

Engineers as Infantry in the Korean War

Not all wars start with prior warning. The Korean Conflict was one such war. And, it was one that illustrates the United States' ability to respond quickly to armed aggression.

When the North Koreans launched an attack across the 38th parallel into the Republic of Korea (ROK) on June 25, 1950, they hoped for a speedy victory. Two days later, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution asking members to assist the ROK in repelling the attack and restoring peace. On June 29, President Truman authorized General of the Army Douglas MacArthur to use ground units in Korea.

No American combat units were in Korea when the communists invaded, and there were few trained U.S. Army divisions available for immediate commitment. The Eighth U.S. Army, stationed in Japan, immediately alerted its four divisions for combat in Korea, even though the units were under strength and mainly unprepared occupation troops. As a result, many noninfantry units were used as infantry in the early days of the war.

The first two divisions to reach Korea, the 24th and 25th Infantry Divisions, arrived in early July. Third to arrive was the 1st Cavalry Division, to which the 14th Engineer Combat Battalion (ECB) was attached. Initially short two companies, the battalion was as-

signed two more, one from the 43rd ECB and one from the 13th ECB. The battalion's strength was then 32 officers, 3 warrant officers, and 648 enlisted men.

The 14th ECB arrived at P'ohang-dong, Korea, on July 18. Relieved of attachment to the 1st Cavalry Division, the battalion went to Pusan to support the 25th Division. At the end of July the battalion moved to Taegu, where it was attached to the 24th Infantry Division, with further attachment to the 21st Infantry Regiment. The regiment was located along the Naktong River, and the battalion established a forward command post near Tukson-dong.

For the next three weeks, the 14th ECB helped hold the Pusan Perimeter. The unit performed a mix of engineer and infantry missions in several actions scattered throughout the 24th Infantry Division area. Their actions typify those of other engineer units called on to provide engineer support and accomplish infantry missions.

Company A's first mission was to prepare a 650-foot steel girder bridge across the Naktong for destruction, while Company C prepared the road out of Koryong for demolition. The demolitions were blown on August 3, when new defensive positions were established in the rear, further shrinking the Pusan Perimeter. The battalion then re-established its command post near

Ch'angnyong.

In an effort to hold the positions against North Korean attacks, the 21st Infantry Regiment tasked Company C to send 12 men and four .50-caliber machine guns to its defensive line along the Naktong River. Engineers ended up manning seven .50-caliber machine guns, including three guns belonging to the infantry. On August 5th, the company was ordered to man the defensive line along the Naktong. Company A was tasked to lay an anti-personnel minefield with booby traps in front of the division.

The following day, Company B dug defensive positions for the regiment. Company C moved to a new position on line. After digging in, Company C made contact with a 50-man enemy patrol trying to cross the Naktong and killed or wounded 46 of the enemy. For the next several days Company C sent out patrols and set listening posts along the river.

On August 10, the 21st Infantry Regiment assigned Company B the mission of perimeter defense for units of the division's artillery. Company A installed 200 yards of double-apron barbed wire fence and an anti-personnel minefield as part of the perimeter defense.

A period of intense enemy activity began on August 11. That morning, Company A and elements of Headquarters and Service Company were tasked to

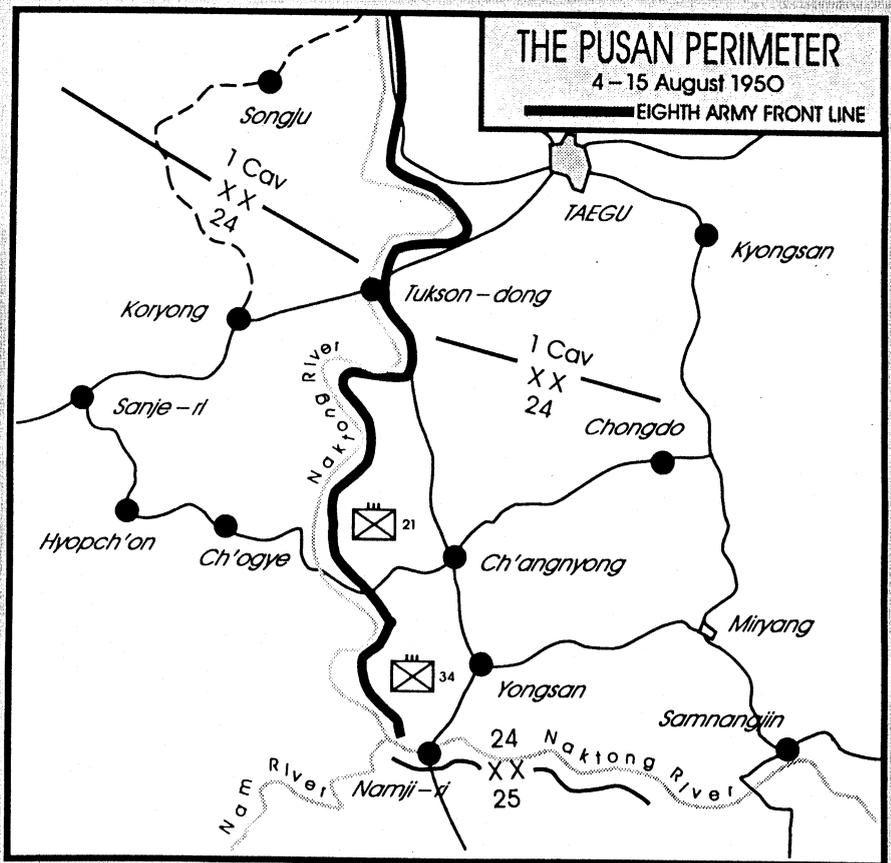
perform infantry missions. North Koreans had infiltrated into the 24th Infantry Division's sector of the Pusan Perimeter. Enemy artillery fire rained down on Yongsan, while sniper fire harassed traffic on the road from Yongsan to Miryang. South of Yongsan, North Koreans killed all members of a squad of K Company, 34th Infantry. The squad had been guarding a bridge over the Naktong at Namji-ri, which connected the 24th and 25th Divisions.

In response to the enemy threat in the rear against the main supply route (MSR) between Yongsan and Miryang, the 24th Infantry Division sent engineers to an area just east of Yongsan. This detail was ordered to keep open a 3-mile section of the MSR between Yongsan and Miryang.

Beginning at a point 2 miles outside of Yongsan, the engineers set up four road blocks extending from west to east. A five-man jeep patrol was to check each post every hour. The patrol's first trip went smoothly, but on its second trip enemy fire wounded the driver. Road block 3 received small arms fire.

When road block 4 began to receive considerable fire, the platoon leader sent his men to an infantry platoon's position one-half mile to the east. He and two noncommissioned officers (NCO) then headed for road block 3, which was under attack by enemy machine guns, rifles, and grenades. They never made it. North Koreans killed one NCO and captured the other two.

Enemy fire was now heavy at road block 3. A hand grenade killed the platoon leader and wounded three enlisted men. When an NCO tried to lead eight men to road block 2, enemy fire killed all except the NCO, who finally reached safety. At road block 2, the communications officer was wounded by three rounds as he tried to adjust a machine gun.



Engineers at road blocks 1 and 2 successfully defended their positions until the 34th Infantry Regiment ordered them to stop infiltrators at a hill northeast of Yongsan. Enemy troops posing as civilians had moved behind the line using a draw to the south of the hill. Late on the 13th, having stopped the North Korean infiltration, the engineers reported back to their command post. That evening it became apparent that the prompt action of the 24th Infantry Division in committing engineer troops to the MSR had checked the dangerous enemy penetration in the Yongsan area.

In three days of fighting, the battalion lost 24 men killed, three missing in action, and four wounded in action. Four soldiers earned the Silver Star.

Until relieved from attachment to the 24th Infantry Division on August 24, the 14th ECB continued in its dual role as engineers

and infantry. Company A maintained the MSR from Chongdo to Ch'angnyong, Company B established a perimeter defense for the field artillery, laid a 300-yard minefield along the Naktong, and did limited work on the MSR from Ch'angnyong to the front. Company C continued in its defensive position along the Naktong.

Because no engineer unit knows when it will be called upon to perform an infantry mission, soldiers must be prepared to respond to such missions at a moment's notice. The 14th Engineer Combat Battalion was one unit called on to fulfill both functions in an emergency situation, and it responded brilliantly.

Dr. Barry Fowle is a historian, Office of History, Headquarters, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Fort Belvoir, VA. He earned a Ph.D. in history from the University of Maryland.