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**A Tale of the Korean War and the United States**

Ha Jong Yoon

[YOON, HA JONG served as ambassador to England and Australia and is a graduate of the Political Science Department of Seoul National University. Since 1986 he has served as a member of the Advisory Committee of the Research Institute for National Unification, Ministry of Unification, and the Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA).]

This is a tale of the Korean War and U.S. participation in the Korean war as I privately experienced and observed.

It was an ordinary calm Sunday morning. I thought it was in the middle of the morning when I heard a radio suddenly breaking the news that all out invasion by North Korean forces are onslaughting throughout the 38th parallel line into South Korea. This was 48 years ago tomorrow.

Kim Il-sung, the stooge of the Soviet Union whom the Soviets brought into North Korea to be installed as the head of the North Korean People’s Committee which was newly organized soon after, dared to venture this unprovoked aggression to “liberate” the southern half of Korea which, according to him, has occupied by American imperialists; that is, to conquer and communize the whole of Korea by force.

Kim Il-sung might have very elaborately camouflaged his personal political ambition and intention in the colour of “people’s liberation” or “revolution,” but it was a blatant and traitorous challenge against the paramount expectation of the whole of the Korean people to build a free, democratic and prosperous Korea after their liberation in August 1945 from the yoke of foreign domination.

This war had completely perpetuated the south-north division of Korea, let alone the untold misery and devastation of the people and the land, and the [page 2] Korean people are still suffering from every result of the war as you all now realize. Kim Il-sung’s son and his dictatorial regime, on the other hand, still persistently claim the anachronistic jargon of “liberation” and “revolution” of South Korea, as if it were their holy mission and objective. In fact, the North Korean Labor Party and the regime still enshrine the theme in the constitution of the Party. I asked over and over again; what was the Korean War to the Korean people themselves and also to myself? What purpose did it serve or accomplished for Korea? I could not for some time find an appropriate answer. I believed that the Korean War was a devil’s design only to destroy and castigate Korea and the people. Indeed, during the war I could not answer any meaning of the Korean war, historical, social or national. I thought it was a huge waste and degrading to this nation.

As for me, I was one of the unheroic heroes of the war. I was in the graduating class of the University before the war broke out. The invading communist forces reached Seoul in early morning of 28th June that year. In the eve of the fall of Seoul, I was drinking whisky in dismal minds with a friend of mine at my home in Shindang-dong the south-eastern part of Seoul, hearing distant sounds of artillery shellings all night which were approaching nearer and nearer.

I and the friend of mine deplored and cursed the communist aggression to the same people, calling the night “the last night of Seoul”. I was woken up the next morning by my mother’s loud calls and the sound of bombardment of communist artillery, and I could see the landings of the shells with the sand smoke on the hillside not distant from my home.

Instantly, I made up my mind to get out of Seoul as quickly as possible. I knew I could not stay in Seoul under the communists’ occupation and their rule, since I had already known to a considerable extent how communists and their world were. I studied communism in my early days at the university, as was something of fashion in those days among students, and also lived briefly under the Soviet occupation collaborated by the Korean communist stooges in North Korea, right after the Pacific War.

While I was running in a hurry over the hillside towards the Han River, I saw perhaps the first civilian casualty of the war in Seoul. I met one woman weeping before a body who was apparently killed by an artillery bombardment of the communist tanks which by that time entered into Seoul proper from northern part of the city. The couple were living near the hill and, frightened by the shell passing over their home, they attempted to escape Seoul towards the South. The woman said he would not have died if they had stayed at home.

When I reached the northern side of Han River, I was surprised at the [page 3]huge crowd of people who gathered there attempting to cross the river which was inundated by a heavy rainfall during the night before. By the way, the Han River bridge had already been blown up prematurely by that time by the elements of retreating Korean Army Engineering units.

At the river side, throwing the bundle of my clothes into a wooden boat, which was about to leave full of retreating soldiers, I jumped into the stream to swim cross the river. Shortly after I reached the other side of the river, the same little boat with the soldiers also arrived at about the spot as I arrived. Picking up my stuff on the boat, I ran towards Suwon with the stragglers of the Army troops. By that time, the Korean army headquarters, with main elements of the Korean government had moved to Taejon, where I could reach in the evening of the next day. Streams of refugees were flowing to southwards on foot or riding on wagons. I was fortunate enough to catch a cargo-train south bound at a small railway station, squeezing into a space on the roof top of the coach.

On my way, I kept thinking in anger, why does such misery of war so frequently befall on our people throughout history? I recalled many cruel invasions by Chinese, Mongols, and Japanese. But this time, by our own people! My anger went on, those who provoked this traitorous outrage to the mother land, brothers and family should not be unpunished! This simple nationalistic and patriotic anger over the communists was the very motive of my determination to join the fighting. I only thought that we had to fight back.

On the street of the refugee capital of Taejon, a group of university students were talking about forming a voluntary student corps to join in the army. I also heard many Korean students overseas had also volunteered to join us and were returning to Korea. In fact many of them died in front with their young comrades in arms from overseas.

Towards the end of the Pacific War in 1943 and 1944, the Japanese government enforced most Korean young men into their military forces. By arbitrary legislation, Japanese drove tens of thousands of the Korean students and young men into the Japanese military camps to fight against the Allied Forces in China, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific. However, I was lucky. Before they shipped me overseas, the Pacific War ended. When I was liberated from a Japanese army camp and returned to my campus again, really, I did not know how much I was delighted. This was the first time that I felt how good it is to be liberated and free. The next 5 years in the university campus were about the happiest of my life. I concentrated myself in study and reading mainly history, philosophy, literature, classics etc., as if I were to recover the time deprived and lost by having been drafted in the Japanese Army. [page 4]

Then, cynical enough, however, the military training, whatever I received at the Japanese army camp was going to be my asset to serve immediately in the fight for my country against the invading communist forces. A few days later in Taejon, I went to the place where the student groups gathered. There I was found by an army major who was a close friend of mine having entered the Korean army much earlier. He took me to the Korean Army Headquarters which was seeking liaison officers with the U.S. contingent forces who were just then arriving in Korea.

In fact, I saw many U.S. troops (later called Smith battalion troops) marching the streets with some of the heavy artilleries which I had never seen before. I also saw later General Dean of the 24th Division of the U.S. Army at the Korean Army Headquarters. Then I was really convinced of the U.S. determination for participation and assistance to Korea. I remember, at the time of defeat and threatened death, the first sight of the U.S. troops indeed, was to me a image of heavenly messengers sent to us for relief and resurrection of the Korean people. I was really moved. How can a people afford the others so great a boon. Then, I had come to be convinced of our final victory. I cannot over emphasize how the prompt decision and instant assistance of the U.S. government was the greatest boost and encouragement to the Korean people at this time of the gravest crisis of the nation.

As I was doing mostly desk work like interpreting or translating at the Army Headquarters for a few days, I was more anxious and tempted to see the front lines where soldiers were actually fighting, and so asked the major to send me out to the field in front.

The first Corps Field Headquarters, then located about the central part of South Korea, was where I was first assigned- There, I was commissioned as First Lieutenant to be one of the liaison officers with the Korean Military Advisors Group members of which were dispatched to about every Korean troop. The strength of the United Nations forces increased to include the troops of lb nations. Their retreat continued to the south eastern tip of the Korean peninsula, the Pusan perimeter, which I thought was to be our last stand within Korea. By that time, I moved to the Capital Division, and, for a few weeks, severe fightings with heavy causalties had been going on along the Pohang-Taegu line. Several times of the enemy breakthroughs including a direct surprise attack on the Division Command post took place, jeopardizing the whole of the defense line of the Division.

At this very crucial moment, the Inchon landing by Gen. MacArthur in the north was launched, and in the middle of September, general retreat of the advanced enemy army who were cut off their over extended supply routes [page 5] began in a hurry and disorder. I take up to this stage, as the first phase of the war.

From then, the advance to the north of the United Nations forces started, chasing the fleeing North Korean forces. The Capital Division was advancing along the eastern coast of the peninsula up to the 38th parallel line. After a couple of days waiting for the order permitting the crossing of the line, we crossed it into the North Korean territory as the spear head of the entire United Nations Forces. The Division with the 3rd Division advanced far to the north almost close to the Korea-China border. On the way, the Division occupied such cities as Won San, Humhung, Chungjin without meeting any substantial enemy resistance, since the main elements of the North Korean forces had already fled into North Eastern China. When the Division Headquarters was about to move to the city of Chungjin, the capital of the northern province, it received on order of withdrawal to south. In fact, the so called Chinese Voluntary Army had already secretly permeated into the northern high ground of Korea coming down further south behind our line. This was the reason for our withdrawal.

It was a particularly cold day in late November when we left Chungjin with large crowds of North Korean refugees who were following just behind the south bound troops on the highway, though they were discouraged to do so. I still cannot forget those roads full of refugee groups, in the severity of cold and starvation. Since our lines were already cut, the whole division took ships to evacuate south. On the way south, we landed on the besieged Hung-nam beachhead where the U.S. 10th Corps headquarters which still remaining to collect the last elements of a U.S. Marine Division who was retreating from the northern high ground where they were sieged in the mountain by newly committed Chinese forces. At this operation, the Capital Division artillery took part in covering the retreating route of the marine troops. I cannot forget those American marine soldiers with bearded and rugged faces in raggy uniforms who were coming to our defense barricade on foot or on broken vehicles. They had been fighting a very isolated battle in the most remote and cold mountain side.

After the marines were completely rescued, the 10th Corps withdrew from Hungnam: at the same time, the Division was on board the ships again to land at the eastern port of Mukho, south of the 38th parallel. It was February 1951. From there the Division was redeployed along the present eastern perimeter of the truce line to stop the communist forces. It was a long retreat again. With the human waves of Chinese troops surging into the peninsula from the north, a general retreat of the U.N. forces took place in the western [page 6] front as well, and an entirely “new war” began.

At this juncture, I cannot go on without mentioning the most outstanding operation of the war; refugee evacuation from the Humhung enclave. Nearly 300 thousand North Korean refugees fled into this small land under enemy siege. The U.S. Army 10th Corps, regardless of heavy military pressure being afflicted at this most critical time of enemy siege, courageously took the risk of shipping all of them out to the south which was entirely out of its line of military consideration. I thought that it corresponded with Moses’ crossing of the Red Sea in leading his people out of slavery. It was really a monumental humanistic achievement in entire Korean war. I thought that this rescue operation, indeed, symbolized the nature of the Korean War.

From here, the third phase of the war started. The Capital Division was defending the peaks of Hyangrobong Mountain over 1800m high, about the highest ground of the eastern range. The Division engaged mainly in trench war across the barbed wire with artillery exchanges for a few months without significant changes of activities. With the warm spring having come, soldiers in the trench seemed to have gotten bored.

In early July, one late night, I got a telephone message from Division Headquarters to report to the G-3 of the Division as soon as possible. When I reached the Headquarters early in the morning walking down the mountain through out the night without sleep, I was told by a G-3 officer that I would be dispatched to the United States for military training. At first I thought he was joking, being unable to believe his words.

Studying in the United States someday had always been my dearest hope then, but the war shattered all of this. I never thought that the opportunity of going to the States was coming so soon in that way.

We were among the first group of about 250 Korean officers who were sent to the U.S. Infantry School at Ft. Benning, Georgia and the Artillery School at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma in August 1951. Regularly every six months the same size of officers groups, were infantry and artillery, were sent for their respective basic training course for six months. This training program continued until after the war, and I stayed at Ft. Sill for about two and a half years as a translator and assistant to the instructors.

Having been assigned to the Artillery School at Ft. Sill, I lived with American officers in the same B.O.Q., in the school compound and also had close associations with American families and their communities. I was astonished in the first place at how vastly generous it was for America to take thousands of Korean officers all the way to the respective service schools in the states for training at its own expense. [page 7]

There, I discovered a new country and a new culture of immense brightness and positivism. I cannot forget the wonderful American couple who were also good enough to come to my B.O.Q. every Sunday to take me to a church congregation where I could meet many families of goodwill, all were being so joyous and good to me. I did not go to church in Korea but, there, I learned something of church and Christian life. I returned to Korea on Christmas eve of 1953 after the war ended. Though, we could not repel the invaders all the way, we defended the country together with the unified forces of the United Nations. Severe tension still exists on the truce line, as they are still there, their guns aimed at us, but we made all shooting stop.

Recalling the situation immediately before the Korea War, I did not quite expect the United States’ commitment to the war in the Korean peninsula. My way of thinking then might have been due to some of the disturbing Korea- U.S. relations from the beginning and the later American view on Korea, seriously lacking deep insight and knowledgeable information on the country.

Let us now come to consider Korea-U.S. relations before the Korean war. I believe that the Korean war had first of all brought the two countries and peoples inseparably close together in a quite unique way. Having said this, I was rather confused to say that, up until the war, the United States had appeared to have done even some harm in their not long history of relations since the dawn of the 20th century, except for the propagation of the Christian gospel to the Korean people by devoted American missionaries. To illustrate some of the historical instances, I first quote the incident of S.S. General Sherman in 1866 which sailed upstream Daedong River to Pyongyang asking for possible trade. Innocent local Korean officers and people who had been completely blind to the outside world except China at the time of absolute closure of the country, having been frightened by the appearance of this strange foreign ship, burnt down the American merchant ship on the river.

Apparently, to set the score of the incident and to make open the ports by force; then U.S. government sent a U.S. Navy fleet into the water of Kangwha Island in 1871. A heavy clash ensued between resisting local Korean forces guarding the fortress of Kangwha Island and American Navy forces who landed on the island after severe fighting. The fortress was destroyed by the navy gunfire. However the American contingent had also suffered heavy casualties and had to withdraw from the island to China. The first contacts between the two countries were marked by these sinister and ominous incidents. I thought these initial encounters between the Korea and the U.S. were a good contrast with the peaceful and successful negotiations having already been initiated by the U.S. Navy Admiral Perry whose fleet had previously visited Urawa, Japan [page 8] in 1854 to urge Japan to open its ports to the United States. Henceforth, the United States government had also opened its consulate office in Kanagawa for the first time in Japanese history. Some time, I wondered if the semblance of the United States’ previous preference for Japan to Korea for sometime in the tripartite relations is not relevant to these contrasting earlier historical incidents involving the three countries at the start of their relations.

The Postmas Agreement in 1905 was the result of the U.S. conciliation of the Russo-Japanese war with advantageous conditions to Japan. By this war Japan had gained a dominant position for the later annexation of Korea, while, like in China-Japan war 10 years before, the whole of the land of Korea, though she was non-belligerent, became the battleground between them. In the Taft-Katsura Agreement of 1905 the U.S. had recognized the Japanese supremacy over Korea while reciprocally being guaranteed of the United States’ rule over the Philippines. I thought there were a few other collaborations between the U.S. and the Japan across the Pacific as perhaps the two late comers to the Far East in the early 20th century. Towards the end and immediately after the Pacific war, I thought there also was some conspicuous American ignorant disregard and omissions on Korea.

At the Yalta Conference in February 1945, the United States on its own initiative made the Soviet Union advance into Manchuria and Northern part of Korea in the way of inducing the latter to participate in the Pacific War. I believe that this Allied decision in fact, was the beginning of the partition of Korea. The division of Korean occupation was decided at the Postdam Conference in July 1945. In the reference to Korean independence in the Cairo Declaration of November 1944, the United States also adjusted the expression by asserting to add the cushioning words “in due course,” in assuring Korea’s independence, instead of immediate independence after the Japanese surrender. Little after the Yalta Conference, the United States had also recommended “trusteeship” Korea and it proposed this plan again at the Moscow Conference of the 3 ministers (the United States, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union). The decision on “trusteeship” by big powers on Korea caused a great internal confusion and conflicts among the Korean people who expected an immediate self-government. After the Pacific War ended, the United States occupation forces, about two divisions strength, arrived in Korea in September 1945, though about one month delayed, in an atmosphere of a great welcome by the Korean people. However, to the surprise of the Korean people, the U.S. occupation authorities entrusted the active Japanese governor-general to continuously administer the Korean people in total disregard of their national feelings. This might have been attributed to the U.S. unpreparedness for the mili- [page 9] tary occupation in Korea, but the Korean people were somewhat dismayed at the United States’ irresponsibility which were naturally ensued by many failures of its military government in Korea. This discouraging situation in the southern part of Korea was often compared with the northern situation where the Soviet Union military occupation authorities promptly established the North Korean Peoples Committee as a governing body and, among others, started to build a modern army of considerable strength. These situations produced a serious unbalance of power in the peninsula which might have caused a war.

At that time, the U.S. and the Soviet Union tacitly agreed to a simultaneous withdrawal of respective occupation troops as soon as possible which having been reflected in the U.N. General Assembly’s resolution in 1947, recommending the withdrawal of the occupation forces as soon as possible. Ever since, the U.S. forces advanced to Korea for disarming Japanese forces in Korea, the U.S. seemed to have thought only of withdrawing the force from Korea. Immediately before the North Korean launching of invasion, there appeared to be a number of disconcerting gestures of the United States which might have caused Kim Il-sung to misjudge that the U.S. had forsaken South Korea. The U.S. Congress, in 1949, voted down the 1950 budget proposal of the Korean Assistance Program, both military and economic.

The U.S. military mission on the Far East headed by Gen. Wedmire which also came to Korea in 1947 recommended to the Defense Department an early withdrawal of its troops from Korea since Korea was not considered as bearing any strategic importance to the United States interest. In his statement in February 1950, then Secretary of State Achison at the Washington Foreign Correspondents Club, declared that Korea and Taiwan were outside of the U.S. defense perimeter in the Far East. In fact, this was only a reiteration of the U.S. government position of the period.

Some of the puzzling indifference and disregard to the repeated intelligence reports by the Korean Army, having had urgently warned of North Korea’s impending all out attack on Korea right up to the outbreak, could be answered by such U.S. government’s basic position on Korea held just before the war finally broke out.

However, the Korean War had entirely changed the whole of this U.S. position on Korea and the Soviet-China axis; The Truman Declaration of 1947 had already ensured the United States’ role as the defender of the free world and democracy against communist expansionism termed as “roll back” or “containment” policy. Against the back drop of the Stalin’s diabolic acts of incursion and the successful Chinese revolution in 1948, the North Korean [page 10] aggression in Korea was taken by the U.S. as a serious challenge to it in the world level. The Korean war had thus become a real start of the Cold War which lasted until almost the rest of this century. The U.S. decision to repel the communist aggression in Korea was so prompt and unshakable. Once the decision was made, the actions were quick and efficient.

The U.S. soldiers, officers and men in the Korean war, were brave and dedicated to the cause of the great nation, namely as defenders of freedom. Korean and American soldiers together with other United Nations contingent forces of the 16 nations fought in the common front shoulder to shoulder.

As a result, Korea also fought the United Nations war against its common enemy of the free world as a member of the free international society under the U.N. banner. This was the first time in its long history where the Korean people acted in such status of the free world nation with other friendly peoples. Though millions of Koreans, civilians and soldiers alike, killed in the war with the maximum misery and devastation, I believe the Koreans should take pride in its role played in the joint rank of the defenders for the law and order of the world. Though I said above that the Korea war was only a huge waste and degrade to this nation, I believe that the Korean war has upheld this historical momentum of the 20th century. That is, the momentum of peace, freedom and democracy on earth.