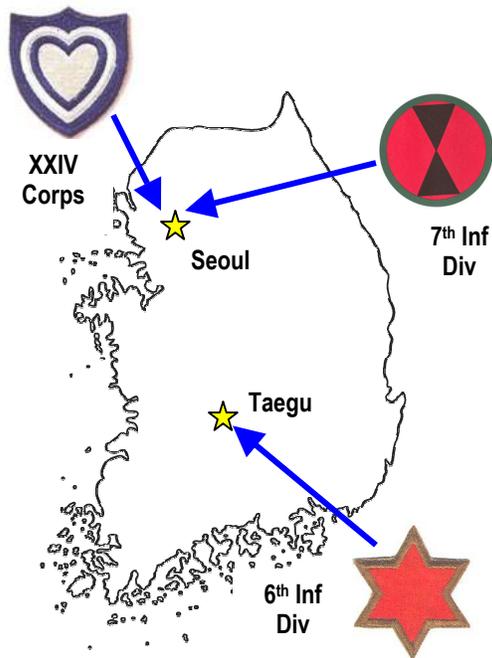


Chapter 8 OCCUPATION OF KOREA 1946-1948

A little known chapter in the 31st Infantry's history is its part in the occupation of Korea after World War II. From 1910 to 1945, Chosen, Korea's Japanese name, was a province of Japan. Korean children were taught Japanese in school and Korean culture was suppressed. During World War II, Koreans were drafted into the Japanese Army, forming the bulk of the labor service units that built airfields and fortifications across Japan's far-flung Pacific empire.



In August 1945, with the war nearing its end, the Soviet 25th Army swept into Korea to disarm Japanese forces north of the 38th parallel. The US XXIV Corps arrived a month later to disarm Japanese troops in southern Korea.¹ Composed of three divisions and 72,000 troops initially, the corps was soon reduced to two divisions and 40,000 men.² The 6th Infantry Division, headquartered at Taegu, occupied the southern half of the US Occupation Zone, while the 7th Infantry Division, headquartered at Seoul, occupied the northern half.

Among the 7th Infantry Division's regiments was the 184th Infantry, originally a California National Guard unit assigned to the division in 1943. On January 19, 1946, the 184th's colors, but not its members, returned to Sacramento to resume its pre-war role. To replace it, General Douglas MacArthur, then commanding all U.S. forces in the Far East, brought the 31st Infantry Regiment back to the active rolls. In a ceremony marking the occasion, Brigadier General Leroy Seward passed the 31st Infantry's colors to Colonel Lee Wallace, the regiment's

¹ Picture of the American flag being raised at Seoul's city hall courtesy of the National Archives Photo #: 80-G-391465.

² California's 40th Infantry Division was the last National Guard division to return home after World War II.

first post-war commander. General MacArthur flew in from Tokyo to show his affection for the regiment.

The regimental colors passed to Colonel Wallace that day are a story of their own. Because the 31st's colors were destroyed in the Philippines, none were available for the reactivation ceremony. To fill the void, Colonel Wallace tasked Staff Sergeant Charles Bartlett to have temporary colors made by a civilian tailor in Seoul. Copied from a pre-war photo, they were all the regiment had until official Colors were finally received in 1948.

Present at the regiment's reactivation were Sergeant Johnnie E. Potts and Staff Sergeant Joseph M. Wolfe who had fought at Bataan and rejoined the 31st when it was reactivated.³ Alton G. Rogers, a 19-year-old medic, recalls the pride he felt standing next to Potts when General



MacArthur saluted him and shook his hand.⁴ A photo in the 7th Division's album shows a squad of Bataan vets, including Potts and Wolfe, standing behind the color guard during the reactivation. Wolfe was perhaps the best machinegunner in an outfit blessed with many. Another was John A. Lynch, who would later become the 31st Infantry's Sergeant Major. When 75mm recoilless rifles were issued in 1947, they arrived without manuals. Joe Wolfe disassembled

the weapon, identified its parts and their function, and reassembled it. He explained that while in POW camps in the Philippines, members of the 31st spent their time exchanging ideas on how they could have improved their weapons. The Army later adopted several of their ideas, including spotting rifles on antitank weapons and sub-caliber training devices for antitank weapons.

In celebration of the 31st Infantry's Organization Day, General of the Army Douglas MacArthur paid tribute to his former Guard of Honor with a congratulatory message issued on August 4, 1946:

"There is no unit in the American Army which has served with greater distinction both in peace and in war, than the 31st Infantry. Never stationed within our continental limits, as the advanced element in our Pacific defense, the Regiment has always performed its assigned mission with marked gallantry and commendable precision. At Bataan, it achieved its greatest glory as its lines held firm time and time again against the assault of overwhelmingly superior forces. As it now faces a future of continued service in our country's cause, its regimental colors fly under a halo of tradition, of honor, duty and sacrifice, which will be an inspiration for American Armies for all time to come."

³ At Bataan, Potts was a Corporal leading a machinegun squad in M Company and Wolfe was a Sergeant leading a machinegun section in D Company. Wolfe earned the Silver Star at Layac Junction and after Bataan's surrender, became an orderly to captured generals. (Information derived from LTC Jasper Brady's regimental roster, Cabanatuan POW Camp, 1942-1944.)

⁴ Email from Alton G. Rogers, Subject: *31st Occupation of Korea*, 10 March 2005.

Another distinguished officer who sent greetings for the occasion was Lieutenant General Robert L. Eichelberger who won the Distinguished Service Cross with the 31st in Siberia. He was a lieutenant colonel serving as S-2 of the AEF in 1918 and rose to command the Eighth Army during World War II.

Officers and men of the 31st Infantry regiment:

My association with the 31st Infantry Regiment extends back 27 years. I feel highly honored that I have been remembered and asked to send you a message on this first organization day after the end of World War II. When I learned some time ago that this proud old regiment was reactivated in Korea as part of the 7th Infantry Division, I was highly gratified. Furthermore, it seemed significant that the 31st should be re-created in Korea to continue its long career of service overseas.

I first knew the regiment in Eastern Siberia in 1919 when I accompanied it during its military operations in the Suchan District. An American force of 10,000 built around the 31st and 27th Infantry Regiments had been sent to Vladivostok with the mission of restoring the railroads and bringing economic relief to revolution-torn Siberia. Our mission involved maintaining strict neutrality in the midst of a madhouse of intrigue, double-dealing, burning, torture, and ambushing. Bolsheviki, White Russian, Japanese, Chinese, British, French, Czechs, and Poles were among the many factions present in Siberia at the time. It was inevitable that, upon occasion, our troops saw action. American columns were ambushed. Small groups were surprised and captured while on peaceful missions—and we retaliated. I was personally involved in most of the incidents. In bearing the brunt of the fighting, the 31st conducted itself nobly. Since those early days of my career, the regiment has always been near to my heart. As a combatant on the spot, I can assure you that you have reason to be proud of the record of the 31st in Siberia.

I need but mention the proudest and saddest chapter of the history of the 31st. The gallant and aggressive manner in which it acted as the backbone of our forces defending Bataan Peninsula will remain recorded in our military history forever. I hope that, on this organization day, you present members of the regiment will look deeply into the history of the 31st and gain from its past achievements the inspiration and the unit spirit that will be necessary to make the future of the regiment as glorious as has been its past.

I thank you.

*/s/Robert L. Eichelberger
Lieutenant General
Commanding the Eighth
United States Army*

*Reproduced: Hq 31st Inf, APO 7
15 August 1946*

Among the most unusual careers of any Polar Bear of that era is that of PFC Nick Loundagin who served with G Company at Chunchon.⁵ His memories of Korea focus on hills that only went up and showers that seldom worked. Nick left the Army in 1947 and got a Navy appointment as supply officer of the USNS *Simon B. Buckner*, transferring to the USNS *Fred C. Ainsworth* just in time to take the 31st back to Inchon in 1950. Nick later helped evacuate the regiment from Hungnam. Weary of life at sea, Nick got his pilot's license on the GI Bill after the war and later flew tons of explosives and hundreds of infantrymen to Vietnam, including some who would become members of the 31st Infantry's 4th and 6th Battalions.

As the Army shrank from over 8 million men in 1945 to only 536,000 the next year, all units suffered shortages. The 31st Infantry's strength declined progressively to under a third of its

⁵ Email from Nick Loundagin, Subject: KOREA, 24 Jan 1999.

wartime authorization. 3rd Battalion was reduced to zero strength in 1947. That left the 31st badly undermanned for its border surveillance mission. The regiment manned three OPs along the 38th Parallel and patrolled between them on foot and by jeep. There was little time for tactical training, since guard duty and patrolling consumed most of the regiment's available manpower every day. Despite the shortages, annual regimental maneuvers were held, but there was never enough time or available manpower to prepare for them.

Morale and discipline suffered as strength declined. At the same time, the experience level of leaders declined as seasoned World War II veterans returned home to be discharged. By 1947, corporals generally led squads, sergeants led platoons, lieutenants led companies, and captains or majors often led battalions. The Doolittle Board, convened after World War II to investigate wartime abuses of authority by officers and NCOs, did not help the situation. The Board's recommendations shifted disciplinary authority from company level to courts and boards convened by higher commands.

Enlisted soldiers who remained in the Army after World War II included a high proportion who could not read or write above fifth grade level. That population had few job prospects back home and many experienced difficulty performing basic military functions. In response, the Far East Command issued a directive in 1947 requiring all units to convene on-duty English classes to be taught by literate members.⁶ Predictably, the quality of teaching was spotty and the benefits varied widely. When on-duty classes were added to routine guard, kitchen detail, sick call, hospitalization, passes and leaves, and occasional unauthorized absences, there were almost no troops left for training, causing tactical proficiency to plummet.

As old-timers accumulated enough points to go home, the 31st received two groups of replacements to keep it operational, but by the end of 1947, it was down to just over 800 men. Most of the 31st Infantry was based in Seoul, but the 2nd Battalion was at Chunchon in central Korea. In Seoul, the 31st was based alongside the 32nd Infantry at a former Japanese Army post that had once been a university campus. Companies rotated from Seoul and Chunchon to three observation posts (OPs) along the 38th parallel, extending from the mountains eastward to the Sea of Japan. The 32nd did the same westward to the Yellow Sea.



Each OP was manned by a reinforced rifle squad of 14 men, including a squad leader, assistant squad leader, automatic rifleman, 8 riflemen, a medic, a cook, and a radio operator. Duty on OPs was rough. Chow was usually cold, mail was usually late, and Quonset huts were miserably cold in the winter and unbearably hot in the summer. Just across the 38th parallel was the Soviet Army, partly manned by Koreans who had joined the Red Army to liberate their country from the Japanese in 1945. Russians, scanning their sector with binoculars and sniper scopes, outposted and patrolled the border just as our men did.

⁶ Headquarters, Eighth U.S. Army, Circular 178, "Literacy Training and Standards," 28 October 1947; Chief of Staff's General Correspondence Files; RG 554: Records of GHQ FEC/SCAP/UNC, NARA II.

An atmosphere of constant tension existed along the border and occasionally shots were exchanged. Loudspeaker propaganda directed at US outposts warned that the Soviets would soon wipe the Americans out. Incidents were more common in the 32nd Infantry's sector because the city of Kaesong and the Ongjin Peninsula were tempting targets due to their isolation from the rest of South Korea. In July 1947, Soviet fighters chased a US liaison plane away from the border and later that month Soviet troops fired at a US patrol that strayed into North Korea. The following month, three soldiers checking communication wire strayed across the border and were held by the Soviets for nearly two weeks. A month later, a US patrol was ambushed near the border, but suffered no casualties.

Sergeant Alton G. Rogers of B Company recalls that relations between Americans and Russians in Korea were not all bad. The Russian legation in Seoul was guarded around the clock by two American soldiers and two Russians who lived in austere rail cars at the nearby rail yard. Although their officers forbade them to speak to Americans, the Russians tried to converse with their American counterparts in Korean, showed off pictures of their families, and sometimes exchanged insignia or other articles of interest for American cigarettes.⁷

South Korea was a hotbed of unrest during the occupation. Soviet agents had penetrated Korea during the time of Japanese rule and formed cadres of saboteurs and political agitators. The Korean people, fed up with the Japanese, were receptive to any form of opposition. As a result, the new Korean Army and Police included a high proportion of communist sympathizers. The garrison on Koje Island sparked a general uprising there and a South Korean regiment, sent to quell the unrest, deserted with its weapons to become guerillas. Some South Korean officers, on completion of their training by the US, deserted and crossed the porous border to join the Soviets north of the 38th Parallel. Communist guerillas were active in many places, attacking police stations, assassinating public officials, and raising general havoc to make South Korea ungovernable.

A GI's life in Korea was primitive but gradually improved, thanks largely to the ingenuity and resourcefulness of Army engineers. Because there had been no fighting in South Korea during the war, former Japanese barracks and support facilities remained intact. Each barracks building housed two companies. In 1947, one of the buildings burned to the ground in 20 minutes, killing a soldier trapped inside. From the outside, the compounds resembled German kasernes, after which they were modeled in the 1930s. On the inside, things were different. Japan did not have indoor plumbing before the occupation and it took U.S. engineers over a year to develop a satisfactory plumbing and sewage system.

North of the 38th parallel, Stalin formed a communist government in 1948.⁸ Almost immediately, North Korea's Army, the *Inmun Gun* was formed from ethnic Korean members of the Soviet and Chinese Communist Armies, relieving Soviet troops on the border. While relations with the Soviets had been tense, the North Koreans were outright aggressive. Sniping against U.S. patrols, "accidentally" shelling OPs and convoys with mortars, and firing on U.S. spotter planes became routine. On July 14, 1948, a relief of one of the 32nd Infantry's outposts was underway just south of Kaesong when a group of Koreans, dressed in civilian clothes pulled out weapons



⁷ Email from Alton G. Rogers, Subject: *31st Occupation of Korea*, 10 March 2005.

⁸ Photo of 38th parallel crossing courtesy of National Archives.

and grenades, killing Private Charles Labita of Brooklyn. Labita has the dubious distinction of being the first American killed in action in Korea, nearly two years before the outbreak of the Korean War.



To relieve tension and boredom, recreation facilities were developed at major US installations throughout Korea. At Seoul, the 7th Infantry Division Service Club, staffed by USO ladies, provided a well-stocked library, game rooms, and a bar. Occasional shows, put on by tour groups from the U.S., Australia, and the Philippines, were the highlight of the club's activities. A smaller Service Club was built for the 2nd Battalion at Chunchon. The 7th Division football team, the "Ramblers" played teams from the neighboring 6th Division and XXIV Corps at Hourglass Field in Seoul. Boxing, basketball, baseball, and marksmanship tournaments were also popular. Bataan Theater was built especially for the 31st Infantry's entertainment. Hourglass Beach recreation area was established on a scenic east coast bay for soldiers on leave.

One form of recreation had its hazards. Venereal diseases were rampant in Asia and syphilis was a particular problem. Troops who contracted the disease were sent to a special treatment and recuperation facility where stern lectures on safety precautions and grim films showing the consequences of unsafe pleasure were mandatory. In September 1948, a train bringing troops back from the recovery center derailed. It was suspected that communist guerillas were responsible for the derailment. Several Polar Bears were among the 36 men killed.



American families lived just an hour's drive from the tense border with North Korea. Husbands and fathers in the 31st knew they might have to fight a delaying action long enough to give their families time to reach evacuation sites at Kimpo airfield and the port of Inchon. Among the dependent family members living in Seoul was Dulce Bartlett and her three daughters. Her husband, Staff Sergeant Charles Bartlett of the Regimental S-1 Section, was the man who had the regimental colors made by a Seoul tailor. Dulce and her children lived at Camp Sobingo, adjacent to the 7th Division's headquarters complex. The complex included an all-grades dependent school, a theater, a library, a small PX/commissary, and precious little else. The Army Hospital and Service Club were downtown. Few Americans had cars because there were few paved roads and no gas stations. All travel was done by bus or train. Telephone service was "Douglas Switch" operated by the 7th Signal Battalion.

American food was mainly of the canned and boxed variety and the supply was uneven, ebbing and flowing with the arrival of resupply ships from the US. There were no dairy cattle in Korea and hence no milk or ice cream. Powdered milk was a staple of children's diets. Although fish was abundant, the absence of a beef industry in Korea made it necessary to ship frozen beef

and lamb from Australia and New Zealand. Vegetables from the Korean economy had to be boiled thoroughly since tuberculosis was still rampant, aggravated by the oriental practice of fertilizing with “night soil”. A quartermaster bakery provided bread, doughnuts, and cake to mess halls and the local commissary. Stoves were coal or wood-fired because the electrical system was not strong enough to power electric ranges. Worse, all electricity was generated in the Russian sector and they often turned it off, leaving Dulce and her family to play pinocle by candlelight or lantern. Drinking water was delivered to quarters twice a day by tanker trucks, but families had to leave their empty Jerry cans on the curb. There were also compensations. The Bartletts had a houseboy and two housemaids who helped with the cleaning and household chores. Most important, the tour brought the Bartletts and many families like them a treasury of friendships and memories of hardships overcome to be cherished as long as they live.



After forming a puppet regime in North Korea, the Soviets withdrew from Korea in 1948 and called for the US to do the same. Political pressures at home and the overextended nature of US forces worldwide prompted President Truman to order the withdrawal of U.S. forces in increments over the next year. When General MacArthur returned to Korea to transfer government authority to South Korean President Syngman Rhee, the 31st Infantry provided his honor guard. The 7th Infantry Division left Korea in December 1948, bound for a quieter tour of duty in Japan.⁹ When the 31st Infantry passed through the port of Inchon, a sign over the departure pier said "*Through these portals pass the best damn soldiers in the world*". When the regiment returned to Inchon in September 1950 under less pleasant circumstances, the sign was still there, knocked slightly ajar by U.S. naval gunfire.

Left in place to cover the approaches to Seoul, the 32nd Infantry Regiment, 48th Field Artillery Battalion, and 7th Reconnaissance Company formed the 5th Regimental Combat Team. On January 10, 1949, the 5th Regimental Combat Team departed for Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, leaving only a 500 man Military Assistance and Advisory Group to train South Korea's Army.

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