

Battlefield Bumbles

Lessons from Korean War Battlefields

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During World War II, General George Patton's troops often saw him jeeping to the fighting front, but they never saw him speeding to the rear. He had a light plane pick him up at the front for return trips.

Doubtless, Patton remembered a notorious World War I fiasco: A staff officer with a routine message galloped his horse from front to rear of a troop column on its way to the trenches. The rider's speedy passage sparked dire rumors, which fanned the troops into a panic. The column broke into a pell mell rush to the rear.

In hope of imparting salutary memories such as this, I offer here a few bumbles from Korean War battlefields:

IT HAPPENED DURING THE EARLY DAYS of the conflict when Major General William Dean's 24th Infantry Division was defending the key town of Taejon. At the division command post in a Korean school house, his G-3 section was in radio contact with a reconnaissance plane cruising the endless column of enemy tanks and troops headed for Taejon. The pilot reported that the tanks were peeling off and disappearing into a wooded area near the road. Obviously, the tanks were going into an assembly area preparatory to attacking the 24th's Kum River defense line.

An assistant G-3 plotted the assembly area on the situation map and measured distance. When he found that it slightly exceeded the division artillery range, he appealed to the Air Force liaison officer—a lieutenant colonel who was the division's contact with GHQ. "Call in those heavy bombers on Okinawa and knock out that assembly area tonight."

The lieutenant colonel laughed at him. "That's only a tactical target,

Major. Don't you know heavy bombers are reserved for *strategic* targets?"

General Dean and his G-3, Colonel Smee, were touring the front line and couldn't be reached in time to overrule the air officer. So the enemy tanks survived to lead the attacks on Taejon.

Although it was too late to save Taejon, the lieutenant colonel's axiom was soon disavowed by General MacArthur. He unleashed a heavy bomber attack upon an entrenched North Korean regiment opposing Colonel Oh's South Korean regiment. The bombardment enabled the South Koreans to join the 19th U.S. Infantry delaying force on the inland road south to Chinju.

At Chinju a battalion commander in the 19th Infantry refused to allow a light tank to venture 50 yards beyond the perimeter where it could destroy a large group of enemy moving in open terrain. He said, "Tanks are never committed singly."

The lesson of such incidents, of course, is etched in blood, not ink. Axioms are pointless—and indeed dangerous—if they are not tempered with the common sense often demanded by specific situations. All available force that fits the occasion must be used to destroy the enemy.

No rule should be as binding as it was to an inflexible 24th Division ordnance supply officer at Taejon. He refused to break up basic loads of artillery shells to provide enough HEAT (high-explosive antitank) rounds for our field artillery to employ in their role as antitank weapons. This at a time when it could have stopped the T-34s from overrunning the skeleton division defenses.

FROM THE OUTSET, THE 24TH Division's most formidable problem was the one

posed by the enemy's World War II Russian T-34 medium tanks. Their armor was impervious to our World War II 2.75-inch rocket launcher. A 19th Infantry lieutenant launched a dozen rockets at close range without damaging a T-34.

So the G-3 section was elated when a colonel arrived at the CP with a classified message from the States. A U.S. factory was working night and day to produce a 3.5-inch rocket launcher that could penetrate any armor then in existence. Two plane loads were on the way to our division, he said. This meant Bazooka gunners should be assembled in the rear for a quickie course on the new weapon. Then they could quickly rejoin their units at the front, armed and ready to knock out T-34s.

"I just hope they split the launchers and the ammunition when they load the planes," said a cynical assistant G-3. His sour grapes drew a frown from the messenger and a dirty look from his section chief. He was banished from the CP forthwith to conduct the 3.5 training course.

A day or two later, one of the planes arrived with a load of the new launchers. The other plane—socked in by bad weather in Kyushu, Japan—contained all the ammunition. Precious days passed while gunners trained without ammunition and front-line units were without rocket launchers.

This bumble was born stateside, but its effects were felt on the battlefield. The salutary lesson in this instance is posed by a question: "Who supervised the loading of the two planes—an experienced G-3 officer or an inexperienced airman?"

THOUGH KOREA IS NOT IDEAL TANK

terrain, all it takes for tactical success there is a few invulnerable tanks on the roads to spearhead the infantry. So the T-34 was still a problem when the 19th Infantry delaying force reached Chinju in southwest Korea. By then they were armed with the 3.5 rocket launcher, but it was effective only at close range. What was needed was an antitank weapon with at least the range of the T-34s.

There were three Pershing tanks in Japan with just such a weapon—a 90mm cannon that could penetrate armor that was immune to our light tank's 37mm or 75mm guns.

Because the 19th Infantry was blocking access to the open southern arc of the Pusan perimeter, the Pershings were sent there. Applause at Colonel Ned Moore's CP in Chinju! Then came a second message like a drench of ice water. The Pershings could not be moved off the railroad flat cars. They had no fan belts.

Quickly the GHQ was informed of the emergency. The next day the 19th Infantry received an air drop of fan belts. Wrong size!

By this time the North Koreans were threatening to envelop the delaying force. The 19th's two battalions had to retreat to the next delaying position at Haman Notch. So the Pershing tanks were left behind in Chinju's rail yards. First, of course, the tanks were rendered as unusable to the enemy as they were to us.

Like the other blunders, this one poses questions: Why wasn't the entire transit process supervised and accom-

panied by ordnance officers? Why weren't the tanks guarded night and day en route to Chinju?

Even a General MacArthur can't think of every detail. That's what staffs are for.

THE FINAL INCIDENT FROM THIS GRAB bag of battlefield bumbles occurred much later—during the Chinese invasion of North Korea. After MacArthur's reconnaissance in force revealed the magnitude of the Chinese threat, he ordered a hasty retreat below the 38th parallel. It was the classic stratagem of the mythic Greek warrior who fled his numerically superior enemies until he could turn and defeat them piecemeal.

For the stratagem to succeed, however, the Eighth Army had to withdraw so swiftly and deeply that it would have time and space to reorganize the defense. So the main roads south were filled night and day by double files of tanks, trucks, and artillery. Units were mixed into the columns wherever they could enter.

Riding between two light tanks, a cynical staff officer of the 24th Division was in the western column when it arrived at a multi-spooked road junction about 50 kilometers below Seoul. There he found two busy military policemen directing elements down the various roads. He stopped his jeep on the shoulder to watch.

Soon it became obvious that the MPs were diverting the column's elements more or less at random. "How do you know which units go where?" he asked. "We were just told to keep the column

from standing still," was the response.

In other words, the units were not being directed to planned assembly areas. They were being sent into a hodgepodge in which artillery could wind up in front of infantry and service units in front of artillery.

As it turned out, the speed of the retreat—plus the rear guard's artillery fire and air strikes—provided just enough time to untangle the units. By the time the Chinese pursuit arrived, the Eighth Army was aligned in a hasty defense. But what if the time necessary to organize the defense had run out?

Why wasn't an Eighth Army G-3 officer at that crucial road intersection with a deployment plan and with radio contact to GHQ in case of late revisions? Why was the job left to two MP privates?

If General Patton could learn from the past, and if General MacArthur could ignore axioms, perhaps today's commanders and staff officers can benefit by remembering any battlefield bumbles they may experience.

How do I know these events in Korea occurred exactly as related? Because I was there every time. I was the staff officer who watched them unfold and observed the consequences.

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