

North Carolina And the Korean War

By Tom Belton

Background

The Korean War was the first US military action against a Communist country during the period known as the cold war (1947–1991).

As part of a World War II agreement, the United States occupied the southern part of Korea and the Soviet Union occupied the northern part while a provisional Korean government was being formed. Korea was divided along the thirty-eighth parallel, with the south under the anticommunist Syngman Rhee and the north under Communist leader Kim Il Sung. Each man was determined to reunite the country under his form of government. In 1949 the United States withdrew its forces from South Korea, believing that the greatest Communist threat was to western Europe. Consequently, South Korea was considered outside America’s Pacific defense perimeter.

The invasion of South Korea by North Korea on June 25, 1950, surprised Americans, who were getting use to the peace, prosperity, and opportunities of the post–World War II years. Taking advantage of a temporary boycott of the United Nations Security Council by the Soviet Union at the time of the invasion, the United States called upon the United Nations to provide military support to South Korea. In addition to the United States, fifteen nations—Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, France, South Africa, Turkey, Thailand, Greece, the Netherlands, Ethiopia, Colombia, the Philippines, Belgium, and Luxembourg—committed troops to the conflict. It was obvious to all of them that this was more than a move to liberate South Korea; it was a war to fight the expansion of Communism worldwide.

At different times during the three-year conflict, the tide of battle favored each side. The UN troops soon found themselves facing not only the North Korean army but also “volunteers” from the People’s Republic of China. In addition, Soviet advisers played an active role manning North Korean jets in the air war. US forces eventually reached as far north as the Yalu River on the Chinese border but stopped there, as President Harry Truman did not want to expand the war.

The Korean War was largely a stalemate during its last two years. This situation, along with restrictions placed on the UN force, caused Americans to become disillusioned with the war. After months of negotiations, a truce was signed on July 27, 1953, and a demilitarized zone (DMZ) separating the warring sides at the thirty-eighth parallel was established. Nearly three million people—civilians and soldiers—died during the conflict. American casualties totaled slightly over 54,000. Of these, 784 came from North Carolina. United States forces remain in South Korea today because no peace treaty has yet been signed.

North Carolina's Role

On Sunday, July 25, 1950, the front page of the *Raleigh News and Observer* focused on Willis Smith's victory over Frank Porter Graham in the US senatorial race the day before. The vicious and heated campaign had deeply divided many North Carolinians and had received national attention. At the bottom of the page, a small two-column article announced the Communist invasion of South Korea with the headline "Warfare Flares in Korea; Reds Open Border Attacks." Once again the United States—and North Carolina—found itself being pulled into war.

The state's two major military facilities, the Marine Corps base at Camp Lejeune and the army base at Fort Bragg, trained many of the soldiers who fought in the Korean War. Seymour Johnson Air Force Base at Goldsboro had been deactivated in 1946 (it was reactivated ten years later) and therefore played no role, but Pope Air Force Base at Fort Bragg trained forward air controllers for combat duty.

Camp Lejeune, near Jacksonville in Onslow County, is the largest Marine Corps training base east of the Mississippi River. It played a pivotal role in World War II, readying both white and black troops for combat duty in the Pacific theater of operations. Various satellite facilities are located near the main base. The pine forests and beaches on the Camp Lejeune site permit woodland and amphibious training. During the Korean War, thousands of marines trained at Camp Lejeune and shipped out from the port at nearby Morehead City.

Fort Bragg, named after North Carolina native Braxton Bragg, a Confederate general in the Civil War, was established in World War I as an artillery training facility. During World War II, the base served as an airborne training facility. In the early 1950s, scores of recruits destined for Korea trained at the base, as did newly activated members of the National Guard and Army Reserve. Fort Bragg expanded its airborne capabilities and during the Korean War became known as the "Home of the Airborne."

Former members of the US Army Rangers and the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in World War II worked behind enemy lines and trained guerrilla forces in North Korea during the war. As a result of their efforts, the army's first unconventional warfare unit, the Tenth Special Forces Group, was activated on June 20, 1952, at Fort Bragg. Colonel Richard M. Ripley, a longtime volunteer with the North Carolina Office of Archives and History, was a pioneering member of that elite group. Col. Ripley directed guerrilla operations on the Korean peninsula from 1951 to 1952.

Few people remember the names of those who die in war. Of the almost eight hundred North Carolinians who lost their lives in the Korean War, one soldier receives recognition countless times a day, because an important institution bears his name.

Bryant E. Womack, a native of Mill Springs in Rutherford County, served as an army medic in Korea. He was killed in action on March 12, 1952, at the age of twenty. While part of a combat patrol, Womack was severely wounded in a firefight, but he refused medical treatment so that he could aid his wounded comrades. He was the last man to withdraw from the scene, and he collapsed and died minutes later. His actions saved the lives of several men in his patrol.

On January 12, 1953, PFC Bryant E. Womack posthumously received the Congressional Medal of Honor. In May 1955 ground was broken at Fort Bragg for a hospital to be built in his name. Today Womack Army Hospital is a major army medical center and the only such facility honoring an enlisted soldier.

WOMACK, BRYANT E.

Rank and organization: Private First Class, U.S. Army, Medical Company, 14th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division. Place and date: Near Sokso-ri, Korea, 12 March 1952. Entered service at: Mill Springs, N.C. Birth: Mill Springs, N.C. G.O. No.: 5, 12 January 1953. Citation: Pfc. Womack distinguished himself by conspicuous gallantry above and beyond the call of duty in action against the enemy. Pfc. Womack was the only medical aid man attached to a night combat patrol when sudden contact with a numerically superior enemy produced numerous casualties. Pfc. Womack went immediately to their aid, although this necessitated exposing himself to a devastating hail of enemy fire, during which he was seriously wounded. Refusing medical aid for himself, he continued moving among his comrades to administer aid. While he was aiding 1 man, he was again struck by enemy mortar fire, this time suffering the loss of his right arm. Although he knew the consequences should immediate aid not be administered, he still refused aid and insisted that all efforts be made for the benefit of others that were wounded. Although unable to perform the task himself, he remained on the scene and directed others in first aid techniques. The last man to withdraw, he walked until he collapsed from loss of blood, and died a few minutes later while being carried by his comrades. The extraordinary heroism, outstanding courage, and unswerving devotion to his duties displayed by Pfc. Womack reflect the utmost distinction upon himself and uphold the esteemed traditions of the U.S. Army.

U.S. Army Center of Military History, "Medal of Honor Recipients—Korean War,"
<http://www.army.mil/cmh/mohkor2.htm>.

Although the truce ending the Korean War was the headline in the July 27, 1953, issue of the *News and Observer*, few North Carolinians felt the same jubilation that accompanied the end of World War II. The newspaper reported the next day that people in downtown Raleigh seemed indifferent and that the "Korean War was the farthest thing from their minds." For many, the war was like an unpleasantness in the distant past to be ignored and left discussed.

Soon overshadowed by the cold war conflict in Vietnam, the Korean War became known as the "forgotten war." But with its fiftieth anniversary in June 2000, Americans again remembered those who fought in Korea. The Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., commemorates the men and women who "answered the call to defend a country they never knew and a people they never met." North Carolinians who served in the war are honored with a memorial on the State Capitol grounds, and the Department of Motor Vehicles created a special license plate for Korean veterans that acknowledges their service.