

nard added. "The only trouble is that none of it works, as Kosovo and other wars keep demonstrating."

Guest Commentary

The high cost of not being ready

by Carl F. Bernard

Carl F. Bernard, a retired Army Colonel, won a Distinguished Service Cross for extraordinary heroism in the Korean War. The following article has also been published by the Los Angeles Times and the International Herald Tribune.

If civilians were massacred at No Gun Ri, it was by untrained and under-equipped U.S. soldiers under brutal assault.

Did U.S. infantrymen massacre more than 100 South Koreans in 1950 during the chaotic early weeks of the Korean War? A Pentagon investigation now under way must answer that question. Yet the more important questions are: How could young American soldiers do such a thing? Can we keep it from happening again?

The current Pentagon investigation involved H Company, 7th Cavalry. At the time, I was a second lieutenant with L Company, 21st Infantry, about 25 miles east of No Gun Ri.

Our "occupation army" in Japan was not ready, in any sense, for the Korean War. The nuclear bombs that took out Hiroshima and Nagasaki seemed to have ended fighting as the Army understood it. American soldiers were in a state of psychic disarmament. Inertia and the distractions of Japanese "social" life finished our battle readiness. Our weapons were relics, often inoperable. Our communications equipment, radios and wire, were too old and beat-up to function in heavy dew, let alone monsoon rains.

We went to fight tanks with a piece of failed anti-tank trash (the 2.36-inch "bazooka") the gravediggers in World War II often found ground up in the bodies of GIs because it would not stop tanks. The terror that bazooka-proof tanks imposed on exposed infantry makes "blind panic" seem a commendation. The myth of airplanes coming from the heavens to rescue our soldiers melted with the early morning mist and low-hanging clouds. The rain took out radios to our supporting artillery; tank's tracks took out the telephone lines that supplemented the radios.

None of these damning mechanical and operational faults

hinted at the size of our most grievous, distressful problem: the continuous transfer of personnel well before they could learn their jobs and the capabilities of their comrades in arms, whether chiefs or subordinates, or of the enemy. Strangers do not make effective fighting units. The 30-man platoon assigned to me in Task Force Smith was my fourth different one in the nine months before this battle.

Yet we went to Korea believing that the North Koreans would turn and head back north as soon as they discovered we were there. Sadly, we were no more than a souvenir-loaded speed bump for North Koreans at our first blocking position. Our seven hours in position bought us only one precious day. Our next five days delaying their move southward toward Pusan cost the Division the best part of three battalions.

These North Korean successes were not lost on the American units coming over from Japan. The North Korean army's successful technique of pinning down the 24th Infantry Division's battalion-sized units with frontal attacks, circling around their exposed flanks and installing themselves behind these battalions to then launch coordinated infantry-tank attacks over the top of our improvised defenses could not be countered. The Division Commander was captured and the remnants of two Regiments were lost in Taejon. U.S. prisoners broadcast their fates and apologies over Seoul City Sue's radio station.

Pulling back south toward Pusan, where most U.S. units' hopes of re-embarking, including the unit accused of the slaughter of No Gun Ri, were shared by many people. The Army's official history quotes this outfit's war diary as saying, two days after the supposed slaughter at the bridge, that the "increased uneasiness of the untested staff and troops . . . had become magnified and exaggerated." Reports of an enemy breakthrough caused the withdrawal of the 2nd Battalion, "an untried unit, [to be] scattered in panic. That evening 119 of its men were still missing. In this frantic departure from its position, the battalion left behind a switchboard, an emergency lighting unit, and weapons of all types. After daylight truck drivers and platoon sergeants returned to the scene and recovered 14 machine guns, 9 radios, 120 M-1 rifles, 26 carbines, 7 Browning automatic rifles, and six 60-mm. mortars."

These units and their men were not remotely ready for the costly operations they were sent to do in Korea. The ignorance of their chiefs was matched only by their incompetence. Men paid for this shameful neglect in blood, pain, and imprisonment.

Were all units like this? Of course not. But enough were to make our Army's subsequent disgraceful conduct undeniable, despite what may have been a very successful cover-up until now. How can we keep this from happening again?

A fruitful beginning might be telling the truth, and avoiding false reports designed to ensure promotions for individual commanders.