Battle of Yongsan - Pusan Perimeter

BLUF: The Battle of Yongsan was an engagement between United Nations Command and North Korean (KPA) forces early in the Korean War from 1 to 5 September 1950, at Yongsan in South Korea. It was part of the Pusan Perimeter campaign and was one of several large engagements fought simultaneously. The battle ended in a victory for the U.N. Command after U.S. Army soldiers and U.S. Marines repelled continuous attacks by the Korean People’s Army (KPA).

MAIN CHARACTERS: Edward Craig (USMC), Laurence B. Keiser (USA), and Walton Walker (USA).

SETTING THE STAGE: Following the 25 June 1950 outbreak of the Korean War after the invasion of South Korea by North Korea, the U.N. decided to commit troops to the conflict on behalf of South Korea. The U.S. committed ground forces to the Korean peninsula to fight back the North Korean (KPA) invasion to prevent South Korea from collapsing. However, U.S. forces in the Far East had been steadily decreasing since the end of World War II, five years earlier. At the time, the closest forces were the U.S. Army 24th Infantry Division, headquartered in Japan. The division was understrength, and most of its equipment was antiquated due to reductions in military spending.

The 24th Infantry Division was the first American unit sent into Korea with the mission to take the initial “shock” of KPA advances, delaying much larger KPA units to buy time to allow reinforcements to arrive. The division was badly outnumbered by the KPA and suffered tremendous losses during the Battle of Osan on 5 July. With Taejon captured, KPA forces began surrounding the Pusan Perimeter from all sides. The KPA advance was halted in a series of engagements in the country’s southern section in the Battle of the Notch on 2 August. Suffering mounting losses, the KPA force in the west withdrew for several days to re-equip and receive reinforcements. This action allowed the U.N. Command to reinforce its numbers with over 4000 Marines from the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade commanded by BGen. Eddie Craig, which landed at Busan on 3 August.

When the KPA approached the Pusan Perimeter on 5 August, they attempted the same frontal assault technique on the four main avenues of approach into the perimeter. These attacks stalled as U.N. forces, well equipped and with Marine reserves, repeatedly repelled KPA attacks. In the First Battle of Naktong Bulge, the KPA division could not hold its bridgehead across the river as large numbers of Marine and Army reserves repelled the Communist forces. On 19 August, the KPA 4th Division was forced back across the river with 50 percent casualties. In the Taegu region, five KPA divisions were repulsed by three U.N. divisions in several attempts to attack the city during the Battle of Taegu. All along the front, the KPA troops were reeling from these defeats. It was the first time in the war their tactics failed.

THE STORY: On the morning of 1 September, the KPA forces stood only a few miles short of Yongsan after a successful river crossing and penetration of the U.N. line. The Communist division was supported by one 76 mm artillery battalion, an antiaircraft battalion of artillery, two tank battalions, and an artillery battalion. Elements of the 9th KPA Division reached the hills just west of Yongsan during the afternoon of 1 September.

Simultaneously, with only the shattered remnants of E Company at hand, the U.S. 9th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division had virtually no troops to defend Yongsan. Division commander Major General Keiser ordered elements of the 2nd Engineer Combat Battalion, the U.S. 72nd Tank Battalion, and the 2nd Division Reconnaissance Company to fill in the gaps to defend Yongsan. Also, disorganized U.S. Army forces were ordered to pull back to Yongsan. The KPA approaching Yongsan from the south attempted to cross the low ground to enter Yongsan undetected in the early evening light. U.S. troops tried to rally and fend off the KPA attack but were too disorganized to mount an effective resistance. American reinforcements entered the fight late evening and drove the KPA into the hills to the west. For the time being, at least, the KPA drive toward Miryang had been halted. In this time, the desperately undermanned U.S. units began to be reinforced with Korean Augmentees (KATUSAs) attached to the U.S. Eighth Army. However, the cultural divide between the KATUSAs and the U.S. troops caused tensions.
At 0935 on 2 September, while the KPA were attempting to destroy the engineer troops at the southern edge of Yongsan and clear the road to Miryang, Gen. Walker attached the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade to the U.S. 2nd Division and ordered a coordinated attack by all available elements of the division and the Marines. Between 0300 and 0430 on 3 September, the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines assembled north of Yongsan, and the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines to the south. The 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines established security positions southwest of Yongsan along the regimental sector’s approaches from that direction.

The Marine attack started at 0855, while Marine air and artillery attacks caught KPA reinforcements in open rice paddies moving up from a second ridge. That night the Marines dug in 2 miles west of Yongsan. Coordinating its attack with the Marines, the 9th Infantry advanced abreast of them on the north. The counterattack continued at 0800 on 4 September, and by nightfall, the counterattack had gained another 3 miles. As dawn broke on 5 September, the KPA launched an attack against the 9th Infantry on the Marines’ right, the heaviest blow striking G Co. With heavy downpours of rain falling on the battlefield, Marine artillery fire dropped accurately in front of the 9th Infantry position, repelling the KPA attack.

On 5 September, the Marines approached Obong-ni Ridge by mid-morning, where they saw KPA troops digging in. The Marines approached the pass between the two hills and took positions in front of the KPA-held high ground. At 1430 approximately 300 KPA infantry came from the village of Tugok. From concealed positions, they struck B Co. on Hill 125 just north of the road and east of Tugok. Two Soviet T-34 tanks surprised and knocked out the two leading Marine M26 Pershing tanks. Since the destroyed Pershing tanks blocked fields of fire, four others withdrew to better positions. Using rocket launchers, B Co. Marines attacked the T-34s front on destroying both of them. They continued the assault on the KPA forces, making this day one of heavy casualties on both sides. Because of their losses, however, the KPA was not able to resume the offensive.

After midnight on 6 September, the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade was ordered back to Pusan to travel to Japan and merge with other Marine units to form the 1st Marine Division. This action was done after a heated disagreement between Walker and MacArthur’s command. Walker said he could not hold the Pusan Perimeter without the Marines in reserve, while MacArthur said he could not conduct the Inchon landings without the Marines. MacArthur sent raw Army recruits to replace the Marines, but Walker felt the transition endangered the Pusan Perimeter.

**AFTERMATH:** The battle caused massive casualties for both sides. By the end of the fight, the KPA 4th Division had been destroyed. The action represented a new phase in the war for the KPA. Their numerical superiority was gone, and their strategy of attacking supply lines and rear formations of U.S. units was no longer effective without overwhelming numbers. For the U.N. Command, they had successfully held the Pusan Perimeter, and the Inchon invasion on 10 September would change the tide of the war. Gen. Walt Walker was very critical of the Army units fighting ability but was most impressed by Gen. Craig’s Marines and their conduct in battle during the Pusan Perimeter campaign.

**QUESTIONS**

1. What was the role of the 1st Provincial Force in the early stage of the Korean War?
2. How did the Marines show their military versatility during the Battle of Yongsan?
3. Why was the Battle of Yongsan significant in the Pusan Perimeter campaign?

**SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY**


