

BC-The Bridge at No Gun Ri

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War's hidden chapter: Ex-GIs tell of killing Korean refugees

With AP Photos NY385-NY397; AP Graphics NO GUN RI BRIDGE, NO GUN RI ORDERS

EDITOR'S NOTE _ A Web presentation of this story, including declassified documents, can be found at the AP's "The WIRE" site (<http://wire.ap.org>).

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It was a story no one wanted to hear: Early in the Korean War, villagers said, American soldiers machine-gunned hundreds of helpless civilians under a railroad bridge in the South Korean countryside.

When the families spoke out, seeking redress, they met only rejection and denial, from the U.S. military and their own government in Seoul. Now a dozen ex-GIs have spoken, too, and support their story with haunting memories from a "forgotten" war.

These American veterans of the Korean War say that in late July 1950, in the conflict's first desperate weeks, U.S. troops _ young, green and scared _ killed a large number of South Korean refugees, many of them women and children, trapped beneath a bridge at a hamlet called No Gun Ri.

In interviews with The Associated Press, ex-GIs speak of 100, 200 or simply hundreds dead. The Koreans, whose claim for compensation was rejected last year, say 300 were shot to death at the bridge and 100 died in a preceding air attack.

American soldiers, in their third day at the warfront, feared North Korean infiltrators among the fleeing South Korean peasants, veterans said. "It was assumed there were enemy in these people," ex-rifleman Herman Patterson told The AP.

American commanders had ordered units retreating through South Korea to shoot civilians as a defense against disguised enemy soldiers, according to once-classified documents found by the AP in months of researching U.S. military archives and interviewing veterans across the United States.

Six veterans of the 1st Cavalry Division said they fired on the refugee throng at No Gun Ri, and six others said they witnessed the shootings. More said they knew or heard about it.

"We just annihilated them," said ex-machine gunner Norman Tinkler of Glasco, Kan.

After five decades, none gave a complete, detailed account. But ex-GIs agreed on such elements as time and place, and on the preponderance of women, children and old men among the victims. They also disagreed: Some said they were fired

on from beneath the bridge, but others said they don't remember hostile fire. One said they later found a few disguised North Korean soldiers among the dead. But others disputed this.

Some soldiers refused to shoot what one described as "civilians just trying to hide."

The 30 Korean claimants _ survivors and victims' relatives _ said it was an unprovoked, three-day carnage. "The American soldiers played with our lives like boys playing with flies," said Chun Choon-ja, a 12-year-old girl at the time.

In the end, the Koreans have said in a series of petitions, some 300 refugees lay dead under the bridge's twin arches. About 100 others were killed in a preceding attack by U.S. Air Force planes, they say.

That would make No Gun Ri one of only two known cases of large-scale killings of noncombatants by U.S. ground troops in this century's major wars, military law experts note. The other was Vietnam's My Lai massacre, in 1968, in which more than 500 Vietnamese may have died.

From the start of the 1950-53 conflict, North Korean atrocities were widely reported _ killing of civilians and summary executions of prisoners. But the story of No Gun Ri has remained undisclosed for a half-century, despite sketchy news reports in 1950 implying U.S. troops may have fired on refugees.

No Gun Ri's dead were not alone. Veterans told the AP of two smaller but similar refugee killings in July and August 1950. They also told of refusing orders to fire on civilians in other cases.

Hundreds more South Koreans were killed on Aug. 3, 1950, when retreating U.S. commanders blew up two bridges as refugees streamed across, according to ex-GIs, Korean eyewitnesses and declassified documents.

The Americans wanted to deny the crossings to the enemy, reported massing more than 15 miles away. But the general overseeing one bridge-blowing, the 1st Cavalry Division commander, had sought to stop the refugee flow as well. He told a correspondent he was sure most refugees were North Korean guerrillas.

For decades in U.S.-allied South Korea, the No Gun Ri claimants were discouraged from speaking out. After they filed for compensation in 1997, their claim was rejected by the South Korean government on a technicality.

The U.S. military has said repeatedly it found no basis in the historical record for the allegations. The AP archival research also found no official Army account of the events.

After the AP report was released Wednesday, chief Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon said, "If there's compelling new evidence to look at, obviously it would be important to make sure we've left no stone unturned in getting to the bottom of it."

Bacon commented while traveling with Defense Secretary William Cohen on a visit to Indonesia.

Some elements of the No Gun Ri episode are unclear: What chain of officers gave open-fire orders? Did GIs see gunfire from the refugees or their own

ricochets? How many soldiers refused to fire? How high in the ranks did knowledge of the events extend?

The Korean conflict, which ended in stalemate, began on June 25, 1950, when the communist North invaded and sent the South Korean army and a small U.S. force reeling southward toward the peninsula's tip.

American units were rushed from Japan to stop the North Koreans. The 1st Cavalry Division _ poorly equipped and ill-trained _ went in with little understanding of Korea. Half its sergeants had been transferred to other divisions. Teen-age riflemen and young officers with no combat experience were thrust overnight into a hellish war, told to expect guerrilla fighting and be wary of the tens of thousands of South Korean civilians pouring south with retreating Americans.

The untested 7th Cavalry Regiment, part of the 1st Cavalry Division, reached the front July 24. Within a day many of its 2nd Battalion infantrymen were scattering in panic, tossing away weapons, at word of an enemy breakthrough nearby.

Records show that on the third day, July 26, the battalion's 660 men were regrouped and dug in at No Gun Ri, a hamlet 100 miles southeast of Seoul, South Korea's capital. Word was circulating that northern soldiers disguised in white peasant garb might try to penetrate U.S. lines via refugee groups.

The refugees who approached the 2nd Battalion's lines on July 26 were South Koreans roused from two nearby villages by American soldiers, who warned them the North Koreans were coming, Korean claimants told the AP.

Declassified records show that 1st Cavalry Division soldiers did move through that village area the previous three days.

As the refugees neared No Gun Ri, leading ox carts, some with children on their backs, American soldiers ordered them off the southbound dirt road and onto a parallel railroad track, the South Koreans said. Ex-sergeant George Preece remembered the way was being cleared for U.S. Army vehicles.

What then happened under the concrete bridge cannot be reconstructed in full detail five decades later. Some ex-GIs poured out chilling memories of the scene, but others offered only fragments, or abruptly ended their interviews. Over the three days, no one saw everything: Koreans were cowering under fire, and Americans were dug into positions over hundreds of yards of hilly terrain.

But old soldiers in their late 60s or 70s identified the No Gun Ri bridge from photographs, remembered the approximate dates, and corroborated the core of the Koreans' account: that American troops kept the refugees pinned under the bridge in late July 1950, and killed almost all of them.

"It was just wholesale slaughter," Patterson told the AP in an interview at his Greer, S.C., home.

Both Koreans and several ex-GIs said the killing began when American planes suddenly swooped in and strafed an area where the white-clad refugees were resting.

Bodies fell everywhere, and terrified parents dragged children into a narrow culvert beneath the tracks, the Koreans told the AP.

Declassified U.S. Air Force mission reports from mid-1950 show that pilots sometimes attacked "people in white," apparently because of suspicions North Korean soldiers were disguised among them. The report for one mission of four F-80 jets, for example, said the airborne controller "said to fire on people in white clothes. Were about 50 in group."

Forward controllers in light planes directed pilots to such unplanned targets in mid-flight. The Korean claimants say a light plane circled their area immediately before the strafing.

The strafing may have been a mistake. Ex-GIs said a company commander had called for an airstrike, but against enemy artillery miles up the road.

Veteran Delos Flint remembers being caught with other soldiers in the strafing and piling into a culvert with refugees. Then "somebody, maybe our guys, was shooting in at us," he said. He and his comrades eventually slipped out.

Retired Col. Robert M. Carroll, then a 25-year-old first lieutenant, remembers battalion riflemen opening fire on the refugees from their foxholes.

"This is right after we get orders that nobody comes through, civilian, military, nobody," said Carroll, now living in Lansdowne, Va.

That morning, the U.S. 8th Army had radioed orders throughout the Korean front that began, "No repeat no refugees will be permitted to cross battle lines at any time," according to declassified documents located at the National Archives in Washington.

Two days earlier, 1st Cavalry Division headquarters issued a more explicit order: "No refugees to cross the front line. Fire everyone trying to cross lines. Use discretion in case of women and children."

In the neighboring 25th Infantry Division, the commander, Maj. Gen. William B. Kean, told his troops that since South Koreans were to have been evacuated from the battle zone, "all civilians seen in this area are to be considered as enemy and action taken accordingly." His staff relayed this as "considered as unfriendly and shot."

Military experts in the law of war told the AP they had never heard of such blanket kill orders in the U.S. military.

"An order to fire on civilians is patently an illegal order," said retired Col. Scott Silliman of Duke University, an Air Force lawyer for 25 years.

Carroll said he "wasn't convinced this was enemy," and he got the rifle companies to cease firing on the refugees. The lieutenant then shepherded a boy to safety under a double-arched concrete railroad bridge nearby, where shaken and wounded Koreans were gathered. He said he saw no threat.

"There weren't any North Koreans in there the first day, I'll tell you that. It was mainly women and kids and old men," recalled Carroll, who said he then left the area and knows nothing about what followed.

The Americans directed the refugees into the bridge underpasses _ each 80 feet long, 23 feet wide, 30 feet high _ and after dark opened fire on them from nearby machine-gun positions, the Koreans said.

Veterans said Capt. Melbourne C. Chandler, after speaking with superior officers by radio, had ordered machine-gunners from his heavy-weapons company to set up near the tunnel mouths and open fire.

"Chandler said, `The hell with all those people. Let's get rid of all of them,'" said Eugene Hesselman of Fort Mitchell, Ky.

"We didn't know if they were North or South Koreans. ... We were there only a couple of days and we didn't know them from a load of coal."

Ex-GIs believe the order was cleared at battalion headquarters, a half-mile to the rear, or at a higher level. Chandler and other key officers are now dead, but the AP was able to locate the colonel who commanded the battalion, Herbert B. Heyer, 88.

Heyer, of Sandy Springs, Ga., denied knowing anything about the shootings and said, "I know I didn't give such an order." Veterans said the colonel apparently was leaving battalion operations to subordinates at the time.

The bursts of gunfire killed those near the tunnel entrances first, the Korean claimants said.

"People pulled dead bodies around them for protection," said Chung Koo-ho, 61. "Mothers wrapped their children with blankets and hugged them with their backs toward the entrances. ... My mother died on the second day of shooting."

Recalled machine-gunner Edward L. Daily: "Some may have been trying to crawl deeper for protection. When you see something like that and you're frightened, you start to claw."

During three nights under fire, some trapped refugees managed to slip away, but others were shot as they tried to escape or crawled out to find clean water to drink, the Koreans said.

Veterans disagreed on whether gunfire came from the underpasses.

Some, like ex-sergeant James T. Kerns of Piedmont, S.C., said the Americans were answering fire from among the refugees. Hesselman said, "Every now and then you'd hear a shot, like a rifle shot." But others recalled only heavy barrages of American firepower, not hostile fire. "I don't remember shooting coming out," said ex-rifleman Louis Allen of Bristol, Tenn.

The Koreans said the Americans may have been seeing their own comrades' fire, ricocheting through from the tunnels' opposite ends. That's possible, said Preece.

"It could actually have happened, that they were seeing our own fire. ... We were scared to death," said Preece, a career soldier who later fought in Vietnam.

On July 28, the 7th Cavalry was told to prepare to pull back again early the next morning. The final barrage still echoes in the memories of old soldiers.

"On summer nights when the breeze is blowing, I can still hear their cries, the little kids screaming," said Daily, of Clarksville, Tenn., who went on to earn a battlefield commission in Korea.

Sounds of slaughter haunt Park Hee-sook's memory, too.

"I can still hear the moans of women dying in a pool of blood," said Park, then a girl of 16. "Children cried and clung to their dead mothers."

Not everyone fired, veterans said.

"Some of us did and some of us didn't," said Flint, of Clio, Mich., the soldier who had been briefly caught in the culvert with the refugees. "... I wouldn't fire at anybody in the tunnel like that. It was civilians just trying to hide."

Kerns, a machine gunner, said he fired over the refugees' heads. "I would not fire into a bunch of women."

Once the fury subsided, Kerns said, he, Preece and another GI found at least seven dead North Korean soldiers in the underpasses, wearing uniforms under peasant white.

But Preece, of Dunville, Ky., said he doesn't remember making such a search or even hearing that North Koreans were found. None of the other veterans, when asked, remembered seeing North Koreans.

Kerns also said weapons were recovered. Hesselman said someone later displayed a submachine gun. Preece recalled only "hearsay" about weapons.

All 24 South Korean survivors interviewed individually by the AP said they remembered no North Koreans or gunfire directed at the Americans.

American military intelligence reports from those days, since declassified, place the North Korean front line four miles from No Gun Ri on July 26, when the refugees entered the underpasses.

Early on July 29, the 7th Cavalry pulled back. North Korean troops who moved in found "about 400 bodies of old and young people and children," the North Korean newspaper Cho Sun In Min Bo reported three weeks later.

Some ex-GIs today estimate 100 or fewer were killed. But those close to the bridge, from Chandler's H Company, generally put the total at about 200. "A lot" also were killed in the strafing, they say.

The North Koreans buried some dead in unknown locations and surviving relatives buried others, the villagers said. Because families then scattered across South Korea, the claimants said, they have the names of only 120 dead, primarily their own relatives.

The war, in all, claimed an estimated 1 million South Korean civilian casualties — killed, wounded or missing. Almost 37,000 Americans died.

At 1st Cavalry headquarters, division commander Maj. Gen. Hobart R. Gay was told South Korean refugees were killed by North Korean troops in a cross fire at No Gun Ri, the division information officer recalled. "I think that's what he believed," said Harold D. Steward, an ex-colonel from San Diego.

Relevant unit documents say nothing about a cross fire, about North Korean soldiers killed under a bridge, or anything else about No Gun Ri.

One battalion lieutenant located by the AP said he was in the area but knew nothing about the killing of civilians. "I have honestly never, ever heard of this from either my soldiers or superiors or my friends," said John C. Lippincott of Stone Mountain, Ga. He said he could have missed it because "we were extremely spread out."

The villagers say they tried to file a compensation claim with a U.S. claims office in Seoul in 1960, but were told they missed a deadline. Later, they say, Korean police warned one man, survivor Yang Hae-chan, to keep quiet about the 1950 events. But as authoritarian South Korea liberalized in the 1990s, they revived their case and sent petitions to Washington. None was acknowledged, they say.

In August 1997, a claim signed by 30 petitioners was filed with South Korea's Government Compensation Committee. Having researched histories, they pointed a finger at the 1st Cavalry.

In response, the U.S. Armed Forces Claims Service said there was "no evidence ... to show that the U.S. 1st Cavalry Division was in the area." A lower-level South Korean compensation committee said people were killed at No Gun Ri but it had no proof of U.S. involvement. In April 1998, the national panel rejected the case, saying a five-year statute of limitations expired long ago.

The AP subsequently reconstructed unit movements from map coordinates in declassified war records. They showed that four 1st Cavalry Division battalions were in the area at the time of the alleged incident.

Months of tracing veterans _ some 130 interviews by telephone and in person _ then pinpointed the companies involved. The AP also pored through hundreds of boxes of once-secret documents at the National Archives and other repositories to find pieces of the story.

The laws and customs of war condemn indiscriminate killing of civilians, even if a few enemy soldiers are among a large number of noncombatants killed, military experts note. The Korean War record shows Army courts-martial only for individual murders of Koreans, nothing on a large scale.

As for civil liability, the U.S. government is largely protected by U.S. law against foreign claims related to "combatant activities." The Korean claimants say the killings were not combat-related _ the enemy was miles away.

"We want the truth, justice and due respect for our human rights," they wrote in a 1997 petition to President Clinton.

One ex-GI objects that "a bunch of lawyers" can't run a war.

"War is not just," said Norman Tinkler. "There's things that goes on that we can't comprehend, but it has to be done. And it's the individual that has to make the decision."

But others who were there said No Gun Ri didn't have to happen. The refugees could have been screened up on the road or checked out under the bridge, Kerns and Hesselman said.

"The command looked at it as getting rid of the problem in the easiest way. That was to shoot them in a group," said Daily. Today, he said, "we all share a guilt feeling, something that remains with everyone."

The late Col. Gilmon A. Huff, who took over the 2nd Battalion from Heyer three days after the pullback from No Gun Ri, was interviewed before his death earlier this year and said he knew nothing of what happened at the bridge.

But he "heard" about refugee killings and told his men it was wrong, Huff recalled at his Abbeville, S.C., home.

"You can't kill people just for being there," he told the AP.

The bridge at No Gun Ri still stands today. For 49 years its concrete was deeply scarred by bullets _ until railroad workers this month patched over the holes.

EDITOR'S NOTE _ AP Investigative Researcher Randy Herschaft contributed to this report.