

"That D***d Dam"

The 4th Ranger Infantry Company and the Hwachon Dam.

by Kenneth Finlayson



One of the principal difficulties faced by the Ranger companies in the Korean War was a lack of suitable targets that fit their mission profile. Too often the Rangers found themselves as the "Palace Guard" at the division headquarters, or used as a reserve element to be plugged into holes in the line. The 4th Ranger Company's amphibious assault against the Hwachon Dam on 10 April 1951 is

an unusual and notable example of their proper employment. The third largest dam on the Korean peninsula at 875 feet long and 275 feet high, the Hwachon blocked the Pukhan River and formed a reservoir 13 miles long and one mile wide. The dam was in the northwest corner of Hwachon Lake that ran roughly east to west. Eighteen sluice gates controlled the flow of water and provided

hydroelectric power to Seoul sixty miles to the southwest. A lack of roads in the steep rugged hills around the reservoir was significant. As the Eighth Army drove the Chinese north with Operation RIPPER, the dam became a strategic target in the U.S. IX Corps area.

Operation RIPPER was General (GEN) Matthew B. Ridgway's March 1951 offensive to retake Seoul and push the Chinese and North Korean forces north of the 38th Parallel. As Operation RIPPER's objectives were achieved, the follow-on offensive, Operation RUGGED continued the drive north. The goal of RUGGED was to advance north to Phase Line KANSAS, which ran from the south bank of the Imjin River in the west to Chuch'on-ni.¹

The Hwachon Dam lay just on the north side of Phase Line KANSAS. The Pukhan River bisected the IX Corps operational area. The dam loomed over the heart of the Corps sector and the imminent danger that the Chinese would flood the plains to the south brought the importance of Hwachon into sharp focus.

On 8 April 1951, twenty Chinese soldiers and five North Korean technicians began opening the sixteen gates of the spillways. Without motors to raise the massive 20 x 60 foot gates, each took ten hours to manually open completely. With four



An aerial view of the Hwachon Dam. The Ranger assault began in the small cove at the bottom of the map and landed at the peninsula in the center. The Rangers only reached a point halfway along the ridge.

gates fully opened and six partially raised, the Pukhan River rose seven feet, washing out a railroad abutment downstream and caused the IX Corps engineers to pull in several pontoon bridges, limiting movement in the Corps rear area. The threat posed by more flooding prompted GEN Ridgway to order IX Corps to immediately seize the dam and disable the sluice gates.

Major General (MG) William M. Hoge, commanding IX Corps, had the 1st Cavalry Division directly south of the reservoir along Line KANSAS. The division commander, Brigadier General (BG) Charles D. Palmer, faced a dilemma. On 8 April the 1st Cavalry started conducting a relief-in-place with the 1st Korean Marine Division. The planning to effect the hand-off with the Korean Marines was well underway, and the 1st Cavalry units were poised to come off the line and head south to refit and rearm. The relief was scheduled for two successive nights, 9 and 10 April. If the 1st Cavalry did not take the dam before the relief was complete, several days would pass before the Marines would be in a position to assault it and eliminate the threat of more flooding.

MG Hoge told BG Palmer to use the 4th Ranger Company to disable the dam before the division pulled off Line KANSAS. The Rangers joined the division on 7 April after being released from the 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team.

Hoge did not direct that the mission be limited to the Rangers.² Thus BG Palmer assigned the mission to Colonel (COL) William A. Harris, whose 7th Cavalry Regiment was the unit closest to the reservoir, and attached the 4th Ranger Company to them.

MG Hoge wanted the Rangers to disable the gears of the dam sluice gates with explosives to prevent the Chinese from opening more of them.³ For the Ranger commander, Captain (CPT) Dorsey B. Anderson, this mission was tailor made for his unit. While the company was trucked to an assembly area just south of Line KANSAS on 8 April, CPT Anderson met with the 1st Cavalry Division G-3, Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) John Carlson. The Ranger commander recommended that they conduct a night crossing of the reservoir in assault boats, plant demolitions on the gate mechanisms, and then withdraw.

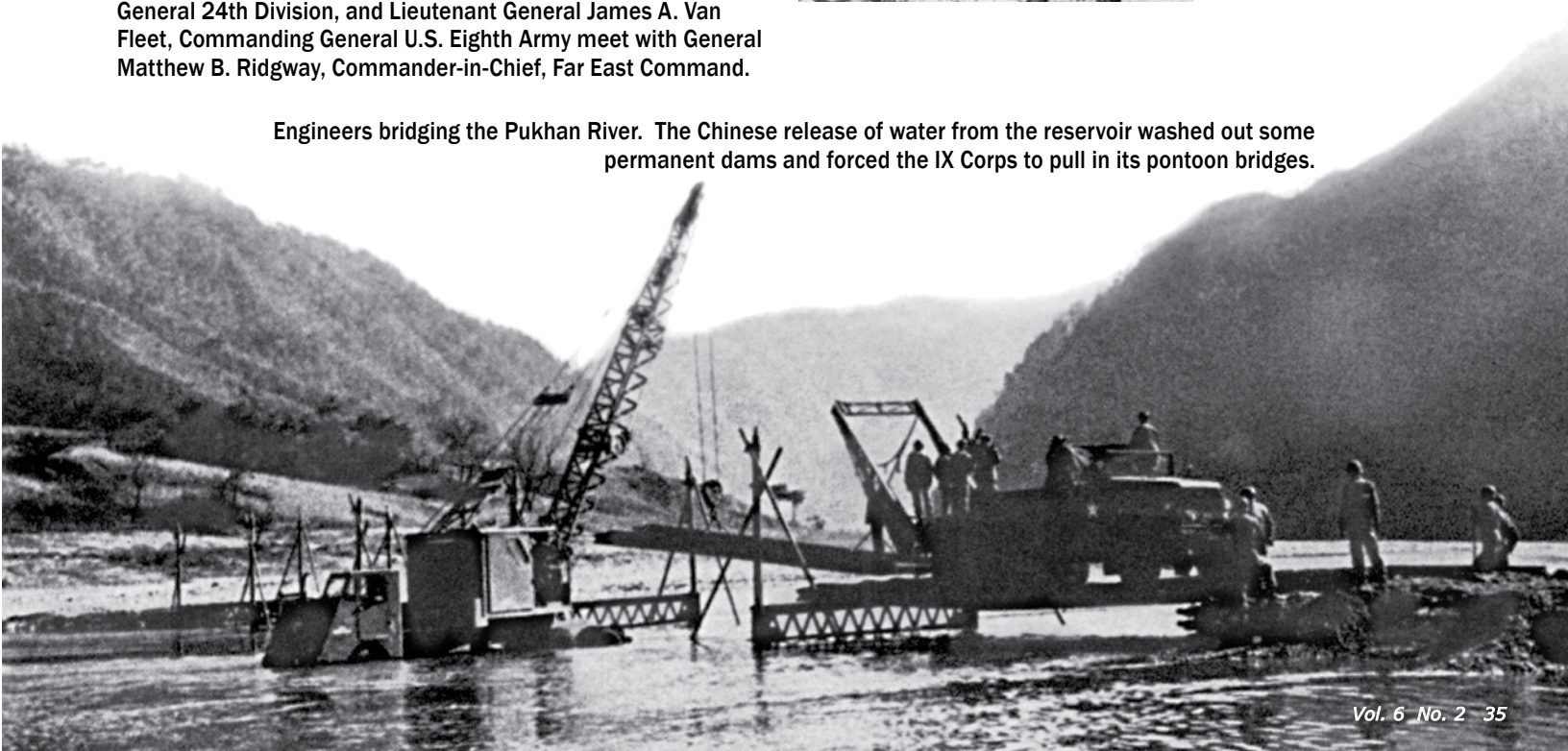


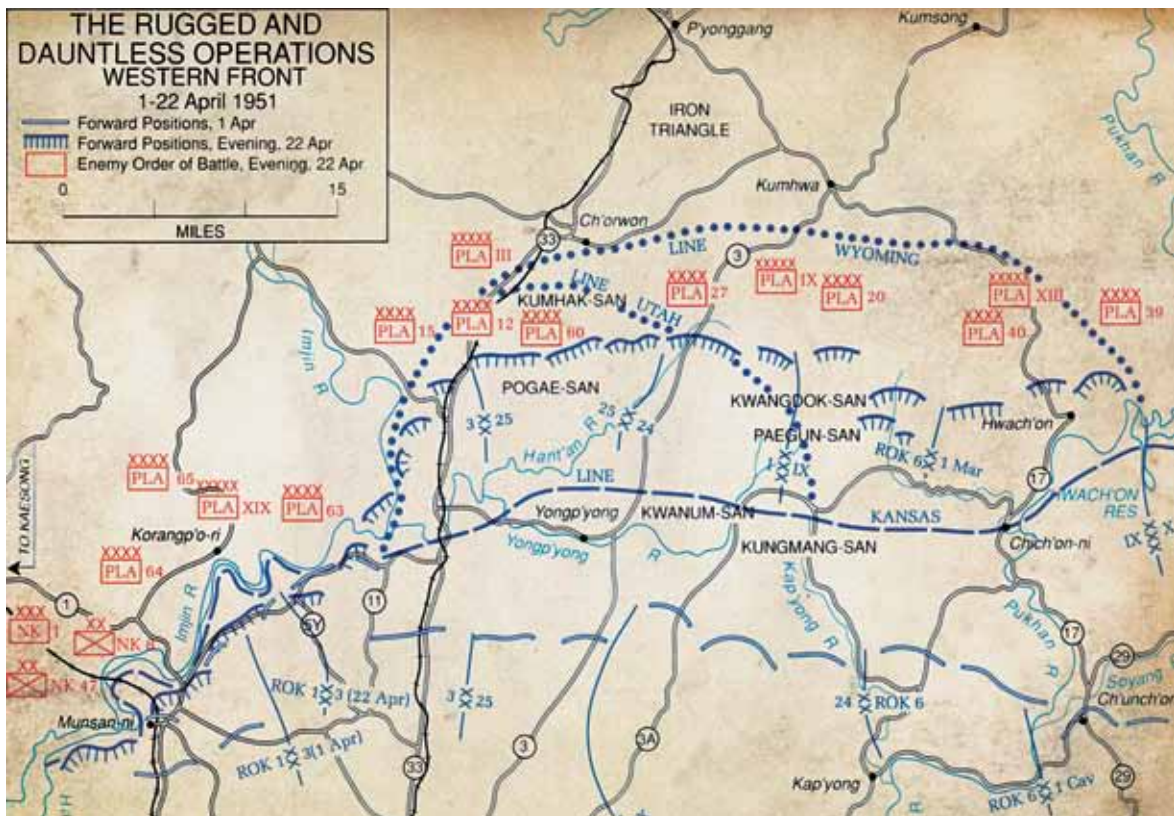
L to R. Major General William M. Hoge, Commanding General IX Corps, Major General Blackshear M. Bryan, Commanding General 24th Division, and Lieutenant General James A. Van Fleet, Commanding General U.S. Eighth Army meet with General Matthew B. Ridgway, Commander-in-Chief, Far East Command.



L to R; General Matthew B. Ridgway, Major General Charles D. Palmer, Commander 1st Cavalry Division, Colonel William A. Harris, Commander, 7th Cavalry Regiment and Colonel John Daskopoulos, Commander of the UN Greek Battalion at Chipyeong-ni, February 1951. The 4th Ranger Company was attached to Harris' 7th Cavalry for the assault on the Hwachon Dam.

Engineers bridging the Pukhan River. The Chinese release of water from the reservoir washed out some permanent dams and forced the IX Corps to pull in its pontoon bridges.





General Matthew Ridgway's Operation RUGGED was designed to drive the Communist forces north off the KANSAS Line to the WYOMING Line and set the stage for a UN push into the Iron Triangle. By 22 April 1951, Ridgway's forces had reached the KANSAS Line. Shortly thereafter the Chinese launched their Spring Offensive and recovered their lost territory.

Carlson initially demurred, because the Rangers would have to paddle across the lake in broad daylight on their return. Carlson favored a plan whereby the 7th Cavalry Regiment moved overland to seize the dam. Then, the Rangers could disable the sluice gates.⁴ While the division staff worked on this alternate plan, Anderson conducted his reconnaissance.

CPT Anderson visited the dam at Chong'nyong with Major (MAJ) Russell J. Wilson of the 8th Engineer Combat Battalion.⁵ He learned that to disable the eighteen gates meant that the Rangers would have to carry an inordinate amount of explosives and would require several hours

“If we crossed in boats, we would have to land about a mile short of the dam. But, there did not appear to be any enemy positions guarding the dam.”
 — CPT Dorsey B. Anderson

to methodically incapacitate the gates. Then Anderson did an aerial reconnaissance of the Hwachon Dam from a light observation plane. From the air he discovered good and bad elements. “The ground appeared even more rugged than I anticipated,” said Anderson. “If we crossed in boats, we would have to land about a mile short of the dam. But, there did not appear to be any enemy positions guarding the dam.”⁶ By then, the 1st Cavalry's plan had done away with the amphibious assault crossing of the reservoir and 7th Cavalry Regiment would seize the dam by a ground attack.

At noon on 9 April, LTC John W. Callaway, the commander of 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, ordered F Company to seize the dam. The Rangers were to follow directly behind the infantry company's advance so that they could execute their demolition mission when the dam was taken. Moving slowly over the very rugged terrain, F Company got within two miles of the dam before encountering resistance. In their first contact, the company commander was killed and the attack against the Chinese, in well-concealed defensive positions below the dam, stalled. As night fell, Callaway halted further attempts. Preparations were made to resume the assault the next morning. Based on the Division operations order, the next day his battalion would be the only 1st Cavalry unit still on the line. On the morning of the 10th, F Company attacked again, but made no headway in the rough, broken terrain. They suffered six killed and twenty-seven wounded in the second attempt.⁷



Troops of the 7th Cavalry Regiment in combat. The 7th received the mission to capture the Hwachon Dam while the rest of the 1st Cavalry Division was being withdrawn off the line.

When MG Hoge visited BG Palmer on the morning of the 10th, he became upset when he discovered that the Rangers were not leading the assault on the dam. He ordered the 7th Cavalry to make a "bona fide attempt" on the dam.⁸ While an energized division staff worked on a plan, the Chinese inexplicably closed the six gates that they opened two days earlier. The waters of the Pukhan began to recede.

Then, on the afternoon of the 10th, MG Hoge decided to let the relief-in-place go as planned. COL Harris gave orders to cease operations at 1700 hours and begin pulling the men off the line into assembly areas for the move south.⁹ Anticipating a well-earned rest, the men began packing equipment and preparing to leave the line. But, at 1700 hours, Hoge changed his mind and ordered Palmer to make a third attempt on the dam. This time, the 1st Cavalry operation included an amphibious assault by the Rangers.

BG Palmer and COL Harris had to halt the relief of the 7th Cavalry and send it back into combat. The 1st Cavalry was in disarray with units already moving south tying up most of the division's trucks. Some of the assault boats used for earlier crossing operations had already been turned in to the supply depot at Chunchon and others had been given to the Korean Marines. The division G-4 worked frantically to get some boats and to move the necessary explosives and ammunition up the single rough road to the designated launch site for the Rangers. Of the twenty boats located, ten were on the wrong side of the river. With the pontoon bridges out, the trucks carrying them had to make a long detour to reach the reservoir. Ultimately, only ten boats (one unserviceable with a hole in the bottom), and four outboard motors were provided for the Ranger crossing.¹⁰

COL Harris' plan called for two diversionary attacks by his 1st and 2nd Battalions. The 3rd Battalion was held in reserve to reinforce the Rangers when they reached the dam. Two batteries of 8" howitzers (17th Field Artillery Battalion, 1st Cavalry Division) and one battery of 155 mm howitzers (4th Field Artillery Battalion, 1st Marine Division) were in direct support. The

heavy guns had to fire at maximum range. The steep rough terrain and lack of roads nearer the dam prevented using the quick firing 105 mm artillery to support the attack. Fog, rain and sleet eliminated air support.¹¹

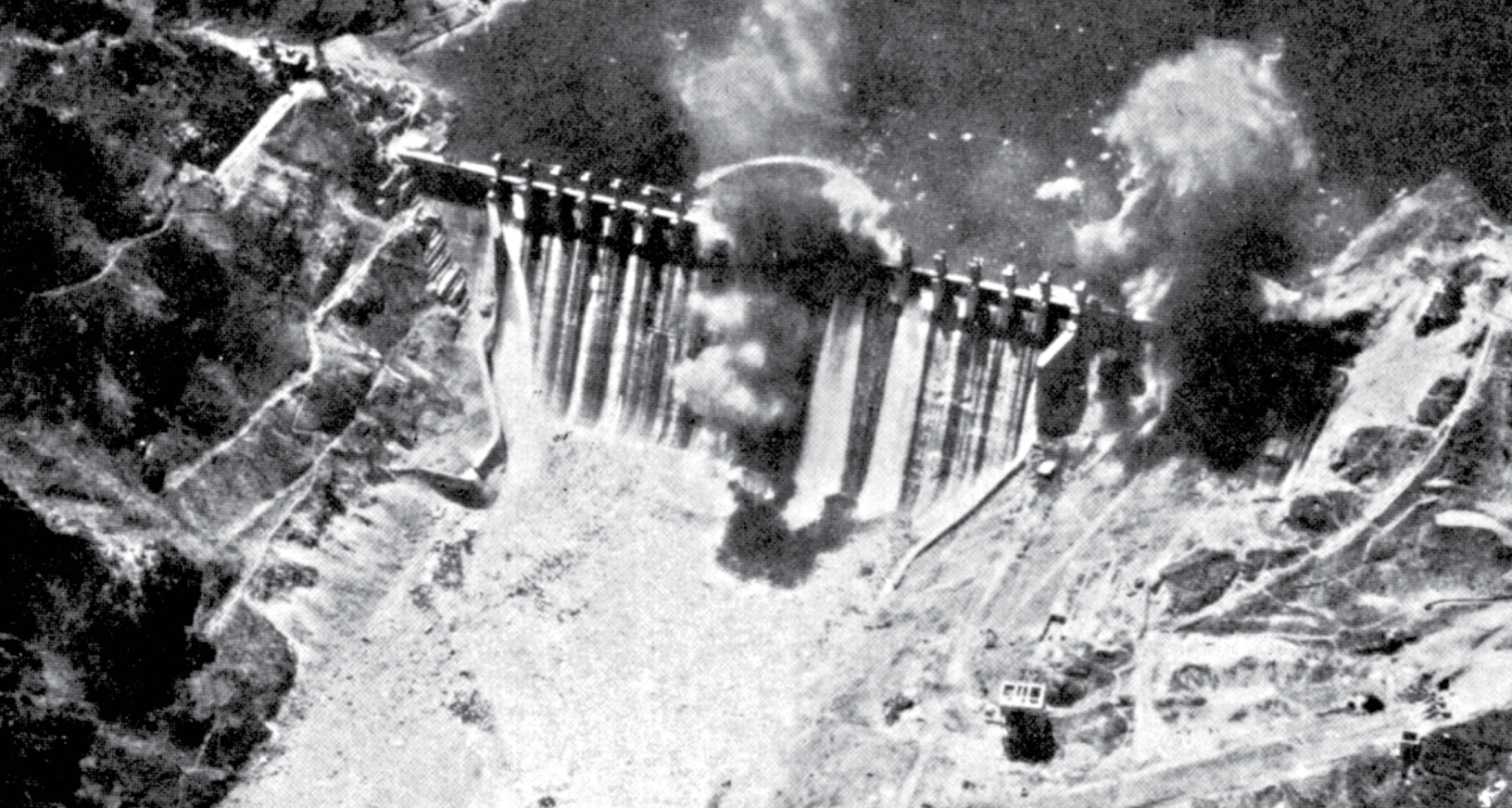
On the south shore of the lake, Anderson and his men prepared for the assault. Lacking trained boat operators and outboard motor mechanics, COL Harris sought volunteers with boating experience. With these *ad hoc* skippers, CPT Anderson loaded two Ranger platoons, artillery and mortar forward observers and twenty machinegunners and mortar men from M Company, 3rd Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment into the nine small plywood assault boats. 1st Lieutenant (1LT) Michael D. Healy's First Platoon was the lead element in three boats. CPT Anderson, the forward observers, and weapons sections followed in three more. 1LT Joseph W. Waterbury's Second Platoon trailed in the remaining three craft. At 0345 hours they pushed off and began



A Battery, 17th Field Artillery firing their 8" howitzers in April 1951. The impassable terrain near the dam precluded bringing the artillery in close to give more accurate fire support to the Ranger assault.

The Rangers used plywood assault boats to cross the Hwachon Reservoir for their assault on the dam. The first waves had to paddle their craft across the reservoir. (Illustration by Mariano Santillan)





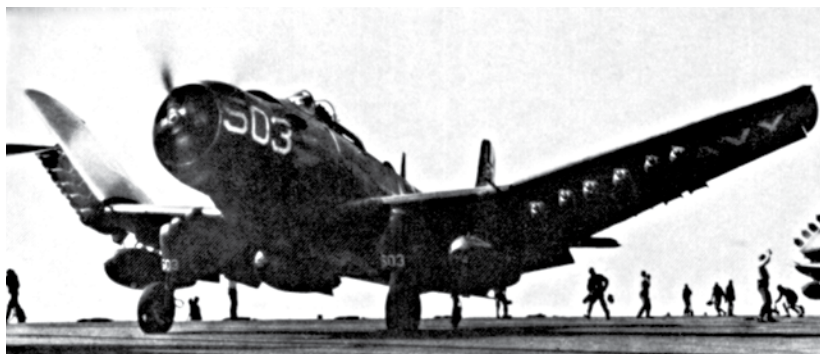
Aerial view of the dam under attack by U.S. Navy AD-6 Skyraiders.

a stealthy paddle across the reservoir to the landing area a mile away from the dam.

Undetected during their 45-minute approach, the Rangers landed as dawn broke. 1LT Healy immediately took a section of five men up the ridge to the high ground above the landing area and below the dam. Anderson started the remaining seventy men, the rest of Healy's platoon in the lead, up the hill. Anderson trailed behind them with the command section. Waterbury's platoon was in the rear as the Rangers began the arduous climb up the steep hill.

Nearing the top, 1LT Healy and his small section saw men ahead through the heavy mist waving at them. Uncertain if they were Chinese or 7th Cavalry troops who had come overland, Healy and his men pressed on. As they topped the crest, they recognized the padded uniforms of Chinese soldiers just as a long burst of machinegun fire was directed at them.¹² As Healy and his team crawled forward, a recoilless rifle team coming up behind them took out one of the Chinese machineguns. The Ranger lieutenant and his men used grenades to knock out another and the Chinese fled down the backside of the hill. By then it was 0615 hours and the Rangers were still a half-mile from the dam. CPT Anderson paused to take stock of the situation and decided to wait for the third platoon now being ferried across the reservoir.

The first three boats of the original wave had returned to the embarkation point to load up two squads of 1LT James L. Johnson's platoon. The earlier firing negated the need for stealth, but when the volunteer coxswains tried to start the outboard motors, they wouldn't fire,



A flight of Navy AD-6 Skyraiders carrying torpedoes disabled the sluice gates on the Hwachon Dam after the ground attack failed. This AD-6 is unfolding its wings prior to taking off from the USS *Princeton*.

forcing the Rangers to paddle hard across the lake. The two squads reached the landing site at 0700 hours. The Executive Officer, 1LT John S. Warren, the remaining Rangers and five Korean laborers, loaded ammunition into four more boats. This time the motors started and the boats quickly sped across the reservoir. But, as they approached the landing, they came under fire. Warren turned them around and returned to the launch site. Seeing the boats being driven off, CPT Anderson decided not to try to move directly to the dam.

Fearing the Chinese could cut him off on his flank, Anderson sent Johnson's fresh platoon through Healy's and along a finger to a small hilltop overlooking the shore. With Rangers on this hill, the enemy could not outflank the company. But, as Johnson and his men started along the finger, heavy small arms fire halted their advance. Fifty or sixty Chinese troops charged the spread-out platoon and were finally repulsed with hand grenades.¹³ This action triggered an all-out enemy assault.

The first Chinese attack was immediately followed by bugles and massive waves of several hundred soldiers pouring down from the higher ground on the right of the Ranger Company position. Vicious hand-to-hand fighting finally halted the Chinese attack. Anderson realized that reaching the dam was impossible. He radioed for permission to withdraw. The 7th Cavalry S-3 told him to stay put because a rifle company from 3rd Battalion was enroute. With their ammunition running low, the Rangers dug in to await reinforcement.

COL Harris decided to send the entire 3rd battalion across the reservoir to assist the Rangers. Ten additional boats had been delivered and I Company, which had road marched to the launch point, began loading up. 1LT Warren, the Ranger Executive Officer, went along to guide them to the landing beach.¹⁴ The infantry company, the squad from 1LT Johnson's platoon, and the Korean ammunition bearers with their loads began arriving at 1330 hours. Sergeant (SGT) William V. Goolsby, a Ranger medic brought a wounded soldier down to the landing site for evacuation. He helped guide the new arrivals up the hill.¹⁵ Soon there were more than 300 American soldiers on the hill with plenty of ammunition. Anderson was again confident that they could reach the dam.¹⁶ But MG Hoge had changed his mind again.

The IX Corps Commander, after talking with BG Palmer, decided not to commit more troops. He recommended calling off the attack unless the Chinese withdrew. Since the floodwaters were receding, urgency had waned. As night approached, COL Harris radioed Anderson to pull everyone out, with the Rangers leading the withdrawal.¹⁷

The Rangers pulled back through the defensive perimeter of I Company. The Chinese made no effort to interfere with the American withdrawal. By 2030 hours, the Rangers had recrossed the reservoir. The men of I Company had to repel another attack before they could pull out.

The results of the reservoir fight were: 4th Ranger Company, two men killed, a third died of wounds the following day, eleven were wounded, and one man suffered a broken leg in a fall. M Company had one man killed and one wounded. I Company had three wounded. Ironically, when the Rangers returned to the embarkation point, CPT Anderson noticed that Korean laborers were still bringing ammunition and supplies forward.

On paper, the amphibious assault on Hwachon Dam was a mission designed for the Rangers. Despite resupply and transportation problems, minimal planning time and ineffective artillery support, the reinforced Rangers were poised to accomplish their mission when recalled. This operation demonstrated the skill and tenacity of the 4th Ranger Company and the professionalism of the 7th Cavalry Regiment. The Hwachon Dam was a difficult task in the best of circumstances. The only amphibious assault by a Ranger Infantry company in Korea was doomed by inadequate fire support, lack of tactical air, and the loss of the element of surprise. Ultimately on 1 May 1951, U.S. Navy AD-6 Skyraiders from Fighter

Attack Squadron 95 destroyed the two center gates with torpedoes, preventing the Chinese from flooding the area for the remainder of the war.¹⁸ ▲

Kenneth Finlayson is the USASOC Deputy Command Historian. He earned his PhD from the University of Maine, and is a retired Army officer. Current research interests include Army special operations during the Korean War, special operations aviation, and World War II special operations units.

Endnotes

- 1 Billy C. Mossman, *Ebb and Flow: November 1950-July 1951* (Washington DC, Center of Military History, 2000), 347-367.
- 2 Mossman, *Ebb and Flow: November 1950-July 1951*, 356.
- 3 **In April 1951, the Hwachon Reservoir was roughly half full. The spring snow melt would fill the reservoir, but if the level rose above the height of the dam, surplus would exit through the overflow spillway in a controlled manner eliminating the danger of artificial flooding in the Corps sector. Later the gates could be repaired.**
- 4 Martin Blumenson, "The Rangers at Hwachon Dam: An Operation in Frustration," *Army* December 1967, 39.
- 5 Dorsey B. Anderson, interview by Martin Blumenson, 13 April 1951, Hongchon, Korea, 3rd Historical Detachment After Action report, Hwachon Dam, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 6 Dorsey B. Anderson, interview by Martin Blumenson, 13 April 1951, Hongchon, Korea, 3rd Historical Detachment After Action report, Hwachon Dam, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Mossman, *Ebb and Flow: November 1950-July 1951*, 359; Martin Blumenson, "The Rangers at Hwachon Dam: An Operation in Frustration," 39.
- 7 John W. Callaway, interview by Martin Blumenson, 17 April 1951, Hongchon, Korea, 3rd Historical Detachment After Action report, Hwachon Dam, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Mossman, *Ebb and Flow: November 1950-July 1951*, 361; Blumenson, "The Rangers at Hwachon Dam: An Operation in Frustration," 40.
- 8 William M. Hoge, interview by Martin Blumenson, 15 April 1951, Hongchon, Korea, 3rd Historical Detachment After Action report, Hwachon Dam, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Mossman, *Ebb and Flow: November 1950-July 1951*, 359.
- 9 William A. Harris, interview by Martin Blumenson, 18 April 1951, Hongchon, Korea, 3rd Historical Detachment After Action report, Hwachon Dam, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Mossman, *Ebb and Flow: November 1950-July 1951*, 359.
- 10 Mossman, *Ebb and Flow: November 1950-July 1951*, 361.
- 11 Mossman, *Ebb and Flow: November 1950-July 1951*, 360.
- 12 Blumenson, "The Rangers at Hwachon Dam: An Operation in Frustration," *Army* December 1967, 48.
- 13 Blumenson, "The Rangers at Hwachon Dam: An Operation in Frustration," *Army* December 1967, 49.
- 14 John S. Warren, interview by Martin Blumenson, 13 April 1951, Hongchon, Korea, 3rd Historical Detachment After Action report, Hwachon Dam, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Mossman, *Ebb and Flow: November 1950-July 1951*, 361.
- 15 William V. Goolsby, interview by Martin Blumenson, 11 April 1951, Hongchon, Korea, 3rd Historical Detachment After Action report, Hwachon Dam, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Mossman, *Ebb and Flow: November 1950-July 1951*, 361.
- 16 Dorsey B. Anderson, interview by Martin Blumenson, 13 April 1951, Hongchon, Korea, 3rd Historical Detachment After Action report, Hwachon Dam, USASOC History Office classified Files, fort Bragg, NC; Mossman, *Ebb and Flow: November 1950-July 1951*, 361.
- 17 William A. Harris, interview by Martin Blumenson, 18 April 1951, Hongchon, Korea, 3rd Historical Detachment After Action report, Hwachon Dam, USASOC History Office classified Files, fort Bragg, NC; Mossman, *Ebb and Flow: November 1950-July 1951*, 361.
- 18 James A. Field, Jr., *History of the United States Naval Operations: Korea* (Washington DC: Department of the Navy, 1962), XX.