

## KOREA, THE INTERIM YEARS

1945 - 1950

Jae Won Lee

In 1945, Korea had been divided at Latitude 38 degrees North, about 40 miles north of Seoul. The 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel was destined to become the frontier of the Cold War in Asia. It was born in a spirit of cooperation at the Potsdam Conference in the summer of 1945 when the Soviet Union agreed to declare war on Japan to prevent accidental clashes between Russian and American planes and ships in the areas bordering Korea.

The Allied negotiators divided the Sea of Japan into separate operational zones. The line drawn between the zones intersected the Korean Coast at about Latitude 40 degrees North. A few weeks after the Japanese surrendered, the United States proposed a land boundary somewhat further south at Latitude 38 degrees North as a line of demarcation between Soviet and American occupation forces. The plan apportioned the Korean land equally, but it favored the Americans by placing the capital of Seoul in their zone. Despite this apparent geopolitical disadvantage, the Russians agreed.

The course of the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel was nothing but a straight line on the map. It made a highly impractical border, as it ran through the western edge of the small towns of Ong-Jin (Outpost O.P. 4), Chong-Dan (O.P. 7), and Paek-Jone (O.P. 9, 10). The city of Kaesong cut across the grain of such natural barriers as the mountain ranges of eastern Korea, making the line militarily all but indefensible. The Ong-Jin Peninsula was isolated except for a weekly convoy from the 3rd Regiment, 7<sup>th</sup> Division. I was with the convoy team that the Russians grudgingly allowed to pass through their zone in Ha-Jin city.

I was on patrol every day to Chong-Dan (O.P. 7), Ko-Woop-Ri (O.P. 9), and the Yesung River (O.P. 10). The company patrol team was located at Yonan, Korea, west of the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel and 80 miles from Seoul.

At the time, the territory north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, home to 9 million Koreans, was occupied by 120,000 troops of the Soviet Union under the command of General Chistakov. The territory south of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, home to 19 million people, was occupied by the United States 24<sup>th</sup> Corps consisting of 50,000 troops under the command of Lt. General John Hodge.

On September 15, 1945, Soviet and U.S. Army 32<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, 7<sup>th</sup> Division troops linked up at the city of Kaesong, Korea. Kaesong is located 2 miles from the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel and 40 miles from Seoul. The 32<sup>nd</sup> Regiment set up a 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion on the west side of the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel in Moon-San. The 1<sup>st</sup> battalion was established on the east side of the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel to the Japan Sea.

Neither side asserted at first that the line was to be more than a temporary expedient. The Soviets took a firm hold in the north part of the country, disarming and interning Japanese soldiers and colonial government officials, many of whom were deported as

prisoners to the Soviet Union. Along with their own troops, the Soviets brought in a contingent of 300 Korean troops with Kim-Il-Sung, as well as a number of Korean Communist politicians who had been trained in the Soviet Union, as an additional security measure. The Russians froze the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel as a permanent border between the two military control zones, denying virtually all outsiders entry to the northern area. Beyond that, the Soviet occupiers effectively blocked the transit of goods and services that normally flowed from North to South regions, disrupting the administrative and economic unity of the country.

The Moscow Plan for international trusteeship over Korea was announced in December of 1945. The South Korean Communists support proved convenient for the Soviets, but most of the South Korean people did not agree with the trusteeship of Korea. The United States turned its back on the trusteeship commission and took the matter to the United Nations. It pushed a resolution through the general assembly calling for elections throughout Korea in the spring of 1947, but the Soviet Union refused to allow the U.N. observers to move north of the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel come July, 1947.

Syng Man Lee (Syngman Rhee 1875-1965) returned to South Korea on October 16, 1945. He was 70 years old. He convalesced in Seoul after a bout of pneumonia in 1946. Following his return to Korea from a 33 year exile, age did not deter the staunch anti-Communist Lee from creating the most potent coalition in the U.S. Occupation zone. In July, 1948, about 90 percent of the South Koreans supported the election of Syng Man Lee to be the first President of the Republic of Korea. Formal proclamation was made on August 15, 1948. In addition to being recognized by the United Nations general assembly, the new country underwent a change in its relationship with the United States. Ambassador John Muccio replaced Lt. General Hodge as the highest ranking American in Korea and overall head of U.S. missions in Korea.

North of the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel, the Communists responded on September 9, 1948 by proclaiming the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea with Kim-Il-Sung as Premier. Kim's regime was immediately recognized by the worlds Communist nations.

From 1945 to 1948, South Korea's economic crisis was worsened by inflation that multiplied the cost of rice tenfold. A thriving black market soon took hold, fueled by the tons of military equipment that the Americans brought with them into Korea. In a single year, more than 1,000 Jeeps were reported missing. American officials found it easier to get spare parts through the black market than through official U.S. Army channels.

Many of South Korea's problems were generated or worsened by the occupying U.S. Army escalation. For example, military government offices sold lumber from Japanese supplies and cases of cigarettes from nonsmoking Americans' tobacco C-rations and added the proceeds to the payroll fund for Korean employees.

General Hodge, a bluff capable Infantry commander, tried hard to do as he was told upon arriving in Seoul. He had duly ordered Japanese officials, including the police, to retain

their arms and maintain order. Some Japanese army units were also employed to keep the peace.

The situation was ripe for exploitation by the Communists and they soon moved to take advantage of it. Party members already placed in the city spread anti-American propaganda. An armed force of more than 4,000 guerrillas at Jiri Mountain (Commanded by Lt. Kim-Ji-Hae, 14<sup>th</sup> Regiment, ROK Army) and at Che-Ju-Do Island (Commanded by former Japanese officer Kim-D all-Sam) infiltrated from the North or were recruited locally and took hold of the Korean mountain. Southwest, the Communist political organ was the South Korean workers' party, which was twin to a so-called workers' party on the Island. The two parties maintained close contact and worked for a common goal, a Korea unified under Communism.

Noncommunist Korea was angered at the continued presence of a foreign army on their soil and added to the political turmoil. In the American zone, a remarkable number of Koreans reacted to the prospect of liberty by anointing themselves to lead their new nation. Between 1945 and 1947, more than 200 political parties sprang up. Sometimes, a party represented no more than one man and his family.

Mr. Lyun-Woon Hiung is the only one who put together an entire governmental structure ready to take power as the Korea Peoples Republic Party in South Korea. However, most South Koreans thought that the Korea Peoples Republic Party was pro-Communist. Nobody joined Mr. Lyun-Woon-Hung's party.

In the American military government, Lt. General Hodge tried to delegate to Korea as much responsibility as possible. However, the illusion of power did not match reality that American advisors stood behind each Korean functionary. The Japanese were chiefly to blame for Korea's stunted development under their harsh rule. Even the important non-government jobs were off limits to Koreans. For example, 75 percent of all teaching positions in Korean colleges and university level administrative jobs were reserved for the Japanese. It was therefore, difficult to find people with the background required to handle the many administrative jobs that became available.

On January 1, 1949, the Soviet Union announced the withdrawal of the last of their occupying troops from Korea as well as American withdrawal of occupying forces. General MacArthur, Far East Commander, organized and equipped a regimental combat team (R.C.T.) from the 7<sup>th</sup> Division. This combat team would remain in Korea and help defend and assist in the training of the R.O.K. Army. Then the 7<sup>th</sup> Division withdrew from Korea to Japan. That January, the 5<sup>th</sup> R.C.T. was activated in Sam-Kack-Jee Yongsan, Korea. There are Korean War museums there now. Most of the soldiers from the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> Regiments of the 7<sup>th</sup> Division as well as the 5<sup>th</sup> R.C.T. were the last remaining U.S. Army combat units in South Korea.

I accompanied 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Bill Conger on rifle platoon problems involving the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division (commanded by Colonel Che-Duck-Shin, R.O.K. Army) at Taegu, Korea. O.P.S. on the

38<sup>th</sup> Parallel, patrols kept the 5<sup>th</sup> R.C.T. in touch with the Korean people and the police when fights broke out between South Korean police and North Korean Constabulary. On January 29, 1949, the North Korean constabulary raided and burned down the police station at Paekchon. I was with the patrol team that found 7 police officers killed in this action.

The K.M.A.G. (Korean Military Advisory Group) announced in 1949 that it was seeking volunteers to train with the R.O.K. Army. There was not a rush of volunteers. The unit had an authorized strength of 182 officers and 293 enlisted men under Ambassador John Muccio. One of my friends, Captain Kane, served as an advisor to the R.O.K. 17<sup>th</sup> R.C. T. at Ong-Jin Peninsula.

In May of 1949, more than 2 battalions of N.K.P.A. (North Korean Peoples Army) soldiers attacked the 13<sup>th</sup> Regiment (commanded by Lt. Col. Che-Keyong-Nock) at Kaesong, 40 miles north of Seoul. After a furious engagement, the 13<sup>th</sup> Regiment succeeded in repulsing the N.K.P.A. by a special suicide attack team consisting of 10 individuals. They all died in this battle.

By the end of June, the U.S. 5<sup>th</sup> R.C.T. departed Inchon, leaving a 475 man K.M.A.G. to operate under the supervision of Ambassador John Muccio. Left behind was \$110 million worth of equipment. The equipment included rifles, machine guns, lights, mortars, bazookas, and more than 40,000 vehicles, but no artillery or combat aircraft. This army was considered enough to equip 50,000 of the 65,000 troops of the South Korean Army, a force intended to deal with only the guerrillas who were still a problem in South Korea.

North Korea, in stark comparison, boasted heavy artillery, tanks, about 110 fighter planes, bombers, and an army of 150,000 to 200,000 men. Its ground forces included as many as 40,000 Koreans who had fought in Chinese Eighth Route Communist Army of Mho-Tae-Tung (Mao Tse-tung, 1893-1976). The South Korean force, which gradually built up to about 100,000 men, lacked the experience of these veterans.

In 1950, Brigadier General Bill Roberts of the U.S. Military Advisory Group in Seoul declared that the South Koreans "had the best doggone shooting army outside the United States". Harold Noble, first Secretary of the American Embassy in Seoul, was reported as saying the R.O.K. Army was capable not only of defending South Korea against attack, but of moving north of the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel and capturing the Communists' capital at Pyon-Yang within a two weeks time.

On June 25, 1950, Sunday, at 4:00 a.m., came the first rains of the season. The North Korean Army hurled itself across the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel into South Korea. During the first few hours there was scant contact between the northern and southern armies. The invading tanks rolled forward at will. Russian built fighter-bombers began bombing and strafing Seoul the first day. R.O.K. Units stationed between Seoul and the border were no match for the invaders and within a few days of the initial assault the North Koreans reached the outskirts of Seoul.

Ambassador John Muccio had already ordered an evacuation of American women and children. He scrapped a long-standing air evacuation plan upon hearing that Communist aircraft might shoot down the evacuating planes. On June 26<sup>th</sup>, 682 people, mostly American civilians, boarded a Norwegian fertilizer ship Incheon harbor. The ship had accommodations for 12 passengers. After 3 miserable days at sea, they docked in Fukuoka, Japan where 50 of the evacuees had to be removed from the ship on stretchers.