

Task Force Smith: A Study in (Un)Preparedness and (Ir)Responsibility

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The author writes, This article tells the story of Task Force (TF) Smith, the first US ground combat unit to meet the North Koreans in battle during the Korean War. It is not a story based on original research and has no new material concerning the experiences of the men involved. It is instead a compilation of material discussing several aspects of the deployment of a force to a combat zone from a peacetime mission. This particular manner of presentation was developed in an attempt to provide cadets at the US Military Academy with a historical situation that would not only interest them, but demonstrate that history has an immediate relevancy to the professional officer.

The circumstances that surround TF Smith's deployment and activities provide a vehicle that allows a wide range of issues to be discussed, ranging from the role and responsibility of junior officers and small-unit leaders, to problems faced by military systems in peacetime. It could be adapted with a little effort into an officers' professional development class and provide a means to discuss real-life problems using a historical situation as a guide. In this era, as in Smith's, the line between peacetime and combat can be rapidly crossed.

AT 0400 on 25 June 1950, the thunder of guns woke South Korean soldiers stationed along the frontier with their northern neighbor. Almost immediately, troops dressed in mustard-colored uniforms crossed the border at numerous points and headed south accompanied by scores of fast-moving, evil-looking T-34 tanks. The blow was unexpected. The South Koreans had their forces spread thinly along their defenses. By the fourth day of the invasion, Seoul had fallen, and resistance was rapidly collapsing throughout the peninsula.

On 30 June, several hundred miles away, Lieutenant Colonel Charles B. Smith, a commander in the 24th Infantry Division (ID), wearily undressed and collapsed on a bed in his quarters at Camp Wood, Japan. His battalion had been on alert the night before, and it was not until 2100 that Smith was able to seek the solitude of sleep.

Almost immediately, it seemed, his wife was shaking him awake, saying, "Colonel Stephens is on the phone and wants to talk with you!" Staggering to the phone, Smith heard his regimental commander bark, "The lid has blown off! Get on your clothes and report to the CP [command post]!" Still groggy, but with adrenalin now beginning to surge through his system, Smith looked at his watch. Less than an hour and a half after he had gone to sleep, he was about to take his battalion to war.

The need to report in spread rapidly throughout the battalion, although with a lack of urgency that was surprising. Sergeant Bill Meninger recalls that night very well:

"When the invasion came, of course everyone was interested, but it never occurred to us that we Americans serving in Japan in the Army of Occupation would ever get involved. For me, it was a typical Sunday night in Japan. I was at home with my family. It had rained all day. My wife was giving the kids a bath prior to putting them to bed

and I was reading a book and nursing a drink when the call came for me to report to headquarters! The wife wanted to know what the call was about. 'Something must be wrong with next week's schedule,' I answered. 'I'll be back as soon as I can.' (Which happened to be eleven months later.)"

Stephens contacted the other commanders in the regiment and made arrangements to fill the gaps in the officer ranks of Smith's battalion by "loaning" him lieutenants. By 0300 on 1 July, the first elements of Task Force (TF) *Smith* loaded on trucks and headed for the airfield where they were to be moved to Korea. Major General William F. Dean, commander of the division, was waiting for Smith. Taking him aside, Dean issued a brief operations order in the light rain.

"When you get to Pusan, head for Taejŏn. We want to stop the North Koreans as far from Pusan as we can. Block the main road as far north as possible. Contact [Brigadier] General [John H.] Church. If you can't locate him, go to Taejŏn and beyond if you can. Sorry I can't give you more information. That's all I've got. Good luck to you, and God bless you and your men." Although Smith, West Point class of 1939, had seen combat in the Pacific in World War II, the situation must have looked grim.

Elsewhere, others were also feverishly making preparations for war. Eighth Army transferred more than 2,100 men from the three other divisions in Japan to bring the 24th ID up to strength. Because of the rapid demobilization after World War II and budgetary problems, US units were at two-thirds of their authorized strength. In practice, this meant each regiment had only two of three battalions; each battalion, two of three companies and so on. This does not tell the whole story, however. Even though the organizational problems were a handicap, there were serious flaws in the existing foundation. The recollections of three indi-

viduals highlight the problems.

"Occupation duty was heaven. I was the troop information and education NCO [non-commissioned officer] at Sugamo Prison, where Japanese war criminals were held. My unit did very little military training. Life away from the prison consisted mostly of athletics, clubs, nightly dances, theater and Japanese girls. Although in those days alcohol made me sick, there was always plenty to drink. GI money and cigarettes went a long way on the black market." — Private First Class Leonard Korgie, L Co., 34th Infantry

"I had additional responsibilities which should never have been performed by a corporal. For example, the Regimental Combat Effectiveness Report was due every three months. Regiment would hold a quarterly conference on how to complete the report. I was detailed to attend these conferences. Afterwards I would report to my CO [commanding officer] and try to explain the report to him. His instructions were always the same: 'Make sure the medical company looks combat effective.' I would then prepare the lengthy report and the CO would sign without reading it."—Corporal Lacey Barnett

"The enlisted men left something to be desired. Enlistees, I learned, were not a very bright bunch of guys. The two smartest men in my outfit, a company clerk and a supply clerk, were draftees, and when their tour ended a month before Korea began, they were shipped home. With most of the enlistees, we really did have disciplinary problems, everything from VD to fighting, disobeying orders to showing up late, going AWOL [absent without leave] to drinking too much.

"Just before Korea started one of my jobs as the company executive officer was to try to get rid of the troublemakers. This wasn't easy because to bust out of the army required five court-martials. I finally got rid of

five guys, all real bad customers. When they left . . . they left in handcuffs. When they reached the Yokohama stockade, they were to be sent back to the States. The war began just as soon as they arrived in Yokohama. You know what happened? Someone up

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there decided C Company could not do without these five thugs and they were shipped back to us."—1st Lieutenant Philip Day, C Co., 21st Infantry

As Smith prepared to board the aircraft for Korea, he mentally took stock of his force. Altogether he had 440 men in an understrength battalion. Each man carried 120 rounds of rifle ammunition and two days' worth of C-rations. Unfortunately, not even this modest force could be airlifted at once as only six C-54 transport planes were available. By 0845, 1 July, the first plane was airborne.

"We started loading some C-54s with gear and equipment. It's sort of funny, you take all those courses on how to load airplanes with jeeps and cannons and so forth; then when you actually do it, you just sit and hold the jeep in place with your feet and hope it doesn't roll out of the airplane."—Day

Because of fog at the Korean airstrip, the landing of TF Smith was spread over the course of the day. Smith, who had taken off in one of the first aircraft, was forced, by the weather, to return to Japan and did not land in Korea until almost three and one-half

hours after his first elements had arrived. Fortunately, transport had been arranged, probably by the US Army Advisory Group Korea (K MAG), and there was a US guide available. The men arranged themselves on the odd assemblage of almost 100 vehicles commandeered to meet them and wound their way some 17 miles from the airport to the railroad station in Pusan. Everywhere they were met with joy. Crowds lined the streets, and banners and flags decorated the route. Once at the station, however, a somber note injected itself into the carnival atmosphere.

"The city wasn't very big in those days. We got all our gear and climbed onto the flatcars. As we waited to pull out, a train from up north came in. It was covered with human beings—troops, officers, old men, women, children, and most important, at least to me, wounded. My God, I thought, maybe there was a real war going on! Hysteria and panic traveled with this train. I heard a gunshot. Someone learned that a South Korean army officer sitting in the train had committed suicide. We were told his family had been captured in Seoul. We didn't have time to think much about that because it was then that our train moved out of the station."

Once the train arrived at Taejŏn, Smith went searching for Church. He found the general at a meeting with several Republic of Korea (ROK) and US staff officers. Taking him aside, Church pointed to a place on the map and said, "We have a little action up here. All we need is some men up there who won't run when they see tanks. We're going to move you up to support the ROKs and give them moral support."

Smith asked that he be allowed to go forward to look over the ground, and Church gave him authorization. While the rest of TF *Smith* began to settle into their bivouac, their commander and his principal officers got into jeeps and drove the 80 horrendously

bumpy miles to their tentative position. Once there, Smith chose what he felt was a suitable defensive position and issued orders for the occupation.

The following day, the men of TF *Smith* had an interesting lesson in the awesome destructiveness and unique limitations of airpower. On three separate occasions, friendly aircraft made devastating runs on targets of opportunity. The first was a South Korean ammunition train that had pulled into the station at P'yongt'aek. Australian aircraft strafed the target, demolishing not only the train, but the station and a large part of the town as well. Ammunition exploded all night, and many of the residents of the town were injured or killed.

That afternoon, a South Korean truck column was attacked near one of the towns the Americans were occupying. ROK rifle fire damaged one of the planes and forced the pilot to land nearby. There, K MAG and ROK officers "captured" a highly embarrassed US pilot.

In the third incident, four friendly jets made strikes along the Suwŏn-Osan highway. On the road they attacked a South Korean truck column and burned some 30 trucks while killing more than 200 ROK soldiers.

After a restless night, the elements of TF *Smith* were moved to P'yongt'aek. Here they were joined by part of the 52d Field Artillery Battalion with six 105mm howitzers, 73 vehicles and 108 men. It was the Fourth of July.

"We celebrated the . . . [holiday] . . . with a bottle of cold beer someone found. Later that day we got back in our trucks and rejoined B Company at P'yongt'aek. Many of us took this opportunity to get rid of the gas masks and blankets that had begun to weigh us down."—Day

"The night had been awful. Without repellent, the mosquitoes ate us alive. On the 4th we held several conferences in the city.



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We had no maps and I had only a general idea of where in Korea Ansong was."—1st Lieutenant William Wyrick

"There were some prisoners kneeling on the ground, their hands behind their backs and tied to their ankles. They were beaten across their thighs with a bamboo stick. I was told these people were accused of being Communists. I heard later they'd been executed but I don't know that to be true."—Day

Around midnight on the 4th, Smith moved the unit out of the city. He had to commandeer Korean trucks and other vehicles. Americans drove because the South Koreans deserted when they found out where they were going. Although it was only 12 miles to the position chosen the previous day, it took more than two and one-half hours due to the crush of refugee traffic and having to drive under blackout conditions. Along the route, ROK engineers were preparing, for demolition, the bridges Smith's men were moving over. Although they were told the Americans following up

the task force (not to mention Smith's men themselves) were going to be using the bridges, the ROKs refused to halt work in several spots. At one site, work was stopped only when the dynamite was thrown into the river by the Americans.

The official history claims that "the delaying force reached the position that Smith had previously selected [at about 0300]. The infantry units started setting up weapons and digging in at the predesignated places . . . [the artillery] moved . . . into positions behind the infantry. . . . All units were in place, but not completely dug in, before daylight." Soldiers who were there do not remember an operation that went this smoothly.

"We moved at night, arriving around 3:00 A.M. Everyone was tired. Then it began to drizzle—a cold, wet, penetrating drizzle. The men began digging foxholes on the hill east of the highway. Guys went down to bring up ammunition and because of the conditions, the hill became muddy and slippery. Time went by. It was raining now. Everyone was tired, wet, cold, a little bit pissed

off. The feeling was, why not wait for daylight to do all this climbing and digging?"—Day

The position Smith had chosen was an excellent one. The task force set up along a ridge that ran perpendicular to the roads coming south out of Suwön. From foxholes that were 300 feet or more above the road, Smith's battalion could see clearly along the approximately eight-mile stretch of road and railroad leading into Suwön.

One platoon of B Company was stationed to the west of the highway on a high knob. The other platoons were dug in to the east of the road. C Company had two platoons to

The six HEAT rounds at the position were quickly expended and the HE (high explosive) rounds had little or no effect. The next tanks through knocked out the gun and wounded several of its crew. . . . The next group of tanks came up against a badly shaken group of soldiers. As the new wave came into view, the men within the artillery battery started to panic. Crew members took off as officers ordered the guns to open fire.

the right of B Company, extending the line to the railroad. The final platoon was placed along a finger ridge running generally north to south so as to refuse the battalion's right flank. One of the recoilless rifles was placed to the east of the highway, while the other was entrenched just west of the railroad to take any vehicular traffic on the road under fire from the flank. The heavy mortars were placed almost 400 meters to the rear of B Company. All in all, not counting the refused right flank, the defensive position was approximately one mile long.

Lieutenant Colonel Perry, commander of

the artillery unit attached to TF Smith, moved his guns into positions approximately one mile behind the ridge. One gun was placed along the road halfway between the battery and Smith's position to act as an antitank gun. The other four howitzers were individually pulled over a difficult trail into battery by a pair of jeeps acting in tandem (the sixth howitzer had to be left to the rear due to transportation problems). At the battery position there were 1,200 rounds of ammunition, only six of which were HEAT (high-explosive antitank). The ammunition officer had drawn all that was available from the depot in Japan and had provided Perry's detachment with one-third of the 18 rounds he drew. Volunteers from the headquarters and service batteries made up four .50-caliber machinegun and four bazooka teams and joined Smith's men in the forward positions.

As the day dawned, the infantrymen test-fired their weapons and ate their C-rations in the rain. As Smith watched anxiously, he saw movement in the vicinity of Suwön beginning at around 0700. A half-hour later he could see tanks lumbering down the road towards his cold and soggy men. The soldiers noticed them too.

"Sergeant Loren Chambers yelled, 'Hey, look over there, Lieutenant. Can you believe?!' Looking down the road toward Suwön, I made out a column of tanks. Seems like there were eight of them. I couldn't believe my eyes. 'What are those?' I asked. Chambers answered, 'Those are T-34 tanks, Sir, and I don't think they're going to be very friendly toward us.' The company commander was called. Everybody got real excited about them. The day was beginning in earnest."—Day

Artillery rounds arched into the sky and began bursting along the tank column, but with little apparent effect. The first group of eight tanks was closely followed by others at short intervals, usually in groups of four. As

the enemy tanks approached to within 700 meters, the recoilless rifles took them under fire. Day was with one of the teams.

"Let's see," I shouted, "if we can get one of those tanks." We picked up the gun and moved it to where we could get a clean shot. I don't know if we were poorly trained, weren't thinking, or if it slipped our minds, but we set the gun on the forward slope of the hill. When we fired, the recoilless blast blew a hole in the hill which instantly covered us in mud and dirt. The effect wasn't nearly as bad on us as it was on the gun. It jammed and wouldn't fire until we'd cleaned the whole damn thing.

"When we were ready again, we moved the gun to a better position and began banging away. I swear we had some hits, but the tanks never slowed down. . . . More of the tanks began shooting at us. . . . I don't know what happened to the other two guys with me, but one blast knocked me and the gun over backward. I began bleeding from my ears. I wasn't unconscious, just stunned."—Day

Although a number of hits were scored, none of the tanks stopped or even appeared to be damaged. As they came even with the infantry positions, the bazooka teams began to get into the action. Lieutenant Ollie Connor grabbed one of the weapons and crawled down the slope into a ditch running alongside the road. He worked his way along the ditch until he reached the rear of one of the tanks where the armor was supposed to be the thinnest.

Steadying the rocket launcher at a range of only 15 meters, Connors fired. The first round burned out against the vehicle with no effect. Hurriedly, he loaded and fired again, with the same lack of effect. All in all, he fired 22 rounds against the T-34 without damaging it. Several of the rounds were so old they failed to explode properly on impact.

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zooka had been designed, it had not been given to the troops because the ammunition had not been perfected. Smith's men were forced to fight with equipment that was known to be outdated more than six years before.

By 0900, 33 tanks had moved through the American positions. Unfortunately, the first through had cut the communication wires leading back to the battery position. The radios Smith's men had were old and wet and functioned badly. Only a jeep-mounted set continued to function. By 1100, this too had ceased to work.

Chambers, an assistant platoon sergeant, called back on the sound-powered telephone for some 60mm mortar fire on the enemy tanks. The answer was:

They won't reach that far.

Well, how about the 81mm mortars?

They didn't come over with us.

How about the 4.2s?

The 4.2s can't fire.

How about the artillery?

No communications.

What about the Air Force?

They don't know where we are.

Call the Navy.

They can't reach this far.

Well then, send me a camera. I want to take a picture of this.

Once past the infantry's positions, the lead tanks came under fire from the lone artillery piece stationed along the road. Two tanks were damaged and pulled off to open the route for their companions. One caught fire and began to burn furiously. Two of the crew members abandoned the tank with their hands up. A third jumped out with a submachinegun and fired into a US machinegun position before he was cut down. An assistant gunner thus earned the dubious honor of being the first American killed in ground combat with the enemy in the Korean War. The six HEAT rounds at the position were quickly expended and the HE (high explosive) rounds had little or no effect. The next tanks through knocked out the gun and wounded several of its crew.

The main battery position was having similar luck in its efforts to stop the progress of the tanks. Although they were firing at ranges of 150—300 yards, the sweating, swearing gunners appeared to do little more than jar the tanks. Once the first group had passed, two bazooka teams under the command of Perry and a sergeant moved out to knock out the remaining immobilized tank. Through an interpreter, Perry called on the crew of the tank to surrender and was promptly shot in the leg for his trouble. He then ordered the howitzers to destroy the tank. After three rounds had hit, two of the crew jumped out and were killed by a squad sent forward to deal with them.

The next group of tanks came up against a badly shaken group of soldiers. As the new wave came into view, the men within the artillery battery started to panic. Crew members took off as officers ordered the guns to open fire. Suddenly, the officers and NCOs found themselves in the unenviable position of having to man the guns.

While the officers handled ammunition, the NCOs laid and fired the guns. Round after round was directed against the oncoming tanks, but once again with little effect. Fortunately for the battery, the tanks did not stop to return fire, but moved rapidly through the position. Perry, leaning against a tree and favoring his wounded leg, managed, along with one of his lieutenants, to talk the men into coming back to the guns. At this point, Perry had suffered only one casualty, other than himself, within the main battery area.

Of the 33 tanks that had moved through TF Smith's position in less than an hour, four had been immobilized or destroyed, and three slightly damaged. On the other hand, the tanks had killed or wounded 20 infantrymen, destroyed all the parked vehicles behind the infantry and artillery positions, and knocked out one of the howitzers.

Although antitank mines would have caused the advancing armor horrendous casualties, the task force fought without them. There were none in Korea. None of the other weapons on hand appeared to be able to halt the enemy armor either. As the rain continued to fall, the task force members dug deeper and waited for the next onslaught.

An hour later, movement could again be seen coming out of Suwŏn. As time passed, the advancing column grew in size until it filled 6 miles of road. While the Americans nervously waited out the hour it took the enemy to get within 1,000 meters, it became clear that the column was composed primarily of trucks and foot soldiers. When they had closed to within range, Smith ordered

his men to "throw the book at them." Mortar and machinegun fire rained down on an enemy that was caught unawares.

Slowly, order was created out of the chaos on the road. Three tanks with the road-bound force moved up to claw at the ridge with cannon and machinegun fire. Behind the destroyed lead vehicles, more than 1,000 enemy infantry dismounted and began to move against the US positions. Beyond them, uncounted hundreds waited. Had air power been available, it would have played havoc with the congestion on the road, but the weather was too bad for close air support to fly. Artillery would have devastated the enemy, but there was no communication with Perry's battery, and it was assumed to have been destroyed.

All efforts to overrun the position frontally were broken up by intense US fire. As the morning progressed, however, North Koreans began to work around the flanks. After artillery and mortar fire started to fall in increasing amounts and accuracy, Smith began to pull his men into a tighter defensive formation. At approximately 1430, it became obvious that the position would have to be abandoned, as the Americans were rapidly depleting their remaining supply of small arms ammunition.

Once Smith gave the order to withdraw, things slowly began to go to pieces. C Company withdrew first, followed by B Company—except for one platoon which had not received the order. This group only discovered that the battalion had pulled out when one of its runners went back to the CP and could find no one around. All crew-served weapons were abandoned, as well as all the dead and some 30 wounded litter cases. Confusion rapidly became rampant.

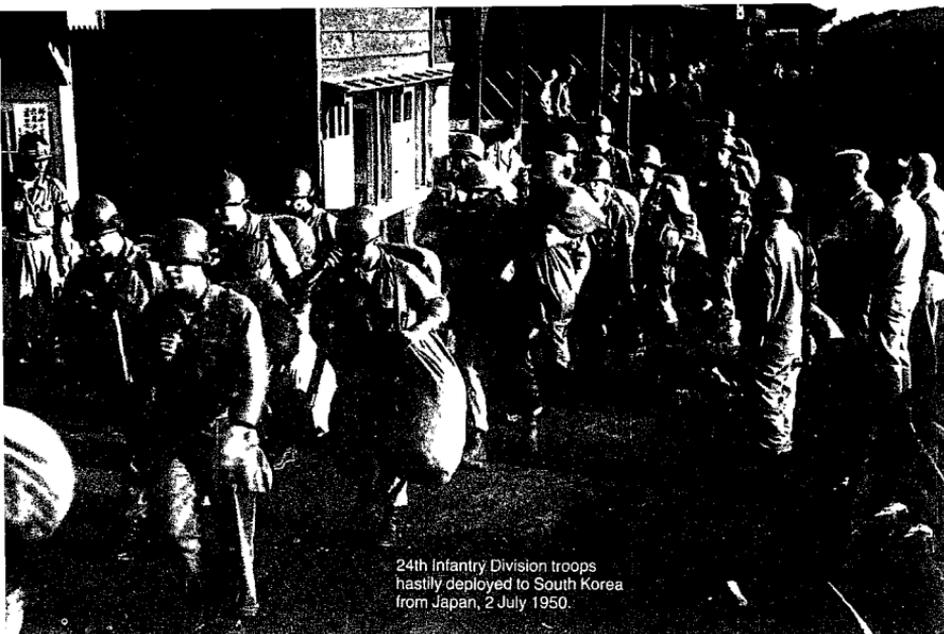
"Guys fell around me. Mortar rounds hit here and there. One of my young guys got it in the middle. My platoon sergeant, Harvey Vann, ran over to him. I followed. 'No way he's gonna live, Lieutenant.' Oh, Jesus, the



Only 185 men out of Smith's original 400 plus had made it back. None of the artillerymen who had been put into ad hoc bazooka and machinegun crews ever returned. . . . "Designed to be an arrogant display of strength to bluff the enemy into halting his advance, [TF Smith] had delayed the Inmun Gun exactly seven hours."

guy was moaning and groaning. There wasn't much I could do but pat him on the head and say, 'Hang in there.' Another of the platoon sergeants got it in the throat. He began spitting blood. I thought sure . . . for the rest of the day he held his throat together with his hand. He survived, too."—Day

It was at this point Smith left the battalion to find the artillery battery and tell Perry the infantry was withdrawing. Upon his arrival, he was amazed to find that the battery had suffered only comparatively light casualties. The artillerymen removed the sights and breechblocks from their guns and carried them, along with their aiming cir-



24th Infantry Division troops hastily deployed to South Korea from Japan, 2 July 1950.

Units at two-thirds of their authorized strength, bazookas that were outdated by more than five years, old and worn communications equipment and scarcity of antitank ammunition all indicate an army underfunded for the missions that it may be required to undertake. . . . TF Smith was [also], quite frankly, neither physically nor mentally prepared for combat. The leadership at the cutting edge of the Army had failed to meet its responsibility to prepare US soldiers for this arduous undertaking.

cles, back to the outskirts of Osan, where they had left the trucks. Much to their surprise, only a few had been damaged by enemy fire. The truck column soon came upon groups of Smith's battalion struggling across the hills and rice paddies. Many had taken off their shoes to be able to run faster, and very few had personal weapons. About 100 of Smith's force were picked up by this group.

Upon arrival in Ansong, a headcount was taken. Only 185 men out of Smith's original 400 plus had made it back. None of the artillerymen who had been put into ad hoc bazooka and machinegun crews ever returned. Survivors continued to straggle in over the

next few days. A few had walked all the way to the Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan and then came south. One man even floated into Pusan in a sampan. TF Smith, in the words of T. R. Fehrenbach, "designed to be an arrogant display of strength to bluff the enemy into halting his advance, had delayed the Inmun Gun exactly seven hours."

TF Smith failed to achieve its primary mission because it was not prepared to fight an experienced army. The traditional interpretation of why it failed stresses that senior military and civilian leaders were at fault because of the adoption of a bankrupt defensive policy. This, in turn, led to several critical organizational flaws that are high-

lighted by Smith's battalion. Units at two-thirds of their authorized strength, bazookas that were outdated by more than five years, old and worn communications equipment and scarcity of antitank ammunition all indicate an army underfunded for the missions that it may be required to undertake. Fehrenbach eloquently states this aspect of liability in *This Kind of War*:

"There just hadn't been enough money for long-range bombers, nuclear bombs, aircraft carriers, and bazookas too. Now, painfully, at the cost of blood, the United States found that while long-range bombers and aircraft carriers are absolutely vital to its security, it had not understood in 1945 the shape of future warfare.

"To remain a great power, the United States had to provide the best in nuclear delivery systems. But to properly exercise that power with any effect in the world—short of blowing it up—the United States also had to provide the bread-and-butter weapons that would permit her ground troops to live in battle.

"If it did not want to do so, it had no moral right to send its troops into battle."

Yet, there is another side to this coin of preparedness that should concern the military professional. It is one that many avoid discussing. TF Smith was, quite frankly, neither physically nor mentally prepared for combat. The leadership at the cutting edge of the Army had failed to meet its responsibility to prepare US soldiers for this arduous undertaking. Weaknesses that can be attributed to this are evident in a number of areas.

Training prior to the deployment was poorly conducted. Although there were severe limitations on maneuver areas and those items required for large-scale maneuvers, a peacetime mind-set manifesting itself as a fixation on readiness reports and after-duty activities is obvious. In addition, lower-level leaders failed to develop cohesion and a sense of urgency into the units under their command.

The difficulties encountered in the preparation of the initial defensive positions during adverse conditions, the rapid disintegration of the battery while in contact and the task force during the withdrawal point to critical weaknesses in morale that should have been identified prior to the firing of the first shot.

On the positive side, there were instances of courage and aggressiveness that all should seek to emulate. Connor's single-handed assault on a tank, Perry's attempts to destroy an immobilized enemy vehicle, and the number of men volunteering for ad hoc teams to employ crucial crew-served weapons all point to a level of personal bravery that is encouraging. What we must do is inculcate into ourselves and our subordinates exactly what our responsibilities are and ensure that such men are not wasted because of our failure to give them the expertise they need to defeat a competent and aggressive foe. M_R

NOTES

Three works were used in preparing this article

- T. R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War*
- Roy Appleman, *South to the Yalu*
- Donald Knox, *The Korean War: An Oral History*

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