal of Honor

RoK – Republic of Korea

USMA – U.S. Military Academy