



The 2nd Division Memorial Modification Project

The Second Division Memorials Foundation

501(C)(3) EIN 47-2434277

The DMZ War

What military historians now refer to as the *DMZ War* denotes the military conflict that raged along the Korean DMZ from 1966-69, exploding briefly again in the summer of the 1970 before finally subsiding, in which North Korean dictator Kim Il-sung attempted to take advantage of South Korea's relative poverty and political instability—along with America's massive military commitment in Vietnam—to decapitate the government, drive the Americans from the peninsula, and reunify Korea under the communist flag.

This chapter in history is significant not merely because it is here—with the 2nd Infantry Division formally returning and unfurling its colors in Korea in '65—that the modern-day Korean/American alliance was forged; but also, because the U.S. military's critical role in the *DMZ War* was so rigorously concealed by order of the Pentagon. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara feared that public knowledge of the conflict on the Korean DMZ, at the very height of the *Vietnam War*, would undermine support for America's efforts in Vietnam, with the result that news about the *DMZ War* was strictly classified. It is long since overdue that this story was finally told.

At the conclusion of *World War II*, Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin had installed Kim Il-sung as First Secretary of the Korean Communist Party in the Soviet-controlled territory of North Korea, and Kim immediately began laying plans to seize the peninsula by force. The failure of the *Korean War* to achieve these aims in the early 1950s merely postponed his objective. By the end of the '50s, Kim had succeeded in consolidating his power base—executing or exiling all political rivals—and, following the Soviet model, had begun collectivizing North Korean industry and agriculture as the foundation for his campaign to re-unify the peninsula.

South Korea, by contrast, remained one of the poorest countries in the world for over a decade following the *Korean War*—with a gross domestic product per capita that ranked it at the very bottom of third-world economies. South Korea's first President, Syngman Rhee, had been ejected from office by a popular revolution in 1960, followed swiftly by a military coup in 1961. And it was against this background of South Korean poverty and political instability that the North Korean dictator laid his plans. Taking a page from the playbook of North Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh, Kim began a campaign of unconventional warfare, together with the steady infiltration of agents across the DMZ, toward the goal of toppling South Korea's government and sweeping the Americans from the peninsula.

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The beginning of armed hostilities can be traced to a speech given by Kim Il-sung in October 1966, which acted as the starting gun for a North Korean campaign of nighttime forays across the MDL (Military Demarcation Line), firefights along the barrier fence, the ambush of U.S. patrols, and nonstop attempts to infiltrate North Korean agents. These armed provocations in the DMZ specifically targeted U.S. forces—as part of Kim’s scheme to drive a wedge between the Americans and their South Korean hosts.

At the onset of military hostilities, the Pentagon deployed a handful of infantry battalions from the U.S. Army’s 2nd Infantry Division along a pivotal eighteen-mile sector of the Demilitarized Zone, immediately north of Seoul, fronting North Korea’s traditional invasion corridor. It was within this region that the *DMZ War* was principally waged.

The *DMZ War* reached its peak with a military offensive launched by North Korea in January 1968—occurring in tandem with North Vietnam’s *Tet Offensive*—in which a North Korean commando unit penetrated the Demilitarized Zone, cut their way through the barrier fence, and assembled in the mountains south of the DMZ. Donning the uniforms of a South Korean Army unit, they made their way to Seoul with the objective of assassinating President Park Chung-hee. They made it to within a hundred meters of the Blue House (South Korea’s Presidential Palace) before being discovered, prompting a massive firefight on the streets of Seoul. A few days later—as North Korean troops massed on the DMZ—North Korea seized the *USS Pueblo* in neutral waters and imprisoned its captain and crew, holding them hostage for the following eleven months.

Fearful that events in Korea would jeopardize support for the *Vietnam War*, the United States government suppressed any news of the conflict unfolding on the DMZ. General Charles H. Bonesteel III, Commander of U.S. forces in Korea, had arrived to take command in September 1966, and his charter from U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara specifically ordered him to do nothing that would adversely affect America’s military efforts in Vietnam. General Bonesteel promptly classified all information about North Korean military hostilities—effectively putting a lid on the *DMZ War*—keeping the media and the public completely in the dark. Only the *Pueblo* incident emerged in the press.

Official casualty figures for the United States and South Korea during the *DMZ War* are as follows:

South Korea: 299 killed, 550 wounded;

United States: 106 killed, 111 wounded; 85 captured (*USS Pueblo*)

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Although U.S. casualty figures in Korea pale in comparison to those of Vietnam, they don't begin to suggest the fragility and vulnerability of the newly born Republic of Korea as a poverty-stricken experiment in democracy in the 1960s, in danger of being toppled by its more organized and powerful neighbor to the north—nor the critical role played by the 2nd Infantry Division in securing its future. North Korea was, at once, more unified politically and stronger militarily than its fledgling neighbor to the south.

The marked disparity of forces on the peninsula between the two Koreas during the period of the *DMZ War* was, in part, a result of South Korea's significant deployment of forces to Vietnam. Of the ten-member coalition fighting alongside the U.S. in Vietnam, South Korean forces numbered second only to America—including a ROK Marine brigade and an entire South Korean Army division. All of which increased the sense of South Korea's vulnerability at home. When I arrived on the DMZ to join the 2nd Bn/38th Infantry of the 2nd Infantry Division in the spring of 1970, U.S. forces in Korea numbered roughly 60,000 troops—and we were acutely aware of North Korea's vaunted '*million-man army*,' in overwhelming numbers immediately to the north, poised to overrun us at any moment. (Although subsequent estimates tally North Korean forces at somewhat less substantial in number).

In sum, it was the presence of the U.S. Army's 2nd Infantry Division on the Korean DMZ, and our willingness to engage, that kept North Korea at bay throughout the 1960s and the period immediately following.

In the decades that followed, of course, fortunes on the Korean peninsula completely reversed themselves. South Korea rapidly industrialized, transforming itself from a struggling third-world country into one of the strongest economic engines on the planet; whereas North Korea, under its founder's doctrinaire communist policies, has steadily dwindled to a regional welfare state that, at present, can neither feed its population nor keep the lights on at night.

The 2nd Infantry Division is now permanently headquartered in South Korea and operates formally under a unique status as a *Combined Division (2nd Infantry Division-ROK/U.S. Combined Division)* comprised of both U.S. and South Korean troops and led by a command staff from both countries— an arrangement that America shares with no other ally.

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The *DMZ War*, however, remains one of the best-kept secrets of the Vietnam era—an untold story that now merits a serious second look. At the very least, the closely coordinated orchestration between Pyongyang and Hanoi in launching major North Korean and North Vietnamese military offensives only days apart in January 1968 hints at a far more complex picture of the Cold War chessboard than has been previously understood.

In conclusion, it's a staggering irony that, of America's various military adventures in the last half century, by far the most far reaching and successful—viz., the 2nd Infantry Division's combat role in the *DMZ War* and its postwar vigilance in creating the space for South Korea's miraculous transformation—also remains the chapter of U.S. military history most determinedly suppressed and hidden from the public.

Respectfully,

William Winship, Historian — 2ID Memorials Foundation;
DMZ Veteran, recipient of the *Imjin Scout Commendation*;
Author, *The Canandaigua Letters* — Pulitzer Prize-nominated memoir chronicling the *DMZ War*

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Signpost for the 2nd Bn/38th Inf, 2nd Infantry Division below the DMZ — circa 1969-70

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2nd Bn/38th Inf, 2nd Infantry Division at Blue Lancer Valley, South Korea — circa 1969-70

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DMZ — foxhole position; 2nd Bn/38th Inf, 2nd Infantry Division; circa 1969-70

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Recon Platoon (Rat Patrol)/ 2nd Infantry Division, Blue Lancer Valley — circa 1969-70

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South Korean village near the DMZ — circa late 1960s

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Libby Bridge (looking east along the Imjin River from artillery position), ROK — 1969-70

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