Kwon and the KATUSAs

Although this title may sound like the name of a Far Eastern rock band, it is actually about six Korean soldiers and a Korean civilian. I first met them some sixty years ago—in the late summer of 1952. I had been sent to Korea as a replacement officer during the Korean War, which was then entering its third year of fighting. Although I have written a book about that experience (Friendly Fire, Omega Communications, 1996)—and some of the title Koreans found their way occasionally into that narrative—they really need to have a chronicle of their own to highlight their unique role in my part of the war.

Typically, when a raw second lieutenant was assigned to an infantry unit in Korea for his first command, he was made a platoon leader in a rifle company. A rifle company consisted of four platoons of about forty men each. They were the units that did the majority of the front-line combat in the war—and they typically sustained the majority of the casualties. However, when I reached my assigned regiment, I was not sent up to a rifle company. I was asked to take command of the regimental Intelligence and Reconnaissance (I&R) Platoon. This platoon was a part of regimental headquarters and was under the tactical control of the regimental intelligence officer. Both its mission and its personnel were unique among infantry units. I have described that mission and something about the personnel in Friendly Fire. Now, I'd like to describe in a bit more detail how Kwon and the KATUSAs fit into the picture.

KATUSA was an acronym for "Koreans attached to the U. S. Army." They were soldiers in the ROK (Republic of Korea) Army. How they were chosen to be KATUSAs, I have no idea. It was unquestionably a much more desirable assignment than to be in a ROK unit. So they were probably among the better soldiers in the units from which they were selected. Certainly, in the five months they served under me, their service was exemplary. I never hesitated—and in sometimes preferred—to have them with me in tight situations rather than some of the GIs assigned to my platoon. It was their country and they weren't counting the rotation points till they could go home.

I was never told—and never questioned—why such a large proportion of my platoon consisted of Koreans. Only one of them could speak any conversational English, although some of the rest could communicate a bit. The Army's Table of Organization at the time specified 33 men for an I&R platoon, although I never did have that many men actually assigned and present. Because of that, these Koreans were often close to a quarter of my total force. And, I don't recall ever hearing from any of my friends who commanded platoons in rifle companies that they had any KATUSAs assigned to their units. Certainly, none of them ever had a Korean civilian on their roster. So, we were a unique outfit in a lot of ways.

Kwon, the seventh member of my Korean contingent was not a KATUSA. He was a civilian, assigned to my platoon as an interpreter. Given the role my outfit was supposed to fulfill in the war—intelligence and reconnaissance—it made sense that I should have an interpreter assigned. However, it was—and remains—a mystery why the KATUSAs were a part of the outfit, given that communication was a critical factor in the intelligence business and they did not communicate in a language that did that business much good. But, they were a significant proportion of my platoon when I took it over and they remained a part of it when I was transferred to another assignment five months later.

This is not to say that I was unhappy to have them as a part of my command. As I mentioned earlier, they were excellent soldiers and totally dependable when we were in combat situations which, as it turned out, was a lot more often than had been planned for my platoon. So,

I adapted my approach to command by accepting the reality that a significant aspect of that command was going to involve subordinates with whom I was going to have to communicate through an interpreter. Given that acceptance—and a bit of time to adapt to the situation—it worked out reasonably well.

As in all command situations, the chain of command dictates most of the relationships in an organization. That is, my closest interactions were with my NCOs (non-commissioned officers)— my platoon sergeant and squad leaders. The KATUSAs were assigned as squad members, so I usually dealt with them—as I did with the GI members—through their respective squad leaders. As a result, I never did get to know them very well. I do remember the full names of all be two of them. Phonetically, they were: Kim Moo Duk, Kim Kyu Yoon, Lee Chun Ho, Lee Chang ?, Kwon ? ? and Che Mon Sool.

Regrettably, I don't recall much about most of them. I do have some memories about three of them; Lee Chun Ho, Che Mon Sool and Kim Moo Duk. My most vivid memory of Lee happened while we were in reserve and engaged in training exercises. That day, I had scheduled the platoon for training in hand-to-hand combat. I don't have any recollection why I chose Lee as the subject for demonstrating a particular throw. Whatever my reasons, Lee was a bad choice. He promptly threw me on my butt.

Che was at least in his forties—probably older. (The age of a Korean was difficult to pinpoint. Whenever I asked one of the KATUSAs his age, he always responded with a question: "GI age? or Korean age?" The reason was the way the Koreans established birthdays. They were one year old the day they were born—and everybody in the country became a year older on New Years Day.) He had been a miner in civilian life. Whenever we had a bunker to build, Che was the prime consultant to the project.

One enduring memory of Che occurred when my platoon had been assigned to fill in on the front lines after the regiment had taken a beating in a recent battle. My position was on a hill that had a cliff on one side that separated the two flanks of the platoon. A narrow pathway had been cut into the cliff, but it was in full enemy observation, so it was seldom used. The preferred route from one side of my position to the other was a trench that ran over top of the hill. It was a lot longer trip—but much less hazardous. One day, I was working with Che on the right flank, near the cliff, and I was in a hurry to get to the other flank. So I motioned to Che—who spoke almost no English—to take the cliff path to the other side. As Che inched along the path, we became sitting ducks on the face of that cliff. I tried in vain to explain the need for haste, but he had no idea what I was saying. Finally, I remembered a word in Japanese I thought he might understand. "Hiacko (hurry), Che," I shouted. Only then did he begin to hustle. Fortunately, we didn't draw any fire.

I wrote about my experience with Kim in *Friendly Fire*, but it was a sufficiently revealing cross-cultural interchange that it is worth re-telling here. It occurred when the regiment was in reserve and it began when one of my squad leaders appeared at my quarters accompanied by our interpreter.

"…Lieutenant," the squad leader announced. "Kim Moo Duk needs three days leave to get married."

"Married?" I responded sharply. "Why on earth does he need to get married? Has that little devil been sneaking off to Chunchon and got some girl down there in a family way?"

"Oh, no sir. It isn't anything like that. The girl he's gonna marry is back in his home village on Chejudo."

"Chejudo?" I was beginning to sound like an echo, but my surprise was genuine. Cheju was an island (do in Korean) about fifty miles off the southern tip of the Korean peninsula.

"That's 250 miles from here," I protested. "Why can't he wait to get married till after the war like the rest of us?"

Apparently it was in anticipation of this question that Kwon had accompanied the squad leader to my tent. Without any prompting, the interpreter took responsibility for answering my question. He explained that Kim's parents had chosen a mate for him and had negotiated with her parents the necessary conditions for the marriage. After the union, she would become a part of his family and would be expected to help his parents work their farm. However, she would not be available as an extra hand on the old homestead unless and until she was officially joined in matrimony to good old Kim. Hence the urgent need for the little Korean to get himself down to Chejudo to tie the knot.

"How long has he known this girl?" I asked, curiosity beginning to replace my initial surprise.

"Oh, sir," the interpreter replied in his typically deferential style, "he does not know the girl at all. But that is not important. It only matters that his parents are satisfied that she will be a good worker on their farm. Kim will marry her because that is what his parents expect of him."

I pondered the situation silently while the two emissaries waited for my answer. My first thought was that Kim would have to have a lot better luck with transportation in this country than I had if he wanted to make the round trip in three days and leave any time for the ceremony—not even considering any time for consummating the union. Of course, considering the circumstances of the marriage, that last requirement wasn't likely to be a high priority—at least among the people who were calling the shots. Yet I had long ago learned not to underestimate Korean ingenuity. If Kim figured he only needed three days to take care of this little duty, I wasn't about to dispute his wisdom.

Given the nature of the platoon's current assignment, we certainly wouldn't miss the Korean soldier for three days while he fulfilled his family obligations, and I was pretty certain that with the first sergeant's help I could arrange the leave he needed. So I gave the mission my blessing and told Kwon to have Kim start packing..."

The interpreter's full name was Kwon Nyong Top. Among the Koreans, he and I had the closest association, of course, because he had to be my shadow whenever I was likely to encounter Korean nationals—military or civilian. He is shown in this picture with two GIs from the platoon. Kwon was an educated man and had spent many of his growing-up years in Japan. (For many years before the end of World War II, Korea had been occupied by the Japanese.) So it was not uncommon at that time for middle class Koreans to be educated in Japan. For Kwon, one result was that he spoke Japanese fluently in addition to Korean and English.

Sometime later in the five months I was in command of the I&R Platoon—when I began to spend more of my time at regimental headquarters—I took an interest in learning Japanese. I had obtained a small book of Japanese grammar and I made a deal with Kwon—who wanted to improve his English—to exchange lessons in the respective languages. I had no interest in learning Korean, which I considered to be an impossible undertaking. As I recall, Kwon and I had a number of sessions, but I can only hope that he learned more than I, because I never got past some very basic fundamentals. However, there are a few things I still remember from those lessons. For example, in the sentence *Benjowa doko desuka?* (Were is the bathroom?—actually, Bathroom where is?), *Benjo* (bathroom) is the subject of the sentence and the *wa* at the end of the

word puts it into the subjective (nominative) case. (If the noun were in the objective case, the ending would be *wo*.) The word *doko* is the adverb "where." Finally, the form of he verb "to be," in this case, "is," can be found in the term *desu*, and the *ka* at the end makes it a question. On other fond memory from those lessons was the discovery that the shortest pronoun in English ("I") is the longest pronoun in Japanese (watashikawa). Note the *wa* at the end. A *wo* at the end would make it "me."

I do recall one other experience with Kwon that is probably worth relating. One of the extra duties I was assigned—possibly because I came with a built-in interpreter—was to go to the Korean national bank in Seoul to exchange wan (Korean currency) for civilian workers in the regiment when the currency was devalued. What I remember most about that trip was that I never saw Kwon after we got to Seoul—until half an hour after we had agreed to meet. I really didn't need an interpreter for my business (the people in the bank spoke English), so Kwon made himself scarce as soon as we hit town. I expect that an authorized trip to the Korean capital was, for Kwon, a gift of momentous proportions. I'm sure he used the time to renew old acquaintances…if you know what I mean.

All in all, those five months provided me a most memorable cross-cultural experience. It remains a highlight of my military career.

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