



## Death on the Road to Osan: Task Force Smith

CPT CONNOR MCLEOD

The first ground battle between American and North Korean forces during the Korean War ended in a North Korean victory, a distinct difference from the performance of the U.S. military that fought on multiple fronts in World War II and contributed to the defeat of the Axis powers.<sup>1</sup> Task Force (TF) Smith lost at the Battle of Osan on 5 July 1950 because it did not appropriately use the characteristics of the defense (specifically **disruption**, **flexibility**, and **operations in depth**) and one of the five military aspects of terrain (**key terrain**) against the Korean People's Army (KPA).

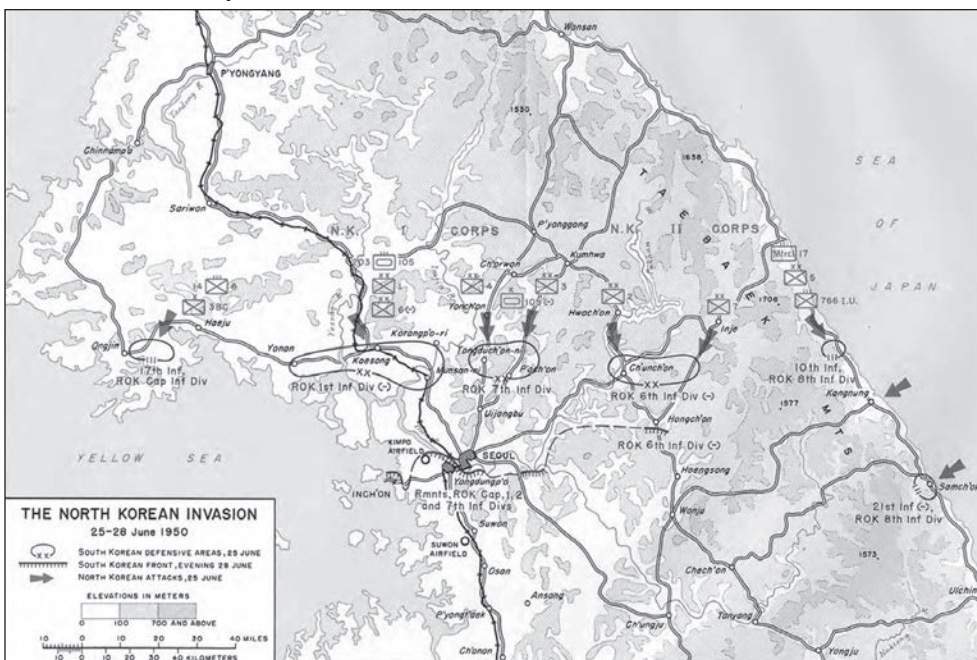
The strategic scene in which TF Smith fought at Osan was set in the aftermath of World War II. President Harry Truman and his Secretary of Defense, Louis Johnson, drastically cut military spending in the interest of transitioning to postwar life. American occupation forces in Asia were among the hardest hit as "U.S. infantry divisions in the Far East were shorn of 62 percent of their firepower... with barely a forty-five day supply

of ammunition."<sup>2</sup> The insufficient funding meant maneuver units did not conduct large-scale field exercises, essentially reducing them to constabulary units in the local area rather than America's first line of defense against communist aggression in Asia.<sup>3</sup> The Korean War began on 25 June 1950 when North Korea invaded South Korea with seven KPA divisions and more than 150 T-34 tanks and 200 aircraft against eight Republic of Korea (ROK) Army divisions.<sup>4</sup> North Korean forces quickly routed the ROK divisions defending the capital city of Seoul and entered the city's suburbs by the morning of 27 June (see Map 1).<sup>5</sup> General of the Army Douglas MacArthur recommended President Truman order air, ground, and naval forces to South Korea as soon as possible to assist the ROK Army.<sup>6</sup>

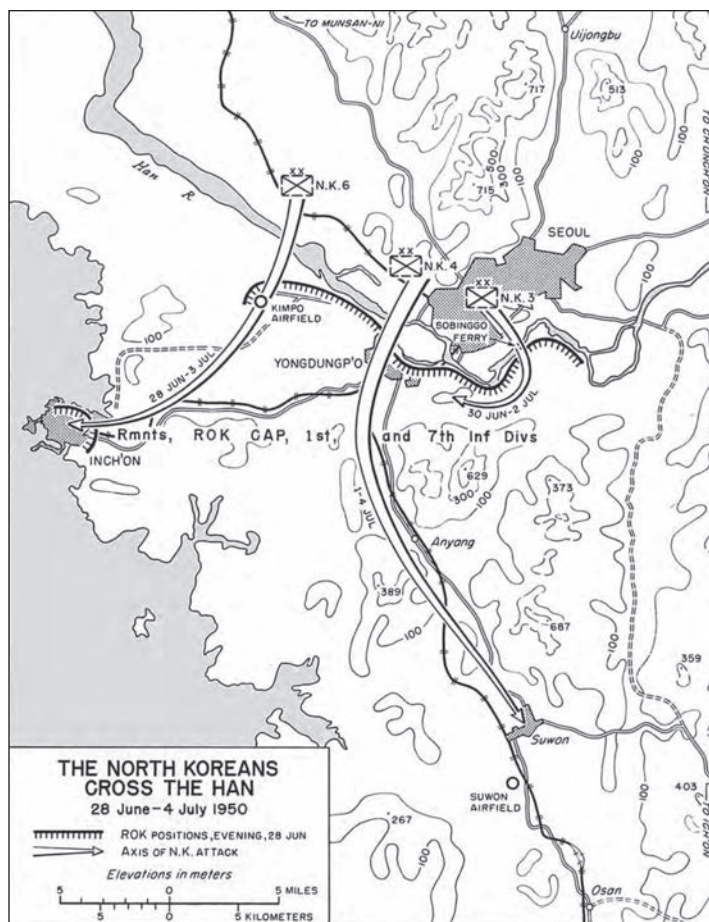
President Truman saw Korea as an opportunity to prevent unopposed communist expansion and set an example for nations bullied by "stronger communist neighbors" to stand and fight.<sup>7</sup> Secretary of State Dean Acheson wrote that

America's "internationally accepted position as the protector of South Korea" was at stake.<sup>8</sup> President Truman deliberated over information as it came in and decided in favor of military action under a United Nations (UN) resolution. The vote passed, aided by the fact that the Soviet Union, one of the five veto powers on the UN Security Council, was absent from the vote because "it was treating the crisis as a Korean internal affair."<sup>9</sup> Air and naval forces of the United States and Great Britain launched strikes against North Korean forces attacking south, particularly around Seoul, starting on 27 June.<sup>10</sup> MG William F. Dean's 24th Infantry Division (ID), on occupation duty in Japan, received orders from Eighth Army on 30 June to prepare for deployment to South Korea.<sup>11</sup> MG Dean selected the 21st

Map 1 — The North Korean Invasion, 25-28 June 1950



Graphics from *South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu (June-November 1950)* by Roy E. Appleman



Map 2 — 28 June - 4 July 1950

Infantry Regiment (the “Gimlets”) because it was the closest 24th ID element to Korea. The Gimlets also had the strongest esprit de corps among the regiments and performed the best in exercises with the division’s limited training resources in Japan.<sup>12</sup> Concurrently, the KPA 4th Division attacked south along the rail-highway axis from Yongdungp’o toward Suwon. It defeated the 5th ROK Regiment fighting a delaying action on 4 July and rapidly advanced toward Osan (see Map 2).<sup>13</sup>

COL Richard Stephens, commander of the 21st Infantry Regiment, alerted LTC Charles Smith, commander of the 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment (1-21 IN), for deployment at 2245 on 30 June.<sup>14</sup> LTC Smith, a veteran of the Guadalcanal campaign in World War II, assembled his troops on 1 July.<sup>15</sup> Smith had six U.S. Air Force (USAF) C-54s available for air movement, meaning he could move only two of his three rifle companies and half of his 75mm recoilless rifles and 4.2-inch mortars from the Headquarters Company.<sup>16</sup> MG Dean met LTC Smith on the tarmac at Itazuke Airfield before the battalion flew to Pusan and simply said, “Head for Osan. We’ve got to block the main Seoul-Pusan road as far north as possible.”<sup>17</sup> TF Smith made a rail movement from Pusan to Taejon on 2 July and a vehicle movement from Taejon north toward Osan,

driving past South Korean refugees fleeing south.<sup>18</sup> The first thing LTC Smith conducted at Osan was a reconnaissance with key leaders from 1-21 IN on 4 July and identified where to establish his defense, “an irregular line of hills stretched across the main road [to Osan] and the railway to the east” (see photo below).<sup>19</sup>

At the time of its airlift from Japan, TF Smith consisted of B and C Companies and assorted Headquarters Company elements: 406 men with small arms, “two 75mm recoilless guns, two 4.2-inch mortars, and some 2.36-inch bazookas.”<sup>20-21</sup> There were experienced men throughout TF Smith to provide a steady core. Including LTC Smith, “about one-third of the officers... [and] one-half of the non-commissioned officers were World War II veterans, but not all had been in combat. Throughout the force, perhaps one man in six had combat experience.”<sup>22</sup> Battery A, 52nd Field Artillery (FA) Regiment, consisting of six 105mm howitzers with six armor-defeating high-explosive anti-tank (HEAT) rounds under the command of LTC Miller Perry, joined 1-21 IN on 4 July.<sup>23</sup> TF Smith established positions on a ridge overlooking the road from Suwon to Osan. One platoon from B/1-21 IN was to the west of the road with the rest of B and C/1-21 IN to the east of the road. A/52 FA was located approximately 1 kilometer south of the infantry positions, except for one howitzer emplaced forward with the six HEAT rounds (see Map 3 for reference).<sup>24-25</sup> LTC Smith and his men faced KPA forces consisting of 33 Soviet-built T-34 tanks and 4,000 seasoned infantry from the KPA 4th Division, with supporting artillery.<sup>26</sup>

At approximately 0730 on 5 July, TF Smith spotted the first North Korean tanks coming from Suwon unaccompanied by infantry. Battery A fired a high-explosive (HE) barrage at a range of approximately 1,800 meters with no effects.<sup>27</sup> The recoilless rifles opened fire at approximately 650 meters and received fire from KPA T-34 cannons and machine guns in return. American bazooka teams waited until the KPA tanks were at point-blank range and then knocked out two T-34s.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, most of the rockets, as well as the 75mm recoilless rifles, were ineffective. 2LT Ollie Conner, awarded the Silver Star after the battle for his actions, “fired 22 rockets, from about fifteen feet... and cursed as his shots...

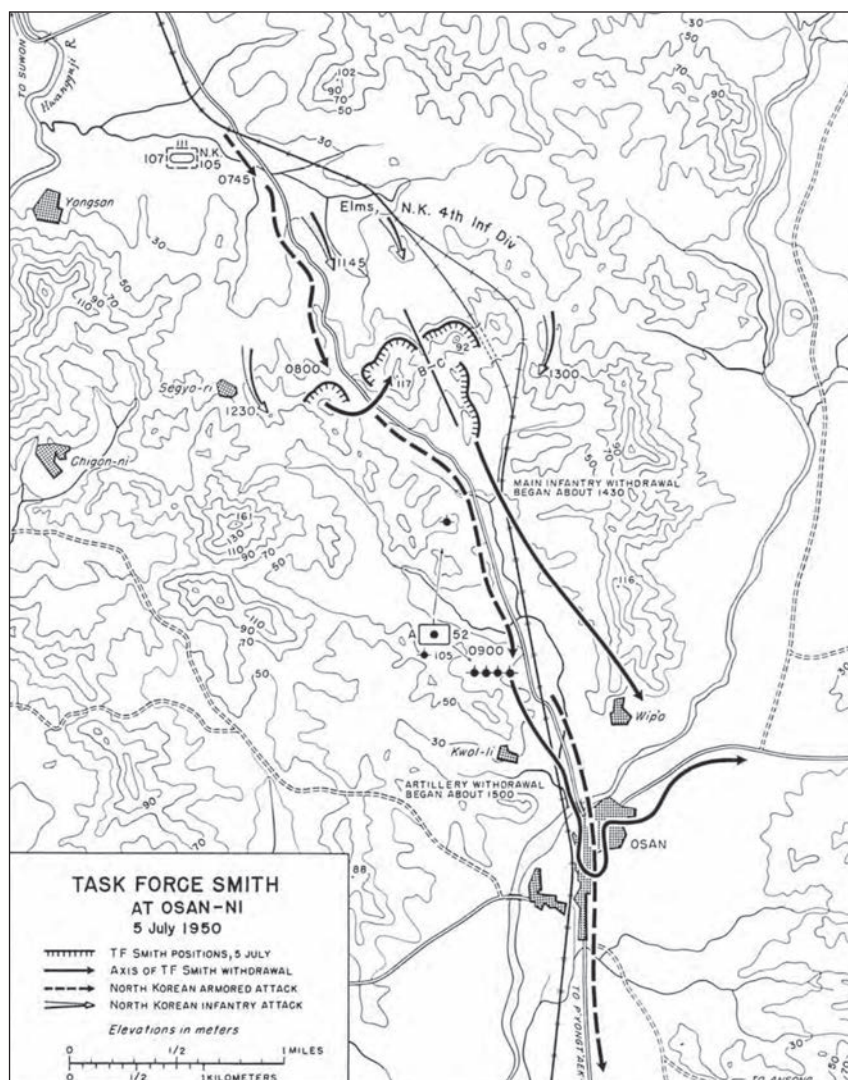


Task Force Smith's position straddled the Osan-Suwon Road.

failed to cripple the tankers.”<sup>29</sup> The remaining T-34s passed through the infantry’s positions and moved toward the artillery battery. Battery A’s lone forward howitzer destroyed two tanks with HEAT rounds before T-34 fire destroyed it.<sup>30</sup> The remainder of A/52 FA “traded howitzer for tank, destroying five enemy tanks [including those destroyed by the HEAT howitzer], and losing five howitzers.”<sup>31</sup> LTC Perry gathered artillerymen into bazooka teams as a last-ditch effort to stop the enemy armor. These bazooka teams destroyed two T-34s, and LTC Perry was wounded in the leg by North Korean fire in the process. The KPA T-34s did not stop to engage A/52 FA and sped toward Osan.<sup>32</sup> At this point, TF Smith suffered around 20 killed and wounded from enemy fire.<sup>33</sup>

LTC Smith used the lull in the battle to improve his companies’ positions and communications as well as conduct hasty weapons maintenance.<sup>34</sup> A column of KPA trucks and dismounted infantry appeared from Suwon about an hour later. At 900 meters, “Task Force Smith ‘threw the book at them.’”<sup>35</sup> The KPA infantry suffered heavy casualties as artillery and mortars “landed smack among the trucks... while 50-caliber machine guns swept the column.”<sup>36</sup> Three T-34s came forward from the column and fired on the Americans. North Korean infantry began to flank TF Smith, establishing support-by-fire positions on hills to the east and west.<sup>37</sup> Fire from Hill 1230 in the west forced LTC Smith to move the B Company platoon on the west side of the road to the main company position (see Map 3).<sup>38</sup> Smith’s executive officer, MAJ Floyd Martin, moved all extra ammunition and the 4.2-inch mortars forward from their previous positions closer to the “battalion command post... [in] a tighter defense perimeter on the highest ground east of the road.”<sup>39</sup>

LTC Smith lost radio communications with his artillery at around 1100 because his radios and communications wire were damaged or destroyed by the previous night’s rain and enemy fire.<sup>40</sup> He could not effectively call for fire on the KPA machine guns firing from the high ground or the infantry maneuvering on his position. Nevertheless, TF Smith kept KPA infantry at bay with small arms and mortar fire until 1430 when LTC Smith realized the task force’s situation was untenable.<sup>41</sup> In LTC Smith’s own words, “In an obviously hopeless situation... I was faced with the decision: what the hell to do? To stand and die[?]. I chose to get out, in hopes that we would live to fight another day.”<sup>42</sup> Faced with no other choice, LTC Smith gave the order to withdraw.<sup>43</sup> B Company covered CPT Richard Dashmer’s C Company, battalion headquarters, and the medical section’s withdrawal off the ridge toward Osan.<sup>44</sup> Once C Company established a support-by-fire position near the



Map 3 — Task Force Smith at Osan-Ni, 5 July 1950

railroad tracks running to the south, it covered B Company’s movement with small arms fire.<sup>45</sup> At this point, KPA forces nearly enveloped the battalion, “but the first units... cleared a pathway... to withdraw southward in small groups.”<sup>46</sup> The withdrawing companies left behind some of their heavy weapons, and regretfully among the TF’s veterans, their dead and around 30 non-ambulatory wounded. Despite leaders’ attempts to keep the movement as orderly as possible, some men took matters into their own hands and escaped any way they could, running across rice paddies or seeking cover from KPA patrols until darkness.<sup>47</sup> By nightfall of 5 July, around 250 personnel from TF Smith, including LTC Smith, regrouped at Ansong and moved to Taejon the next morning.<sup>48</sup> Smaller groups evaded KPA patrols and reunited with their units over the following days.<sup>49</sup>

After the battle, LTCs Perry and Smith said reflectively in interviews that “a few well-placed antitank mines would have stopped the entire armored column in the road.”<sup>50</sup> There were no antitank mines in TF Smith or all of Korea.<sup>51</sup> TF Smith suffered approximately 150 casualties killed, wounded, or missing during the Battle of Osan.<sup>52</sup> North Korean casual-

ties number around 40 killed and 90 wounded and between four and seven T-34s.<sup>53-54</sup> TF Smith's stand at Osan gave the 24th ID's 34th Infantry Regiment enough time to deploy to Korea and establish defenses south of Osan, but actions of the 34th Infantry Regiment and other 24th ID elements were all too similar in the first weeks of the Korean War due to piecemeal employment and KPA momentum.<sup>55</sup>

TF Smith's defeat at Osan stems from its inappropriate use of the characteristics of the defense, specifically disruption, flexibility, and operations in depth, and the military aspect of terrain of key terrain. Disruption, as defined in Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-90, *Offense and Defense*, is when "defending forces seek to disrupt attacks by employing actions that desynchronize an enemy force's preparations."<sup>56</sup> Disruption means taking action to prevent the enemy's plan or operation from working smoothly. TF Smith failed to practice disruption because it did not effectively employ anti-armor weapons to destroy significant amounts of KPA armor.<sup>57</sup> This shortcoming led to defeat because TF Smith did not force an early deployment of forces or stop the North Korean movement and massing of combat power. The task force also displayed a lack of disruption because it did not desynchronize the enemy's operation. Besides the forces manning battle positions along the Suwon-Pusan Road, there were no other effects to block or disrupt the North Korean advance.<sup>58</sup> This deficiency was critical because North Korean tanks easily punctured TF Smith's positions due to ineffective direct and indirect fires targeting the tanks' movement. Also, North Korean infantry moved unimpeded near TF Smith's positions once the North Korean support-by-fire positions achieved suppression.<sup>59</sup>

As for flexibility, ADP 3-90 states that "defensive operations require flexible plans that anticipate enemy actions and allocates resources accordingly. Commanders shift the main effort as required. They plan battle positions in depth and the use of reserves in spoiling attacks and counterattacks."<sup>60</sup> Flexibility is having multiple options available to adapt to the enemy's actions. TF Smith's plan to make a stand against a mobile, armored threat and lack of subsequent battle positions broke the characteristic of flexibility. The inflexible nature of TF Smith's defense was a factor in the loss at Osan because it confined TF Smith to battle positions on the ridge and limited the ability to mount a counterattack or retrograde if necessary. There was also no contingency or anticipation if North Korean tanks penetrated TF Smith's positions, which contradicted the characteristic of flexibility.<sup>61</sup> The absence of flexibility in the defense influenced the outcome of the battle because once the infantry lost radio communications with the artillery, A/52 FA knew North Korean tanks were approaching only when they came into view. The belief that the enemy tanks would turn around after being engaged by the infantry meant the artillerymen had to quickly create ad hoc bazooka teams that had little effect.<sup>62</sup>

Operations in depth, as defined in ADP 3-90, "is the simultaneous application of combat power throughout an area of operations. Commanders plan their operations in depth.

They create conditions by disrupting enemy long-range fires, sustainment, and command and control. These disruptions weaken enemy forces and prevent any early enemy successes. Operations in depth prevent enemy forces from maintaining their tempo. In the defense, commanders establish a security area and the main battle area (MBA) with its associated forward edge of the battle area (FEBA)."<sup>63</sup>

Operations in depth means there are multiple parts of the battlefield to fight the enemy and prevent them from gaining an advantage. TF Smith did not implement operations in depth because it employed no security or reconnaissance elements forward of its position to provide early warning or disrupt enemy forces and their warfighting functions.<sup>64</sup> The inability to achieve this characteristic was pivotal because TF Smith had no information about the enemy situation and did not observe the enemy force until it was a few kilometers away. LTC Smith arrayed his two companies on line with each other along a ridge.<sup>65</sup> He violated operations in depth because he did not organize a reserve force or have subsequent battle positions between the infantry and Battery A. LTC Smith had insufficient forces available to constitute a reserve or depth, so he had to place his companies on line to establish the defense. This decision allowed the North Koreans to penetrate and bypass TF Smith's battle positions, leaving no American forces between the North Koreans and the unprotected artillery battery and Taejon.<sup>66</sup>

ADP 3-90 defines key terrain as "an identifiable characteristic whose seizure or retention affords a marked advantage to either combatant."<sup>67</sup> In layman's terms, key terrain is a place or point that gives one side the advantage over the other if it is controlled or acted upon. TF Smith incorrectly utilized and recognized key terrain because it did not occupy, or at least deny enemy access to, the high ground around its battle positions. The North Koreans established support-by-fire positions on hills to the east and west of the task force's positions.<sup>68</sup> This event was influential because the enfilade fire that came from those hills allowed the North Korean infantry to maneuver on the flanks and into dead space to envelop TF Smith in its battle positions.<sup>69</sup>

North Korean forces defeated LTC Smith and his troops at Osan on 5 July 1950 in the first ground battle between American and North Korean forces. TF Smith managed to stop the North Korean advance for several hours, but it was not enough to slow the momentum as the North Koreans continued through Osan to P'yongt'aek.<sup>70</sup> TF Smith failed at the Battle of Osan on 5 July 1950 due to the poor use of the characteristics of the defense, specifically disruption, flexibility, and operations in depth, and the military aspect of terrain key terrain, against the Korean People's Army.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bill Sloan, *The Darkest Summer, Pusan and Inchon 1950: The Battles that Saved South Korea – and the Marines – From Extinction* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 22-23.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>3</sup> Roy K. Flint, "Task Force Smith and the 24th Division: Delay and Withdrawal, 5-19 July 1950," in *America's First Battles: 1776-1965*, ed.

Charles E. Heller and William A. Stofft (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 270-274.

<sup>4</sup> Allan R. Millett, *The War for Korea, 1950-51: They Came from the North* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 85-89.

<sup>5</sup> Roy E. Appleman, *South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu (June-November 1950)* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1961), 29-31.

<sup>6</sup> Sloan, *The Darkest Summer*, 19.

<sup>7</sup> Bevin Alexander, *Korea: The First War We Lost* (NY: Hippocrene Books, 1998), 33.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-43.

<sup>10</sup> Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 50-52.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>12</sup> Flint, "Task Force Smith and the 24th Division," 271- 276.

<sup>13</sup> Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 54-58.

<sup>14</sup> Richard W. Stephens, "21st Infantry Regiment War Diary for the Period 29 June to 22 July 1950, from 292400 June 1950 to 302400 June 1950," in *United States Army 24th Infantry Division Unit War Diaries from June to November 1950* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1950).

<sup>15</sup> T.R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War: A Study in Unpreparedness* (NY: Macmillan, 1963), 65.

<sup>16</sup> Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 60-61.

<sup>17</sup> George B. Busch, *Duty: The Story of the 21st Infantry Regiment* (Sendai, Japan: Hyappan Printing Company, 1953), 20.

<sup>18</sup> *Korea – 1950* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1952), 14.

<sup>19</sup> J. Lawton Collins, *War in Peacetime: The History and Lessons of Korea* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969), 47.

<sup>20</sup> Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 60-61.

<sup>21</sup> John Toland, *In Mortal Combat: Korea, 1950-1953* (NY: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), 77.

<sup>22</sup> Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 61.

<sup>23</sup> Collins, *War in Peacetime*, 47-50.

<sup>24</sup> Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 66-67.

<sup>25</sup> Collins, *War in Peacetime*, 49-50.

<sup>26</sup> Shelby P. Warren, *A Brief History of the 24th Infantry Division in Korea* (Tokyo: Japan News, 1956), 4.

<sup>27</sup> Toland, *In Mortal Combat*, 80.

<sup>28</sup> Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 69.

<sup>29</sup> Busch, *Duty*, 21.

<sup>30</sup> Collins, *War in Peacetime*, 50-51.

<sup>31</sup> Busch, *Duty*, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Collins, *War in Peacetime*, 51.

<sup>33</sup> Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 70.

<sup>34</sup> Collins, *War in Peacetime*, 51.

<sup>35</sup> Busch, *Duty*, 21.

<sup>36</sup> Collins, *War in Peacetime*, 52.

<sup>37</sup> Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 73.

<sup>38</sup> Collins, *War in Peacetime*, 52.

<sup>39</sup> Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 73.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>41</sup> Alexander, *Korea*, 60-61.

<sup>42</sup> Busch, *Duty*, 22.

<sup>43</sup> Stephens, "21st Infantry Regiment War Diary for the Period 29 June to 22 July 1950," 2.

<sup>44</sup> Busch, *Duty*, 21.

<sup>45</sup> Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 74-75.

<sup>46</sup> Stephens, "21st Infantry Regiment War Diary for the Period 29 June 1950 to 22 July 1950."

<sup>47</sup> Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 74-75.

<sup>48</sup> Busch, *Duty*, 22.

<sup>49</sup> Alexander, *Korea*, 62.

<sup>50</sup> Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 72.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>52</sup> Collins, *War in Peacetime*, 54.

<sup>53</sup> Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 76.

<sup>54</sup> Alexander, *Korea*, 58-60; Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 69-76; Collins, *War in Peacetime*, 50-52; and Millett, *The War for Korea*, 137-138. There are conflicting numbers of T-34s destroyed. Most cited sources report four T-34s destroyed, including Appleman, Collins, and Millett. According to Alexander, TF Smith destroyed four T-34s and damaged three more to the point of being combat ineffective.

<sup>55</sup> Collins, *War in Peacetime*, 55.

<sup>56</sup> Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-90, *Offense and Defense*, July 2019, 4-1.

<sup>57</sup> Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 72.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-68.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>60</sup> ADP 3-90, 4-2.

<sup>61</sup> Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 70.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-71.

<sup>63</sup> ADP 3-90, 4-2.

<sup>64</sup> Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 66-67.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Busch, *Duty*, 21.

<sup>67</sup> ADP 3-90, 3-10.

<sup>68</sup> Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 73.

<sup>69</sup> Alexander, *Korea: The First War We Lost*, 60-61.

<sup>70</sup> Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 79.

At the time this article was written, **CPT Connor McLeod** was attending the Maneuver Captains Career Course at Fort Benning, GA. His previous assignments include serving as a rifle platoon leader, mortar platoon leader, and assistant S3 with 2nd Battalion, 3rd Infantry Regiment, Joint Base Lewis-McChord, WA. He earned a bachelor's degree in history from Michigan State University.

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