

# PROFESSIONAL FORUM



## The Weight of Command Colonel Harold K. Johnson in the Korean War

LEWIS SORLEY

Copyright © by the University Press of Kansas, 1998

Harold K. Johnson had served brilliantly as operations officer of the 57th Infantry (Philippine Scouts) during desperate fighting early in World War II, then survived the Bataan death march, the hell ships, and 41 months of captivity by the Japanese. Rebuilding his shattered career, he found himself in command of a provisional battalion hastily thrown together and rushed to the Pusan perimeter early in the Korean War, another very difficult situation.

Johnson's regimental commander was fully aware of what he was asking of Johnson in selecting him to command the provisional battalion. "Since in my opinion Johnny was far and away my strongest battalion commander," explained Colonel John Guthrie, "I felt constrained to send him and his battalion to Korea, despite the horrendous experience he had just undergone as a POW in World War II."

The initial onslaught of North Korean forces had rapidly pushed South Korean and U.S. forces southward, driving them into a defensive enclave around the port of Pusan, where they would have to hang on or get pushed into the sea, and hanging on was about what it amounted to at that point. The troop ship carrying Johnson and his troops docked in Pusan on 25 August 1950. There, Johnson's unit was re-

designated the 3d Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, and assigned to the 1st Cavalry Division. Four days later, they were in a shooting war in a sector of the Pusan Perimeter. (Despite the "cavalry" designation, these units were by now infantry formations.)

"We sort of played yo-yo for about five days at a place called Tabudong," said Johnson. Actually, it was a lot more than that. After fierce enemy attacks had driven elements of his battalion from a critical piece of high ground nearby, Johnson personally led a counterattack to regain the lost position. Placing himself with the forwardmost elements, he rallied his men and led them forward. Apparently unconcerned, Johnson moved about exposed to enemy artillery, mortar and small arms fire, and by his example kept the attack moving. When devastating enemy fire threatened to bring it to a halt, he moved in close proximity to the enemy, where he set up and personally operated a forward observation post. From that exposed position he directed mortar counterfire against the enemy positions.

Ultimately, however, the weight of the opposing forces prevailed. When Johnson's mortars were disabled and his unit's casualties continued to mount, it became necessary to withdraw. He

remained in his exposed position until the last unit had cleared, ensuring that weapons and equipment were salvaged as the troops moved out, then reorganized the survivors. Two days later, coming at the position from another direction, they seized their objective. By the time nightfall came on 4 September, Johnson's battalion had been in combat for just one week, and he had earned the Distinguished Service Cross for "extraordinary heroism."

One of his platoon leaders later recalled the situation for *Time* magazine (December 10, 1965, page 33): "The world was coming apart. Our company commander had been killed. There was heavy firing 100 yards away. Colonel Johnson said we could handle it. He parceled out firepower and called in air strikes. He hadn't slept for three days, but he never used a profane word."

Korea was a war of infantry, by and large, and a tough, hard-slogging and bitter war besides. Johnson subsequently commanded two regiments, the 5th Cavalry and then the 8th Cavalry, in that fighting. "I remember vividly the faces of many of your stalwarts along the Naktong and the bloodletting at such places as Hill 314," wrote an officer who had been with Johnson on the ship going to Korea. "I remember seeing Colonel Johnson below Hill 314

when we were getting ready to attack," he said later. "He looked very weary. He had just been in a tough battle." Another officer later told Johnson he remembered a talk they had in an apple orchard north of Taegu at a place called the "Bowling Alley." "Things were very grim," he recalled. "Your concern then was for your men and in taking objectives with minimum loss of life." Even with that concern, three weeks after entering combat Johnson had taken 400 casualties in his battalion of 703 men. It is not surprising that he remembered these as "dark, bitter days." The cost had been high, but they had done what was asked of them. "It was," he thought, "a superb effort on the part of a green unit. My pride in that unit has never diminished."

A long time later he wrote to his mother about the experience: "During my first week in combat I didn't see any generals unless I went to the rear a couple of miles. Our generals weren't any cowards, either, but it was really hot. I feel in my own heart that the third day we were in [action] my outfit held the Pusan perimeter and the main road leading to Taegu. There just wasn't anything behind us. We paid dearly but we held pretty well."

Before leaving his battalion, Johnson had one last duty to perform. In mid-October, on the outskirts of Pyongyang, he personally conducted a memorial service for the 400 killed and wounded that the battalion had lost since arriving in Korea in late August. There with him, he recalled, "a pitifully small remainder" from the original contingent paid tribute to their fallen comrades. Then he bade them all farewell.

Johnson was a compassionate leader of men, one who took very seriously the heavy burden of asking men to risk their lives in combat. "I spent a great many nights on my knees" in prayer, Johnson said of his days in command in Korea. "I didn't expect any voice to answer me, but we operate so much of the time in the gray area, where it is hard to tell the difference between right and wrong. It is important to have some kind of star that can take you through troubled times."

In the autumn of 1950, Chinese

communist forces entered the war, and the 1st Cavalry Division was the first American division to engage them. Not long before this, Johnson had typed a letter to his mother and brother, at home in North Dakota. "The worst job is the letter to the family of my officers [killed in action], and I've lost so many, many of them close friends," he wrote. "This is a terribly grim game. It is bad enough behind a rifle platoon, but the toll in the rifle platoon is high."

Entry of the Chinese forces into the war was the nastiest kind of a shock. General MacArthur had assured President Truman that it could not happen, and now seemingly unlimited masses of Chinese soldiers were swarming everywhere. In fact, by mid-November there were some 300,000 Chinese troops in the field, 180,000 of them confronting Eighth Army. "About all there is to do is hang on and pray each day," Johnson wrote to his mother. "I've done a lot of it and it has brought a certain peace of mind and spiritual comfort."

Johnson would later speak candidly of his doubts in the midst of those dark days. "On a lonely road just southeast of Pyongyang," he often recalled when asked to speak at a prayer breakfast or some such event, "a lonely commander was deeply troubled by the threat to the men he was charged with safeguarding. Could he do the job that was his to do and still give his men a fighting chance to survive? And out of the still of the night, as if from a great distance, came God's voice saying, 'Be strong, have no fear, I am with you.'"

In early February, with his regiment on the attack and performing well, Johnson moved to a new assignment as a corps G-3. When he had settled into the routine of the staff job, Johnson wrote to his mother with some reflections on the command assignments he had just completed. "This job is radically different from what I've been doing over here," he told her. "Command is a terrible strain. There is never a moment when you aren't conscious of the responsibility for the lives of the men in your command. My regiment had over 3,000 most of the time, and that is a lot of responsibility. You had to be in touch with moods of the mo-

ment, and there was always the fear that the constant running would continue when we were supposed to be going the other way. There was a lot of satisfaction to doing a job, too, and I left my outfit when it was at its peak."

As his career evolved in succeeding years, Johnson surprisingly never commanded again. He would serve as an assistant division commander, head up a major Army school, run the most important Army staff element, and ultimately head the entire Army as its chief of staff, but never again would he command an Army unit. Regimental command was it as far as his assignments were concerned. Nevertheless, it is certain that in those last assignments he sought to apply the lessons he derived from his battle commands in the Korean War.

As he described them later, Johnson distilled three major insights from his experience as a commander. One was that if you could command successfully at battalion level you could also expect to be successful in command of substantially larger elements. What that boiled down to, he maintained, was "being a man of integrity as the commander of a unit. That is, your relationships with subordinate and superior alike are open and frank, and you stand up and take the consequences of your actions."

Next, he held that "a foremost consideration of any commander has to be the welfare of the men under him, and that he does not abuse his subordinates for personal gain.... That is," he insisted, "just something that cannot be condoned under any circumstances."

And third, he stressed the commander's obligation to do everything possible to improve his technical and tactical competence, by which he meant those aspects of the job that are outside the area of human relations. "Command to me," he explained, "is a series of continuing problems in human relations, and a good commander is a fellow who solves them and a bad commander is the fellow who pushes them aside or ignores them. I believe that any reasonable person can solve most problems in human relations."

These were not, the record makes

clear, simply theoretical constructs that Johnson developed. Rather, they embody his own style and values as demonstrated in command. The way he was regarded by his fellow soldiers reflects that, as expressed for example by Major James Huey, an assistant regimental S-3 in the 8th Cavalry when Johnson had command: "Duty, honor, country,' yes; but courage, morality and fortitude must follow those words to truly and

honestly describe this outstanding soldier," he wrote of his former commander. "At times, I felt General Johnson was a very lonely man, but later I was to discover this was not true. He was merely so deep in thought about the outcome of the next day's fighting, and the welfare of his troops and their families, that he just had to be alone to work out those difficult problems that face a commander in combat. I say, 'Thank

you, God,' for providing this nation such an outstanding leader."

---

**Lewis Sorley** is the author of *Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Times* (Simon and Schuster, 1992). This article is an edited excerpt from his book *Honorable Warrior: General Harold K. Johnson and the Ethics of Command*, published by the University Press of Kansas in April 1998.

---