

Introduction

The Korean War began at 4:00 in the morning, 25 June 1950, when elements of the North Korean People's Army crossed the 38th Parallel and invaded South Korea. Within days, the United Nations had condemned the aggression and authorized the use of force to resist the invasion. President Harry Truman named General Douglas MacArthur to command U.S. military units sent to Korea. At the request of the United Nations, MacArthur also became commander in chief of all UN forces in Korea.

At the time of the North Korean invasion, the only U.S. Army units in the area were four understrength divisions engaged in occupation duties in Japan. Advanced elements of the 24th Infantry Division, under Major General William Dean, arrived in Korea on 2 July 1950. The next day a small task force, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Charles B. Smith, made contact with the advancing North Korean Army. In this first engagement between U.S. forces and the North Koreans, Task Force Smith was badly outnumbered and outgunned. The North Korean force, which included more than thirty tanks, quickly pushed aside the small American force and continued its advance.

Throughout the month of July, Republic of Korea units, along with the U.S. Army 24th and 25th Divisions, conducted a fighting withdrawal down the Korean peninsula. As additional U.S. Army units entered the fight, resistance stiffened, until a stalemate was reached in a defensive perimeter surrounding the South Korean port city of Pusan. For most of August and into September, the beleaguered defenders repulsed repeated attacks on their positions. However, as U.S. reinforcements, as well as military contingents from twenty other nations began to pour into Pusan, the tide began to turn.

At dawn on September 15, elements of the 1st Marine Division and the U.S. Army 7th Division began the amphibious assault on the port of Inchon, deep in the enemy's rear. This unexpected strike, coupled with the breakout of Eighth Army forces in the Pusan perimeter, broke the back of the North Korean offensive. Within days, the North Korean Army was in headlong retreat. UN forces began a pursuit that carried them across the 38th Parallel and north toward the Yalu River and the Manchurian border.

In November the war entered a new phase as Communist Chinese units counterattacked the advancing UN forces. On 25 November a major attack against X Corps elements (1st Marine Division and 7th Infantry Division) near the Chosin Reservoir halted their advance and forced a general retreat across the front. The war moved south again as UN forces struggled to secure defensible terrain and regain the initiative.

On 11 April 1951, President Truman relieved General MacArthur from command of the UN forces. MacArthur was replaced by General Matthew Ridgway, who was moved up from his position as Eighth Army commander. Lieutenant General James Van Fleet assumed command of the Eighth Army. Together, Ridgway and Van Fleet orchestrated a series of limited attacks designed to utilize the fire-power advantage that the UN units possessed and to inflict maximum casualties on Communist forces.

For the next two years UN and Communist forces dueled back and forth across the central portion of the Korean peninsula. Neither side gained a clear advantage, and the war became an artillery-dominated trench stalemate that greatly resembled World War I battles on the western front. American soldiers and Marines attached colorful names to the yards of rock and rubble they contested with the Communists. Bloody Ridge, Old Baldy, The Punchbowl, and Pork Chop Hill entered the lexicon of American military history.

Faced with a stalemate, Communist and UN representatives began negotiations on 10 July 1951. Peace talks continued, off and on, for the next two years as both sides jockeyed for a military or diplomatic advantage. Finally, on 27 July 1953, the armistice was signed, and a grim cease-fire ensued across the front. The war was over.

All told, 33,629 American servicemen died in Korea, and an additional 103,284 were wounded. Approximately 3,000 servicemen from UN forces also died in the conflict.¹ Estimates on Korean and

Chinese casualties vary widely but may have approached 200,000 South Korean, 520,000 North Korean, and 900,000 Chinese killed or wounded during the war.²

1. Department of Defense, Office of Public Information, Release Number 1088-54, 5 November 1954.

2. "Operations in Korea," Department of Military Art and Engineering, U.S. Military Academy, West Point, New York, 1956.