

No War Crime at No Gun Ri

The truth about the notorious Korean War atrocity claim.

Leonard "Buddy" Wenzel, a rifleman with the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment in Korea, was an eyewitness to the tragic events that unfolded July 26, 1950.

All parties agree that something terrible happened near the village of No Gun Ri, South Korea, in the opening weeks of the Korean War. Indeed, the basic facts are not in dispute: On July 26, 1950, the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, poorly prepared to fight an unexpected war, was reorganizing its scattered elements near the village. Sometime that day, a group of South Korean civilians approached the battalion's broken battle lines. Firing erupted and several explosions occurred within the group of civilians, a number of whom were killed by small-arms fire. By any definition, the situation was a tragedy. But was it an atrocity – a hidden U.S. war crime – as claimed in media reports?



The very first night the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry



A reconnaissance photograph taken August 6, 1950, and released January 11, 2001, shows No Gun Ri, South Korea, the area where Korean witnesses claim U.S. forces killed South Korean civilians in July 1950.

Pulitzer Prize ... or Booby Prize?

In September 1999, nearly half a century after the incident, the Associated Press (AP) news agency shocked the world by breaking the No Gun Ri story. The AP report claimed that U.S. troops had committed what amounted to a deliberate massacre – a war crime and atrocity – at the small South Korean village in the summer of 1950. All major media outlets picked up the sensational account, and AP garnered a Pulitzer Prize for it.

The AP version of events began in this manner:

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.

According to the AP story, as many as 100 civilians initially were killed when they were strafed and bombed by American jets called in by nearby U.S. ground troops. Those same American troops were said to have herded the survivors to a railway underpass and subsequently machine-gunned them at point-blank range. The firing, according to AP sources (see “The Eyewitness Who Was Not There” on page 36), continued for two additional days and possibly killed 300 more men, women and children. Therefore, AP asserted, the total number of dead might have reached 400. Inevitably, breathless commentators compared the No Gun Ri event to the infamous My Lai massacre in Vietnam in 1968.

The problem with the AP report is that it has been proved to be grossly inaccurate,

representing a blatant misuse of the power of the press. It appears that AP was more deserving of a booby prize than the coveted Pulitzer.

What *actually* occurred at No Gun Ri was a tragic incident of war; however, it was *not* the horrific, cold-blooded atrocity AP reporters claimed. A more thorough examination of the evidence – including aerial photographs, forensic investigations, interviews with veterans, and solid historical research – points instead to miscommunication and panic on the part of a few U.S. troops. The disastrous result was 30 to 90 seconds of undisciplined small-arms fire that led to as many as 35 civilian deaths on the first day (July 26) – but it was not sustained acts of wanton murder.

Examining *how* the No Gun Ri tragedy occurred reveals a bitter lesson in the enduring importance of training and small unit leadership when inexperienced Soldiers are thrust into the chaos of the battlefield.

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Prelude to Tragedy

The Korean War began June 25, 1950, when the armies of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (communist North Korea) stormed across the 38th parallel, the boundary separating North Korea and South Korea. Influenced by the global Cold War, President Harry S. Truman decided almost immediately that the United States would intervene in order to preserve a democratic South Korea from a communist military takeover.

Although four U.S. Army divisions were stationed nearby in Japan, they were woefully undermanned, under trained, and indifferently equipped with World War II-era arms and equipment. In the rapid downsizing following World War II, Army regiments had been reduced from three battalions to two, and the rotation of personnel in the occupation units was nothing short of whirlwind, resulting in poor, and often nonexistent, combat training. This environment was not conducive to fostering high-performing combat units. Indeed, the Army officials who oversaw the pell-mell postwar downsizing never expected that the deliberately crippled units would ever actually have to *fight* a war.

In the wake of the North Korean invasion and the Truman administration's decision to intervene, one of those Japan-based units, the 24th Infantry Division, was deployed to South Korea to stem the tide. To compensate for the division's reduced force structure, its numbers were brought closer to a full-sized division's strength by taking troops (especially sergeants, the key small unit leaders needed for combat efficiency) from the other three divisions in Japan. As a result, the 1st Cavalry Division lost 732 men – mostly non-commissioned officers, including 168 sergeants from the two-battalion 7th Cavalry Regiment – as they were hastily transferred to the 24th. The loss of these small unit leaders was almost immediately significant since it quickly became apparent that the 24th Division was not strong enough to halt the North Koreans. The 1st Cavalry Division therefore was deployed to combat, and its 7th Cavalry Regiment reached Korea on July 22. Ominously, the 7th's rifle platoons entered the war manned chiefly by inexperi-



July 26, 1950. A long line of Korean refugees flees Yongdong and heads south following the communist invasion of South Korea. Tens of thousands of civilians fled with retreating U.S. and South Korean troops. Eight miles down the road from Yongdong lay the village of No Gun Ri.

enced privates and second lieutenants. It was a perfect recipe for disaster.

The North Koreans, many of whom were battle-hardened veterans of the recently concluded Chinese civil war, did not stop their attacks when they encountered the first U.S. units in Korea, as many Americans had naively expected them to. In fact, the surging North Koreans – spearheaded by formidable Soviet T-34 tanks – rolled right over their poorly prepared U.S. opponents. The soft life of occupation duty in Japan had made the American divisions easy marks for their tough, determined enemy. The predictable results were lopsided engagements in which the North Koreans overran or swept aside the Americans' feeble attempts to stop them.

The very first night the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry spent on the battle line (July 25), it virtually disintegrated – while not even in heavy contact with the enemy. The unit's Soldiers scattered, dropped their weapons, and left materiel strewn all across the Korean hills. The next morning, some miles to the rear of their initial position, the battalion attempted to reconstitute.

90 Seconds of Panic

The disintegration of the battalion occurred unevenly. Some components, no more than a platoon here and there, managed to stay together. A few officers also held together moderately sized elements by force of personality and firm leadership. But the efforts were isolated and clearly not enough to maintain any semblance of battalion cohesion. Strewn along the route from their position of the night before to their improvised rally point some four miles to the east were several mortars, four light and four heavy (water-cooled) machine guns, three .50-caliber machine guns and 119 M-1 Garand rifles, the Soldiers' individual weapons. The latter was the surest sign of panic and lack of effective small unit leadership.

The initial report from the battalion that morning, recorded in the 1st Cavalry Division G2 log at 7:14 a.m., listed 80 "effectives," meaning that only 80 Soldiers were under the direct command and control of their of-

The battalion's radios were incompatible with those used by the Air Force; therefore, the Soldiers could not have called in an air strike.

The Eyewitness Who Was Not There: The Strange Tale of Edward Daily

Central to the AP's 1999 Pulitzer Prize-winning blockbuster story – and to many of the subsequent reports by news outlets such as the *Washington Post*, the *LA Times*, and NBC's *Dateline With Tom Brokaw* – was the testimony of one absolutely essential “eyewitness,” Edward Daily. Daily not only claimed that he was the main machine-gunner mowing down civilians that day at No Gun Ri, but that he did so under the orders of the battalion's officers.

Daily seemed like the ultimate “source” with his impressive Korean War military record. His biography stated that he won a battlefield commission and earned the Distinguished Service Cross and three Purple Hearts while fighting throughout the war with the 7th Cavalry. He claimed to have been captured and that he then managed a daring escape to return to his unit at the front. The apogee of Ed Daily's fame came when NBC, for its news show *Dateline*, flew him to South Korea to meet the civilian claimants and apologize on camera for the horrible things he did to them 50 years earlier. It was a dramatic moment seen around the world.

Daily was a central figure in the news reports since he brought together all elements of the AP narrative: the machine-gunning, the order from higher head-

quarters (making the killings a deliberate act), and confirmation of the high casualty count. As a decorated combat veteran – a real war hero – his testimony was important and compelling. In researching the story, AP reporters relied heavily on Daily since he had written books on the regiment and maintained a phone roster of veterans who were active in the regimental association.

However, Ed Daily proved to be a blatant fraud. He was not the Distinguished Service Cross-winning, battlefield commissioned, captured-and-escaped, three Purple Heart-earning combat stud that he and the uncritical news organizations had claimed. In fact, he was no war hero at all. At the time of No Gun Ri, Ed Daily was ... a jeep mechanic. He was not even in the 7th Cavalry, nor was he in any front-line combat unit. In reality, Ed Daily was a former used-car salesman who created a phony combat record in the 1980s and then filed a compensation claim for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). By the time his fraud was exposed – long after the AP story had collapsed – Daily had collected more than \$400,000 in disability claims for PTSD resulting from his “horrific combat experiences” in 1950.

Daily pleaded guilty to fraud and served 21 months in a federal penitentiary. The AP kept its Pulitzer Prize.



U.S. infantrymen move forward to meet advancing North Korean units. Lacking veteran NCOs, 7th Cavalry Regiment units lost cohesion and combat effectiveness.

quarters at a known location. The battalion, as such, did not exist. July 26, 1950, therefore, began as a day of recovery and reconstitution, with weary men and exhausted leaders struggling to regain a semblance of order.

At some point during the day, a large party of Korean civilian refugees began streaming toward the battalion's lines. Confused, and with many of their comrades scattered about the refugee-packed region forward of the lines searching for missing weapons and men, the reaction of the Soldiers of the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry was hardly organized or even coherent.

The 2d Battalion's radioman, Jim Crume, recalled what happened next:

The battalion was astraddle the road coming down from the north, and I was about 10-15 yards from the battalion commander [Lieutenant Colonel Herbert B. Heyer] and the battalion S3. It was a clear day. The first thing that I remember seeing was the individuals [Korean civilians] coming down the road. You could see that they were not combat personnel. They were about 300-500 yards away at the time, the road sort of went obliquely to my location. They were fairly well grouped together, about 100 yards of them, but there were a fair number.

The next thing I know, the mortar rounds started going into them – there's a different sound between artillery and mortars, so that's how I knew it was mortars. There was a burst of mortars rounds, and then it stopped, and [the civilians] continued coming down the road, and more [mortar rounds] come in. Well, the refugees sort of dispersed [from] the road, and then it stopped, and they got back up on the road, and then when the [civilians] started [moving] again, more mortar rounds came in. I don't remember seeing any bodies. I was just about four or five feet lower on the hill than [Lieutenant Colonel Heyer] was, and off to his left. As the mortar [rounds] were coming in, I looked at him and I could see that he didn't agree with [the bombardment] at all. He had kind of a craggy face anyhow, and he was very slow in speaking, and [his face] was drawn and he was frowning. I don't remember ... any [small-arms] gunfire.

Rifleman Buddy Wenzel was on the valley floor. He remembered those seconds this way:

[The civilians] started coming through down the [railroad] tracks, on paths on both sides of the tracks. ... The front ones, there were like maybe 15 or 20 of them, and they

Aerial reconnaissance photos of the valley, taken just three days after the Americans withdrew, show neither bodies nor extensive upturned dirt that would betray the location of a mass grave.

were getting thicker beyond that [i.e., more civilians were pressing on from behind the leaders]. Somebody said, "Fire over their heads for a warning." ... I got out of my hole with about 30 other guys; we all had M-1s. Now, we had one machine gun up on the railroad tracks and another air-cooled machine gun on the right. Well, when we fired over their heads they panicked. ... That's when some of them started to run towards us. We were firing over them all this time.

After the mortar shells had landed and the initial gunfire shot over the heads of the 75 to 100 civilians had ended, local Korean guerrillas within the group returned fire with at least one submachine gun and one Japanese rifle. This proved a fatal mistake as it elicited a lethal, although brief, American fusillade of return fire.

Wenzel continued:

Then somebody yelled, "We're being fired at," then there was a bunch that started shooting into the refugees. ... This all happened in a minute, but it all came out when we panicked 'cause we thought we were getting shot at.

There was a lieutenant that was running down to that group I was with. I saw this little girl [among the civilians] that was sort of in front, she was maybe four or five years old, and she was coming down the track and I shot towards her and she fell. Well, this lieutenant ran out there and picked up this little girl. Why ... why I [shot her] I can't tell you. That's why the lieutenant was yelling, "Cease fire," and he was running. She was out there in front, by herself, and flailing her arms and throwing her arms down.

After the cease-fire I stayed where I was, maybe 10 or 15 yards from the track, and maybe six or eight guys went down the tracks from the group that I was with, and a few went down from on top of the tracks. One of the guys went down there and searched a few of the bodies, he ... found a body with a burp gun, and he yelled, "Here's the goddamned gun," and he held it straight up and slammed it down on the tracks.

Among the civilians, the total number of wounded or killed, both from the mortar fire and the small-arms fire, appears to have been between eight and 35 people. There is little



January 12, 2001. The Associated Press's release of the No Gun Ri story, followed by President Bill Clinton expressing "deep regret" but not offering an apology, prompted South Korean protestors to demonstrate and shout anti-American slogans near a U.S. Army base in Seoul.

A careful examination of the civilian eyewitness accounts reveals that many of the Koreans in the group mistook the mortar fire for aircraft bombs. There were unconfirmed reports of a light observation aircraft overhead at the time, but not a combat jet. Moreover, the battalion's radios

were incompatible with those used by the Air Force; therefore, the Soldiers could not have called in an air strike. On the other hand, although weapons were found among the bodies, it cannot be proved that they were used at that time and place, as many GI veterans believe.

What does appear irrefutable, however, is that the casualty figures were actually much lower than the sensational numbers put forth by the AP in 1999. Aerial reconnaissance photos of the valley, taken just three days after the Americans withdrew, show neither bodies nor extensive upturned dirt that would betray the location of a mass grave. Yet something did happen – something tragically avoidable.

indication that in the immediate aftermath the men of the battalion did much to aid the civilians caught in their fire. Soldiers collected a Japanese rifle and a Russian submachine gun during a subsequent sweep through the refugees and forwarded the captured weapons through proper channels. Forensic examinations of the site by the ROK government 50 years later found some of the submachine gun's spent cartridges at the location where the Americans stated that they had received fire.

July 27 found the U.S. troops still in their positions. The only notable combat action occurred when U.S. Air Force fighters mistakenly strafed the headquarters of the 7th Regiment's 1st Battalion, destroying one truck and damaging a jeep and trailer. The 2d Battalion remained near No Gun Ri for an additional day, apparently still offering little or no assistance to the South Korean civilians to their front. On July 29, the regiment pulled out and established a new defensive line to the southeast.

What took place at No Gun Ri was definitely *not* the under-orders, cold-blooded "execution" of up to 400 unarmed Korean civilians as claimed in the AP report. It certainly was no Korean War version of Vietnam's My Lai massacre. Instead, the few minutes of undisciplined, panicked small-arms fire that killed or wounded up to 35 civilians was the nearly predictable result of hastily throwing mostly inexperienced, poorly led and inadequately trained U.S. troops into a confused, chaotic situation for which they were completely unprepared.

The real *atroc*ity of No Gun Ri was the rush to judgment perpetrated by the Associated Press, not the 7th Cavalry Regiment. ★

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What Really Happened at No Gun Ri?

The South Korean eyewitness accounts must be examined rigorously. Many of the civilians' stories are contradicted by the extensive physical evidence and smack of folklore – and the Koreans' \$400 million claim for reparations has sparked a host of new claimants who have suddenly "remembered" the incident.