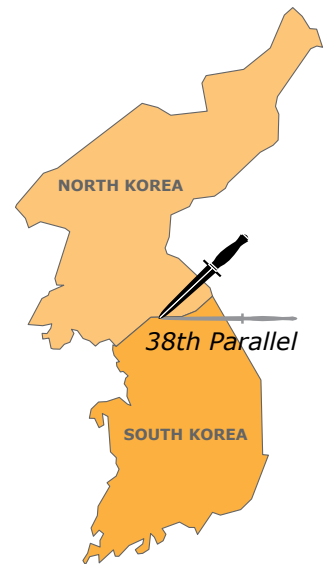


Catch as Catch Can: Special Forces and Line Crossers in the Korean War



by Steven F. Kuni and Kenneth Finlayson

THE Korean War (1950–1953) was the first combat employment of Special Forces. Sent to Korea in 1953 in the late stages of the war, Special Forces soldiers participated in two distinct unconventional warfare operations. Some of the Special Forces troops were assigned to work with the North Korean partisan units conducting raids behind the enemy lines from bases on the islands off the coast of Korea. The second mission Special Forces soldiers participated in involved the handling of agents sent behind enemy lines to gather tactical intelligence. This article will examine the role of the organization tasked with conducting the gathering of tactical intelligence, the Tactical Liaison Office (TLO), and the experiences of the Special Forces soldiers serving with the TLO.

Military operations on the Korean peninsula were the responsibility of the United States Far East Command (FEC). Established after World War II, FEC was a joint headquarters located in the Dai'ichi Building in Tokyo, Japan. Since its inception, General Douglas MacArthur commanded FEC as well as being “dual-hatted” as the commanding general of the U.S. Army Forces, Far East, (USAFFE).¹ Prior to the war, the G-2 (security) of FEC, Major General Charles A. Willoughby, established the Korea Liaison Office (KLO) to gather intelligence about North Korea.² At the start of the war, the KLO was virtually the only operational human intelligence asset in Korea. Throughout the war, the KLO provided strategic intelligence for FEC, primarily by inserting agents deep behind enemy lines.

Captain Chester Carpenter was stationed in pre-war Korea with the 671st Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC) detachment. He initiated a program that inserted agents into North Korea that provided virtually the only source of information. Some of his agents reached as far north as Manchuria, where they identified the 8th Route Army, a unit of the Chinese Army composed of North Koreans

who fought alongside the Communist Chinese against the Japanese in World War II. Carpenter returned to Japan before the start of the war, but returned when hostilities commenced.³

With the start of the war, the KLO remained the primary agency for gathering intelligence at the strategic level. For the acquisition of battlefield intelligence at the tactical and operational level, the U.S. combat divisions initially depended on combat patrols and their own agent programs. Later on the TLO program augmented their efforts.

Timely and accurate intelligence of the composition and disposition of the enemy is a crucial component of conducting combat operations. During the Korean War, both sides depended on infiltrating agents to gather this information. On the United Nations' side, these “line crossers” were exclusively Korean or Chinese because a Caucasian would have no chance of keeping his identity secret. Women, often with young children or babies, proved to be very effective agents, as did older males. Young, healthy men were in danger of being forcibly conscripted into the North Korean Army if caught in the enemy rear area. Chinese and North Korean defectors in military uniform were often used as line crossers. At different times in the conflict each of these groups made effective line crossers.

The rapid movement of the armies up and down the Korean peninsula characterized the first months of the war. During this period of flux, the presence of large numbers of refugees on the battlefield permitted the insertion of agents, notably women, into the flood of displaced persons. They readily blended into the displaced population and could move with relative ease around the battlefield.⁴

Sim Yong Hae was a 16-year-old South Korean girl from Suwon. She stayed in her town and witnessed the



Post-1951 Far East Command shoulder patch



Suwon, Sim Yong Hae's hometown, in September 1950.

carnage as the Chinese attacked through it in early 1951. After the UN forces pushed the Chinese back, an American sergeant and a Korean interpreter drove through the town recruiting for the TLO. Patriotism motivated her to join as an agent.⁵

Sim and three other girls went to the U.S. 25th Infantry Division headquarters at Munsan. She joined a TLO group of thirty to forty people, most of them women. Her particular team was made up of five women and three men. She received rudimentary training on what intelligence to gather. Sim, dressed in civilian clothes and posing as a refugee, went deep into enemy territory and remained there for an extended period.⁶ She served with the 25th Division TLO as an active agent conducting missions until the spring of 1954.

Captain Chester Carpenter was assigned to the 971st Counter Intelligence Corps detachment before the war and returned to run agents for both the 25th and 2nd Infantry divisions. With one U.S. enlisted man, his Korean interpreter "Ramrod," and twenty-five North Korean defectors, Carpenter conducted some of the earliest line-crossing operations in the war.⁷ He moved north out of the Pusan perimeter as the

UN forces drove back the North Korean Army. Carpenter and his agents retreated south with the 2nd Infantry Division in the face of the Chinese onslaught in November of 1950. He conducted line-crossing missions until he rotated back to Japan again in June 1951.⁸

After a fast-paced twelve months of attack and retreat up and down the Korean peninsula, the battle lines hardened along the 38th Parallel in the late spring of 1951. From this point onward, refugees disappeared from front line areas and the insertion of agents through the "No-Man's Land" between the forces became more difficult. The American units turned to Chinese and North Korean "turncoats" and South Korean civilians, mostly refugees, and dressed them in military uniforms to perform the line-crossing mission.

You Duk Ki fled from Chinnamp'o, North Korea in 1950. He was recruited into the TLO and received a month of training in Taegu. He was sent initially to the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division TLO near Young-gu on the east coast.⁹ He quickly learned that crossing into enemy territory was often the easiest part of his task.

Returning to friendly lines could be the most hazardous part of the line crosser's mission. The agents would crawl up in front of the American lines, take off their enemy uniforms, put their underwear on a stick and wave it as they stood up. When the American soldiers responded, the line crossers declared themselves as TLO agents and showed the soldiers strips of cloth which were sewn inside their garments identifying them. In many cases, the American infantrymen did not know what TLO meant. Once, You Duk Ki was sent to a prisoner of war compound. He was released back to his unit after he convinced the interrogator that he was an agent of the TLO.¹⁰

You Duk Ki, by his own estimate, did nearly one hundred missions between early 1951 and the summer of 1952, working in the sectors of the U.S. 2nd and 45th Infantry Divisions. On his last mission, he was wounded in the hand by a Communist grenade during a Chinese attack. He stayed between the lines until the 2nd Division forces counter-attacked and overran his hiding place. He spent the rest of the war procuring material to make North Korean Peoples Army uniforms for use by other TLO line crossers.¹¹

In November 1951, the TLO

2nd Infantry Division shoulder patch



45th Infantry Division shoulder patch



25th Infantry Division shoulder patch



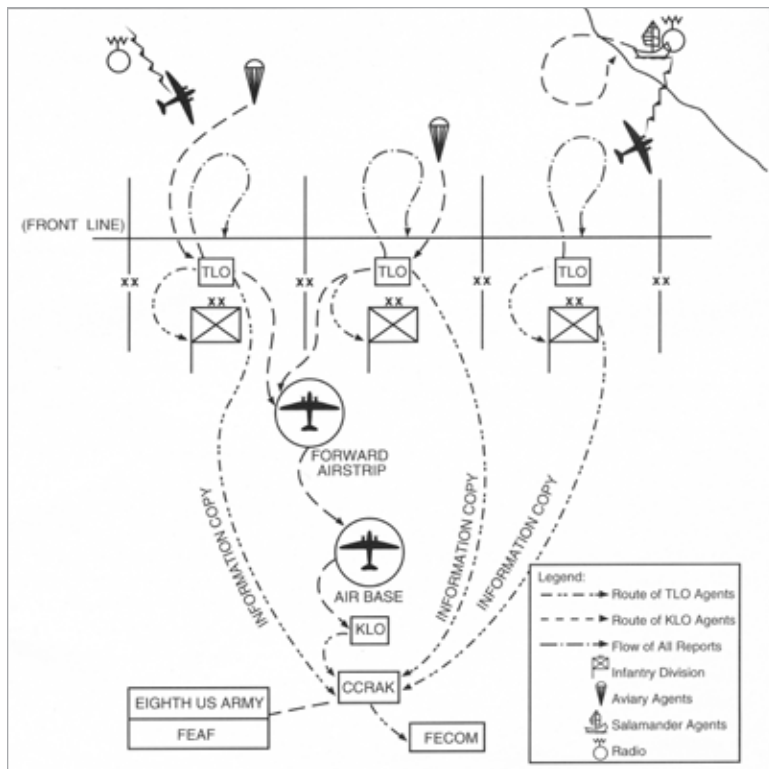


Diagram showing the relationship between TLO agents, the divisions they supported, and the presence of other partisans gathering intelligence on the battlefield. Source: Garth Stevens, Frank Bush, Robert Brewer, Jefferson Capps, and Charles Simmons, "Intelligence Information by Partisans for Armor." 2 Volumes (Fort Knox, KY: Armored Officer Advanced Course, 1952), 29.

started sending small teams of partisans to each U.S. division to act as line crossers. Advised, supported, and controlled by U.S. personnel, these partisans were sent across the lines on foot dressed either as Communist soldiers or in civilian clothes to collect tactical intelligence. Every agency involved in intelligence collection recruited agents primarily from the same source: North Koreans who had fled south or defectors from the Chinese forces. As the pool of North Korean and Chinese defectors dried up, increased use was made of South Korean civilians.¹² The mission of agent handling was one of the special operations missions that eventually involved the Special Forces soldiers.

Control of special operations was problematic throughout the war. Far East Command in Japan controlled all U.S. and UN forces on the peninsula. FEC attempted to exercise control over all special operations (including those of the Central Intelligence Agency and Korean civil and military intelligence) through the Combined Command Reconnaissance Activities-Korea (CCRAK) located in Seoul. Activated on 10 December 1951, CCRAK was a coordinating headquarters with no command authority. The organization, therefore, could do little to prevent each service—as well as agencies such as the CIA, the South Korean Government, and even individual units—from conducting unilateral and uncoordinated special operations. CCRAK's only real leverage was the apportionment of UN air and naval assets that fell under FEC control. The 8240th Army Unit, a subordinate element of CCRAK,



8240th Army Unit headquarters in Seoul, Korea.

conducted most of the Army's special operations. It was to the 8240th that most of the Special Force soldiers were assigned in 1953.¹³

On the Army Staff, the Office of the Chief of Psychological Warfare (OPCW) was the agency responsible for getting the Special Forces personnel involved in Korea. In September 1952, OPCW sent a staff element to Korea to find missions and to determine the feasibility of employing the newly formed Special Forces. Afterward, OCPW urged FEC to request Special Forces to conduct unconventional warfare missions on the peninsula. On 24 November 1952, the Department of the Army offered to send "specialized personnel" to FEC. This offer was forwarded to CCRAK, who accepted in January 1953. FEC formalized the request for sixty officers and fifteen enlisted men from Special Forces. They were to be sent directly from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, to CCRAK.¹⁴

Between February and September 1953, five groups of 10th Special Forces Group soldiers—totaling ninety-nine officers and enlisted men—were sent to Korea. The Special Forces soldiers were sent over as individuals, not in operational detachments. Department of the Army orders sent them initially to Camp Stoneman, California, where



The Airborne Command shoulder patch worn by the 10th Special Forces Group in the 1950s.



Special Forces officers at the replacement depot at Camp Drake, Japan, April 1953. Left to right: First Lieutenant Sam C. Sarkesian, First Lieutenant Warren E. Parker, Captain Francis W. Dawson, Second Lieutenant Earl L. Thieme, and First Lieutenant Leo F. Siefert.

they were processed for overseas movement. Some men traveled by plane, others went by ship to the Far East.¹⁵

While a few Special Forces soldiers went directly to Korea, the majority went to Camp Drake, near Tokyo, Japan. Here they received training from the FEC G-2 section. Descriptions and opinions about the training vary among personnel who arrived at different times. Captain Charles Bushong, in the first group, attended a three-week FEC intelligence course. "It scared the bejesus out me because of all the emphasis on security."¹⁶ Master Sergeant John Kessling, in the second group, described his two-week's of training as a "gentlemen's course."¹⁷ The training programs varied in length from two to four weeks and included such subjects as escape and evasion, intelligence gathering, weapons familiarization with North Korean and Chinese small arms, demolitions, and agent handling.¹⁸ Special Forces officer Captain Reuben Mooradian remembers, "two ridiculous weeks of intelligence training and a mission planning exercise to snatch a North Korean General," (a mission that was actually in the planning stages until killed by General Matthew Ridgway).¹⁹ While at Camp Drake, the men received specific unit assignments.

Once in Korea, most of the Special Forces soldiers were assigned to the 8240th Army Unit in Seoul. The 8240th controlled, supplied, and advised partisan units operating off the Korean coast. The unit had an airborne training and aerial delivery unit (code-named AVIARY) and furnished U.S.-controlled Korean agents to American divisions as line crossers on the front lines. The majority of the Special Forces men assigned to the 8240th were sent to advise the partisan units on the offshore islands. Others served on unit staffs or with AVIARY. A few men from each group went to the TLO to run agents.²⁰

Before 1953, the agents' advisors were conventional soldiers, most with just on-the-job-training as agent handlers. As some of these early advisors from the conven-

tional army accumulated sufficient points to rotate home, Special Forces soldiers that arrived in 1953 replaced them. The assignment of Special Forces soldiers did not cause significant changes to the TLO operations. What had changed was the nature of the battlefield. Since mid-1951, the defensive lines of the opposing forces had become increasingly static. Both sides improved and hardened their positions, constructing camouflaged bunkers with stout overhead cover. The permanence of the positions allowed both sides to rotate forces off the line for periods of rest, training, and rebuilding. Forward of the main line the units emplaced barbed wire and mines. In front of this was the Combat Outpost Line (COPL), positions occupied temporarily by up to a platoon to give early warning in case of attack. Between this and the enemy's COPL, was "No-Man's Land" where patrols from both sides probed for weaknesses in the defenses and tried to capture prisoners for intelligence purposes. While the defensive positions on both sides were much more consolidated and interlocking than they were in the early phases of the war, gaps still existed where TLO agents could slip through. The job of the Special Forces handlers was to assist the TLO agents in getting through those gaps and to recover them when they returned to friendly lines.

Captain Charles Bushong was assigned to the TLO in March 1953 and worked with turncoats, Chinese soldiers

A group of North Korean Partisans who conducted line crossing operations with front line divisions. Some of these men also jumped behind enemy lines.



who had defected to the South Korean side. These soldiers wore their Chinese uniforms, but carried no weapons.²¹ Bushong sent them out in groups of three on missions lasting one to two months. He deployed three teams through the U.S. 7th Infantry Division lines during his time with the TLO. The length of these missions precluded the agents from returning to their entry point. As a consequence, Bushong did not see his Chinese agents if they returned. He heard of some turncoats returning successfully, but not many. He also heard of teams making it as far as Manchuria before returning. His Chinese agents were trained to stand up and yell "TLO!" to alert American soldiers that they were coming through the lines. Bushong said the turncoats were ". . . damn good . . . these guys were true heroes who did great service for us."²²



7th Infantry Division shoulder patch



40th Infantry Division shoulder patch

as ". . . a flat failure."²³ These teams also consisted of three people, but instead of veteran Chinese soldiers, the agents were generally refugees from Seoul. Bushong was

In addition to working with Chinese turncoats, Bushong also inserted South Korean line crossers. Unlike the turncoats, he described these operations

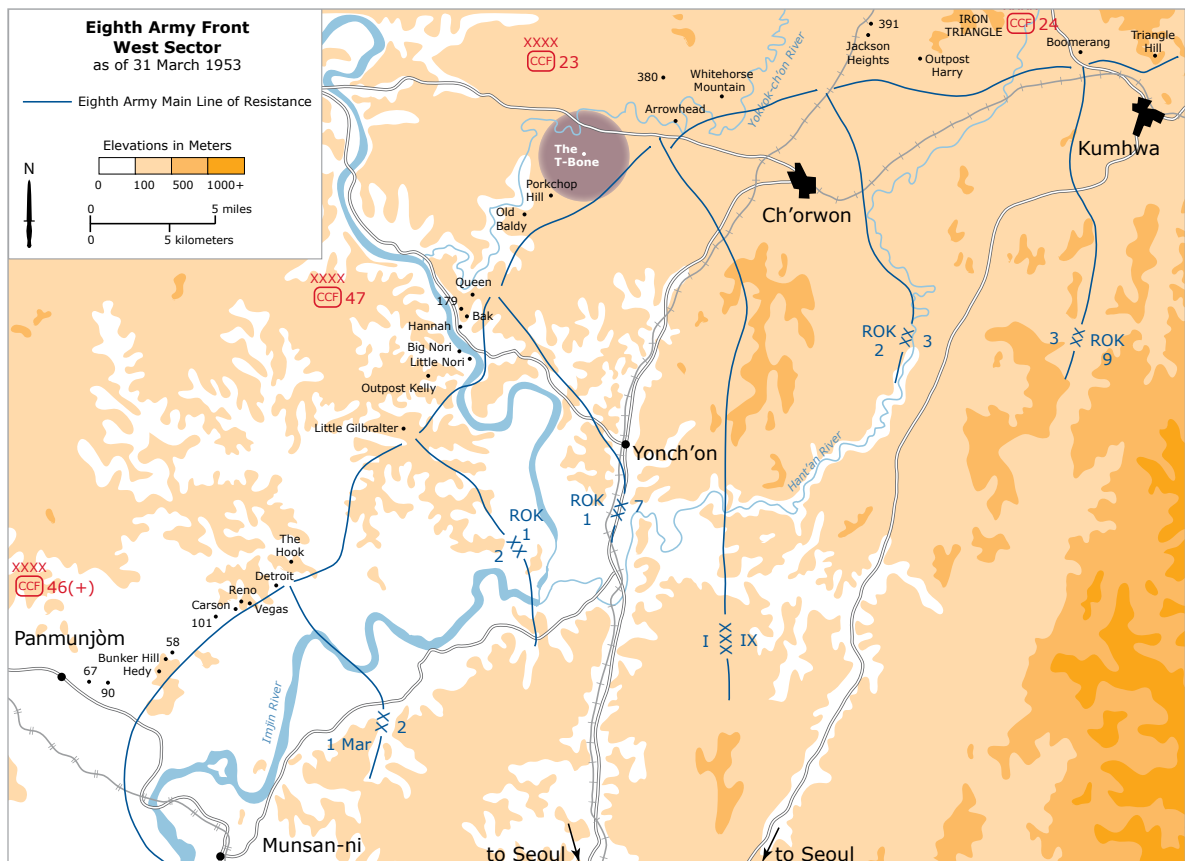


View of the T-Bone Hill sector.

convinced that the agents would "go a short way past friendly lines, hide, make up stories, and return."²⁴ Bushong recalls that his agents did not bring back any viable intelligence and he knows of only one case in which any of the civilian TLO agents brought back valuable information. In that instance in May 1953, agents reported large numbers of Chinese forces massed in the vicinity of T-Bone Hill in front of the US 7th Division and the UN Ethiopian forces. When the Chinese attacked the Ethiopians, UN air power used this intelligence to break up the assault and killed an estimated 600 Chinese. Bushong worked with TLO from March through May 1953 and was then assigned as an advisor to the 6th Partisan Infantry Regiment on the east coast island of Cho-do.²⁵

Master Sergeant John Kesslering arrived at Pusan in April 1953 and was sent to the 8240th Army Unit. There, he was briefed on the TLO (of which he had never heard) and assigned to a team. He felt his training prepared him well and the fact that the Special Forces soldiers were

Situation on the main line of resistance during the time of Captain Bushong's service with the Tactical Liaison Office.





The quilted cotton uniforms worn by these captured Chinese soldiers illustrate one type of uniform supplied to the Tactical Liaison Office agents advised by Special Forces soldiers.

not employed as teams did not impact adversely on their mission.²⁶

His TLO team was initially assigned to the U.S. 7th Infantry Division. Later, the team worked for the U.S. 2nd and 40th Infantry Divisions. Kessling trained his agents on map reading, obstacle courses, and low crawling through barbed wire while under live fire. As many of the agents had prior military experience, they took to the training "pretty good."²⁷ Lacking Korean language skill, he relied on demonstrations and hand and arm signals to communicate.

When Kessling brought his teams to TLO headquarters for mission briefings, they were separated to ensure compartmentalization. Then they returned to the division sector, coordinated with the G-2 and the forward line unit, and dispatched the teams through the lines. He normally sent out multiple teams of two or three agents each. They were dressed in North Korean or Chinese uniforms and carried documents obtained from prisoners of war or enemy casualties. Kessling led his teams out through the COPL in daylight to avoid fratricide. To move his agents through the line, one American would lead, followed by the agents, with another American trailing to guard against the possibility of an armed double agent. Americans never accompanied them beyond the COPL on missions.²⁸ Having accomplished their missions, the agents would approach the American lines and yell "TLO!" to the observation/listening posts beyond the



First Lieutenant Earl F. Thieme and an enlisted team member conduct a map reconnaissance for a suitable location for a cache. The plan to hide caches for stay-behind agents proved impractical.

COPL. Kessling says he never had any casualties as they returned through friendly lines. The American unit on the line would then bring the line crossers back to Kessling. Following a debriefing with the division G-2, he transported them to Seoul for further debriefing.²⁹

Kessling continued operations after the armistice agreement was signed on 27 July 1953 and actually sent more teams through the lines after the final cease-fire. While overt hostilities had ceased, large numbers of forces still faced each other across the 38th Parallel and the need for intelligence collection remained constant. Special Forces advisors and TLO agents like Kessling and Sim Yong Hae continued to provide intelligence for the UN. Kessling dispatched about a hundred teams during his tour. When he left the TLO in March 1954, the unit was still conducting line-crossing operations.³⁰ Upon returning to the United States, Kessling was not debriefed nor was his experience incorporated into postwar Special Forces training.³¹ Other Special Forces soldiers continued with their operations after the signing of the Armistice.

First Lieutenant Earl F. Thieme worked inserting agents by air and by sea as part of the 8007th Army Unit, known as Recovery Command. When combat operations ceased, the 8007th was deactivated on 30 September 1953 and reactivated as the 8112th.³² The 8112th continued to insert agents behind the lines and worked on preparing for stay-behind operations in the event of the resumption of hostilities. The stay-behind plan called for Thieme and his team to establish caches of weapons, ammunition, radios, and food for the use of agents. As Thieme and his team soon realized, it proved impossible to dig caches undetected and the plan was abandoned.³³

Other than to validate the individual training given to Special Forces soldiers, the actions of Special Forces personnel assigned to TLO and other unconventional warfare efforts in Korea had little impact on Special Forces training. Even though a small "hot war" raged in Korea for over three years, the attentions of the nation, the Army,

and the Special Forces were focused on Europe and the Cold War with the Soviet Union. In retrospect, Bushong was critical of the TLO. "Programs ranged from magnificent with the Chinese to imbecilic with what we tried to get the Koreans to do."³⁴ Kessling had a different opinion, "Our operation was rather simple. Not glamorous. In our little area, we did our job."³⁵ First Lieutenant Sam Sarkesian characterized the TLO operations as, "Catch as catch can."³⁶

The mission to gather tactical intelligence remained a constant requirement throughout the war. The changing nature of the Korean War battlefield, from a fluid war of movement to one of rigid defensive lines, changed the character of the TLO operations. The task of handling agents caused the Special Forces soldiers to be innovative and creative to accomplish their missions. Special Forces agent handlers in the last stages of the war demonstrated that they were "up to the task" and performed well in Korea. ▲

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- 27 Kessling interview.
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- 31 Kessling interview.
- 32 Thieme interview.
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- 34 Bushong interview.
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