

KOREA 1950

The First Air Defense Contingency



A statue of a poncho-clad soldier represents servicemen who endured the bitter cold, harsh conditions and savage fighting of the Korean War.

Thousands of Americans remembered the "Forgotten War" this past summer when U.S. President Bill Clinton and Korean President Kim Young Sam dedicated the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington. The memorial features statues of infantrymen trudging wearily up a hill, as if returning from a patrol. There are 14 soldiers, three Marines, one Navy medic and one Air Force forward observer, representing all services that fought in the ground war. More than 2,500 photographic images of the war are etched on a highly polished, 164-foot-long granite wall that serves as a backdrop.

Antiaircraft artillerymen who served in the Korean War are among those honored by the long-delayed Korean War Memorial. Antiaircraft gunners helped defend the desperate perimeter at Pusan against "human wave" assaults, they supported ground attacks on Heartbreak Ridge and blasted Chinese roadblocks out of the path of Marine and Army units during the fighting retreat from the Chosin Reservoir and Yalu River. They seldom engaged enemy aircraft during a war in which the U.S. Air Force quickly established air superiority, but the first unit the Army sent to respond to the North Korean invasion of South Korea was an antiaircraft detachment. It helped cement Air Defense Artillery's reputation as the "First to Fire" branch and set a precedent for today's ADA contingency missions.

When the North Koreans crashed across the 38th Parallel on a Sunday morning in June 1950, Lt. Col. William S. Fultz, who commanded an antiaircraft artillery automatic weapons bat-



A hastily assembled anti-aircraft detachment airlifted from Japan to South Korea's Suwon Airfield mounted the first organized U.S. resistance of the Korean War.

talion stationed as part of the American occupation forces in southern Japan, received an order from the Fifth Air Force Command. Acting on that order, Fultz organized an anti-aircraft detachment for "an air-transported mission." The exact destination and details were guarded in close secrecy. Even so, most of the battalion's officers and enlisted men volunteered. As events developed, this detachment spearheaded the Army combat units committed to action in Korea.

In the meantime, word came that the detachment would man four M-55 quadruple .50-caliber machine guns. Fultz selected three officers and 32 enlisted men for the mission. He exercised care to ensure that all chosen for the mission had at least six months yet to serve in the Far East Command, but soon discovered that two volunteers would have to re-enlist before they could make

the trip. So Sgt. William S. Hasse and PFC Clarence I. Myers stood in full field packs beside the plane that was to carry them to Korea, raised their right hands and were sworn in by Cpt. Harry F. Money, the battalion adjutant, to extend their enlistment.

Finally, on June 29, with details completed and the men, ammunition and equipment aboard, Fultz gave last-minute instructions to the detachment commander, Cpt. Frank J. McCabe, and his assistant, 2nd Lt. Joseph V. Bailey, and the planes rolled down the runway, destination Korea. In a briefing just prior to departure, Maj. Stanley Paction, the battalion executive officer, had told him that the detachment was to establish air defense of an airfield in Korea, but McCabe still didn't know which airfield.

Most of the men slept or dozed as the airships droned steadily over the Sea of

Japan, across the coast of Korea and inland over mountainous terrain toward their destination, the Suwon airfield. Shortly after 0900 hours, the planes touched down. The anti-aircraft artillerymen swung into action so rapidly that many did not have time to remove their "Mae West" life jackets. They unloaded their M-55 quad .50-caliber machine guns from each plane as soon as they rolled to a stop. With the eager assistance of South Korean soldiers, they established primary positions within 10 minutes. Since rice paddies surrounded the field, the positions selected were practically on the runway. Despite the language barrier, the South Koreans pitched in to help the anti-aircraft artillerymen improve their positions.

With the immediate chores of field occupation completed, men of the detachment took time off to survey their

new surroundings, which for the most part could be described as hilly to mountainous terrain with valleys filled with rice paddies. Corridors leading through a ring of hills that surrounded the airstrip provided air avenues of approach. Suwon, the city that gave the airfield its name, lay to the northwest. It looked for the present as if no apparent action was pending. But by 1615 hours, June 29, as the sun dropped behind the hills, the situation drastically changed. In the distance appeared what most of the men at the gun positions first thought were four friendly F-51 Mustangs. "Looking around the town about four miles away we heard an explosion," recounted Sgt. Melvin E. Tyra, "and seconds later we caught it."

McCabe, the detachment commander, said, "The four planes approached the strip from the northwest at about 1,400 feet. They formed with a pair in front followed by the other two in single file and power-glided on our position area in an apparent attempt to destroy planes parked on the runway. They made four passes, dropping three medium-light bombs, and strafed the field at each pass."

One plane dived on Sgt. Sidney T. Holman's section and attacked it by dropping bombs in trail. Observers said that a row of cannon shells tore up the earth on both sides of the gun section. Hasse got a neat crease in his helmet. Pvt. Harland S. Scoville had just pulled the M-55's operating handle when he saw it shot away. A piece of concrete hurled across the runway by an exploding bomb broke PFC Thomas Merante's leg.

"One plane crashed beyond the field," said McCabe, "and the second, obviously crippled, was losing altitude as he left the area. I labeled it a probable, and its destruction was confirmed a short time later by South Korean rural police, who reported finding the wreck close to the place where the plane was last seen."

Crews continued to improve gun positions and all was quiet until 2000 hours, when a "dusk patrol" of three North

Korean fighters came over on two strafing passes. The guns went into action again, but no kills were made. The fighters, now more wary of the ack-ack, fired only short bursts and were driven off after two passes. It was growing dark now and guards were established about the field, supplemented by Korean soldiers. The night passed uneventfully, with the gunners getting a badly needed rest between guard tours.

Early on the morning of June 30 another C-47 arrived, carrying six communications men headed by WO Junior

AAA Detachment Suwon, South Korea June 1950

PFC Robert Alaniz, Los Angeles, Calif.
2nd Lt. Joseph V. Bailey, Salt Lake City, Utah
Cpl. James N. Bishop, Cumberland, Md.
Col. Burley T. Blankenship, Richlands, Va.
PFC Henry P. Bond, Brooklyn, N.Y.
PFC James F. Bowman, Knobnoster, Mo.
PFC Herbert L. Bumgarner, Hudson, S.C.
WOJGDarrek M. Clagett, Omaha, Neb.
Cpl. Fred W. Cobb, Leesville, La.
Pvt. Robert L. Davis, Rockville, Md.
Cpl. Richard Drapeau, Meriden, Conn.
Cpl. Ray E. Everts, Yakima, Wash.
Pvt. Harold E. Forsyth, Marysville, Iowa
PFC Donald E. Gentzler, Honolulu, Hawaii
PFC Solomon H. Hall, Glamorgan, Va.
Sgt. William S. Hasse, Grand Junction, Colo.
Sgt. Sidney T. Holman, Negaunee, Mich.
PFC Roger E. Johnson, Jamestown, N.Y.
PFC Robert M. Lutz, Stewartstown, Pa.
PFC Thomas Merante, Hudson, N.Y.
PFC Johnnie McGee, Wytterville, Va.
PFC Frank A. Pierce, Mariner Harbor, N.Y.
Sgt. Walter R. Reavis, Lufkin, Texas
PFC Lawrence E. Rogers, Searcy, Ark.
Pvt. Harland S. Scoville, Mindoro, Wis.
Pvt. Kenneth W. Shields, Dallas, Texas
Cpl. Leslie G. Todd, Minooka, Ill.
Sgt. L. Worrol, Milford, Conn.
Pvt. Charles Vaughn, Clearwater, Fla.

Grade Darrell M. Clagett. They immediately began to establish and improve communications under McCabe's direction. Phones were installed at the guns in place of runners who had previously been employed.

The same morning a C-54 with urgently needed supplies and ammunition developed engine trouble just short of the strip. It circled but decided not to land, returning instead to its base in Japan. The problem of ammunition and food then fell on McCabe's shoulders as he scrounged the area. He secured ammunition from South Koreans and food from nearby units.

Shortly after 1300 hours that afternoon, five airplanes appeared. Three were obviously F-80s, and two several hundred feet below looked like F-51s. "What are they?" Clagett asked McCabe.

McCabe said, "I'm not sure yet."

Clagett continued, "Well, I guess we'll know if they peel off and start shooting."

As he voiced the final word, the two lower planes did just that!

The guns immediately took them under fire, but scored no kills. The planes splattered the area with small 23mm cannon shells, which burst upon impact, spraying pellets. One of these slightly wounded PFC Lawrence E. Rogers. The F-80s gave chase and shot down the two strafers. Most members of the detachment expressed difficulty in distinguishing between North Korean fighters and F-51 Mustangs, and waited until approaching aircraft took hostile action before engaging them.

The afternoon following the attack was quiet. Around 2115 hours, word was received from Advanced Command, General Headquarters, Far Eastern Command, then under command of Brig. Gen. John Church, to prepare to evacuate the airstrip. North Korean armor had punched through the South Korean lines. South Korean and U.N. forces were retreating southward.

Orders were relayed to gun sections to prepare for the movement, and three

trucks were obtained from South Korean personnel to evacuate the detachment to a new location. Guns were rendered inoperable as ordered, and the convoy moved out quietly without lights en route to the south. The convoy had moved some 15 miles down the highway, picking up Korean civilian vehicles, all obviously going the same direction.

Halt was called and McCabe received orders to provide a rear guard action, which called for a 45-minute wait. Once on the move again, mechanical difficulty with the Korean trucks forced the detachment to abandon the three originally procured about 25 miles from its destination. By a system of walking and shuttling, the detachment finally reached its southern destination.

During the stay at the new headquarters location, which lasted until the night of July 2, members of the detachment

worked with other personnel around the area. It was 2000 hours when word was received that the detachment, which had participated in the first organized ground combat action in Korea, was to be airlifted back to Japan for re-equipping and return to action. When they returned to their home station, Fultz and the rest of the battalion welcomed them with a steak dinner with all the trimmings at the service club. Purple Hearts were awarded to McCabe, Bailey, Cpl. Burley T. Blankenship, Merante, PFC Frank A. Pierce and Rogers.

The soldiers who fought in Korea weren't seven feet tall like the statues of the Korean War Memorial; their courage and perseverance against numerically superior forces and harsh environmental conditions merely made them seem seven feet tall. More than 1.5 million Americans left their families, friends and homes to help defend

a determined ally halfway around the world. During the war, more than 54,000 Americans lost their lives, 33,620 in direct combat. Some 103,284 service members were wounded. There were 7,410 American POWs: 4,418 returned, 2,701 died in captivity and 21 refused repatriation. There are still 8,177 American service members unaccounted for. Technically, the Korean War never ended. The signing of the military armistice on July 27, 1953, left North and South Korea on a war footing. Today, more than 37,000 U.S. service members are stationed in South Korea. American units, including 5-5 ADA (B/S/A), which supports the 4th Infantry Division, and the more recently deployed 1-43 ADA (Patriot), which counters North Korea's growing theater ballistic missile capability, continue to play a vital role in maintaining peace along Korea's volatile DMZ.



South Korean President Kim Young Sam and thousands of veterans listened as U.S. President Bill Clinton dedicated the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.