

By Michael E. Krivdo

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West Coast Aircrew Recovery and the Guerrilla-Held Islands

A major problem faced by the United Nations Command (UNC) in Korea was the development of a workable escape and evasion (E&E) plan for recovering pilots and aircrews downed behind enemy lines. For the first year of the war, considerable effort and resources were expended by all services and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to establish evasion routes and guerrilla way stations that aviators in trouble could use. These early E&E plans attempted to provide blanket coverage over enemy territory so that pilots could be recovered wherever they went down.¹ The island enclaves that were held by the American-led guerrillas proved to be one of the few highlights in a flawed theater E&E plan.

Essentially, the Far East Command (FEC) developed a theater E&E plan that consisted of two different, but

overlapping pieces. The first component involved establishing an E&E network (of 'agents' and 'safe areas') in the interior of the peninsula. Aircrewmen or soldiers operating behind enemy lines were prebriefed to make contact with friendly Korean agents in designated areas. After linking up, the agents would then safeguard the evaders until they could be recovered by friendly forces.²

The second part of the plan included stationing air rescue assets on the several guerrilla-held islands off the North Korea coast. Those resources consisted of rescue boats, helicopters, and small guerrilla units trained to serve as recovery forces. Since these elements were forward-deployed behind enemy lines and covered most of the North Korean coastline, pilots in trouble could contact the rescue assets directly, inform them of their location, and await pickup.³ This part of the plan worked well.



Sikorsky H-5A helicopter operating from Cho-do, an island held by American-run guerrillas off the northwest coast of North Korea. Both the Air Force and Navy rotated aircraft and crews on the guerrilla-held islands to extend their recovery range.



USAF Grumman SA-16 Albatross rescue amphibian. These aircraft ran many recovery missions along both coasts of Korea. Although the planes were normally stationed behind the Main Line of Resistance (MLR), the rescue craft also deployed forward to the guerrilla islands to better cover large Allied air missions.

A Sikorsky H-19 rescue helicopter operates from a field landing zone on one of the guerrilla-held islands. Facilities are primitive: a small dirt field was fenced off to provide a degree of security; a rough scaffold for facilitating maintenance; and barrels for hand refueling. For long-distance missions it was not unusual for the pilot to load extra barrels inside the H-19 to refuel along the route.



Because they operated from relatively secure forward positions, the island-based E&E assets experienced greater success than those that were supposed to operate in the interior of North Korea.⁴ Establishing survivable agent networks or secure way stations in the interior of North Korea proved an exercise in futility. The Communists simply had very strong control of their citizens and easily detected every attempt to infiltrate guerrillas. Security personnel were suspicious of everyone, particularly

strangers or newly returned citizens. And since the North Korean police and military tightly restricted all movements and activities within their rear areas, attempts to set up safe areas failed miserably.⁵

By September 1952, after more than two years of trying to make the interior plan work, the CIA concluded that "the mission's E&E teams had almost no chance of success."⁶ Why? In addition to the limits on movement, the agents' "cover was almost uniformly bad, the mission was vague and indefinite, [and] the problems of communication had not been properly solved."⁷ The recovery agents inserted "with articles of clothing and equipment which would blow them, and they did not understand the nature of resistance work."⁸ The overall assessment was that the agents "would be captured in a very short time and that the majority of them would be doubled."⁹ One Agency report declared that "E&E operations as conducted by the CIA in Korea were not only ineffective but probably morally reprehensible" in terms of the lives lost trying to set up networks.¹⁰ As far as can be determined, "no airman or POW was known to have been assisted by CIA-sponsored clandestine mechanisms."¹¹

Because of the failure to make the interior part of the E&E plan work, attention shifted to another aspect of the scheme that actually succeeded – the coastal portion of the plan. It became the default solution to do everything possible to avoid ditching in the interior. Pilots in trouble over the interior began to 'stretch' their flight to reach the shore, knowing that their chances of being rescued were



This F-86 Sabre fighter made an emergency landing on the flat beach of one of the guerrilla-held islands off the coast of North Korea.



USAF 85-foot crash rescue boat at Cho-do. The Air Force maintained several such boats and crews on some of the more remote guerrilla-held islands during the war. These forward-deployed recovery assets were credited with many rescues and proved very successful. The crews developed good working relations with the American advisors and sometimes supported guerrilla insertions/extractions. The U.S. Navy also stationed rescue boats and crews on some of the guerrilla islands.

better there. Mission planners ran ingress and egress flight paths up the coastlines to avoid land-based Communist anti-aircraft positions and to take advantage of off-shore rescue assets should trouble arise. By keeping the northwest islands in friendly hands and available for use by recovery assets, the guerrillas made a valuable contribution to the Allied air effort. ♣

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Endnotes

- 1 Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), "Infiltration and Resupply of Agents in North Korea, 1952-1953," Vol. 1, CSHP 2.339, December 1972, Extract, 160-63; CIA, "CIA in Korea, 1946-1965," Vol. 1, DDO HP 283, July 1973, Extract, 192-93. **According to "Infiltration and Resupply of Agents in North Korea, 1952-1953," 160, the first E&E program initiated in Korea began "on 7 September 1950 at the request of General Partridge, Fifth Air Force."**
- 2 CIA, "The Secret War in Korea, June 1950-June 1952," Clandestine Services History, A1-A2; CIA, "CIA in Korea, 1946-1965," 191-93.
- 3 "CIA in Korea, 1946-1965," 191-93; "Infiltration and Resupply of Agents in North Korea, 1952-1953," 162-63.
- 4 Rickey L. Rife, "Combat Search and Rescue: A Lesson We Fail to Learn," School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 1994, 8; Earl H. Tilford, Jr., "Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, 1961-1975" (Office of Air Force History, U.S. Air Force, Washington, DC, Government Printing Office, 1981), 13; and Robert F. Futrell, *Development of Aeromedical Evacuation in the USAF, 1909-1960*, U.S. Air Force Historical Study 23 (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL, 1960), 539-40. **According to these sources, the guerrilla-held islands allowed for the forward deployment of helicopters and other rescue assets. They recovered ten percent of all pilots and aircrew downed in North Korea. Without the ability to pre-position forward on the guerrilla-held islands, the early generation helicopters and boats might not have had sufficient range to be effective.**
- 5 ORO Study, 75, 85, 99; "Infiltration and Resupply of Agents in North Korea, 1952-1953," 164-67; "CIA in Korea, 1946-1965," 166-67.
- 6 "CIA in Korea, 1946-1965," quote from 167.
- 7 "CIA in Korea, 1946-1965," 167.
- 8 "CIA in Korea, 1946-1965," 167.
- 9 "CIA in Korea, 1946-1965," 167.
- 10 "CIA in Korea, 1946-1965," 167.
- 11 "CIA in Korea, 1946-1965," 167.

This photo shows the diversity of boats supporting guerrilla activity off the coasts of North Korea. In the foreground is a captured *sampan*. Behind it is a barge and several coastal freighters that carried supplies and personnel to the islands. The West Coast guerrillas had hundreds of boats ranging from two-man 'wiggle' boats to *sampans* and junks equipped with 'hothead' diesel or marine engines. All helped to search for and recover downed pilots and aircrew.

