

Soldier-Sailors in Korea:

JACK Maritime Operations



by Charles H. Briscoe

DURING the Korean War, special operations were conducted by all American military services, United Nations (UN) forces, Korean civilian and military elements, and a fledgling Central Intelligence Agency. In addition to being surprised by the North Korean invasion of South Korea in June 1950, neither General Douglas MacArthur, his Far East Command (FEC), nor the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had developed strategic, operational, or tactical special operations contingency plans for Korea. Roles in behind-the-lines operations had not been defined.¹ The only special operations asset available in the Pacific was a B-29 Superfortress “carpetbagger” (Psywar leaflet) squadron based in the Philippines.

General MacArthur had “stonewalled” any civilian agency that sought to conduct military or paramilitary operations in his theater of war. During World War II, he kept the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) out of the Southwest Pacific, although it performed quite well in Europe, the Mediterranean, Burma, and China. MacArthur did not want the OSS successor setting up shop in Korea, even though the Agency had been running agents into Communist China and North Korea since the end of WWII and had accrued a substantial amount of regional knowledge.²

With the exception of the small 971st Counter Intelligence Corps Detachment in Seoul, the FEC commander in Japan had no covert intelligence collection capability in Korea. Despite 971st reports of North Korean divisions in the Lee Hong-won Branch of the Chinese 8th Route Army in Manchuria before the war, Major Gen-

eral Charles Willoughby, the FEC G-2 (security), chose to ignore the implications.³ Shortly before the North Koreans invaded South Korea and drove the Americans and

Koreans into a final defensive perimeter around Pusan, General MacArthur reluctantly agreed to allow the CIA to establish a small office in Japan. It was fortuitous that Colonel Richard G. Stilwell, detailed from the Army, was serving as the Director of Far East Operations. The Agency became an independent player, not only because MacArthur disliked and distrusted anything he could not control, but also because of its unique global strategic mission. The FEC had a regional view and focused on the strategic implications of Korean events.⁴

Still, when North Korea invaded in June 1950, the new agency had done little to define its role in behind-the-lines operations anywhere.⁵ It was not until the Red Chinese intervention shattered UN Command illusions of a quick victory that U.S. military planners began to seriously consider guerrilla operations. Guerrilla operations could relieve some pressure on frontline UN units by destabilizing enemy rear areas.⁶ And they were an inexpensive force multiplier for the Eighth Army.⁷

Though peace talks in the summer of 1951 served to halt the UN advance on or near the 38th parallel, there was no ceasefire. No longer distracted by intelligence

crises of the moment because the main line of resistance was somewhat stabilized, all military intelligence elements and the CIA began to expand covert operations and to build a support structure to deal with a new form of warfare. It became a wider secret war because it was



Unofficial post-war Korean JACK Guerrilla Operations patch



Unofficial post-war Yong-do partisan unit patch

the only combat arena in which efforts could be intensified. It was waged widely, but with minimal coordination.⁸ On the seas surrounding Korea, the U.S. Navy and Marines, British Commandos, and the CIA raided coastal targets, seized military personnel, and destroyed rail and road infrastructure. Submarine and surface ships carried Marine Force Reconnaissance Teams, Underwater Demolition Teams, British Commandos, Army-advised partisans, and CIA guerrilla raiders.⁹

The purpose of this article is four-fold: first, to remind our readers that USASOC has an “Army Special Operations Forces in Korea, 1950–1953” history in progress; second, to separate the CIA covert maritime operations from military special operations activities during the Korean War; third, to reveal the critical role U.S. Army sergeants had in special operations while detailed to the CIA; and lastly, to capitalize on recent primary research—veteran interviews. This article uses an Army paratrooper who conducted paramilitary operations with JACK (Joint Activities Commission, Korea) during the Korean War—former Sergeant First Class Thomas G. Fosmire—to explain some maritime missions from his perspective as an operative. JACK was the CIA cover for status in Korea.

With the dissolution of the OSS after World War II, most U.S. military operatives returned to their parent services or civilian life. Thus JACK, like the Ranger Airborne Infantry companies formed for combat in Korea and Special Forces in 1952, recruited veterans from the OSS and SOE (Special Operations Executive), Rangers, Marauders, paratroopers, Para-Marines and Raiders, and Navy Underwater Demolition Team personnel for “details” with the Agency. An “old boy” network of former connections was used to identify military personnel for JACK.¹⁰ With Colonel William DePuy, Colonel William Peers (OSS Detachment 101–Burma), and Colonel Stilwell detailed to the CIA, Major John K. “Jack” Singlaub (OSS Europe and Indochina) was selected to be the military deputy of JACK in Korea. That *modus operandi* of recruiting was popular . . . much to the chagrin of some WWII parachute infantry officers trying to serve with the 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team.¹¹

Numerous U.S. military (all Defense services) officers and sergeants “served” in JACK, yet few knew about

all activities due to compartmentalization by a “need to know.” JACK paramilitary operations were conducted simultaneously while the U.S. military services, the UN, and the South Koreans ran special operations activities. The limited naval and air assets in and around Korea had to support everyone. Thus, special operations conducted during the Korean War have been regularly intertwined by military analysts to promote the existence of a grand special operations strategy by simply joining together the most enterprising and successful tactical operations achieved by several commands and a variety of elements. To compound the grand strategy illusion, General Matthew Ridgway, who succeeded MacArthur

in 1951, directed that a new Army-controlled command be formed to oversee and coordinate all covert operations in theater. This was the Combined Command for Reconnaissance Activities, Korea (CCRACK).¹²

CCRACK was to coordinate all special operations in Korea. Every Army, Navy, Marine, Air Force, and allied unit; South Korean military and intelligence elements; and the CIA doing behind-the-lines operations were to be represented in the command. However, CCRACK was a coordinating headquarters; it had no command authority. FEC appointed the commander while the Document Research Division (CIA liaison office) provided the deputy director. Army Major Singlaub, the deputy JACK commander and deputy station chief for Korea, also filled that position. The CIA reported directly to Washington. Its worldwide strategic mission transcended that of Far East Command. In his memoirs Singlaub simply stated “that JACK had neither the responsibility nor inclination to coordinate its independent covert activities with CCRACK.”¹³

CCRACK had no explicit command authority over JACK. It expected JACK to coordinate but JACK was not required to do so.¹⁴ Though CCRACK was really a “paper command,” Singlaub considered it as a rival for personnel, funding, air support, and above all, mission authorization.¹⁵ Scarce air and naval resources would be allocated based on availability, not mission need.¹⁶ Need was CCRACK’s source of power. However, the greatest flaw was that covert activities in FEC had been relegated to a staff rather than a command function.¹⁷

Typical of special operations today, the military and



Corporal Oscar “Pete” Johnson, JACK parachute rigger, with Sergeant Tom Fosmire collecting supplies from the British post exchange at Pusan before shipping out on K-333.

Photo courtesy of T. Fosmire

civilian working relationships at the tactical level were marked by a very distinct cooperative attitude among case officers and field operatives.¹⁸ JACK special operatives in the maritime branch overcame dysfunctional command, control, and coordination to become quite successful during the Korean War. Some JACK maritime operations conducted from Wonsan to the Tumen River (northeast border with China) from 1952 through 1953 will be explained by a veteran.



U.S. Army glider badge

Former Sergeant First Class Thomas George Fosmire from Wisconsin joined the Army as an airborne enlistee on 31 August 1948 to “catch up” with his older brother. Chuck Fosmire, a draftee, had fought with the 9th Infantry Division in Europe during WWII. After the war he reenlisted for Airborne School and was subsequently assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division. During the winter of 1948–1949, Private Tom Fosmire received basic infantry training with the 7th Infantry Regiment (Cottonbalers) at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, before leaving for jump school at Fort Benning, Georgia. In 1949, glider qualification was accomplished during the first week. Three weeks of parachute training followed.

It was June 1949 when Corporal Fosmire joined D Company, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, as a 81mm mortar man. By then, his brother Chuck was serving in the 82nd Airborne Division Reconnaissance Company. A year later, after some finagling by both, Tom joined his brother in the 82nd Reconnaissance Company. When war broke out in Korea in June 1950, Tom hoped that the two could fight together. After several months on alert, it became apparent that the All-American division was not Korea-bound. The newly-promoted Sergeant (SGT) Tom Fosmire volunteered for the Rangers, but like many others, his first sergeant would not release him.¹⁹

Totally frustrated in his efforts to get into the war by the fall of 1951, and with Chuck gone to become a warrant officer in counter-intelligence, Tom re-enlisted for Korea. He was determined to earn his Combat Infantryman Badge as his brother had in WWII. Military service was a family tradition. His father had been gassed and wounded while fighting as an infantryman in the 32nd Division in France during WWI, and wore the German bullet as a tie clasp.²⁰ Re-enlisting for Korea was the only way to get into the war.

While aboard the USTS *Marine Adder* traveling from Seattle, Washington, to Sasebo, Japan, SGT Fosmire never imagined that his Combat Infantryman Badge dream would go unfulfilled. When he got to the replacement depot (“Repo” Depot) at Camp Drake, Japan, virtually all combat arms soldiers were being processed and shipped to Korea in less than forty-eight hours. Casualties had been very heavy during the winter of 1951–1952. When he reached the head of the in-processing line, Fosmire was more than ready to “grab his gear” and get on the

bus to the airfield.²¹

Instead, he was told to report for an interview in an office of the Far East Air Forces Technical Analysis Group (FEAF/TAG) in downtown Tokyo. When Fosmire objected to this diversion from combat, the replacement company commander advised, “You ought to take the assignment, but you can come back. Then, you will definitely go to Korea as an infantryman.”²² Curiosity more than anything prompted him to get on the troop bus to Tokyo.

The FEAF/TAG office was located in the old NYK Shipping Company building up the street from the Dai’ichi building, the Far East Command headquarters. As Fosmire entered the building carrying his duffle, he was quite amazed to see American women working there. The man in charge was an Army first sergeant wearing “every val- or decoration except the Medal of Honor.” Fosmire was given a battery of aptitude tests. After checking his scores, the first sergeant said that he was being assigned to JACK, the Joint Activities Commission, Korea. Then, he was told to take another bus to Atsugi Airbase (outside of Tokyo) to catch a plane to Korea. At Atsugi, SGT Fosmire found a Civil Air Transport twin-engine C-46 Commando that was bound for Pusan and boarded.²³

A jeep driver awaited the flight and took Fosmire to a forward operating headquarters of JACK in Tongnae, a spa village just outside of Pusan. JACK headquarters was in the Traymore Hotel in Seoul. This field headquarters was in an old Japanese hotel in Tongnae. Instead of sleeping in a pup tent like most infantrymen in Korea, Fosmire was assigned a bunk bed in a hotel room. There was a central hot bath and a very nice mess hall. While “checking around,” Fosmire noticed that there were Army, Navy, and Marines assigned and most were WWII veterans.²⁴

JACK maritime operations at Tongnae had a wealth of experience from all services. The Marine Raiders, Underwater Demolition Teams, Amphibious Corps Scout-Observers, and U.S. Naval Group China hands were Lieutenant Colonel Robert “Rip” Robinson, Major Vincent R. “Dutch” Kramer, and First Lieutenant Thomas L. Curtis. The WWII paratroopers were Colonel Benjamin

Civil Air Transport C-47 Dakota aircraft with JACK Navy Lieutenant George Atcheson (left), Korean Captain Han Chul-min (center), and Marine Major Vincent A. “Dutch” Kramer (right) standing by their jeep.



In 1951, Lieutenant Colonel John H. McGee, G-3 (Operations) Far East Command, sought similar soldiers to raise, train, equip, and direct guerrilla operations in Korea. McGee was a veteran of guerrilla war in the Philippines. He wanted:

*a cadre of enlisted men who really knew their jobs thoroughly, were capable of working with Koreans under isolated conditions for relatively long periods of time, were accustomed to doing without amenities considered normal for the American soldier, and were wild and woolly enough to inspire confidence with their deeds alone.*¹

His recommendations attracted little interest in FEC. When the Ranger companies were disbanded in the fall of 1951, McGee's staff study was reexamined. But it was not until 1953 that the Army sent ninety-nine Special Forces officers and sergeants to Korea. They were not employed as teams; the vast majority were assigned to the 8240th Army Unit as advisors to the UN partisans on both coasts and the Tactical Liaison Office as "line-crosser" agent handlers with the conventional units. They became part of a myriad of American, British, Korean, and JACK elements conducting special operations in Korea.

McGee understood that the geography of Korea made air and naval support critical to unconventional warfare operations behind enemy lines; limited assets would have to be shared by many.² When he established Task Force Kirkland (8240th Army Unit) on Nan-do, a fifteen-acre rock atoll six miles offshore and ten miles south of Wonsan to conduct partisan raids on east coast targets and assist downed UN pilots, he knew that JACK and other American and South Korean elements were already operating in the area. CCRACK intervened to reduce the Task Force Kirkland area of operations from Wonsan to the main line of resistance near the 38th parallel when JACK protested. Task Force Kirkland guerrilla operations were restricted to a fifty-mile radius of Wonsan.³ Still, McGee worked closely with JACK maritime elements. He sought their advice because they had the most combat experience and constantly sought training opportunities.⁴

1 Major Shaun M. Darragh, "Where Special Operations Began: Hwanghae-do: The War of the Donkeys," *Army*, November 1984, 72.

2 Michael E. Haas, *In the Devil's Shadow: UN Special Operations During the Korean War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2000), 33–34.

3 Haas, *In the Devil's Shadow*, 49.

4 John B. Dwyer, *Commandos From the Sea: The History of Amphibious Special Warfare in World War II and the Korean War* (Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 1998), 251–52.



The island war zones.

Vandervoort, legendary battalion commander of the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment in France and Holland, and Captain John "Skip" Sadler, 11th Airborne, Philippines. The Korean War veterans were Navy Lieutenant (LTJG) George A. Atcheson and Captain (CPT) Robert L. Kingston. Vandervoort succeeded Colonel Albert R. Haney, the first JACK commander.²⁵

Junior intelligence officers were the weakest link. Most agent case officers were brand-new Reserve Officers Training Corps second lieutenants. Straight from Ivy League colleges, they were given three months of basic paramilitary skills and parachute training at Fort Benning, while at Training Center One.²⁶ A select cadre of strong, experienced sergeants was teamed with seasoned officers in the field. They trained and advised the operational elements of JACK. Vandervoort knew first-hand the value of airborne noncommissioned officers.²⁷ In lieu of special training most of the sergeants were sent to agent camps to assist the JACK advisors in training volunteers.²⁸

Sergeants Fosmire and Walter Hoffman were assigned to one of the most senior lieutenants in the Marine Corps: First Lieutenant Tom Curtis. This "maverick" officer (enlisted to warrant to battlefield commission) was a highly decorated veteran from Atlantic Fleet Scout–Observer Group and the OSS Operational Groups in Greece and China. The three men were sent to Kadok-to, an island northeast of Koje-do and west-southwest of Pusan. When they arrived, it housed thirty North Koreans (Captain Han Chul-min's cadre that had trained JACK escape and evasion net personnel). Seventy more guerrillas training on Saipan were to arrive shortly. Curtis' group was to build a 1,000-inch zero range as well as small arms, machine gun, and crew-served ranges (57mm recoilless rifle and 60mm mortar).²⁹

Supplies and foodstuffs were delivered weekly by a thirty-ton Chinese junk that JACK elements had captured. It was large enough to carry an Army jeep to the island. However, the strong currents and prevailing westerly winds made the trip to and from Pusan an all-day affair.



Southern Korea and Kadok-to, northeast of Koje-do, west-southwest of Pusan.

Afterward Fosmire and Hoffman helped Curtis to train the guerrillas in marksmanship (American, Chinese, and Russian weapons); hand grenades, mines, and booby traps; and first aid, map reading, and small unit infantry tactics with particular emphasis on raids and ambushes. Curtis taught instinctive shooting, a skill that he had mas-

UN naval forces blockaded the Korean coasts with a carrier task force shortly after the North Korean invasion in June 1950. Naval air and surface vessels bombarded enemy ports, railroads, roads, and known troop assembly areas daily while minesweeper craft protected the patrolling vessels. Chinese intervention in late November 1950 enabled the North Koreans to shift artillery and anti-aircraft weapons systems to protect cities and seaports. Artillery barrages on guerrilla bases offshore and UN navy ships increased and became more effective.¹

1 Department of the Navy. Naval Historical Center Web Page. Wars and Conflicts of the U.S. Navy. "Korean War: Chronology of U.S. Pacific Fleet Operations, January 1951–April 1953," <http://www.history.navy.mil/wars/korea/chron51a.htm>, <http://www.history.navy.mil/wars/korea/chron51b.htm>, <http://www.history.navy.mil/wars/korea/chron52a.htm>, <http://www.history.navy.mil/wars/korea/chron52b.htm>, and <http://www.history.navy.mil/wars/korea/chron53c.htm>, hereafter Korean War Chronology with internet citation.

Lieutenant Tom Curtis (left front wearing an OG bomber jacket, soft cap, and low quarters) and Sergeant First Class Walter Hoffman (hatless center front wearing an army knit sweater) with Korean crew aboard K-333.



Photo courtesy of T. Fosmire

tered in the OSS. After three months working on Kadok-to (January through March 1952), Curtis and his new charges returned to Tongnae for a weekend R&R (rest and relaxation). That very short respite at headquarters landed Fosmire in JACK maritime operations.³⁰

After a night of hard drinking, Curtis decided that a prank would "loosen up" a few "stiff-backed" officers. He used a fire extinguisher to wake them up in the early morning hours. The next morning Curtis was "standing before the mast" in Vandervoort's office. Luckily, the two senior Marines—Lieutenant Colonel Rip Robinson, a fellow Atlantic Fleet scout-observer, and Major Dutch Kramer, a kindred China OSS man—spoke up in his behalf. They suggested that instead of being immediately reassigned, Curtis should be sent to command the Japanese trawler that would cover the northeast coast of Korea.³¹

An 85-foot Japanese-built trawler, *K-333*, crewed by Koreans, would be the first JACK vessel to operate from Wonsan harbor in the winter. Curtis' acceptance was conditional; both Fosmire and Hoffman must volunteer to join him. Both paratroopers agreed and became sailors aboard a 1940s, diesel-powered, 80-ton fishing trawler that would operate offshore in the dead of the Korean winter.³²

K-333 and its 12-man Korean crew were berthed at Pusan awaiting the mounting of weapons and interior modifications to accommodate forty passengers. Capable of a top speed of twelve knots (twelve nautical miles per hour) and a cruising speed of eight to ten knots, trawler *K-333* had four hatch-covered foredeck holds to conceal forty guerrilla raiders. Light machine gun mounts (.30 caliber) had to be welded on both sides of the forward hold section and a .50 caliber heavy machine gun was to be installed behind the captain's cockpit.³³ Radio antennas were hidden in the masts and cranes to preclude long



JACK trawler K-444, sister ship of K-333, berthed at Pusan.

Photo courtesy of T. Fosmire



*The islands in Wonsan harbor were occupied by a variety of special operations elements. Task Force Kirkland, headquartered on Nan-do, a fifteen-acre rocky atoll six miles offshore and ten miles south of Wonsan, had a helicopter pad and a communications center. Kirkland's Miryang Battalion had an outpost on Alsom-do island. It was half the size of Nan-do and just eight hundred meters from the North Korean mainland. (Michael E. Haas, *In the Devil's Shadow: UN Special Operations During the Korean War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2000), 49, 51.) The UN naval blockade workhorses were the carrier task force screening elements that worked close in—the destroyers, destroyer escorts, frigates, and corvettes—whose patrol areas were being cleared daily by minesweepers.*

distance identification.³⁴

Fosmire and Hoffman collected weapons, supervised the fabrication and installation of shielded machine gun mounts, and accumulated ammunition to test fire everything. Curtis signed for liquor and cigarettes, both of which were used as pay for the crew and as barter goods for food and supplies only available on the black market. After several multi-day shakedown cruises well beyond Pusan harbor, the K-333 team received its operations brief. Afterwards, they sailed northeast up the coast to Yo-do, the largest island in Wonsan harbor.

This island, garrisoned by Korean Marines, had been used as a special operations base by the Royal Marine 41 Commando. A small cemetery contained three fallen Commandos. Navy and Marine Corps fire control ("spotter") teams, a 581st Air Force RH-5 Sikorsky rescue helicopter element, and JACK had used the island as an agent base and launch site for raiding forces since late summer 1950. A short strip could accommodate twin Beechcraft C-45s and C-47 Dakotas.³⁵

Although some 400 Republic of Korea Marines guarded Yo-do, the K-333 team and crew slept aboard their trawler

at night, only eating meals in the sandbagged messhall.³⁶ This was a wise precaution because the Wonsan offshore islands (held by Task Force Kirkland partisans, Air Force air-sea rescue helicopters, Tactical Liaison Office line crossers, JACK, Navy and Marine air and naval gunfire spotter teams, and signal intercept elements) and UN minesweepers and blockade ships (since January 1951)

British Royal Marine 41 Commandos destroy a North Korean railroad on the east coast.





Unofficial post-war
Task Force Kirkland insignia

Unofficial post-war
Line Crossers
badge



were targeted daily by North Korean shore batteries, ranging from mortars to 155mm howitzers.

The firing exchanges varied from single harassment rounds to more than a hundred rounds and alternated between ships and the islands. The ships countered the fire when UN forces on the islands called for air and naval gunfire support. Thus, destroyers, minesweepers, and UN ground forces stationed on the islands were daily hit by barrages that resulted in deaths, wounded, and damaged vessels monthly.³⁷

The mission of the K-333 team was to rescue downed UN airmen, to land and extract JACK agents, to support Special Mission Group (SMG) raids and Special Activities Force missions, and to direct naval gunfire against targets of opportunity along the coast from Wonsan to the Tumen River, the Soviet Union and Red China border. These tasks supported the overall JACK mission to collect intelligence, to sabotage enemy infrastructure, to kidnap North Korean government officials, to dispatch agents into North Korea to organize resistance groups, and to establish an escape and evasion network for shot down UN pilots.³⁸ Responsibility for the east coast below Wonsan belonged to Eighth Army.³⁹

Danish-American Hans Tofte (OSS Europe), the first CIA station chief in Japan, started to create an elaborate escape and evasion net for downed fliers with a designated island on each coast above the 38th parallel to serve as destinations for downed airman. Captain Han Chul-min initially recruited North Koreans to be trained as guerrillas to serve as guides for the escape and evasion network. Trained on Yong-do, these guerrilla groups were inserted to establish fixed bases on the mainland. Two fishing fleets involved in smuggling were to serve as a secondary net for downed airmen.⁴⁰ K-333 was to plug the holes in this net—lack of JACK control over the sea smugglers, absence of resistance groups on the mainland, and the general lack of support in the Communist-controlled interior.⁴¹

The three Americans on the K-333 team were always armed with .38 caliber pistols, .45 caliber automatics, and .45 caliber Thompson sub-machine guns. All carried six 30-round magazines for the Thompsons taped in reverse pairs for quick reloads. They were alternately loaded with .45 caliber ball and tracer ammunition (for the psychological effect that the large fireballs had at night). The Americans also had a separate arms locker with several M1 .30 caliber Garand sniper rifles, M2 .30 caliber carbines, M3 .45 caliber sub-machine guns (“Grease guns”), a 57mm recoilless rifle, and spare .30 caliber and .50 caliber machine guns and barrels. The Korean crew was regularly drilled in the use of the crew-served weapons aboard ship and marksmanship practice was routine. They were expected to man those weapons. Seamen not manning a crew-served weapon (gunner and loader) were issued small arms only during “battle stations.”⁴¹

1 Thomas G. Fosmire, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 6 September 2005, Florence, SC, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

Though JACK infiltrated hundreds of agents into North Korea to organize resistance operations, success was rare—whether they parachuted in, transferred to local boats offshore, or simply walked in overland. At night aboard K-333, SFC Fosmire put agents over the side of the trawler into small *sampan* “wobble boats” for the trip to the shore. The *sampans* were crewed by local fishermen.⁴² But, this was not a new infiltration concept.

Confronted by unacceptable North Korean “line crosser” losses in late 1950, Tactical Liaison Office teams attached to the 3rd and 25th Infantry Divisions began to insert agents by small boats on the west coast. The 441st Counter Intelligence Corps Detachment (Far East Command) started a grander amphibious espionage operation codenamed SALAMANDER. They also used Korean-manned fishing boats to insert agents deep in enemy territory, initially from the numerous islands off the west coast of Korea above the 38th parallel. The islands were relatively free from enemy attack because of the UN naval blockade and some were occupied by anti-Communist North Korean partisans. Later, the 441st moved north from Paengyong-do to Cho-do island with better access north to the Yalu River. An east coast SALAMANDER base was established in 1951 on Yo-do, further increasing the special operations population there. Then, agents could infiltrate one coast and exfiltrate from the other. The size and limited deep sea-worthiness of Korean fishing boats caused the 441st to introduce fast American sea craft.⁴³

The North Koreans were not sitting idle. By mid-1951,



Map depicting west coast operations area.

military and government officials had established tight internal population controls, linked military to home defense elements with fixed communications, and tasked coastal communities with nightly “shore watch” and repair of roads, bridges, and railroads damaged by air and commando attacks. Daily coastal bombardment by the UN blockade ships destroyed interest in supporting guerrilla resistance elements. Only the derailment of trains inside tunnels created sufficient chaos and wreckage to close major sections of the Hungnam-Kojo-Yangyang line for long periods.⁴⁴ Neither the U.S. military, UN, nor JACK factored how Asian Communists controlled their populations. North Korean internal security was even tighter after cease-fire talks began in 1951 and the main line of resistance became semi-fixed.⁴⁵

This was the environment in which Sergeant Fosmire and the JACK maritime element operated. It was very hostile and there was no coordinated UN effort. However, the success that came from employing one trawler led to the assignment of another to the Wonsan operation. The following story illustrates the difficulties faced by JACK operatives.

The mission to capture a group of Russian officers meeting with the North Korean Armed Forces (NKAF) near Dok-jin-ri (North Hamgyong), North Korea, had been assigned to the SMG in mid-October 1952. Instead of using their trawlers (K-333 and K-444) to carry the SMG force offshore, Lieutenant Curtis and Sergeants Fosmire



Sergeant First Class Walter Hoffman (far left rear with military sweater) with both Korean trawler crews aboard K-444.

and Hoffman were to assist LT Atcheson and SFC William Hanscombe aboard Navy whaleboats (twenty-six-foot plywood motor launches used for general duty and as auxiliary lifeboats). The three-man east coast maritime team transloaded the SMG raiders from their trawlers to the Buckley-class destroyer escort (DE-699) *Marsh*. This was done at night on the seaward side of Yo-do island to improve security. When the trawlers returned to the other side of Yo-do island to anchor, the *Marsh* slipped away to the north on 17 October 1952.⁴⁶

Shortly after midnight 18 October 1952, the *Marsh* arrived offshore the beach landing site pinpointed by ship radar. Two whaleboats were lowered into the dark

North Korean order of battle intelligence staff officers faced major challenges when trying to sort Marine Reconnaissance–Underwater Demolition Team Special Operations Group from JACK Special Mission Group and Special Activities Force, British 41 Commandos [part of UN Special Action Group], and the Republic of Korea Marines . . . especially since all used the same limited UN naval assets and U.S. Air Force and Navy aircraft for ingress and egress of partisan, guerrilla, and military forces. By mid-1952, when peace talks were well underway, practically every command in Korea was conducting covert special operations. And simultaneously, North Korea was busy inserting agents, raiding coastal targets, and sowing ship mines.¹

1 Korean War Chronology, <http://www.history.navy.mil/wars/korea/chron52c.htm>; Dwyer, *Commandos from the Sea*, 257.

sea. Rubber boat lines were tossed to each and the assault boats were slid over the side. Then, the SMG raiders climbed down cargo nets to board their eight bobbing rubber craft. The two whaleboats, each towing four boats, were to tug them 600 meters offshore, and then stand-by idling, to tow them back after the raid. LT Curtis and

Sergeant Hoffman accompanied LT Atcheson in the command whaleboat while SGT Fosmire was teamed with SFC Hanscombe. The *Marsh* had radio communications with the two Navy whaleboat coxswains to guide them ashore with radar vectors and to call for protective fire if needed.⁴⁷

Interestingly, the time of the alleged meeting with the Russians (according to the defector with them) happened to coincide with the dark of the moon when the SMG preferred to conduct operations. But the meeting was to take place not close to the beach, rather in a village two miles inland. The whaleboat ingress went smoothly. Only the muffled engines and phosphorescent boat wakes signaled their presence. Upon reaching shore safely, the scout swimmers quickly checked the area. Afterward, using their light sticks, they signaled “all clear.”⁴⁸ The flank security and assault elements began to paddle into shore.

As the beach security element disembarked and ran to take up their flank positions, the situation changed drastically. Both flank security forces began receiving effective small arms fire. Then a heavy machine gun firing tracers engaged from the north. Instead of “laying low,” the SMG, “itching for a fight,” returned fire to give away their positions. The firefight quickly intensified.⁴⁹

By the time LT Atcheson fired his flare gun to signal an immediate withdrawal, several rubber boats had been hit. Hearing the increased volume of fire and seeing the heavy machine gun tracers moving closer to the beach landing site, the two whaleboats headed in to grab the rubber boat tow lines. Fosmire and Hanscombe got in first and they grabbed four boat lines. As they headed back out with four boats in tow they saw that the other whaleboat was “dead in the water.” Its propeller had become fouled in some fishing nets. Fosmire had the coxswain swing alongside and he passed the towline to Lieutenant Curtis. Then, under even heavier small arms fire, Fosmire and Hanscombe turned about and raced back to the beach for the remaining rubber boats, two of which were partially deflated.

In the confusion, neither coxswain called

The destroyer escort USS *Marsh* DE-699 had the distinction of being the UN ship that had steamed farthest north into Korea—up the Yalu River.¹ Before that the *Marsh* supplied electrical power to Pusan for two weeks in September 1950, did area defense of Inchon Harbor, and then served as a ship-to-shore power source again until March 1952. DE-699 came back on station in Korea in mid-May 1952 to perform blockade duty until mid-November, shelling troop and transportation centers identified by Navy and Marine Corps spotters on islands near Songin and Wonsan as well as coastal targets identified by JACK trawlers and UN aircraft.²

1 1950 unnamed newspaper article, “Four Warships Here After Dueling With Reds in Korea,” http://www.desausa.org/images/uss_lewis_and_uss_marsh_5.htm.

2 “USS *Marsh* (DE-699),” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Marsh_\(DE-699\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Marsh_(DE-699)).

USS Marsh (DE-699), one of the U.S. Navy's floating power stations, supported the JACK Special Mission Group during October 1952. Its 26-foot plywood whaleboats towed SMG raiders in rubber boats offshore of the selected beach landing site at night.



USS Marsh DE-699 unit insignia



Courtesy of Edib Krifbegovic

Courtesy of Mike Smolinski

The Special Mission Group was the “muscle commando force” of JACK. Its members had been recruited from die-hard anti-Communist North Korean refugees. On Yong-do they received amphibious warfare and marksmanship training with Russian, Chinese, North Korean, and American weapons—small arms, machine guns, 57mm anti-tank recoilless rifles, and 60mm mortars. To support the behind-the-lines missions, the element wore black, North Korean, or Chinese uniforms and equipment and carried North Korean weapons.¹ The SMG area of operations ranged from Pohang above the 38th parallel on the northeast coast to the Tumen River estuary—the southern border of the Soviet Union and Manchuria—extremely rugged, mountainous terrain where the railroad and road hugged the narrow coastline.²

1 James C. Pagnella, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 17 March 2006, Pacific Grove, CA, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

2 John B. Dwyer “Behind the Lines: Secret Naval Raids in Korea,” *Military History* (December 2002), 69.

the *Marsh* for suppressive fires. Both seamen were intent on their tasks—steering and freeing the whaleboats. “The coxswains were hell bent on breaking contact and getting out of small arms range,” remembered Fosmire. “In the time it took us to return, the remaining SMG raiders had gotten their wounded in the boats and cleared the shore. They were paddling frantically to get beyond small arms range. When we closed on them, Hanscombe and I grabbed the tow lines and lashed them to the stern of the whaleboat as the coxswain turned back out to sea. In the meantime, the second whaleboat had ‘cleared’ its propeller and was headed back to the *Marsh*. The action didn’t last more than ten minutes . . . or so it seemed, but it was extremely exciting.”⁵⁰

The wounded SMG raiders were treated in the sick bay while DE-699 steamed south to Yo-do island. Fortunately, no one had been killed. The SMG was transferred to the trawlers for the return trip to Yong-do. SFC Fosmire was later decorated for his heroic actions.⁵¹ Another SMG-trawler raid mission was more successful.

An SMG raiding party captured a North Korean lieutenant and several soldiers. With

Major Dutch Kramer observes SMG rubber boat training. The rubber boats are being towed by LCPRs offshore of a beach landing site.



Marine Raiders and Underwater Demolition Teams had proved the utility of the four thirty-six-foot landing craft personnel, ramped (LCPR) carried aboard APDs (high-speed destroyer escorts) during WWII in the Pacific. The three APDs that supported JACK with LCPR were the Horace A. Bass (APD-124), Wantuck (APD-125) and Begor (APD-127).



The 36-foot LCPR had two .30-caliber shielded machine guns on the sides of the bow, could reach nine knots fully-loaded, carried three crew, and thirty-six combat-loaded troops or 8,100 lbs. of cargo. The three and one-quarter-inch marine plywood hull afforded little protection, but its underwater exhaust system muffled the 225 hp Gray Diesel engine to facilitate covert infiltrations.



Photo courtesy of B. Dwyer

Photo courtesy of U.S. Naval Historical Office



Photo courtesy of U.S. Naval Historical Office

The carrying capacity of the U.S. Navy twenty-six-foot Mark II plywood whaleboat was limited. The coxswain normally stood to steer the craft. It is easy to understand why the coxswains were eager to break contact and get out of small arms range.

the rotation of LT Tom Curtis, Fosmire and Hoffman became trawler commanders. Both men were aboard K-333 when they slipped in close to a rocky section of the east coast to offload an SMG platoon in rubber boats.⁵² Gently sloped beaches provided sea access to railroad bridges, tunnels, and the coastal road. But nearly all beaches abutted fishing villages and coastal currents, and the absence of harbors or inlets, made them dangerous landing zones.⁵³

The SMG platoon ambushed a small truck convoy on the coastal highway. The raiders triggered the ambush by simultaneously disabling the lead and trail vehicles of the convoy with 57mm anti-tank recoilless rifles. Credit for proficiency with the 57mm should be given SFC Joe Pagnella, the noncommissioned officer advisor who preceded Hanscombe. Pagnella had relentlessly drilled the SMG on 57mm marksmanship and personally demonstrated its effectiveness on several missions.⁵⁴ This time, a badly stunned North Korean lieutenant and several soldiers were quickly captured and hustled down to the rubber boats. The raiders had to escape before reinforcements arrived.⁵⁵

With the SMG raiders and enemy prisoners stowed safely aboard the trawler, the crew fired their machine guns toward the ambush site to cover their withdrawal from the coast. This was also done to prevent any patrolling UN blockade vessels from mistaking them for enemy. Afterward, the North Korean lieutenant brazenly climbed out of the hold to smoke a cigarette on deck. To remove any ideas that he might have had about being a

Sergeant First Class Joe Pagnella coaches Lieutenant George Atcheson on the 57mm anti-tank recoilless rifle.



Photo courtesy of B. Dwyer



Photo courtesy of B. Dwyer

JACK advisors (center to left): Major Dutch Kramer, Lieutenant Tom Curtis, Major Jack Singlaub, and Lieutenant George Atcheson observe SMG rubber raft training.

VIP prisoner, Sergeant Hoffman knocked him down and shoved him back into the hold, retrieving the lieutenant's fur-lined hat from the deck. The frigid cold of Korean winter was a constant aboard the trawler.⁵⁶

Between the harsh weather and limited coordination with UN naval vessels constantly patrolling the coasts, life aboard the trawlers was tough, primitive, and dangerous for all hands—Korean and American. The engine room was the only place to get warm. Two weeks of below zero temperatures in the winter of 1952–1953 instantly turned sea spray to ice, coating everything. Crewman used sledgehammers and worked the pumps constantly to prevent ice buildup on the all-iron vessels. The accumulated weight of ice topside could cause the boat to “turn turtle” unexpectedly, trapping crew inside or throwing them overboard into the freezing cold water.⁵⁷ Cold weather survival suits were things of the future.

Korea and Japan were also regularly hit by typhoons in the summer. In June 1952, Typhoon Dinah had forced the UN blockade ships to seek safe harbor for nearly ten days. Air operations were severely reduced. UN ground forces had only artillery to counter the enemy attacks along the line. “Sheltered in a small cove of Yo-do, we had all three K-333 anchors out and kept the engine running slow forward for thirty-six hours to keep from being

SMG interpreter Chong Do-hyun sighting the 57mm recoilless rifle. He was later killed on an SMG mission.



driven ashore. Every time the stern scraped bottom we'd 'rev up' the engine. It was a hairy time," remembered Fosmire.⁵⁸

Recognition as a friendly by UN blockade ships posed another constant danger. Visual signals identifying the JACK trawlers as "friendly" vessels to UN aircraft and ships changed monthly. These were simple signals to support a "fishing vessel" cover. They varied from flying three rice sacks to hanging two glass-ball fishing floats on the mast during daylight to using colored identification lights and firing flares at night. Since the two trawlers regularly hugged the coast at night to observe enemy activity (truck convoys on the coastal highways or trains that ventured out of railroad tunnel daylight hide sites—steam locomotive fireboxes were easily spotted), offload SMG raiding parties, slip agents on board North Korean *sampan*, or loiter close-in to pick up returning commandos, the two JACK vessels looked suspicious on ship radars.⁵⁹

They were challenged regularly. In dark-of-the-moon nights, UN ships on "flycatcher" patrol (searching for mine-carrying *sampan*s) would slip in quietly and "light them up" with searchlights. "A 'light up' was brighter than a Hollywood set," recalled Fosmire. "When we turned to face the searchlights and appropriately respond to the challenge, I saw that virtually every gun on the ship was trained on us."⁶⁰ Even when recognized as friendly, Fosmire was usually told to turn seaward ninety degrees and go to the five-mile limit. If they were idling, awaiting the return of a SMG raiding party, the JACK commandos had a long paddle in store while *K-333* or *K-444* obeyed orders. After the flycatcher vessel cleared the area, the trawler would slip back in for the SMG pickup.⁶¹

Coordination aboard Navy ships (arranging naval gunfire support and delivery of SMG elements) offered respite from the harsh daily routine on the trawlers. It gave American advisors an opportunity for a hot meal, shower, and sometimes, a change of clothes. Clean uniforms accompanied the weekly aerial resupplies from Pusan. Aircraft supporting JACK would drop C-rations, fresh water, rice, and fuel on the Yo-do island airstrip before heading to other drop sites. Sometimes a Navy helicopter (Sikorsky RH-5) would ferry the Americans to planning sessions aboard ship. One RH-5 helicopter lifted a pilot from the wing of his downed Corsair in Wonsan harbor "without him getting his shoes wet," remembered Fosmire. "We idled between the pilot and the shore to protect him while the helicopter effected the rescue. The nearby blockade ships were reluctant to assume the position because of the threat posed by innumerable floating mines in the harbor."⁶²

By late summer 1953, Fosmire had accumulated sufficient points to rotate back to the United States, but he agreed to another assignment despite the peace talks. By then, Curtis and Hoffman were long gone; Department of the Army civilian Michael Nolan, former fullback for the Los Angeles *Rams*, had taken charge of *K-333*. Now SFC Fosmire joined SSG John Blake at the Saipan training base to give six weeks of paramilitary training to

forty Chendo Gyo, a radical religious group living in the mountains to the north of Wonsan harbor. They had been a part of the east coast escape and evasion net. The Chendo Gyo were vehemently anti-Communist and very nationalistic. They had started fighting in 1928 against the Japanese, and then the North Korean Communists in the late 1940s.⁶³ They also worked with the 441st Counter Intelligence Corps Detachment SALAMANDER operation.⁶⁴ The Chendo Gyo were not irregulars or mercenaries, but armed members of a very strong theocratic political movement intent on free government in a modern Korea.⁶⁵

After the Saipan training, the Chendo Gyo were moved to a camp south of Sak-cho-ri on the east coast for advanced training. There, they learned of the pending cease-fire. The guerrillas became very upset and frustrated. They would not be able to retaliate against the NKAFF for the abuses suffered by their people. On a cold, rainy day they refused to train and began drinking. That night, SSG Blake had to wrench an M2 carbine from a drunken Chendo Gyo intent on killing Fosmire. That incident convinced the Milwaukee native that it was time to return to the U.S. Army and go home.⁶⁶ Fosmire was not the only American who recognized the futility of trying to organize and train guerrilla forces to fight the Chinese and North Korea Armed Forces in Korea with a cease-fire pending and the guerrilla caveats tied to the negotiations by both sides.⁶⁷

With UN ship patrols and aircraft operations limited to south of the 38th parallel, North Korean fast patrol craft essentially eliminated amphibious raids into North Korea by the fall of 1953. The escape and evasion nets had been crippled by UN naval blockade withdrawals. The cease-fire requirement to evacuate partisan-held offshore islands (reduced to five total on both coasts) was the death knoll for guerrilla operations.⁶⁸ For all intents and purposes, the JACK maritime mission was over in Korea.

U.S. Navy RH-5 Sikorsky helicopter effecting pilot rescue with sling and "horse collar."



Of all JACK covert operations against North Korea, those of the Maritime Section were the most successful. Which coast proved more productive is difficult to assess. While the west coast had more beaches, operations were hampered by the enormous tides (thirty-two feet) and resulting far-reaching mudflats. The west coast was home to a greater number of North Korean partisans and more islands were available to base forces and launch forays against North Korea military and country infrastructure. Human intelligence was better there as result.

East coast raids were conducted primarily by the SMG elements (trained and led by JACK personnel) and not local partisan elements. Task Force Kirkland (8240th Army Unit) partisans did raid the mainland. Many of these raids proved to have only nuisance value.⁶⁹ However, the JACK military advisors with the SMG, like those Army advisors coordinating Kirkland activities, routinely conducted joint operations—without a joint command or joint organization. CCRAK was only a U.S. Army-dominated staff organization with the services represented.⁷⁰ Amphibious operations conducted by Far East Command via 8240th Army Unit partisans and JACK maritime guerrilla operations had the highest agent return rates and most tactical successes of the covert war in Korea.⁷¹

When the Chinese entered the war, the North Korean military and local commissars gained control of the population, severely hampering infiltration of agents, successful overland escape and evasion of downed pilots, extraction of agents and downed pilots, and minimized the effects of coastal infrastructure raids. The relative stabilization of the front that followed the peace talks gave the North Koreans the opportunity to consolidate their holdings.⁷² The strength of enemy troops postured along the coast fluctuated in direct proportion to partisan strength and activity.⁷³ If a strange Korean or former resident showed up in a village, he was immediately suspect. He was either an infiltrator or a deserter and the local security police were notified.⁷⁴ Because JACK operations were regularly conducted during dark-of-the-moon periods, the North Korean military could schedule temporary shifts of force along coasts without significantly reducing those on the main line of resistance.

Because there were so many different UN elements as well as the CIA and South Korea conducting special operations in Korea, and because almost all were classified, collectively they received little fanfare. Therefore, a mysterious aura obscured actual effectiveness while serving to promote mythology and legends. Thus, during Vietnam, all U.S. Defense services and the CIA conducted covert special operations in Southeast Asia. And, as they did in Korea, various covert operations and intelligence efforts regularly bumped into one another causing jurisdiction fights and creating considerable confusion. The relevant question was who was the more confused—the enemy or the friendlies.⁷⁵

This account of maritime operations conducted by JACK during the Korean War was to present some realities, dispel a few legends, and to part the constantly shift-

ing mythological fog that surrounds special operations in Asia before the Vietnam War. The Korean War established CIA jurisdiction in Asia and provided the foundation for paramilitary activities employed by the Agency for more than twenty years.⁷⁶ Guerrilla and intelligence operations, however, become creatures of a particular war, much as they are today in Afghanistan and Iraq.

What worked in Korea might be applicable in the future, but there are no “cookie cutter” insurgent war models that will fit all wars and conflicts. The counterinsurgency plan for Afghanistan is considerably different from that being applied in Iraq. Various American counterinsurgency campaigns in the Philippines (the Spanish-American War, the Philippine Insurrection, and the Moro War) differed considerably from Filipino-American guerrilla operations against the Japanese in WWII, and the Philippine internal fight against the communist HUK insurgents in the postwar years and combating terrorist groups in the southern archipelago now. However, each analyzed in context has factors relevant to counterinsurgency operations prosecuted in conjunction with JACK successors today. ♣

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