FACT SHEET

Men of the 1st Section, AAA Battalion, 187th A/B RCT, U.S. Eighth Army, fire on Chinese communist positions in the hills of central Korea, May 28, 1951.

Chinese Communist Forces Spring Offensive

April 22 - July 8, 1951

Background

Lieutenant General James A. Van Fleet replaced General Matthew B. Ridgway as Eighth U.S. Army (EUSA) commander on April 14, when Ridgway succeeded General of the Army Douglas MacArthur as commander of the U.S. Far East Command (FEC) and United Nations (U.N.) Command. Van Fleet found EUSA consolidating its positions along Line KANSAS after pushing back Chinese and North Korean Peopl'e's Army (NKPA) forces in Operation DAUNTLESS. Line KANSAS extended from Yangyang in the east, where it was manned by the Republic of Korea (ROK) III Corps, west to Yanggu and then south of the Hwachon Reservoir to Chichoni in its central sectors, which were held by the U.S. Army X and IX Corps. In the west, Line KANSAS followed the trace of the lower banks of the Imjin and Han Rivers and was occupied by the U.S. Army I Corps. For the most part, the line consisted of a series of battalion strong points.

As it probed north of KANSAS in the wake of Operation DAUNTLESS, EUSA found few enemy forces and no signs of an impending enemy offensive. On April 21, Van Fleet directed EUSA to begin the second phase of DAUNTLESS to move EUSA's front toward Lines WYOMING and ALABAMA, north of Line KANSAS near the base of the Iron Triangle, an important enemy logistical complex near Kumhwa and Chorwon. As U.N. forces advanced, they met stiffening enemy resistance and detected signs of enemy reinforcements, but no signs of offensive preparations. The lack of such signs did not necessarily mean

that an enemy attack was distant, since CCF forces often had concealed their locations until immediately before they attacked. Such was the case with the CCF Spring Offensive. During the night of April 21-22, U.S. I Corps patrols engaged CCF positions that were stronger and farther forward than those they had encountered during past searches. Aerial reconnaissance revealed many enemy units moving forward from rear assemblies north and northwest of U.S. I and IX Corps and extensive troop movements above Yanggu and Inje in the vicinity of the Hwachon Reservoir near the U.S. X Corps-ROK III Corps boundary.

The Chinese Spring Offensive Begins

The enemy's spring offensive began the night of April 22 with an assault against the ROK 6th Division west of the Hwachon Reservoir in U.S. IX Corps sector. Punching through the ROK positions, the CCF sent two ROK regiments into flight, exposing the flanks of the U.S Army's 24th Infantry Division in the U.S. X Corps sector to the west and of the 1st Marine Division to the east. The 24th Division was hit the same night, the CCF driving almost three miles through the center of the division line. The Turkish Brigade, struck hard during the same attack, had to leave the line to reorganize. Fighting running rearguard actions, U.S. IX and I Corps pulled back from their forward positions toward Line KANSAS to shorten – thereby strengthening – the front and establishing a defense in depth against new attacks. To the west, the CCF engaged U.S., British, Philippine and Belgian ground forces along the Imjin River in a series of intense battles during which the enemy established bridgeheads below the Imjin.

In the east and east-central sectors of KANSAS, the enemy pressed the attack. An NKPA attack against the ROK 5th Division carried the enemy below Inje and Line KANSAS before the ROKs could mount an effective defense. Above Kapyong, enemy forces slicing southwest toward I Corps routed the ROK 6th Division, which fled south through the Kapyong Valley. As remnants of the ROK division fell in behind the 27th Commonwealth Brigade, Australian, Canadian and New Zealand contingents, supported by the U.S. Army's 72d Tank Battalion, held off the pursuing CCF forces. For their stand above Kapyong, the Australian and Canadian battalions and Company A, 72d Tank Battalion, were awarded the U.S. Presidential Unit Citation. The disheartening failure of the ROK 6th Division indicated to Van Fleet the need to develop more competent ROK combat leaders.

While air and artillery fire kept the pursuing CCF forces at bay, on April 23 I Corps withdrew the U.S. Army 24th and 25th Divisions to Line KANSAS where, the next day, the two divisions withstood repeated enemy daytime attacks. The CCF struck far harder against the ROK 1st Division and the British 29th Brigade along the Imjin, particularly against the Gloucestershire Battalion in the vicinity of Solma-ri. Hemmed in on their hilltop position by the CCF, the Glosters put up a tenacious defense while waiting for relief from I Corps. An attempt by one Gloster company to breakout of its perimeter resulted in its destruction. Rescue efforts by tank-infantry forces on April 24 and April25 failed to reach the battalion. A combination of enemy resistance, terrain impediments, confused instructions and mis-leading estimates of the Gloster's dire situation at several levels of command contributed to the failure of rescue efforts.

CCF attacks against the ROK 1st Division, to the right of the Glosters, created a gap between the ROK division and the Gloster battalion. To plug the gap, U.S. I Corps brought forward the 15th Infantry of the U.S. 3d Division to a position behind the ROKs to block CCF access to a secondary road, which, if reached, would afford the enemy easy access to Seoul and jeopardize U.S. I Corps' rear. The threat of major enemy penetration through the widening gap between the ROK and British forces convinced U.S. I Corps commander, Lieutenant General Frank Milburn, that Line KANSAS was untenable. On April 25, he ordered I Corps to with-draw to Line DELTA, four to 12 miles south. Having decided to abandon KANSAS, he directed the U.S. 3d Division and the ROK 1st Division to make every effort to pull out the Gloster battalion. These efforts again were futile. Taking matters into their own hands, the entrapped Glosters chose to fight their way back to U.N. lines. Taking a circuitous route they hoped would lead the battalion to the ROK 1st Division's sector, the Glosters followed a trail that led to a dead end and their capture by the CCF. Of the 28 officers and 671 men that manned the Gloster battalion at the beginning of the CCF spring offen-sive, 21 officers and 509 men were taken captive.

The Defense of Seoul

The direction of the enemy's offensive in the center of Line KANSAS and the unfolding of the offensive on the western front indicated that the enemy's main objective was to recapture Seoul, the South Korean capital. Given the enemy's inroads in the west and central segments of EUSA's line, EUSA could no longer hold Line KANSAS. Van Fleet, nevertheless, rejected a voluntary deep withdrawal by EUSA,

Ammunition for this 57-mm recoilless rifle crew of the 1st U.S. Cavalry Division, engaged in action against the Chinese communist forces in Korea, must be hand-carried up the mountain, as jeeps are unable to make the steep climb, June 8, 1951.

insisting that the enemy would have to fight EUSA for every piece of ground it took.

EUSA intended only a brief occupation of Line DELTA before withdrawing to Line GOLDEN to form a tighter perimeter for the defense of Seoul. On April 26, U.S. I Corps began a deliberate withdrawal to intermediate phase lines so that withdrawing ground forces always were in range of their supporting artillery. After holding back enemy attacks in the vicinity of Uijongbu on the night of the April 26-27, U.S. I Corps moved to Line GOLDEN on April 28. For the defense of Seoul, U.S. I Corps had six regiments on line and the same number assembled within and on the edges of the city as reserves. Planning a strong defense of Seoul, Van Fleet believed its loss would be psychologically devastating to South Korean confidence. With adequate forces on line and in reserve, and fortified defenses along a narrower front, which allowed for heavier concentrations of artillery fire, U.S. I Corps's position was stronger than at any time since the start of the enemy's spring offensive and enabled it to repulse all enemy efforts to breach Line GOLDEN.

By the end of April there were signs that the enemy's offensive had run out of steam. Patrols as far as six miles north of Line GOLDEN detected no enemy forces. The CCF/NKPA armies, in fact, were withdrawing. EUSA's stubborn defense, with its heavy use of artillery and steady American air support, took a heavy toll on the enemy's manpower during the first week of his spring offensive. EUSA estimated that 30,000 enemy had been killed since April 22. Throughout the period, FEAF aircraft provided strong and effective close-air support to the U.N.

forces. American air interdiction of the enemy's supply system, moreover, made it difficult for him to move his own artillery forward and to sustain offensive operations.

Back to Line KANSAS

The withdrawal of U.S. I Corps to Line GOLDEN necessitated an adjustment of the entire EUSA front. By April 28, Van Fleet established a new line, NO NAME Line. It extended east from line Golden on the outskirts of Seoul, bulged north as it moved eastward below Chunchon and Inje, and finally angled northeast to the coast above Yangyang. With NO NAME Line its main defense line, EUSA had ceded about 35 miles of territory in the I and IX Corps sectors and somewhat less in the U.S. X Corps and ROK III Corps sectors. Believing the enemy would again try to capture Seoul, in early May Van Fleet shifted most of EUSA's strength and all U.S. divisions to the western and central sectors of NO NAME Line to bolster EUSA's defense of the CCF's most likely invasion corridors. The eastern sector, where the terrain favored the defense, was manned entirely by ROK forces that faced weaker North Korean forces. Encouraged by the lack of contacts with the enemy across the entire NO NAME Line, Van Fleet decided to return EUSA to Line KANSAS. Some ROK forces in the east already had patrolled beyond Line KANSAS. To support EUSA's counterattack, Van Fleet proposed a lavish use of artillery, five times the usual daily expenditure of artillery, known as the "Van Fleet day of fire."

Meanwhile, the elusive CCF and NKPA had shifted major forces eastward from the west and central sectors of EUSA's line. By mid-May, the CCF had significantly increased their numbers in the area along the Soyang River between Chunchon and Inje. The enemy planned to sever the six ROK divisions on the eastern front from the remainder of EUSA, to annihilate them and then attack the 2d Infantry Division in X Corps' sector.

On the evening of May 15-16, an estimated 21 CCF divisions, flanked by three NKPA divisions in the east and six in the west, struck the U.S. X Corps and ROK III Corps in the Naepyongni-Nodong area. CCF forces slammed into the ROK 5th and 7th Divisions south of Kwandaeri, causing both divisions to withdraw in disarray. The attack exposed the west flank of the ROK III Corps and the east (or right) flank of the U.S. 2d Division. As in its difficult engagement along the Chongchon River in November 1950, the U.S. 2d Division was again threatened from the east after ROK forces gave way to strong CCF attacks.

For the next few days, the U.S. 2d Infantry Division and troops from France and the Netherlands north of
Hangye and in the Hongchon Valley fought to control
ridgelines, hills and valley approaches to plug gaps in the line through which waves of enemy forces were attacking. Reinforced by the 7th Marines on the division's west flank and elements of the 3d Infantry Division, brought up from near Seoul where it was EUSA's reserve, the 2d Division stabilized its position on the Hangye-Nuronni area by May 19. The enemy, however, had gained a deep salient below NO NAME Line. Chinese and NKPA forces created an even deeper pocket in the eastern X Corps sector and wedged into the western sector of ROK III Corps. Sweeping around the 2d Division, CCF forces attacked the collapsing ROK units of the ROK III Corps, driving them back in disorder to the vicinity of Soksa-ri, below Line KANSAS. Quickly bolstering the ROK positions, EUSA stopped the enemy and eased the threat of envelopment from the east. Although the CCF/NKPA continued to mass above X Corps and ROK III Corps, the enemy's offensive had slackened by May 19. EUSA had exacted a heavy price from the enemy. As prescribed by Van Fleet, division and corps artillery units had quintupled their ammunition expenditure, inflicting enormous casualties on the enemy. U.S. Air Force B-29 bombers, in radar-guided night attacks, struck enemy troop concentrations only a few hundred yards forward of EUSA's lines, adding to the toll of enemy losses.

EUSA Counterattacks

On May 20, believing that enemy forces across Korea were overextended, General Ridgway ordered EUSA to counterattack across its entire front, seeking to capture key road centers to block the enemy's routes of resupply and withdrawal. U.S.I Corps's objective was the road hub in the Yongpyong River valley, north of Uijongbu. U.S. IX Corps was to seize the road junctions on the western side of the Hwachon Reservoir, and U.S. X Corps was to gain control of the road complex in the Yanggu-Inje area east of the reservoir.

EUSA's counteroffensive progressed slower than planned. Many CCF/NKPA units withdrew faster than EUSA units advanced, raising doubts whether EUSA would reach the road hubs in time to block the enemy forces. As I Corps drove to Line KANSAS, reaching it May 27, most enemy forces in the corps' sector had withdrawn above the 38th parallel in the east and across the Imjin River in the west. Except for some brief enemy resistance near Chunchon on

May 24, U.S. IX Corps also discovered that enemy forces had moved rapidly north toward Hwachon and the Hwachon Reservoir. Several thousand CCF soldiers trapped north of Chunchon in the triangle formed by the Kapong-Chiamni road and the road leading from Chunchon to the west side of the Hwachon Reservoir were captured. In U.S. X Corps sector, the 1st U.S. Marine Division and the U.S. 2d Division moving cautiously toward the Yanggu-Inje area met stiff NKPA resistance below Inje and failed to curb the exodus of enemy forces to the north. Meeting little opposition, the ROK I Corps on the east coast drove north to Kansong.

With most major CCF forces having escaped EUSA’s efforts to trap them, on May 27 Van Fleet proposed Operation PILEDRIVER to extend the range of EUSA's counterattack. In the west, I Corps and IX Corps were to advance north of line Kansas to line Wyoming at the base of the Iron Triangle. While U.S. I Corps operated in the Kumhwa-Chorwon area, IX Corps was to block the main roads running southeast out of the triangle toward the Hwachon Reservoir and Chunchon. U.S. X Corps, after completing operations in the Yanggu-Inje area, was to fortify a new segment of Line KANSAS that ran northeast from the Hwachon Reservoir across the southern rim of a hollow circle of mountains called the "Punchbowl" to the east coast town of Kojinni, five miles above Kansong. At the end of May, the Fifth Air Force began an interdiction campaign, dubbed STRANGLE, against enemy supply lines.

The New War

Although Ridgway approved EUSA's plans for PILEDRIVER, he was mindful of guidance that he had received earlier from Washington that limited EUSA's advance to lines KANSAS and WYOMING without prior approval. He reminded Van Fleet that EUSA's mission still was to inflict maximum enemy losses at minimum cost to UNC forces. He advised Van Fleet to conduct a gradual advance and ruled out an ambitious amphibious operation on the east coast behind the enemy's lines that Van Fleet also had proposed. Ridgway's caution reflected both a desire to avoid risks that might impair EUSA’s combat effectiveness and Washington's new guidance of June 1 that reflected a new and overriding political consideration: the possible start of armistice negotiations.

On June 1, Van Fleet instructed his commanders to fortify lines KANSAS and WYOMING upon reaching them and thereafter to conduct limited objective attacks, reconnaissance in force and patrolling. Operation PILEDRIVER began on June 3 for U.S. I Corps and on June 5 for U.S. IX Corps. Through June 8, CCF forces gave ground grudgingly, apparently intent on holding the Iron Triangle. Between June 9 and 11, U.S. I Corps units occupied line WYOMING and sent patrols up both sides of the Iron Triangle to its apex near Pyonggang without meeting any resistance. U.S. IX Corps forces advanced north of Kumhwa until they met CCF resistance. Neither side controlled the road complex in the Iron Triangle area, which was located in no-man's land between EUSA's and the CCF's lines. As x Corps' 1st Marine Division drove to the Punchbowl, it engaged a determined enemy in some of the most difficult com-bat conditions of the war, including steep and sharply pitched ridges, extremely narrow fronts, and arduous climbs and descents. Defending from fortified positions on nearly every ridge, the NKPA fought tenaciously, with some ridges changing hands several times in a span of a few days before the Marines gained control of the lower lip of the Punchbowl. Elsewhere in X Corps' sector, U.N. forces cleared the eastern half of the Hwachon Reservoir and, by\ mid-June, X Corps controlled its objectives on Line KANSAS.

With the seizure of Line WYOMING and the adjusted segment of Line KANSAS in the east, EUSA had reached its allowed limit of advance. Van Fleet originally argued that EUSA's line should extend at least 20 miles above Line KANSAS. Since any armistice agreement would likely call for a withdrawal to a cease-fire line, Van Fleet was loath to abandon Line KANSAS. But the hard fighting that ensued to reach the Iron Triangle and the Punchbowl convinced Van Fleet that a deeper advance might prove too costly. On June 30, after officials of the Soviet Union and Chinese Peoples Republic endorsed armistice talks, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff instructed Ridgway to seek a meeting of military representatives of the CCF and NKPA forces to discuss an armistice. The next day, CCF/NKPA military leaders agreed to start armistice negotiations on July 10 at Kaesong, North Korea.

The start of armistice negotiations ended the CCF Spring Offensive and EUSA's counteroffensive. The CCF/NKPA forces had moved north, out of contact with EUSA, to reorganize and reequip. As the negotiations began, the size of the opposing ground forces was almost even. EUSA's strength was 554,500; CCF/NKA strength was some 569,200. Since April, enemy forces had suffered more than 200,000 casualties and incurred heavy materiel loss-

es. The enemy's ability to conduct large-scale offensive operations had been seriously impaired. For the time being, U.N. forces were limited to protecting Line KANSAS. According to official guidance from Washington, there would be no great ground pressure by EUSA to help persuade enemy authorities to conclude an early armistice. Without that pressure, the negotiation of an early armistice was questionable and prolonged hostilities were likely. After a little more than a year of war, the ebb and flow of battle on the Korean Peninsula had subsided, and the fighting would not again take on the scale and momentum of the war's first year.

Sources

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