

INTRODUCTION

LAND OF THE MORNING CALM

As in most cultures, history, art, and mythology come together to tell the story of the birth of a nation. In the small villages that have dominated the Korean peninsula for ages a story is told of a god named Hwanung who comes down from heaven. Lonely for companionship he transforms a bear into a woman. They marry and their union gives birth to a son, Tangun. Tangun is a great leader and builds the first capital of the Korean nation in 2333 B.C. He calls it Choson, Land of the Morning Calm.

Korea is a land of remarkably durable people, despite their country's difficult climate and turbulent history. Korea's geographical location places it at the crossroads to East Asia, resulting in a long history of invasion and domination by powerful neighbors. For centuries the people of Korea have spoken the same language, liked the same foods, shared the same traditional dress, and embraced the same age-old customs. The Korean heart feels strong national pride about its homeland and longs for an independent Korea.

The Korean peninsula runs six hundred miles down from the eastern coast of Asia, pointing south toward Japan. The peninsula is surrounded on the east by the Sea of Japan and on the west by the Yellow Sea. It's a mountainous land in the north with rocky, mile high ridges along the Taebaek Range, rich with mineral deposits. In the north the winters are bitterly cold, with temperatures that dip as low as fifty degrees below zero, Fahrenheit. The southern part of Korea is primarily a farming area, with steaming hot, humid summers. For centuries the rice and cabbage fields of the south fed the entire country.

Japan's occupation of Korea during World War II led President Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Chiang Kai-shek to agree in the Cairo Declaration that "Korea shall become free and independent." After the surrender of Japan in 1945 President Harry Truman suggested to Josef Stalin that Russia receive the surrender of Japanese forces north of the 38th parallel, an arbitrary line on a map, and America receive the surrender of Japanese in the south. The expedient agreement ultimately led to Stalin's choice of the 38th parallel as his line for dividing the country in half, once again destroying Korea's dream of independence. The Soviets controlled everything north of the line, relinquishing control of the south to America. The 38th parallel was nothing more than a line on a map. It was an unnatural boundary, with none of the common geographical features that usually determined national boundaries. The north had 58 percent of the land mass, but only one-third of the total population of 30 million. The north possessed Korea's industrial base, with the country's only hydroelectric power plant, petroleum, and cement processing plants. The south held the farmland to feed the masses.

Although America's goal was eventual disengagement, it encouraged a free democratic form of government in the south and attempted to train an army to sustain that government. In September 1946, President Truman tossed the hot-potato over to the United Nations. When the UN General Assembly voted for Korean elections, the Soviets refused to permit UN observers to enter north of the 38th parallel. The south subsequently elected Syngman Rhee the first President of the Republic of Korea. The communist in the north responded by forming the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and named Kim Il-sung to lead it. The two hostile forces began digging in on either side of the 38th parallel. In the south the US continued to train a poorly equipped ROK Army of sixty five thousand. In the north the KPA Army was one hundred and fifty thousand strong, equipped with Soviet 122-mm howitzers, 76-mm guns, self-propelled guns, and T-34 tanks. Most of those troops, eighty nine thousand, were Korean volunteers who had fought under Mao against Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Army.

Late in the spring of 1950 the KPA Army prepared for a large military exercise along the 38th parallel. On the morning of June 25, the world realized the true intent of the military exercise as North Korea began a full-scale invasion of South Korea. For the Soviets, Korea was an ideological battleground for their relatively new form of government, Communism. For China, the Soviet's understudy and Korea's neighbor, the war was the continuing struggle in their search for respectability and power.

For America it was a limited war, a war the American people did not understand, want or feel a part of. The tragedy of any war is measured by destruction and human death, ground won and ground lost. In the end negotiations between countries establish the winners and losers. Heroes emerge from such conflicts and return home to an appreciative family and public recognition. The seldom talked about tragedy of captivity leaves deeper scars in both the men held in captivity and the families back home who await their return. Under the best of

circumstances prisoners of war suffer immeasurable humiliation and pain in the hands of their enemies. Their families do their best to carry on back home, but they suffer deep heartache as they live with the daily terror of the unknown, not knowing if their loved one is dead or alive. Historically, the mortality rate for American POWs has averaged twelve percent. There is one exception, American POWs held in North Korea from 1950 to 1953 died at a rate of forty-two percent, nearly four times higher than any other war. Some refer to the Korean War as the “Forgotten War,” a “Police Action” or simply a conflict. The fact remains, the human tragedy that occurred in the POW camps of North Korea and in the broken hearts of those waiting back home remains untold.

There is nothing more fragile than a captive heart and nothing more powerful than its story of survival. On the morning of June the 25, the Land of the Morning Calm woke up once again to find its dreams of independence shattered and its destiny controlled by others. On that same morning America found itself once again at war. Although the characters of this story are fictional, the events are based on individual and historical fact. This is not a war story, as very little takes place on the field of combat. It is a story of honor, survival, and heartbreak in the POW camps of North Korea and in the hearts of American families waiting back home in Kentucky, the heartland of America. Korea and Kentucky share the same latitude and nearly the same land mass. Both have mountains rich with minerals, along with bountiful farmland. The people of Korea and Kentucky are durable and independently minded. In both settings, a world apart, the story begins.