


THE KOREAN WAR



GREAT
BATTLES
FOR BOYS

JOE GIORELLO

The Korean War

Great Battles for Boys
EXCERPT

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with
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Great Battles: The Korean War

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Excerpt Edition

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*This book is dedicated to my son, Nico Giorello, United States
Marine Corps.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Korean War Overview](#)

[The Invasion of South Korea](#)

[More Books in the Great Battles for Boys Series](#)

KOREAN WAR OVERVIEW

BEFORE WE GET into the “blood and guts” of the Korean War battles, you need to know some history about the country of Korea.

Let’s start in 1905.

At that time, Japan and Russia were fighting each other. These two countries are located near Korea. The conflict between them was known as the Russo-Japanese War.

Why were Russia and Japan fighting?

Russia wanted to expand its territory, and Japan wanted to halt that expansion. The battles raged for about a year before Japan won the war. The victory was unexpected because the Japanese military was much smaller than Russia’s army, but the Japanese soldiers were better trained and had a more modernized navy.

As the winner of the war, Japan enjoyed the “spoils of war.” The spoils are riches and resources taken by the victory from the losing country during or after the war. In this case, Japan seized control of the Korean Peninsula.

Look at the map below. Locate the countries of Russia, Japan, and China. Now check out that long stretch of land beneath Russia and China that dangles into the sea. That land is the Korean Peninsula. Notice, too, there’s a line dividing the Korean Peninsula into two separate countries, North Korea and South Korea. We’ll come back to that border line in a minute.



Fast-forward about forty-five years after the Russo-Japanese War, and Japan then found itself losing a war—World War II. The war’s six years of continuous fighting had decimated the Japanese military and the country’s economy. But despite those dire circumstances, Japan refused to surrender. The United States, which opposed Japan during WWII, sent many warnings. If Japan did not surrender immediately, it would suffer severe consequences.

Japan ignored the warnings.

In response, the US dropped two atomic bombs on Japan in August 1945. Those explosions wiped out two cities. Nothing was left but cinders and ashes.

Japan finally surrendered.

But soon after that surrender, Russia declared war on Japan. Of course, declaring war on an already-demolished country is like kicking a guy when he’s down. But in war, countries don’t always play fair.

Also, Russia had changed. For one, in 1917, Russia suffered a devastating revolution. Violent protestors killed the corrupt Russian king—a leader known as the czar (pronounced “zar”)—

and these revolutionaries created a new kind of government. Instead of being ruled by a king, the new country grew into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics—or USSR—ruled by Communist leaders.



Josef Stalin

Communism is a political ideology. It says the government should own everything—literally everything and divide it equally among the people. The concept is that everyone will then have the same amount, and common ownership will work for everyone's good.

Here's one example. Let's say you're a farmer. Under Communism, the government owns your land. It also owns the crops you produce on that land, and any money you earn from the

sale of those crops. You *work* as a farmer, but you don't *own* any part of the farm.

The same situation is true for every other farmer in your country.

The problem is, somebody needs to be in charge of this system. That role falls to the Communist dictator—a ruler with absolute power. The dictator runs the Communist government, and he decides who gets what from your farm and from everyone else's farm. The dictator can also take as much as he wants, and no one can stop him. Under this system, the Communist dictator keeps gaining more and more power over people.

There's an old saying: "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Soviet dictator Josef Stalin grew into a ruthless political leader. Absolute power corrupted Stalin absolutely.

In 1945, as WWII was ending, Stalin felt confident about declaring war on Japan. After WWII, the Soviets and the US (as victors in the war) took control of the Korean Peninsula from Japan. They divided Korea in half.

The Soviets would control North Korea.

The United States would control South Korea.

The line dividing these two countries would be the 38th parallel.

Check out the map below.



You might be wondering: What's a "parallel"?

World maps have a grid of lines that run east-to-west (left-to-right) and north-to-south (top-to-bottom).

The lines running east-to-west are latitudes, also known as "parallels." Each parallel marks the distance from the earth's equator—the middle of planet Earth. When we say the "38th parallel," it refers to a point on the globe that is 38 degrees north of the equator.

But the 38th parallel didn't solve the differing ideologies between these two countries.

Under Stalin's rule, North Korea became a full Communist country. North Korea's leader-by-title was Kim Il-Sung, a cruel dictator. He was mostly Stalin's puppet, doing whatever Stalin told him to do. Under Kim Il-Sung, the North Korean people lost many freedoms, including the right to vote. They soon fell into poverty and starvation.

Meanwhile, South Korea was headed by a democratically elected president, Syng Man Rhee. Backed by the United States, Rhee was elected by the South Korean people—who could also vote him out of office. South Korea’s living conditions and freedoms were superior to those of their Communist neighbors to the north.

But a new referee had walked onto the field of battle—the United Nations. Known as the UN, the United Nations was organized after WWII to keep peace among nations and to help avoid wars, especially world wars.

The UN insisted that the North Korean people should have the right to vote. The people could decide for themselves if they wanted to live under a Communist government or if they wanted to be a democracy like South Korea.

But Josef Stalin and Kim Il-Sung refused to allow any general elections in North Korea.

United States President Harry S. Truman grew concerned. Truman worried that Communism would spread to other countries, oppressing more people. The world had just wasted too much blood and treasure defeating a group of WWII dictators such as Adolf Hitler in Germany and Benito Mussolini in Italy.

Dictatorships caused problems worldwide.

Truman, along with the UN, did not want Communism to spread. Yet China had already become a Communist country. It was ruled by a murderous dictator, Mao Tse-tung (pronounced “mow say tong”).

Look at those maps again. Can you see who is Korea’s nearest neighbor?

China.

For several years, there was an uneasy peace on the Korean Peninsula. This is what’s called a “cold war”—no shots fired and no wars declared. Neither the Soviets nor the US wanted a “hot war.” Both sides had atomic bombs, and both sides had witnessed

the terrible destruction that those bombs inflicted on Japan. Further, both sides were still recovering from the ravages of WWII.

But suddenly in 1950, the cold war in Korea turned hot.

What happened?

That's what you're going to read about next—the devastating battles that erupted into the Korean War.

THE INVASION OF SOUTH KOREA

June 25, 1950



US Marines, carrying M-1 rifles and Browning Automatic Rifles, fight to liberate Seoul.

IN THE EARLY morning hours of Sunday, June 25, 1950, the people of South Korea woke to the sounds of a tremendous storm.

Flashes of lightning.

Rumbles of thunder.

But the sounds grew even louder—the thunderbolts were smashing into the ground, blowing the earth into pieces. As the explosions continued, the South Koreans suddenly realized the terrible truth.

This “storm” was an artillery barrage. Thousands of guns were firing all at once.

Thrown into panic and chaos, the South Koreans grabbed their children, their elderly family members, and their most cherished possessions—then ran for their lives.

But the artillery barrage was only the beginning of their terror.

Immediately following that fury of gunfire, about 100 Soviet-built tanks smashed through South Korea’s border defenses at the 38th parallel. The monstrous tanks were followed by more than 100,000 North Korean soldiers marching forward, guns blazing.

Imagine what it was like for boys in a quiet South Korean town. In one violent moment, everything changed. Artillery fire turned their entire neighborhoods to rubble. Every sense of security suddenly evaporated in a cloud of gun smoke. Entire families were suddenly on the run, homeless, desperate to find food, safe drinking water, and safe shelter.



South Koreans flee their homes after the North Korean invasion.

The North Korean Army (we’ll call them the NKA) attacked South Korea across a 200-mile wide front. The plan was to capture South Korea’s capital, the city of Seoul, and force a quick surrender.

South Korea had about 100,000 men in its army. But when this attack began, many of those soldiers were on leave, taking time off from military duties. The remaining soldiers were not equipped to stop this powerful NKA attack. Also, the South Korean Army (SKA) had no tanks or even any heavy artillery weapons that could stop the Russian tanks.

In the invasion's first few hours, thousands of SKA soldiers were killed.

Hoping to salvage what remained of their country and its people, the SKA formed a fighting retreat, also known as a withdrawal. That's when an army fights while backing up. The SKA tried other defensive tactics, too, such as trench warfare. Soldiers dug channels into the ground and hunkered inside with their weapons. But the NKA machine guns mowed them down and the Soviet tanks—known as T-34s—barreled forward with cannons belching flames of fire.

The SKA's only effective weapons against these tank assaults were hand grenades and light bazookas. But these exploding projectiles sometimes bounced off the fire-breathing tanks. Some SKA soldiers bundled hand grenades together, trying to create a more effective weapon. Still others, in desperation to save their country, sacrificed their lives by throwing their own bodies onto the tanks.

The slaughter lasted for days.

Finally, the SKA managed to put up a strong defensive line at the Han River, holding back the enemy and blocking them from moving forward. That defense line also ruined the plan of North Korean dictator Kim Il-Sung, who wanted to quickly capture Seoul and force South Korea to surrender.



UN forces fighting on the outskirts of Seoul, 1950

News about this catastrophic invasion spread around the world. The United States—as the “caretakers” of South Korea—went to the United Nations and asked for military support to fight the NKA. The UN approved the request, and US President Harry S. Truman agreed to send American forces into the conflict. (Side note: Truman’s order was the first time in US history that a sitting president sent troops into an international conflict without first asking Congress for a declaration of war.)

On July 1, 1950, the first US military forces arrived in Pusan, South Korea. Pusan is a port—a waterfront city with a harbor for ships. Ports are strategically crucial during warfare because they help expedite armies and supplies to the battlefield.



US soldiers, dug into the hillside, firing on Communist-held NKA positions.

These first US forces, about 400 men, were part of the Army's 24th Infantry Division. Most of these soldiers were young, inexperienced, and had limited training. But these American servicemen had one crucial trait that would both help them and hurt them—pride.

Five years before this invasion, the United States military had helped win World War II. Given the fresh memory of that amazing victory, the US forces were convinced that once the NKA faced the formidable US military, they would flee.

That didn't happen.

On July 5, 1950, this portion of soldiers from the 24th Infantry Division faced the advancing NKA. From their defensive line, these 400 soldiers fired guns, hurled grenades, and hollered to rally their fellow men through the smoke and noise.

But rather than run away from this force, the NKA charged from all sides. The Soviet-made T-34 tanks rolled forward, blasting fire. It quickly became evident that these first US forces were nearly as ill-equipped to fight back as the SKA—they had arrived without the necessary weapons to stop the Soviet tanks.

The US soldiers went into a full retreat.



United Nations soldier fires a submachine gun on Communist-led forces in Seoul.

Fortunately, help was coming. The rest of the 24th Infantry Division—about 16,000 men—arrived in South Korea under the command of Major General William Dean.



UN gun crew near the Kum River, South Korea, July 15, 1950.

Dean placed his men into a new defensive position. But, once again, without heavy weapons to combat the onslaught, they were unable to stop the NKA from pushing forward.

The 24th fell into another retreat.

Even worse, Dean was captured in the retreat! It was a devastating blow for the US forces—their leader was now a prisoner of the enemy.

Morale sank among the US forces.

But reinforcements arrived, mostly from the US and Great Britain. Known as the 8th Army, these men were led by Lieutenant General Walton Walker. Perhaps even better, US and British tanks also arrived to combat the Soviet-made T-34s.

This fresh infusion helped the UN forces hold a perimeter, or boundary, around the port city of Pusan.



Pershing and Sherman tanks of the 73rd Heavy Tank Battalion at the Pusan Docks.

On July 7, more help arrived. US General Douglas MacArthur was named the Commander in Chief, Far East Command.

MacArthur, a legendary military general, was placed in command of all soldiers from every country that was coming to help South Korea—and many countries wanted to halt this violent expansion of Communism. In addition to the United States, Britain, Canada, and Australia, dozens more countries sent aid in the form of soldiers or equipment.

MacArthur realized that given the dire situation in South Korea, a powerful counterattack was needed.

But what kind of counterattack?

That's what you're going to read about in the next chapter.

WHO FOUGHT



General Douglas MacArthur with his corncob pipe.

DOUGLAS MACARTHUR WAS born on January 26, 1880.

His father, Arthur—yes, his name was Arthur MacArthur!—was a US Army captain who had fought for the Union during the American Civil War.

When Douglas was thirteen years old, the MacArthur family moved to San Antonio, Texas, the site of the famous American battle The Alamo. Douglas attended the West Texas Military Academy, then enrolled in the United States Military Academy at

West Point. In 1903 Douglas graduated with honors and began his rise through the US Army's ranks.

MacArthur earned a strong battlefield reputation in World War I. After Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941, propelling America into World War II, MacArthur was stationed in the Philippine Islands. Japan soon attacked there and MacArthur countered with several successful offensive operations. However, MacArthur was a strong-willed man and an outspoken soldier. He was frequently—and openly—critical of the decisions made by his superiors. Because of that, President Truman eventually fired him, removing him from leadership in the Korean War.

MacArthur was respected as much as he was despised—men either loved him or hated him. Fearless on the battlefield, MacArthur uttered many memorable statements:

“It is fatal to enter a war without the will to win it.”

“Age wrinkles the body; quitting wrinkles the soul.”

“We are not retreating—we are advancing in another direction.”

Despite all his controversy, when General Douglas MacArthur died, he was honored with a state funeral and was buried at the MacArthur Memorial in Norfolk, Virginia. The memorial also houses a museum collection that documents the life of this passionate American whose dedicated military service changed the world.

BOOKS

The Start and End of the Korean War – History Book of Facts by Baby Professor

America In Korean War: A History Just for Kids! by KidCaps

The Korean War: An Interactive Modern History Adventure by Michael Burgan

INTERNET

The Korean War, by Simple History: [youtube.com/watch?v=yxaeggvl4aE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yxaeggvl4aE)

General Douglas MacArthur's life and military service:

[youtube.com/watch?v=Jb5bdelws4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jb5bdelws4)

Fourteen interesting photos of the Korean War, presented by

[History.com: history.com/topics/korea/korean-war#section_6](https://www.history.com/topics/korea/korean-war#section_6)

MOVIES

One Minute to Zero (1952), starring actor Robert Mitchum. You can watch the movie's trailer here: [youtube.com/watch?v=rwJV5EdRk60](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwJV5EdRk60)

Get the rest of the book at GreatBattlesForBoys.Com and [Amazon!](https://www.amazon.com)

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