

From The Editor

Army Readiness in 1950—The Seeds of Disaster

In June of 1950, the United States Army was riddled with major shortcomings in personnel, unit cohesion, discipline, housing, equipment, and overhead. These issues were addressed in an article by Hanson W. Baldwin in the *New York Times* as late as 22 June 1950, a scant three days before North Korean forces invaded South Korea, and some of the factors that contributed to the crushing defeats suffered by U.S. forces early in the war are worth reviewing.

The author noted that few if any Army units were ready for immediate combat service, and that the combat forces available were too small to provide the base for a wartime mobilization and still maintain a strategic reserve. Foremost among the Army's problems was personnel turnover, with a 150 percent rate not considered uncommon. This was due partly to the demands of maintaining occupation forces overseas and the demands of service schools, and partly to poor personnel management. Whatever the cause, the replacements meant constant training to bring units up to a minimal state of readiness.

A second deficiency—a lack of unit esprit—was also due to the personnel turbulence. When leaders and soldiers cannot serve together for more than a year, it is difficult to build and sustain unit cohesion. This is evident even today when a new commander arrives, rejects programs of his predecessor, and sets about building the rifle company, battalion, or whatever in his own image. A new broom does indeed sweep clean, but in so doing it may well sweep away much that is useful, including esprit. Another factor was the post-war policy of reducing emphasis on elite or specially trained units, many of which had been vital to the war effort only five years earlier.

The lack of qualified and experienced officers and noncommissioned officers, another problem, was exacerbated by the discharge of many of the veterans of World War II. In the months preceding the outbreak of war in Korea, efforts were already under way to improve the quality of leadership, through service leadership courses and a more demanding selection process, but the results of these efforts had not yet permeated the Army. Today's emphasis on professional development, including leadership instruction in officer and NCO courses, is aimed at ensuring that we do not end up in similar straits at some time in the future.

Another interesting difficulty facing the Army of 1950 was that of eliminating incompetent or otherwise unfit officers and NCOs. Aside from the administrative task of processing elimination actions, the writer attributed the blame to the tendency to "pass the buck" by allowing substandard soldiers to assume other duties or assigning them to other units. This is a good point, because a poor soldier, of any rank, is the Army's problem, not just the unit's.

Materiel readiness was another source of concern. Baldwin noted that as of June 1950, most of the Army was equipped with weapons that had seen service in World War II, were turned in as troops were discharged, and then reissued to the postwar Army. Many of those weapons had seen hard use in combat and had required extensive reconditioning. This was the case with other materiel as well, and as a result the Army found itself in the process of being upgraded, but still unprepared when 89,000 North Korean soldiers—seven divisions plus other units—poured across the border into South Korea.

Today the U.S. Army is focusing efforts on the whole spectrum of infantry weapons, from the pistol to antitank systems, and we cannot afford to lessen our emphasis. Task Force Smith has been singled out as an example of the price of unpreparedness, but it was a microcosm of the disaster that befell the four understrength South Korean divisions and the regiment that first stood before the communist onslaught.

It is no coincidence that North Korea today stands as one of our strongest potential adversaries. In light of recent revelations concerning the fate of U.S. soldiers that nation has held as prisoners of war, and the mistreatment of South Korean civilians and military who fell into their clutches, we cannot afford to let our guard down again. The events that sowed the seeds of disaster prior to 1950 can recur at any time if we fail to learn from these bitter lessons of history. We must train, maintain, and equip the U.S. Army to go in fast, hit hard, and do the job right the first time.

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