

# Operation SPITFIRE

## No Lessons Learned

Although several authors have tried to recount the details of Operation SPITFIRE, to date none have managed to get the story straight. Because the failed airborne operation caused changes to how the guerrillas conducted similar actions afterward, it is important to fully understand the many factors that led to the debacle. This article presents a factual account of what was planned to happen, and what actually occurred during the execution of that plan. It is a synthesis of all of the facts as reported in all available primary source documentation.<sup>1</sup>

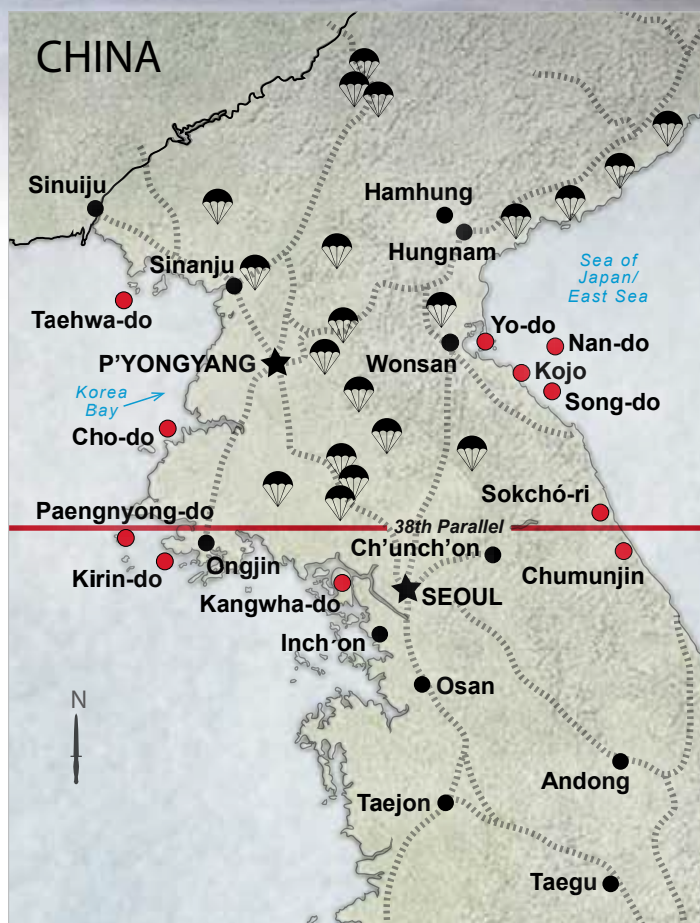
by Michael E. Krivdo



North Korean guerrilla parachute training.

At 2200 hours on 18 June 1951, a five-man pathfinder element consisting of British Army Captain (CPT) William Ellery Anderson, Ranger Sergeant (SGT) William T. Miles, Jr., SGT Charles B. Garrett (communicator), and two Koreans (Song Chang Ok and Ho Yong Chong) parachuted from a C-47 'Skytrain' into the mountains of North Korea. Problems surfaced immediately as two men (Anderson and Song) were injured in the jump and needed medical evacuation. Despite this rough start, the lead element discovered a large Chinese unit moving toward the UN lines and called in air support that inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy. The second element (CPT David C. Hearn, British Second Lieutenant (2LT) Leo S. Adams-Acton, British Fusilier Calder 'George' Mills and ten Koreans) parachuted in around 0130 hours on 26 June. Hearn had been added to replace the injured Anderson as the mission commander, and the latter was evacuated by helicopter on the 28th. Meanwhile, several more men were injured in the second jump and communications problems plagued the team.<sup>2</sup>

The earlier strike on the Chinese unit and the multiple attempts to resupply, reinforce, and evacuate SPITFIRE personnel had compromised the group's location and enemy forces closed in to destroy it. Dawn airdrops by circling U.S. Air Force aircraft on the 6<sup>th</sup> of July led the enemy right to them. SGT Miles and Ho disappeared in a rear-guard action as the main body broke contact from the enemy; their bodies were never recovered. British Fusilier Mills and several Korean guerrillas met the same fate in the following days. The remainder, moving south



North Korean guerrilla 'drop' locations.



## Operation SPITFIRE: The Plan

**Phase 1 - Thunder** - Insert five-man Pathfinder team to scout and mark Drop Zones

**Phase 2 - Lightning** - Insert twelve-man augmentation team

**Phase 3 - Storm** - Insert twenty-man augmentation team

**Phase 4 - Northwind** - Insert last twenty-man augmentation team and commence operations

## Operation SPITFIRE: Actual Events

**18 June - Thunder**, SPITFIRE's Pathfinder element (5 men) parachutes into North Korea

**20 June** - Team calls air strike on Chinese division positions; good effect on targets

**21 June** - Team adjusts and repeats air strike on Chinese unit; many secondary explosions

**= 1 Day**

**26 June - Lightning**, second element (13 men) parachutes in, links up with Pathfinders

**28 June** - MEDEVAC helo extracts two men (CPT Anderson and Korean Song Chang Ok)

**30 June** - Supply drop arrives, but all chutes malfunction

**1 July** - Observer aircraft circles team and drops penicillin for injured persons

**5/6 July** - Supply plane orbits all night then drops chutes in daylight right on SPITFIRE, enemy ambushes SPITFIRE, two men fight rearguard action and disappear

**26 July** - Second and last group of survivors cross UN lines (2 men)

**25 July** - First group of survivors link up with 35th Infantry Regiment (5 men)

**7 July** - Enemy tracking main body, SPITFIRE's radios fail, group begins evading



Ranger Sergeant William T. Miles, Jr., reported as Missing in Action/Presumed Dead during Operation SPITFIRE in North Korea.

and evading capture for almost three weeks, eventually bumped into the UN lines and linked up on 25 July with security elements of Item Company, 35<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment. Of the eighteen participants in the mission, only nine walked out or were recovered in the early medevac. SGT Miles, Fusilier Mills, and seven Koreans were never heard from again.<sup>3</sup>

After the guerrilla command's disappointing second attempt to insert forces by parachute (VIRGINIA I on 15 March 1951 was the first), the Far East Command (FEC) prohibited non-Koreans from participating in future airborne special operations. This decision had far-reaching consequences, particularly for the hundreds of anti-Communist guerrillas who were later dispatched over North Korea in similar efforts.<sup>4</sup> One fundamental problem with the decision was that it made no distinction between missions specifically designed to be long-term (i.e., deep insertions to establish 'permanent' guerrilla base camps) and shorter duration raids where deliberate withdrawals were an essential element of the planning. In issuing a blanket prohibition, the FEC staff exposed its ignorance of special operations in general and excluded experts (like the airborne-qualified Ranger infantrymen) from participating in airborne raids that they were well-qualified to accomplish.

Furthermore, the decision meant that all future participants of these operations would be newly trained individuals. Unlike American Rangers or other special operators, the guerrilla units possessed no ready pool of experienced airborne raiders. And until one survived a mission there could be no pool of experience to be sent on a second. Consequently, succeeding waves of poorly qualified, inexperienced Korean guerrillas were committed to one-way operations where none survived. Furthermore, with no feedback from survivors to determine what did or did not work, these operations constituted a 'lessons-learned nightmare' that saw one failed mission follow another. A vicious cycle began wherein at least seventeen similar operations were launched and "Not one member . . . is known to have exfiltrated."<sup>5</sup>





North Korean guerrillas conducting suspended harness parachute training.

The situation brings up a disturbing point: if Americans had participated in those later operations it seems doubtful that FEC would have continued to parachute units to their deaths like it did with the all-Korean groups. Some corrective actions would have been taken to increase the chances of recovering their personnel. Evidently, the FEC considered indigenous troops expendable and believed that by removing Americans/British from participation in missions such as these, there would no longer be a need to plan for extracts in event of emergencies.<sup>6</sup> As a result, more than 400 Korean guerrillas were parachuted into North Korea between 22 January 1952 and 19 May 1953 and none were ever seen again.<sup>7</sup> †

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## Endnotes

1 There are few primary source materials on Operation SPITFIRE; most of the information comes from secondary sources and third parties. And some of that material is contradictory or contains factually incorrect material. Probably the most complete single account appears in Ed[ward C.] Evanhoe, *Darkmoon: Eighth Army Special Operations in the Korean War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 103-16, yet it contains some inaccuracies. One specific weakness of that account is that it relies heavily on a single source, the "Sgt. C.H. Lane Diary," not available for scrutiny by historians. As such, its contents cannot be independently verified. Unfortunately, the accounts of SPITFIRE that appear in other secondary sources generally draw heavily from Evanhoe's version (of the Lane Diary) with undocumented variations, further clouding what actually happened. The few points that can be verified

in this account are derived from the essential elements of the story found in primary documentation sources such as: Letter, CPT David C. Hearn to COL John H. McGee, 6 September 1951 (hereafter Hearn Letter), COL John H. McGee Papers, Army Heritage Education Center (AHEC), Carlisle Barracks, PA; Letter, John H. McGee to Colonel Rod Paschall, San Antonio, TX, 24 March 1986 (hereafter Paschall Letter), AHEC, 22, 26-27; Frederick W. Cleaver, George Fitzpatrick, John Ponturo, *et al.*, "UN Partisan Warfare in Korea, 1951-1954," AFPE Group Technical Memorandum ORO-T-64, Johns Hopkins University, Operations Research Office, June 1956 (hereafter ORO Study), 92-94, 155.

2 Hearn Letter; ORO Study, 52-53, 62-64, 74-76, 90-95; Second Supplement, *London Gazette*, 7 October 1952, 5323; National Archives, United Kingdom, Reference WO 373/116/53, 1950-1953; Alex McVeigh, "Korean War hero receives Distinguished Service Cross," *Army News Service*, 24 April 2009; DSC Citation for Sgt William T. Miles, Jr.; Evanhoe, *Darkmoon*, 108-09.

3 Every published account of SPITFIRE is frustrating because each provides different casualty figures/participant numbers that range from none out of a total party of sixteen (ORO Study, 52) to thirteen dead out of eighteen (Dillard, *Aviary*, 32-37). Other accounts suggest two casualties out of eighteen members (Evanhoe, *Darkmoon*, 111-15), eight out of sixteen (Malcom, *White Tigers*, 135) and eight out of eighteen (Haas, *Devil's Shadow*, 58-59). Although the most accurate assessment seems to be Evanhoe's, he neglects to account properly for the addition of Hearn and collate the Korean members of the team. More distressingly, most completely miss the contributions of Fusilier Mills, missing in action and presumed dead while on the mission ("List of Royal Northumberland Fusiliers Killed in Korea," on internet at: [http://www.fusiliers-association.co.uk/Northumberland/RNF\\_Killed\\_in\\_Korea.htm](http://www.fusiliers-association.co.uk/Northumberland/RNF_Killed_in_Korea.htm), last accessed on 7 January 2013). Most accounts simply recap the events from Evanhoe's version, with some variance in details of the mission. All provide vague cites of sources, most of which are not available for inspection. The casualty figures in this article are derived between those known to have inserted for the mission and those returned to friendly lines as cited in Hearn's letter to McGee, a contemporary document written in the aftermath of the mission by a leader-participant (Hearn Letter, 1-3).

4 ORO Study, 52-53, 62-64, 74-76, 90-95.

5 ORO Study, 90-95, quote from 91.

6 The independent post-war analysis contained in ORO Study, 94, frankly concluded that the "decisions to use partisans . . . in airborne operations appears to have been futile and callous." This author agrees with that assessment.

7 ORO Study, 91-94.