

A Continuous Nightmare



Communist north Korea has made 1968 the bloodiest year in Korea since 1953.

—Gilbert H. Woodward
Major General, U.S. Army,
representative at Panmunjom, 1968

Allied losses in 1967 increased dramatically in comparison to previous years. In accord with Kim Il-sung's new intent, Americans suffered some especially sharp reverses both on patrols and in their rear areas, with sixteen killed and more than fifty wounded. ROK casualties also climbed to over 100 killed and more than 200 wounded. About seventy-five South Koreans died or fell injured in fighting around their villages.¹

Still, while a matter of great concern to both the Americans and the ROKs, these losses had not caused either country's government to question the validity of their alliance. In fact, General Bonesteel and President Park seemed to be working more closely together than ever. Their military forces showed signs of developing useful anti-infiltration and counter guerrilla capabilities. At the same time, the ROK populace remained, at best, apathetic toward the North Korean interlopers and far more often were exceedingly hostile.

What was going wrong? Due to lack of numbers, Kim Il-sung's covert forces simply could not mount an unconventional offensive on the scale necessary to shake the United Nations Command. Nor had the KPA proved adept at striking at sensitive targets certain to generate U.S.-ROK discord. Most of the attacks simply struck average American and ROK soldiers. Although more energetic and bloody, the escapades to date still lacked organization and focus, the same problems that plagued the 1962-66 political agitation campaign. The KPA generals had delivered a great many disjointed operations but had made precious little progress.

Indeed, the KPA-led campaign was creating an even worse situation than the previous political effort. North Korean special operators had neither driven off the Yankees nor subverted the ROK farmers. Rather, the KPA men had done just enough to galvanize the Americans and South Koreans

into taking the kinds of strong measures that would, if completed, spell the end of any chance for decisive DPRK unconventional operations. Moreover, Kim's goal of a South Korean uprising seemed to be slipping further away with each new meter of barrier fence built and each coast-watcher cell organized.

But Kim Il-sung was not yet ready to give up on his three-phase campaign. After all, many of the North Korean's more potent stratagems still waited on the drawing board, approved but unfunded, recognized but not yet implemented. If the North Koreans acted promptly and chose their targets carefully, they could still damage the U.S.-ROK alliance and create the preconditions for victory in the south.

The DPRK could turn to new forces to carry out this renewed effort against the south. Chief among these were the plainly titled 124th and 283d Army Units, which were in fact unique outfits raised and schooled specifically to carry out Kim Il-sung's unconventional campaign. Each unit numbered about a thousand men, all officers, all handpicked. They coalesced around a chain of command chosen from the most experienced veterans of the foot reconnaissance brigades.

The two units each fielded nine subunits, with every subunit targeted on one of the nine major ROK provinces. Members of the units trained intensively to gain familiarity with their assigned areas. The officers readied themselves for direct-action roles and for recruitment and organization of South Korean guerrillas. Alongside their provincially focused elements, both formations retained separate teams for special missions of strategic significance to the DPRK leadership.²

One such mission arose on 5 January 1968, well past the date when the DMZ settled into its usual winter torpor. A 31-man detachment from the 124th Army Unit went into isolation in Sariwon, where they began to rehearse a building seizure and assassination sequence. For eight days, the team studied sanitized maps of a hypothetical objective and ran through numerous practice exercises concerning various key events. They had been on many such exercises since reporting to the 124th back in March of 1967. This one, however, was no war game. That became obvious on 13 January, when the team staged forward into the 6th Infantry Division's rear area, only a few kilometers north of the DMZ. KPA Reconnaissance Bureau chief, Lieutenant General Kim Chong-tae, met the men. "Your mission," he said, "is to go to Seoul and cut off the head of Park Chung Hee."³

The Blue House Raid

The officers on the detachment knew that their mission might well decide the outcome of the Second Korean Conflict. North Korean Lieutenant Kim Shin Jo, a participant captured during the mission, explained that killing the ROK president "would create political problems within the South Korean government and would agitate the South Korean people to fight with arms against their government and the American imperialists."⁴ With

one stroke, the spearhead group of the 124th Army Unit might push the Republic of Korea into chaos and open the way for reunification from the north.

Late on the evening of 17 January, the team changed into ROK Army uniforms, donned dark coveralls, and penetrated the U.S. 2d Infantry Division sector. They cut several holes through the famous chain-link fence and slipped the entire group through, all within thirty meters of a manned U.S. position. They moved carefully for two days and nights through the American division's sector. The North Koreans even camped the second night on a forested hillside within a few kilometers of Camp Howze, the U.S. divisional headquarters.

The infiltration went smoothly until the afternoon of 19 January, when the team unexpectedly encountered four South Korean woodcutters. Seizing on an opportunity to impart a bit of indoctrination to these representatives of the ROK's "oppressed masses," the special operators harangued the terrified woodcutters about the coming insurrection and the glories of North Korean communism. At the same time, they apparently gave some inference as to the nature of their impending raid.

After a few hours, the KPA officers released the woodsmen unharmed with a stern warning not to go to the police. The special forces leaders calculated that their assassination mission was within hours of completion and that the civilians would probably not go to the police immediately, nor would the authorities believe such a wild tale.

This proved to be a fatal mistake on their part. The South Koreans went to the police that very night. The local police chief believed them and notified his chain of command, which reacted promptly in accord with Presidential Instruction #18. By morning, the ROK's new counter guerrilla structure commenced operations.⁵ Unfortunately, the ROK leadership did not know the exact mission of the 124th Army Unit, so the police and the military tried to guard all important sites and at the same time search the approaches to Seoul. Even with massive resources employed, however, the ROKs could not cover everything.

The stealthy raiders entered the city in two- and three-man cells on 20 January. They quickly became aware of the frenzied atmosphere in the capital. Eavesdropping on busy police and ROK Army radio nets, the KPA team's leaders plotted the identities and movements of their foes. Obviously, the original plan had to be abandoned. The 124th Army Unit would have to improvise. The North Koreans were well trained, and their commander saw a possible way to make use of the heightened alert. Maybe they could still complete their mission.

Upon rendezvous that night, the men removed their coveralls. This revealed their ROK Army uniforms, complete with the correct unit insignia of the local ROK 26th Infantry Division. The team then formed up and prepared to march the last mile to the Blue House, the ROK presidential residence, posing as ROK Army soldiers returning from a counter guerrilla patrol.



Army

A tracker dog from the U.S. 2d Infantry Division trains for its anti-intruder role on the DMZ

The platoon marched smartly toward the Blue House, passing several National Police and ROK Army units en route. A scant 800 meters from the Blue House, a police contingent finally halted the platoon and began to ask questions that exceeded anything the raiders had rehearsed. The nervous North Koreans fumbled their replies. One suspicious policeman drew his pistol; a commando shot him. A melee then ensued in which two 124th men died.⁶ The rest of the North Koreans scattered and began racing for the DMZ.

ROK soldiers, police, and American troops cooperated in the massive manhunt that followed over the next few days. Several sharp encounters flared as the desperate North Koreans clawed their way toward home. Three more operatives were pursued and killed in the Seoul area. Subsequently,

aroused I Corps (Group) units—to include both U.S. divisions—participated in successful sweeps that killed twenty-three and captured one of the North Koreans. Only two of the thirty-one northerners could not be accounted for—and they were presumed dead.

The liquidation of the Blue House assault team, however, came at a horrendous price. Three Americans died and three fell wounded in attempts to block the escaping infiltrators. ROK casualties totaled sixty-eight killed and sixty-six wounded—mainly army and police but also about two dozen hapless civilians.⁷ This cost hardly served as a ringing endorsement for all the security improvements developed and instituted throughout 1967.

Much had gone very wrong. The 124th cut right through the heart of the most developed segment of the DMZ barrier system. The embarrassing inattentiveness of the U.S. 2d Infantry Division said little for American military performance and strained U.S.-ROK relations. Indeed, the key event in the whole process revolved around a chance meeting with unarmed timbermen—random players not really part of the United Nations Command's anti-infiltration scheme. Fortunately for President Park, the loyal civilians notified the police, and the local authorities acted with alacrity. Had the KPA killed the woodcutters, the infiltrators might well have killed Park too. Even in the teeth of an alerted Seoul, the enemy nevertheless closed to within 800 meters of Park's residence, stopped more by luck and individual initiative than by a grand design.

Much had also gone right. The citizenry responded, the police foiled the raid, and a hasty but thorough amalgam of quick-reaction forces relentlessly pursued the North Koreans. The 124th Army Unit had gotten in, but they could not get back out—a tribute to the DMZ enhancements. In terms of anti-infiltration methodology, the delay and neutralization efforts had gone pretty well. Detection, however, still relied too much on the thin crust of regular forces along the DMZ. Most of the casualties occurred during attempts to track down the intruders. The allies were still finding too many of their prey only while being ambushed.

Nobody had much of a chance to reflect on lessons learned. U.S. and ROK soldiers were still tracking down the remnants of the Blue House raiding detachment when, as Bonesteel recalled, “the damned *Pueblo* occurred two days later and that really put the fat in the fire.”⁸

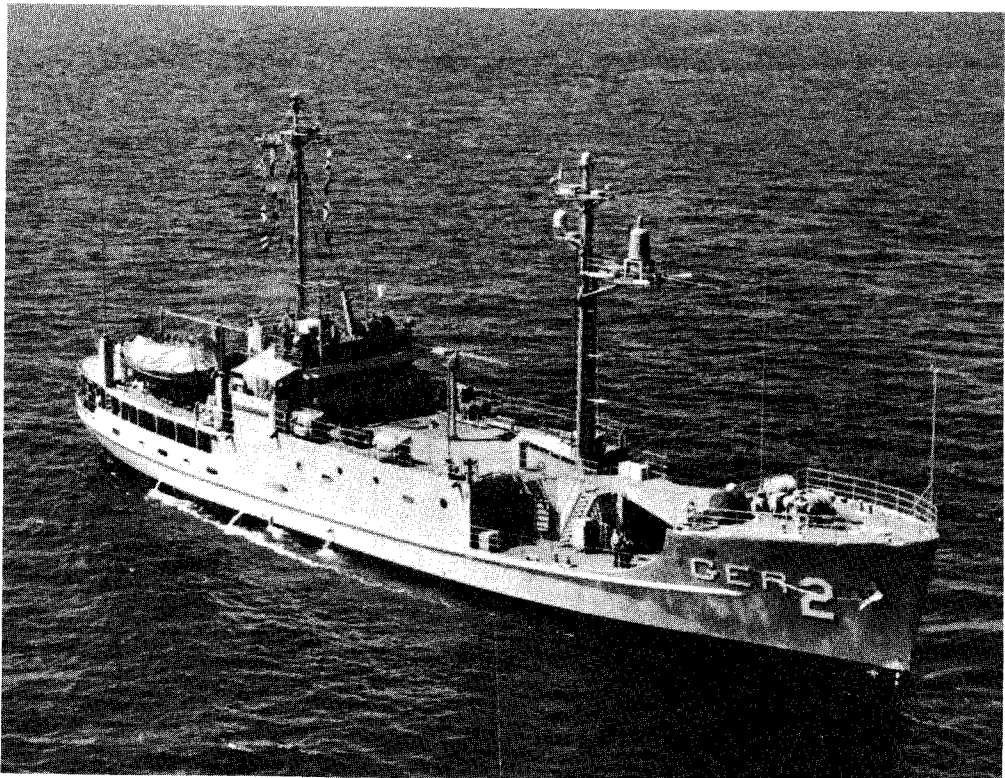
The “Damned Pueblo”

Neither General Bonesteel nor the South Koreans knew anything about the USS *Pueblo* (AGER-2), an American electronic surveillance ship operating off the east coast of the DPRK in January 1968. The United Nations Command forces, like most of the world, first heard of the small vessel when it surrendered to KPN patrol boats and KPAF MiGs on 23 January 1968. One American died during the boarding; eighty-two entered North Korean captivity. The ship was then anchored in Wonsan harbor.

Officially, the USS *Pueblo* did not concern Bonesteel until it was captured and thereby entered his area of operations. He had warned the intelligence agencies and the Seventh Fleet about previous activities near Wonsan, but nobody had paid much attention to him.⁹ Now, Bonesteel was compelled to worry about it. After the capture, any UNC response to the Blue House raid had to take into account eighty-two unlucky American sailors.

The best chance to help the defenseless *Pueblo* passed during the afternoon of 23 January, as Seventh Fleet, Fifth Air Force, and U.S. Forces, Korea, attempted to sort out what was happening. The small ship, responding to various intelligence agencies and operating on the fringes of the Seventh Fleet-U.S. Forces, Korea, areas, really did not “belong” to anyone. Neither the U.S. Air Force nor the U.S. Navy had set aside any air cover for the ship, and their understrength local units could not scramble enough of the right type of planes in time to drive off the *Pueblo*’s tormentors.

In theory, Bonesteel’s 314th Air Division and the ROKs had the power to intervene. But they were fully involved in the post-Blue House sweeps, vigilant to thwart any follow-up North Korean attacks, and had no prior knowledge of the *Pueblo* mission. Indeed, Bonesteel found out about the capture “just as it was happening.”



The USS *Pueblo*

Admiral Ulysses S. G. Sharp,
Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific
Command



National Archives

When he turned to his U.S. Air Force commander, he found that the only seven aircraft ready and capable of reaching Wonsan carried fittings strictly suited for nuclear bombs. If the ground crews changed them over or readied other planes, they would be too late to prevent the ship from reaching Wonsan. On its part, the ROK Air Force could range all the way to Wonsan only with the most lightly armed fighters—and then only by violating DPRK airspace, a risky proposition in light of recent events.¹⁰

Nightfall sealed the fate of the *Pueblo* and her unhappy crew. American leaders fumed, raged, and wondered what to do. Some civilians in the White House and State and Defense Departments talked about blockading Wonsan, telling the ROKs to grab a Soviet spy ship, or even initiating “warning” air raids that would fly right up to the Wonsan area with all radars operating before angling off. But what about the ship’s crewmen? That was always the rub.

Involved military men advocated the sternest possible response, fearful of the bad precedent being set and wary of the effects on the already edgy ROKs. Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, the Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command, proposed sailing the destroyer USS *Higbee* (DD-806) straight into Wonsan harbor, covered by the aircraft of the carrier USS *Enterprise* (CVAN-65).¹¹ The *Higbee* would demand release of the *Pueblo* and its crew, promising air strikes on Wonsan if unheeded.

Bonesteel’s idea was even harsher. Already fully enmeshed in the aftermath of the Blue House raid, the general reacted with uncharacteristic



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Military operations during the Tet Offensive in Vietnam

emotion at this latest North Korean affront: "It was a most inexcusable and infuriating thing," he said. His patience exhausted, Bonesteel argued for a blunt nuclear ultimatum against Kim Il-sung: release the *Pueblo* or else.¹²

It was the strongest measure ever suggested by Bonesteel and quite possibly the strongest course of action ever recommended by any U.S. theater commander during the nuclear age. If nothing else, it offers an indication of how much pressure rode on Bonesteel's shoulders in January

of 1968. The insertion of eighty-two American hostages into an already highly charged and dangerous DPRK-UNC confrontation had, at least for a few hours, brought the normally intellectual Bonesteel to the brink of irrationality.

Nothing came of Bonesteel's suggestions nor that of the others for that matter. On 30–31 January 1968, the Vietnamese Communists launched their massive Tet Offensive, and the Korean crisis had to take a backseat to a full-scale war.

The Moment of Crisis

The last week or so of January 1968 offered enough problems for a dozen American presidents—let alone an already haggard Lyndon Johnson. On 20 January, U.S. Marines repulsed a heavy attack on the hills surrounding their vulnerable Khe Sanh combat base; a steady artillery barrage began the next day. On 21 January, reports of the Blue House raid reached Washington. On 22 January, a B-52 bomber crashed off Greenland, spilling four nuclear weapons into the icy waters. On 23 January, the *Pueblo* was lost. On 29 January, Johnson had to announce a large tax increase to finance the Vietnam War. On 30–31 January, the great Tet Offensive swept across South Vietnam, simultaneously rocking the major cities and even briefly threatening the U.S. Embassy compound. Johnson wrote later: “I sometimes felt that I was living in a continuous nightmare.”¹³

For Johnson, it would get worse, especially in Vietnam. By this time, the president considered almost every issue in relation to the war in Southeast Asia. He focused on the *Pueblo* and Tet Offensive—not the Blue House raid. Johnson assumed the North Korean seizure of the *Pueblo* to be closely coordinated with the Tet attack and evidence of a Communist master plot: “They were trying to divert U.S. military resources from Vietnam,” explained Johnson. He guessed that Kim Il-sung was “trying to pressure the South Koreans into recalling their two divisions from that area (Vietnam).” If his memoirs are any indicator, Johnson really believed that strange, improbable contention.¹⁴

At this point, the American president still hoped for a favorable outcome in Vietnam and seemed determined not to widen the hostilities in Korea—regardless of the *Pueblo*. Rather than threaten reprisal, Johnson decided to deal with the devil to get his men back. He ordered Bonesteel to approach the DPRK through the Military Armistice Commission at Panmunjom, the only channel of contact between America and North Korea. The ROKs, who were represented by the United Nations Command in the commission meetings at Panmunjom, were not consulted.¹⁵

President Park and his advisers also narrowed their focus. For them, Tet was a sideshow. The raid on the Blue House and the taking of the USS *Pueblo* demonstrated the magnitude of the North Korean threat—a menace that called for the strongest possible riposte from *both* allies. Newspaper editorials and government officials remarked that perhaps the ROK

must bring its troops home from Vietnam to meet the new Communist peril. This chorus of opinion grew more strident once rumors of direct U.S.-DPRK negotiations reached Seoul. Angry ROK Defense Minister Kim Song-un charged Bonesteel with conscious duplicity in the affair. On 6 February, the ROKs lodged an official protest against their U.S. ally, accusing the Americans of a "policy of appeasement." An enraged President Park refused to negotiate seriously with General Bonesteel or Ambassador William J. Porter. The ROK leader demanded immediate dispatch of a new emissary empowered to speak for President Johnson.¹⁶

Many opinion leaders in the south urged Park to "go north"—with or without the Americans. ROK generals bragged openly of their inclinations to interpret rules of engagement to permit "hot pursuit all the way to the Yalu River." Concerned by this bellicose talk, Ambassador Porter cabled a warning that "Park might take some unpredictable action, such as an attack on north Korea." An embassy official later told reporter Emerson Chapin that the South Koreans hovered "very close" to war.¹⁷ Kim Il-sung's raiders had failed, but the attempt alone, combined with other circumstances, was creating the kind of U.S.-ROK split long desired by the DPRK.

In the middle of all of this controversy sat Bonesteel, the very man who had just recommended nuclear threats to regain control of the USS *Pueblo*. Where would he stand in relation to his country's president—who wanted to do whatever he could to avoid midintensity war in Korea—and his ally's president—who appeared to be itching to start that same war?

The emotional Bonesteel had already lashed out, but now with the moment of crisis at hand, the relentlessly logical Bonesteel took over. He made a quick but thorough study of Tet, the Blue House raid, and the *Pueblo* seizure, searching for connections. He found none. Only the assassination attempt appeared to have been preplanned in Pyongyang. Tet was coincidental but helpful, the *Pueblo* a gift that the DPRK had gladly snatched and exploited.

It looked like the North Koreans had been aware of Tet but launched the Blue House raid in conformity with their own schedule. If Tet served to distract America and fix South Korean forces in distant Vietnam, all the better. The Blue House attack was clearly designed to force issues on the peninsula, not tie in with some Vietnamese operation. Lyndon Johnson's conviction that Kim Il-sung acted to spur an ROK withdrawal from Southeast Asia makes little sense. More ROK infantry on the Korean peninsula surely was the last thing Kim wanted.

As for the *Pueblo*, it certainly benefited the North Koreans to hold U.S. prisoners. Even so, the attack on the U.S. ship looked opportunistic, perhaps even initiated by an overly aggressive local commander. The attack followed a long series of similar DPRK acts against various American and South Korean vessels and aircraft. This pattern, stretching back to 1953, predated the Second Korean Conflict.¹⁸ It was unlikely that Kim Il-sung planned the seizure, but once he had the ship, he certainly knew how to use it and its crew to create contention between the Americans and their ROK allies.

Based upon this analysis of the situation, Bonesteel fell back on his unchanged, two-fold mission: to defend the ROK, while avoiding a second major Asian war. Bonesteel resolved that the American determination to avoid a major war had to be reflected in a restated and strengthened commitment to deterring the bigger war, while winning the low-intensity conflict in progress on the Korean peninsula. The South Korean ardor for vengeance had to be transformed into actions that precluded a rerun of the Blue House raid.¹⁹ If General Bonesteel handled it correctly, this crisis could become an opportunity.

The Conventional Response: A Show of Force

In reacting to the Korean crisis, President Johnson and his key subordinates borrowed from Theodore Roosevelt. America spoke softly to the South Koreans, while carrying a much bigger stick than usual in the waters and air near the DPRK. This stick provided leverage over both Koreas. Concerned about a North Korean drive to take advantage of the U.S.-ROK indecision and discord, President Johnson ordered a massive contingency deployment of American sea and air power in the Korean theater (see figure 8). Ground reinforcements were not sent. "We assumed that the South Korean Army could look after itself," wrote the president. "We moved as much military power into South Korea as we could without diverting units from Southeast Asia," Johnson recalled. This increase of forces continued even as Tet broke out in Vietnam.²⁰

With the Southeast Asian war already stretching the U.S. active components to their limits, the president called up 14,787 U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy reservists to replace those forces deployed to Korea. Korea, not Tet, forced Johnson to announce a formal, partial mobilization, the first since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. While most of the reservists remained in the United States, about 3,000 airmen eventually made it to Korea.²¹

The air power arrived under the operation code-named Combat Fox. Spurred by Lieutenant General Seth J. McKee of Fifth Air Force, several air units arrived in Korea before 1 February 1968. Along with forces from Okinawa, these included the three, potent F-4D Phantom II squadrons of Colonel Charles E. ("Chuck") Yeager's 4th Tactical Fighter Wing. Yeager's "suitcase air force" flew in from North Carolina within seventy-two hours of notification, a truly remarkable performance. Altogether, almost 200 combat aircraft deployed.²²

At sea, the Seventh Fleet marshaled some thirty-five major surface combatants. Six aircraft carriers led the procession of naval might that comprised Operation Formation Star. Navy air furnished another 400 or so frontline combat jets.²³

The buildup looked impressive, but appearances could be deceiving. Bonesteel had asked for this show of strength, but he did not really command it. Narrowly defined command relationships strictly limited these contingency forces to a deterrent role. Thanks to his personal influence,

Operation Formation Star

Task Group 77.5

USS *Enterprise* (CVAN-65) with air wing
 USS *Truxtun* (DLGN-35)
 USS *Halsey* (DLG-23)
 USS *O'Bannon* (DD-450)
 USS *Collett* (DD-730)
 USS *Higbee* (DD-806)
 USS *Ozbourn* (DD-846)

Reinforcing Elements, Seventh Fleet

USS *Ticonderoga* (CVA-14)
 USS *Coral Sea* (CVA-43)
 USS *Ranger* (CVA-61)
 USS *Yorktown* (CVS-10)
 USS *Kearsarge* (CVS-33)
 USS *Canberra* (CA-70)
 USS *Chicago* (CG-11)
 USS *Providence* (CLG-6)
 (Thirteen other destroyer types)

Operation Combat Fox

Fifth Air Force Advance Echelon to Osan AB (from Fuchu AS, Japan)
 4th Tactical Fighter Wing to Kunsan AB (72 F-4Ds from Seymour Johnson AFB, North Carolina)
 18th Tactical Fighter Wing (-) to Osan AB, Kwangju ROKAFB (36 F-105Ds from Kadena AB, Okinawa)
 12th Tactical Fighter Squadron (-) to Osan AB (12 F-105Ds from Kadena AB, Okinawa)
 334th Tactical Fighter Squadron to Kwangju ROKAFB (24 F-105Ds from Kadena AB, Okinawa)
 64th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron to Kimpo AB (24 F-102As from Naha AB, Okinawa)
 82d Fighter-Interceptor Squadron to Suwon ROKAFB (24 F-102As from Naha AB, Okinawa)
 318th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron to Osan AB (24 F-106As from McChord AFB, Washington)

Abbreviations

AB	air base	CVAN	nuclear-powered CVA
AFB	Air Force Base	CVS	antisubmarine aircraft carrier
AS	air station	DD	destroyer
CA	heavy cruiser	DLG	guided missile DD leader
CG	guided missile cruiser	DLGN	nuclear-powered DLG
CLG	guided missile light cruiser	ROKAFB	Republic of Korea AFB
CVA	attack aircraft carrier		

Figure 8. The United States' military response to the seizure of the USS *Pueblo*, January through March 1968

Bonesteel received some help from the Fifth Air Force in prosecuting the Second Korean Conflict; the Seventh Fleet did not cooperate at all.

The Fifth Air Force's Advance Echelon took charge of the U.S. Air Force's (USAF) contribution. Senior USAF officers made it clear that these air units "[were] neither assigned nor attached to the command of General Bonesteel as Commander, US Forces Korea." In the event of an overt invasion, the Fifth Air Force would come under UN authority. But until then, it responded to distant U.S. Pacific Air Forces and through them to U.S. Pacific Command.

Fortunately, Generals McKee and Bonesteel worked out practical arrangements to make use of the new air units in the ongoing low-intensity conflict. Combat Fox aircraft aided the ROKs in sea-approach coverage and provided strip-alert quick-reaction flights. Both American infantry divisions received and exercised new forward air controller teams and procedures, although no actual air strikes occurred. Squadrons and wings rotated to Korea at regular intervals, allowing some training for them from the commitment. Once the imminent danger subsided, the USAF component gradually pared back to its precrisis strength. In all, Combat Fox lasted sixteen months.²⁴

The U.S. Navy went its own way, with the Seventh Fleet anxious to reduce the task groups and speed ships to Vietnamese waters. None of the warships responded to General Bonesteel in any capacity, although he would gain some air sorties in the event of a major war. For Seventh Fleet, the Korean circuit mainly constituted a waste of time. According to one participating admiral, these activities “usually involved some rather innocuous air operations for a couple of days, using one of our aircraft carriers.”²⁵ By summer, the Seventh Fleet had moved on.

Although not fully orchestrated for maximum support of General Bonesteel’s UNC, the contingency buildup worked. This tremendous show



Charles E. ("Chuck") Yeager in a Bell X-1 supersonic aircraft. Yeager led three squadrons of F-4Ds into Korea in response to the *Pueblo* seizure

of force brought in ten times the amount of aircraft normally operated by the 314th Air Division. The 600 or so USAF and U.S. Navy (USN) jets completely negated the only real conventional edge the DPRK possessed—their air arm. Any northern blitzkrieg would have to proceed under American-dominated skies. North Korea did not try anything. Even unconventional operations dwindled in the face of the U.S. air and sea armadas.

Thus, the contingency deployments did their job and guaranteed some breathing space for the Americans and South Koreans to settle their disputes. Apprised of the ROK intransigence and war fever, President Johnson wisely deferred to General Bonesteel and Ambassador Porter and sent an envoy immediately. Cyrus R. Vance arrived in Seoul on 10 February.

Vance possessed topflight credentials. A former secretary of the Army and deputy secretary of defense, Vance had spoken for Johnson and the United States in several delicate situations: Panama in January 1965; the Dominican Republic (that same year); in Detroit during the riots of June 1967; and on strife-torn Cyprus that autumn.²⁶ He would speak softly enough to the Koreans, but his words would be blunt.

As usual, Vance traveled light. Only John E. Walsh, ambassador to Kuwait, and translator Daniel A. O'Donoghue accompanied the trouble-shooter. Bonesteel and Porter met the trio at the airport, and they took off immediately for the secure confines of U.S. Eighth Army headquarters. Walsh experienced a frigid flight in a bubble-topped, little OH-23 while perched unceremoniously on Bonesteel's lap. With the Blue House raiders just run to ground, even the commanding general could not afford to borrow one of the few enclosed UH-1 Hueys. The cold flight said a lot about the resource situation in United Nations Command. Bonesteel might have done it intentionally, to make a point.

Vance wanted to meet immediately with President Park, but ROK Blue House staffers rebuffed his request with uncharacteristic rudeness. The officials told Vance that Park was meeting with his military planners and not to be disturbed. Unable to arrange a meeting, and looking ahead to a banquet that evening sponsored by the ROK Army, Vance and his men huddled with Bonesteel and Porter. The fivesome went over some hundred discrete issues, ensuring a unified front. Vance would do all the talking for the next few days.

At the ROK Army dinner that night, the Americans stuck to light conversation and banal, obvious toasts. Their excited counterparts talked with conviction about the mighty things to come as the allies avenged the Blue House and *Pueblo* incidents. The southerners seemed to think that Vance's arrival presaged the great march north. One boozy ROK general cornered Ambassador Walsh and confided in him: "We're blood brothers. . . . When you are hurt, we are hurt."²⁷ If Vance and his partners had any doubts about ROK belligerence, the banquet demonstrated just how wild things had gotten in Seoul.

When Vance met Park the next day, the South Korean president proved quite obstinate. But Vance did not compromise. Johnson's spokesman laid

out his position frankly. First, there would be no wider war in Korea—period; the U.S. already had its hands full in Vietnam. Any ROK military action against the north would be cleared with General Bonesteel, and he was not empowered to allow South Korean cross-border reprisals without President Johnson's approval. Vance made it clear that he could foresee no circumstances—short of a full-scale North Korean invasion—that could garner such approval.

Second, with a military attack ruled out, the United States would negotiate as necessary in order to gain freedom for the *Pueblo* sailors. Vance reminded Park that America had a tradition of talking with groups and states it did not recognize, including such thorns as the Barbary pirates, the Filipino insurgents, and Pancho Villa. This matter was between the United States and North Korea.

Finally, Vance offered some sweetener with the bitter gruel. He promised Park \$100 million in immediate military aid, to include F-4 series Phantom fighter jets for the ROK Air Force; additional assistance would follow. To get this equipment, Park had to vow not to go north.

For four days, Park equivocated. But he really had no choice. Without the United States, South Korea could never hope to defeat the DPRK at any acceptable cost. The ROK leader finally consented to reign in his generals. Vance left, his mission accomplished. Presidents Johnson and Park met in Honolulu in April to seal the deal.²⁸ So the great crisis abated. A midintensity war had been averted. The low-intensity war, however, remained to be won.

The Conventional Response: Resources

General Bonesteel made good use of the Blue House and *Pueblo* incidents to garner the additional visibility and funding he needed to throttle the North Korean unconventional threat. While careful not to divert resources from Vietnam, Bonesteel knew enough about bureaucratic politics to make sure that he received a priority on what was left over. He made his case both within the military establishment and among the larger community of American political leaders.

The general did his best to convince his military commanders and the military as an institution that Americans in Korea were in a real war. While U.S. Pacific Command agreed, the service departments and the Defense Department held the final authority. If they admitted that any part of Korea was a combat zone, that would formally give Bonesteel's theater a priority second only to Vietnam.²⁹ This formal recognition would help both American and South Korean morale and signal continued U.S. commitment to prevail in the Second Korean Conflict.

Due to the narrow prerogatives granted by operational control, Bonesteel could not do much to influence internal U.S. Air Force or U.S. Navy policies toward Korea. For the Navy and Air Force, Korea did not constitute combat. Both services, especially the U.S. Navy, wanted to reduce their post-*Pueblo*

shows of force as soon as possible. Neither the Air Force nor the Navy moved to grant any sort of combat incentives to their deployed contingency forces, although airmen later benefited from Bonesteel's efforts.

Bonesteel wisely concentrated his efforts within his own U.S. Army. After all, by 1968, he could point to numerous patrolling and ambush casualties—all from the ranks of the U.S. Army. Obviously, whatever sailors and airmen might think, Korea was not just another overseas tour for soldiers.

Until 1968, Korea fell into an odd category with regard to combat pay and awards. In Korea, as in the Dominican Republic intervention of 1965—66, provisions already existed to give combat pay—but only to American dead (one month, paid posthumously, of course) and wounded (three months' pay or paid while hospitalized, whichever was shorter). If qualified by duty position and recommended by their division commanders, these casualties might also receive Combat Infantryman Badges or Combat Medical Badges.³⁰ Those not actually hit by hostile fire soldiered on, their sacrifices and dangers officially unrecognized. By the U.S. Army's reckoning, soldiers on patrol in the DMZ received the same official consideration as those in garrison at Fort Benning, Georgia.

Bonesteel changed that. Since mid-1967, the general had been pressuring the Department of the Army (as Commander, U.S. Eighth Army) and Department of Defense (as Commander, USFK and CINCUNC) for designation of the area north of the Imjin River and south of the DMZ's center (the Military Demarcation Line) as a "hostile fire zone." Soldiers and airmen serving or flying in this zone would receive hostile fire pay and other combat incentives. Only about 4,000 men would be involved, almost all from the U.S. 2d Infantry Division.

Before 1968, nobody at the Department of Defense really wanted to agree to such a move for fear of spurring the pugnacious ROKs to think that the United States was moving toward midintensity war. After the Blue House raid, the *Pueblo* incident, and the Vance visit, the South Koreans had been cowed. Designation of a hostile fire zone might serve to demonstrate that the United States recognized the Second Korean Conflict and stood by its ally. Keeping the zone discrete, however, would underscore the sharp limits to U.S. involvement.³¹

On 1 April 1968, largely at the insistence of outgoing Secretary McNamara, the Department of Defense announced that U.S. forces serving in or flying over the DMZ-Imjin sector would be given hostile fire pay. Army troops who spent six months in this area received an overseas service bar and the privilege to wear their combat organizational patch on their right sleeve for the remainder of their time in service. Within a few months, the commanding general of U.S. Eighth Army received permission to award the Combat Infantryman Badge and Combat Medical Badge to all qualified men serving north of the Imjin River.³²

Bonesteel did not confine his promotional efforts to the military. He went out of his way to make the case for a stronger defense in Korea to

interested civilian lawmakers, government executives, and influential private citizens. Bonesteel welcomed hundreds of visitors, even during the height of the 1968 crisis period. He explained the nature of what he termed the "porous war" on the peninsula and made it clear what he thought he needed to finish the job.³³

As a result, both executive decision makers and Congress had access to informed opinions about what was necessary in Korea. Along with the \$100 million in assistance to the ROKs promised by Cyrus Vance, Congress appropriated \$230 million more to improve both U.S. and ROK facilities and combat readiness throughout the United Nations Command's Korean domain.³⁴ In light of legislative discontent with the Johnson administration in general, and the Vietnam War in particular, this reflected directly on Bonesteel's ability to make his argument heard.

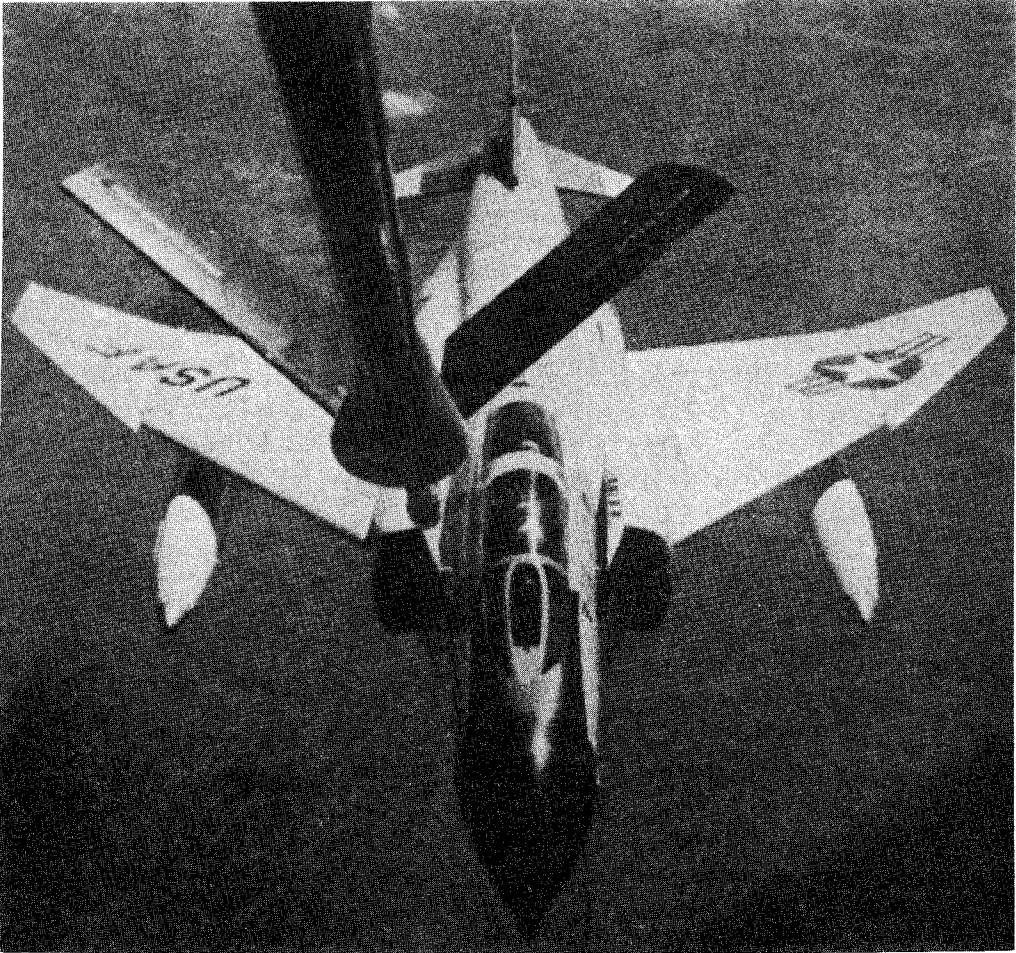
Bonesteel's lobbying within the defense community and the American policy-making stratum opened the door to more resources—not a great amount, but enough. More important, these measures forced Bonesteel's superiors to acknowledge the Second Korean Conflict as a real war. "They are in every sense involved in combat," noted a Joint Chiefs of Staff memorandum.³⁵ To the extent allowed in his economy-of-force theater, Bonesteel now had the wherewithal to meet the DPRK challenge.

The Unconventional Response: The DMZ

Bonesteel knew exactly what to do with his increased budget, thanks in large part to the detailed forecast prepared for the late 1967 Counter-infiltration-Guerrilla Concept Requirements Plan. Unfortunately, he did not control all of the funds. Since President Park had a major say in the spending priorities for the initial \$100 million and the follow-on military assistance monies, Bonesteel could not direct the exact purchase patterns. On their part, Park and his generals succumbed to the attraction of purchasing eighteen new F-4D Phantom II aircraft—consuming well over one-third of the first \$100 million.³⁶ Obtaining chain-link fencing, platoon radios, and night-vision devices amounted to small potatoes next to the gleaming promise of new fighter jets.

Bonesteel did what he could to influence the use of the remaining money, and he closely monitored those funds earmarked strictly for U.S. use. The general recognized that the window of opportunity opened by the troubles of early 1968 would not stay open forever, so he focused on those things most useful to his missions of DMZ counterinfiltration, sea approach counterinfiltration, and counterinsurgency.

Unwilling to count on appropriations from the ROKs and Washington, Bonesteel's logisticians took advantage of the general increase in stock permitted after the *Pueblo* capture. Rather than ordering vast quantities of ammunition and weapons, UNC supply planners requested a great many mundane counterinfiltration and counterinsurgency items for delivery by the massive USAF airlift that brought in the Combat Fox units. Thousands of



Air Force and Space Digest

The F-4D Phantom II

tons of critical barrier materials and communications gear—worth some \$32 million—arrived via the largest strategic airlift in history up to that time.³⁷ The UNC used these materials to complete the chain-link fence and its associated barrier defense system. By 30 July, the line spanned the entire south boundary of the DMZ, ready to detect infiltrators and delay their progress sufficiently for quick-reaction forces to finish them off.

The completion of the fence tied together the U.S.-ROK efforts along the DMZ. With physical linkup completed, Bonesteel took steps to extend the juncture into the combined command structure, a course foreshadowed by the consciously mixed Special Working Group of November 1966. Prior to late 1968, South Koreans served only as liaison officers on UNC and USFK staffs. In October, the U.S.-ROK Operational Planning Staff began work, specifically to deal with the anti-infiltration fight. The staff totaled only twenty-four men, seventeen of them Korean. Though more a cell than

a true staff, this important conclave represented the first permanent and official ROK voice in the combined command.³⁸

Along with supplies and a new combined planning organization, Bonesteel's UNC received one small but invaluable reinforcement unit: the U.S. 6th Combat Aviation Platoon, originally en route to Vietnam. This outfit's six UH-1D Hueys doubled the number of useful air-assault platforms in Korea. In conjunction with the six overworked Hueys on hand and the obsolescent OH-23 Ravens, the 6th Platoon finally gave the allies sufficient lift to maintain a ready heliborne quick-reaction force on strip alert, while at the same time employing some Hueys on neutralization operations. The platoon normally worked directly for I Corps (Group), although Bonesteel often saw fit to loan the platoon to the ROK Army for counterinsurgency missions in the interior.³⁹ The new combined staff made such transfers easier.

Aside from these welcome developments, the rest of the anti-infiltration improvements occurred only in the American sector. This made sense, because the Americans guarded the key avenues that headed toward Seoul, and these same Americans had failed so utterly to detect the Blue House raiders. For the sake of both tactical necessity and alliance politics, the U.S. sector had to be tightened up.

Manpower remained a problem, both in quantity and quality. The short-handed U.S. 2d Infantry Division could not send out enough patrols nor man enough positions to seal off its thirty-kilometer-long DMZ sector. The backup U.S. 7th Infantry Division, smaller than the 2d Division to start with, found itself stretched thin as it guarded various nuclear weapons sites, defended the U.S. Embassy in Seoul, and provided an on-call QRF for I Corps (Group).

The quantitative deficiencies proved easier to solve. Worried Department of the Army officials pumped a few thousand additional enlisted men into the Eighth Army replacement pipeline. They also authorized one-month tour extensions for certain key leaders and skilled troops in Korea, a policy rejected outright by the Air Force and Navy Departments.⁴⁰ Along with U.S. Eighth Army's prudent restrictions on leaves and passes and some tough internal cross-leveling of personnel, this erased the manpower deficit that plagued DMZ units before 1968.

Quality, of course, also had to be addressed. The U.S. Army tried to bolster the leadership situation in Korea, a tough proposition with Vietnam going full tilt. Bonesteel received a few more company-grade officers and sergeants with Vietnam experience, although not nearly enough to take charge of the rapidly swelling ranks of the infantry divisions. Shortages meant that inexperienced and incompetent leaders had to be used. It had always been a problem during Bonesteel's tour, but now the inept chiefs had more Indians to misuse. Without good leaders, more men provided little added combat punch.

With many lower-level leadership slots unfilled, the American forces resorted to their usual solutions: schools and supervision. Vigorous unit

schooling in counterinfiltration tactics made trained leaders, if not sergeants, out of the more promising privates. The well-known "Imjin Scouts" patrol leaders' program dates from this period.

Greater supervision by higher headquarters ensured that the novice leaders did their jobs. Mindful of the strain on his field-grade commanders, Bonesteel moved a brigade headquarters from the U.S. 7th Infantry Division forward to the DMZ to take charge of two of the five battalions in the U.S. sector (see figure 9).⁴¹ This reduced the span of control for the brigade commanders, permitting maximum influence by these experienced infantry colonels.

At the higher level, Bonesteel gained a subordinate general well suited to the unique demands of the Second Korean Conflict. The Department of the Army provided Lieutenant General William P. Yarborough to head I Corps (Group). A former commander of the Special Warfare School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, Yarborough had pioneered many of the counter-insurgency concepts used by U.S. Special Forces.⁴² He would be a useful source of ideas and leadership.

Finally, the U.S. Army provided three more potential combat multipliers. First, U.S. Eighth Army accepted a handful of bloodhound dog-tracker teams to aid in detecting penetrators south of the barrier fence. Second, soldiers received a few hundred precious M-16 automatic rifles, which for the first time gave those on patrol firepower equal to North Korean PPSH submachine guns and AK-47 assault rifles. Third, U.S. Pacific Command made two Special Forces teams temporarily available for use as anti-infiltration trainers.⁴³ Small things in themselves, each paid dividends when properly used. These DMZ improvements, especially the completion of the chain-link fence, the arrival of the additional Huey helicopters, and the adjustments in the American sector cemented the progress made the prior year. While the KPA attempted more infiltrations than in 1967, the allies were ready for them.

Thanks to better detection, contacts increased markedly, but successful North Korean penetrations dropped off. North Koreans began to fall victim to ambushes and suffer from chance encounters with alerted UNC troops. The KPA paid in blood for running the DMZ gauntlet, sustaining almost twice as many losses as in 1967.

The new UNC tactics worked. In a typical example on 19 September, outposts of the 3d Brigade, U.S. 2d Infantry Division, detected five northern intruders at the fence. The Americans, aided by their Korean Counter Agent Company, coordinated a dawn attack by an air-assault reaction force, armored cavalry, and mechanized infantry to isolate and eliminate the hostile team. A succession of similar efforts enabled U.S. 2d Infantry Division to claim that it had repulsed or killed twenty-five of twenty-seven agents between June and November, the height of the infiltration season.⁴⁴ ROK units enjoyed similar little victories. Win or lose, each skirmish made it just that much harder for the next KPA special unit to confront the steadily improving DMZ defenses.

On the DMZ

- ROK 99th Regimental Combat Team¹
 - 1-99 Infantry
 - 2-99 Infantry
 - 3-99 Infantry
- 4th Brigade, U.S. 2d Infantry Division²
 - 1-38 Infantry
 - 3-23 Infantry
- 3d Brigade, U.S. 2d Infantry Division
 - 2-38 Infantry
 - 2-9 Infantry (Mechanized)
 - 3-32 Infantry³

South of the Imjin River

- 2d Brigade, U.S. 2d Infantry Division
 - 1-9 Infantry
 - 2-23 Infantry (Mechanized)
 - 1-72 Armor
- 1st Brigade, U.S. 2d Infantry Division
 - 1-23 Infantry
 - 2-72 Armor
- Division Reaction Force
 - 4-7 Cavalry
 - Counter Agent Company

Chorwon Valley

- 3d Brigade, U.S. 7th Infantry Division
 - 1-31 Infantry
 - 2-31 Infantry
 - 1-32 Infantry
 - 2-32 Infantry
- 1st Brigade, U.S. 7th Infantry Division
 - 1-17 Infantry (Mechanized)
 - 2-17 Infantry (Mechanized)
 - 1-73 Armor
 - 2-10 Cavalry
 - 22d Royal Thai Company

¹Under the operational control of the U.S. 2d Infantry Division.

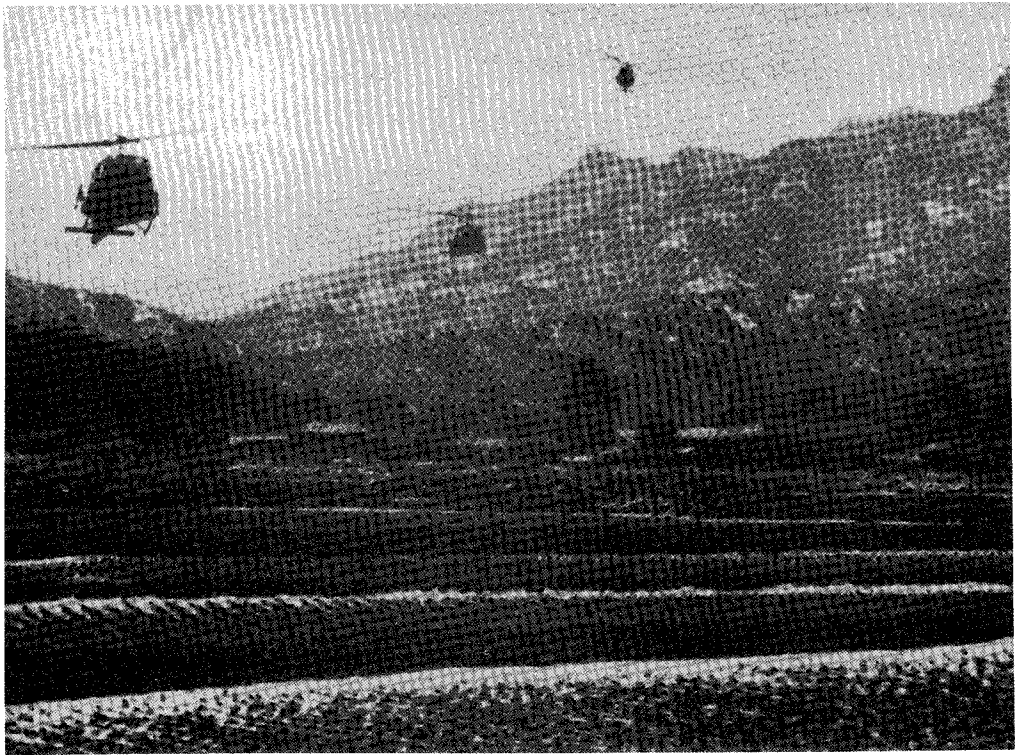
²Actually, the 2d Brigade, U.S. 7th Infantry Division, under operational control of the U.S. 2d Infantry Division.

³From the U.S. 7th Infantry Division, under operational control of 3d Brigade, U.S. 2d Infantry Division.

Source: 2d ID, "Operational Report—Lessons Learned, Headquarters, 2d Infantry Division, Period Ending 30 April 1969 (U)," UNCLASSIFIED, Inclosure 1.

Figure 9. American maneuver battalion deployment as of 30 April 1969 (typical after 21 March 1968)

It had taken time, but the conventional U.S. and ROK infantrymen had regained a definite measure of control over South Korea's ground frontier. "Their record speaks for itself," said Major General Leland G. Cagwin of the U.S. 2d Infantry Division; "The other side is coming through the barrier with less frequency."⁴⁵ The DPRK was fast losing its ability to come by land.



Helicopters from the 6th Combat Aviation Platoon, U.S. I Corps, sweep through a valley in search of North Korean saboteurs

Army

The Unconventional Response: The Sea Approaches

Unlike the DMZ, South Korean seacoasts remained very vulnerable to enemy infiltration. Though some equipment upgrades occurred and the ROK Navy worked with both ROK and U.S. air units in neutralizing North Korean contacts, the lengthy coastlines still defied effective defense.

United States equipment transfers allowed for marginal improvements in the ROK Navy. Aided by advisers from U.S. Naval Forces, Korea, South Korean sailors accepted two new patrol escorts and an old destroyer into service. They also standardized their communications to allow for better links to the ROK Air Force, ROK Army, National Police, and intelligence agencies.⁴⁶

The most spectacular sea triumph came on 21 August, when two ROK Navy destroyers joined in a Korean CIA-directed interception off Cheju Island. A KPN-KPA special warfare team had been lured to the area, enticed by the prospect of rescuing a top operative imprisoned on the island. ROK Air Force fighters and even USAF F-4 Phantoms flew cover during a running gunfight that ended with the North Korean craft sunk and its passengers killed or captured.⁴⁷

The Cheju victory suggested the real problem with the game but over-matched ROK fleet. Lacking long-range patrol planes and coastal radars,

the ROK Navy worked best after enemy intentions became obvious. The South Korean sailors could cut off sea reinforcements or catch known hostiles offshore—but only after being notified by landward ROK elements. Without a solid counter guerrilla net to snare them ashore, a great many spy boats could slip past the harried ROK Navy. This fact did not go unnoticed by the DPRK Reconnaissance Bureau, blocked on the DMZ and desperate for success.

The Unconventional Response: The Interior

The Blue House raid caused President Park to make one important addition to his otherwise comprehensive counterinsurgency directive: Presidential Instruction #18. In mid-February, he finally approved creation of the Homeland Defense Reserve Force (HDRF), a popular militia. Formally announced in April, it proved to be the single most crucial step in the Second Korean Conflict.

Within 6 months, 2 million enthusiastic southern citizens, including 15,000 women, joined up. These formed more than 60,000 local-defense platoons and companies, formed around a backbone of former ROK soldiers.⁴⁸ While not well armed for some time, they became an invaluable information web and eventually a source of supplemental troops for regular ROK Army formations. It was the story of 1967's dutiful coast watchers in magnified form.

Emboldened and encouraged by the obvious attraction of the HDRF, Park took steps to extend the idea toward its logical conclusion by securing the whole of rural South Korea into the government fold. At the end of August, a scant month after the barrier fence had been finished, the first two of twenty planned "Reconstruction Villages" opened just south of the DMZ. Populated by armed ex-soldiers and their families on the model of Israeli border kibbutzim, these settlements created a band of fiercely loyal people squarely in the path of any likely northern infiltrators. Lone KPA intruders and small agent teams would not long survive in such a pro-ROK medium.

At the same time, the ROK Army reworked its old civic-action program. Formerly, ROK soldiers did civil engineering work, building roads and bridges during certain periods each year. The new approach put troops to work right in the villages to "promote ties between the military and civilian populace and intensify anti-communist spirit and support anti-espionage operations." The ROK units dug wells and built classrooms, clinics, and cultural centers. These community edifices could and did serve as gathering places for anti-Communist indoctrination classes.

The most important ROK civic-action effort entailed the dispatch of "Medical/Enlightenment Teams" into the forbidding, backward Taebaek and Chiri Mountains, scenes of much North Korean infiltration during the summer of 1967. These carefully schooled ROK regulars and reservists, in close coordination with the Korean CIA and National Police, conducted

medical screenings, inoculations, and minor surgery. They also “enlightened” the local people by spreading the “gospel” according to Park Chung Hee, hoping also to inoculate the villagers against North Korean Communist propaganda. The teams met warm receptions.⁴⁹

At this point, these efforts were still tentative and experimental. When they proved popular, Park went further. By the early 1970s, the rural information programs metamorphosed into the government-mandated *Saemaul* (New Community Movement) throughout the villages of the south. This rural mass movement squarely confronted Kim Il-sung’s nationalistic *Juche* brand of communism. *Saemaul* offered a southern mixture of village cooperation, southern democratic tolerance (as versus northern “arrogance”), a sense of mission, and a pioneer spirit to raise rural production and living standards.⁵⁰ Park intended to challenge Kim Il-sung on all fronts, including ideology. The Reconstruction Villages, new ROK Army Civic Action Program, and Medical-Enlightenment Teams of 1968 merely became the first steps in the education of the countryside in proper ROK patriotism.

The special counterinsurgency units authorized in Presidential Instruction #18 also took shape throughout 1968. Much attention went to the reserve component ROK Second Army and its designated rear-area security divisions. Each division added a second counterinfiltration battalion. The Korean National Police continued to expand its paramilitary Combat Police, raising more local units that tied in with the militia below them and the supporting reserve divisions that backed them up. All formations received new American radios courtesy of the Combat Fox airlift.

The ROKs used the lull after the Blue House raid and U.S. air-sea buildup to organize and exercise these new units, to include training with I Corps (Group)’s new U.S. 6th Combat Aviation Platoon. ROK Army regulars and U.S. advisers designed and supervised the training, integrating selected, regular ROK forces as necessary.⁵¹ By midsummer, after many field problems and a few small-scale call-ups, they seemed ready.

Even the Americans joined in the general enthusiasm for counterinsurgency. Notoriously ethnocentric and determined to speak English, the U.S. troops were ill-suited for village counterinsurgency work, as Bonesteel recognized. Still, an attempt had to be made to show that the American troops also cared about the Korean people and their problems. Some sort of cultural awareness and language familiarization might permit better working relationships with local people in the U.S. sector—not to mention better U.S.-ROK relations overall. In a struggle for hearts and minds, every little bit could help.

Previous U.S. efforts in this direction had been honored in the breach; an abortive 1966 2-week voluntary school fizzled after educating less than 200 U.S. 2d Infantry Division soldiers. To work, the new program would have to be mandatory and go beyond mere “welcome to Korea” classes. When an experimental version received positive feedback from participating units, Bonesteel and his subordinate commanders gave the idea command emphasis and implemented it.⁵²

The consequent "Eighth US Army Education and Individual Action Program," or "Cold War Program" for short, was in place by late spring of 1968. It reached its full fruition under the watchful eye of counter guerrilla expert General Yarborough. Described as "a revolutionary program which consists of educational materials that actually change attitudes to a significant degree," the scheme endeavored to help U.S. troops "work and associate more constructively with Koreans." The KATUSA soldiers assigned to American companies played pivotal roles in the program, acting as conduits that connected the American soldiers with Korean villagers.

Along with sustaining classes and field trips, American troops took an active role in supporting Korean social welfare establishments. The U.S. 2d Infantry Division, for example, supported thirteen orphanages; taught English at fifteen nearby schools; conducted cultural exchanges with certain universities; and helped with an average of thirty local construction, medical, and educational projects. Division operational reports listed implementation of the EUSA Cold War Program as one of four missions, coequal to defense against conventional attack, counterinfiltration, and implementation of the 1953 Armistice Agreement.⁵³

Did the Cold War Program make any difference? It is hard to say, but this much can be sure; it offered clear proof that U.S. troops were serious about their role as defenders of the ROK, not just occupiers. Given the torrent of North Korean propaganda that forever built on images of U.S. troops as whoring, drunken colonizers who ran over old people and abused children, the person-to-person contacts created by the Cold War Program certainly provided some strong evidence to the contrary.⁵⁴ In combination with the UNC's other steps, it certainly dealt more damage to DPRK credibility—an important matter in a struggle for popular loyalty.

The cumulative effects of the 1968 initiatives spelled disaster for North Korean underground networks throughout the south. Stunned by the Blue House raid, South Koreans rallied to the Park government, which moved quickly to set up new militia units, reconstruction villages, real civic-action projects, and medical-enlightenment teams to accommodate the popular ground swell.

Aided by thousands of willing informants, the Korean CIA cracked major spy rings in February, July, and August—bagging 132 key agents in the process. These DPRK networks had reached into the military, the police, the intelligence services, Seoul government circles, academe, religious groups, and the countryside. Some of those fingered worked as contract employees of U.S. Eighth Army, one of the cells having been in place since 1961.⁵⁵ But by August, they were gone.

The year that had started with such promise for Kim Il-sung and his generals had gone disastrously wrong. Shrewd U.S. diplomacy, ROK political pragmatism, and an intelligent use of new resources had made the DMZ untenable for the DPRK and enfeebled a big chunk of the North Korean intelligence apparatus. The only North Korean hope lay in a strike against

the allies' weakest flank—the seacoast. It would be the northerners' last chance at victory.

The Ulchin-Samchok Landings

Around midnight on 30 October, 120 men of the 124th Army Unit landed at 8 separate locations on the east coast of South Korea, between the towns of Samchok and Ulchin. The northerners had selected their landing beaches with great care along the boundary between two separate rear-area security divisions. After disembarking undetected from a variety of KPN clandestine watercraft, the men headed inland into the Taebaek Mountains for a planned thirty-day mission. Perhaps due to intelligence breakdowns, they did not know that this same area had hosted the Medical-Enlightenment Teams just months before, or maybe they knew it and did not care.

These elite 124th soldiers were functioning in their guerrilla organizing role. They intended to create long-lasting guerrilla bases in the south, complete with new informant nets to help make up for those wrecked during the summer. Any local officials foolish enough to intervene would be killed. As they reached their first objective villages around daybreak on 31 October, each of the eight teams rounded up the sleepy locals for introductory educational sessions. They had been told to expect jubilant welcomes as liberators. After some rote speeches and distribution of pictures of Kim Il-sung, the soldiers asked for volunteers to join the KWP. The South Koreans just stared back, dumbfounded.

In one hamlet near Ulchin, nervous 124th Army Unit members beat a man to death as an example to the others. That same detachment killed seven others, including a family of five, trying to terrorize the farmers into cooperation. Instead, even as the KPA special forces men filibustered and bullied, a teenage boy slipped a note to a woman, who in turn spirited the paper to her husband. He escaped unseen, running four miles to find a provincial police chief, who immediately radioed his superiors.⁵⁶ But they already knew about the 124th, thanks to many other reports.

ROK forces swarmed into the area. Some of the first arrived aboard the rotary-wing aircraft of the ubiquitous U.S. 6th Combat Aviation Platoon, summoned through the good offices of the new U.S.-ROK Operational Planning Staff. The American choppers joined six new ROK-operated Hueys, gifts of the American military assistance program. The 36th Rear Area Security Division, parts of two other divisions, an ROK Marine Corps battalion, numerous Combat Police companies, an ROK Special Forces Group, and thousands of Home Defense Reserves took part in the exhaustive man-hunt that followed. Eventually, some 70,000 troops assisted in the operation.

Within two weeks, the elite, new ROK counterinfiltration battalions ran down most of the intruders. By 26 December, Park suspended the special counter guerrilla alert on the east coast. ROK forces announced that they had killed 110 and captured 7, as compared to 63 South Koreans dead, 23

of whom were civilians. The other southerners killed included regulars, reservist police, and militiamen.⁵⁷

The ROKs conquered the North Koreans not only because of superior organization and some timely U.S. support but also because of strong local support in South Korea. Consequently, unlike the Blue House raid, the Ulchin-Samchok situation was never really in doubt. Thanks to thorough preparations, ROK forces "had the full support of the populace," General Bonesteel observed. "So," he continued, "it was a losing game to begin with for the North because of a miscomprehension of the situation in the south."⁵⁸

Ulchin-Samchok provided the acid test for the United Nations Command. Pretty much on their own, the ROKs had prevailed against the best the north could offer. Two years earlier, the results might have been disastrous. But now, the ROKs knew what to do, and the Americans knew how to help them without doing it for them. Nobody realized it yet in the United Nations Command, but the Second Korean Conflict had been won.
