

FACT, STRANGER ? THAN FICTION!

By Bill Weber

As most of you know I'm Chairman, Korean War Veterans Memorial Foundation, Inc. (KWVMFnd)" Take a minute and look us up on our website for a complete rundown on us: www.koreanwarvetsememorial.org Help us with our 'WALL OF REMEMBRANCE' endeavor! I HOPE THE FOLLOWING INTRIGUES YOU AS IT DID ME!

The graphic to the right on this page defines the location of the Imjin River and its confluence with the Han River just Northwest of Seoul. At that and where it crosses the Seoul-Pyongyang road it is a major barrier. Crossing it as quickly as possible was a 'mandate'! The pursuit of the remnants of NK Forces had to be maintained

Note: In Hangul the KATUSA in this story would be named Chang, Wondo as Koreans place last name first. I will 'anglicize' to Wondo Chang to make your reading easier and pray Korean readers will agree!

FOREWORD

On 25 Jun 2015 the KWVMFnd sponsored a ceremony, at which we read at the Korean War Veterans Memorial, the names of the 36,574 U.S. Soldiers KIA in the Korean War. Unknown to our people is that Republic of Korea Soldiers were assigned to U.S. units during the war due to a shortage of trained U.S. replacements. KATUSA combat losses would otherwise have been U.S.

They were called Korean Augmentation To U.S. Army (KATUSA). Approximately, 25% of U.S. Army combat and combat support units were KATUSA. Over 23,000 KATUSA served during the war and continue to do so today in the 2nd U.S. Inf Div. Of these, during 25 Jun '50, to 27 Jul '53, 5936 were KIA! That's a ratio of almost 1 in 5 vs a U.S. ratio of 1 in 9—almost twice as much! Irrespective of the ratio it is fair to assume every KATUSA KIA could otherwise well have been a U.S. Soldier!

Ergo, in honor of their sacrifice and the U.S. Soldiers lives they saved, this past 25 Jun 2016, we read the names of these KATUSA KIA, just as we did their U.S. counterparts last June. The 'reading symbolism' used was to have the name read first by a Korean (KATUSA vet, ROK Embassy military aides, Korean-American KATUSA veterans, Korean-American ROK Army veterans, and then by U.S. Korean War Veterans Association members, my Board members and active U.S. military members.

Readers were paired----a Korean national or Korean-American would first read the name in Hangul (Korean language), followed by an American



reading the name in phonetical English. This process continued unabated for almost seven hours until all 5936 names were read!

Members from Chapters 33, 100, 142, 312 and 313 participated as 'readers' as did Tom Stevens (new President), and others from KWVA Board. To those of you who supported this ceremony, my thanks!

But, let me get to the reason for this short and, strangely named, article—for sometimes, 'Fact, Stranger? Than Fiction!' can be so!

One of the reading pairs was a Korean-American KATUSA war veteran, Wondo Chang and his partner, Robert Mount, currently President of KWVA Chapter 142 in Frederick, MD.

And it is at the juxtaposition of 'reading pairs', chosen at random, that the title of this article became manifested this past 25 June! KATUSA veteran Wondo Chang, and KWVA veteran Robert 'Bob' Mount were again (Note: I'm a firm believer that 'coincidence' is sometimes pre-ordained!), 'paired', though this time somewhat more intimately, as 'readers' to read together.

But, unbeknownst to all, that day and 66 years earlier, the TWO had also been 'paired' though unknowingly, (and somewhat indirectly), in a combat related activity in Korea in late Sep-early Oct 1950!

BACKGROUND

In the U.S. Eighth Army breakout pursuit of retreating North Korean Army forces, 'Bob' Mount was assigned to the 72nd Combat Engineer Company, attached to the 5th Regimental Combat Team (RCT), and, Wondo Chang was a



11th Engr Cbt
Bn DUI

KATUSA assigned to "A" Company. U.S. 11th Engineer Combat Battalion! They unknowingly served, in a sense of the words, 'side by side' helping to construct a bridge over the Imjin River to replace the one destroyed during the see-saw fighting north of Seoul after the Inchon Landing!

In late September-early October, following the recapture of Seoul, the 5th RCT was one of the lead elements of U.S. I Corps attacking abreast the MSR from Seoul through Kaesong to



Portion of abutment of original road/rail bridge spanning the Imjin River?

Pyongyang. The 11th Engineer Combat Battalion was part of Eighth Army combat support forces.

Both units were part of U.S. I Corps which was advancing on the West Coast of Korea from Seoul to Pyongyang. At the Imjin River, the original highway/rail road bridge

across the Imjin had been destroyed by U.S. bombing

and, whatever remained that enabled crossing the river, by North Korean forces retreating North.

The Imjin River was a major barrier to U.S./ROK forces and could not be crossed by any heavy wheeled or tracked vehicles, absent a bridge! Crossing by Infantry in assault boats was possible, though somewhat hazardous as the banks were steep and, at that time of the year, the current strong and swift from the residue of late summer flooding. In addition, the depth too deep to permit crossing on foot.

THE IMJIN RIVER AND BRIDGE(S)

The Imjin River (as named in Hanguk in South Korea) or Rimjin River (as named in Chosŏn'gŏll, in North Korea) is the 7th largest river in Korea. It flows from north to south, crossing the now Demilitarized Zone and joining the Han River downstream of Seoul, near the Yellow Sea.



Destroyed Imjin River Bridge 1950 and replacement 'full service' bridge being constructed by U.S. Army Engineers, o/a late Oct 50.

It is a barrier, if not bridged, to the Main Supply Route (MSR), running from Seoul through Wonsan to Pyongyang. Absent bridges, even crossing by foot after flood stage (Jul-Oct), is treacherous because of the precipitous banks and for weeks after flood stage, soft bed and banks!

Plus, even though the remnants of their Army were in full retreat the North Koreans still had organized units and guerilla elements to conduct rear guard and delaying opposition from the far bank. Air and indirect fire were decimating such as well as

enfilading action by U.S. crossing further upstream.

But, it would take ‘man against man’ to clear the North banks and approaches to the Imjin! And, time was of the essence to prevent the North Koreans from reorganizing the remnants of their Army. No one knew the CCF was already crossing the Yalu or, if they did, believed it was limited to limited forces to recover material and munitions stockpiled for NK use!

THE ‘RIVER’!

The active channel of the Imjin (Rimjin) River in non-flood stage, utilizes only about 150 to 200 feet of the 1,200-foot width of the dry riverbed (except in immediate post-flood stage), that it runs through. It is bordered by almost vertical rock cliffs standing approximately 75 feet above the mean low water level. It gives no indication in normal times of the tremendous power it develops when in flood.

During the Korean rainy season of July and August and, at times extending through September and sometimes to early October, (Note: As it was in 1950), the Imjin becomes a raging torrent. Though largely confined by its steep rocky banks. Nonetheless, fed by its larger tributaries and many small mountain streams, it reaches flood heights of 48 feet above mean water level and a velocity of 15 to 20 feet per second!

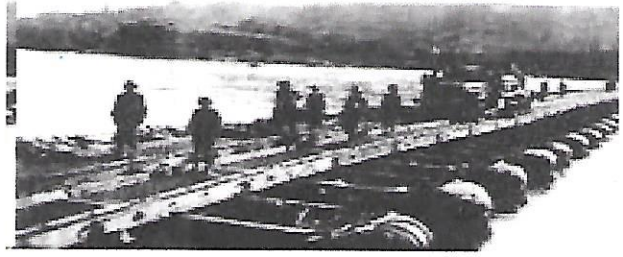
The rapid runoff of approximately 95 percent of precipitation during heavy general rains has caused the Imjin, on occasion, to rise at a rate of more than six feet per hour. During the flood stage, and at the ending of such, the entire 1200 foot width of the river is filled with a torrent of rushing water that slowly returns to a relatively quiescent stage.

In short, the Imjin River was a major barrier to modern warfare during the Korean War! Even in its ‘quiet state’ the dry portion of the river bed would not support heavy wheeled or tracked traffic!

THE ‘FIRST’ PAIRING?

A ‘real bridge ‘BRIDGE’ was needed if the North Koreans were to be defeated and the ‘war’ to be decisively ‘won’! Needed was a bridge capable of handling heavy military traffic—SOMETHING no pontoon bridge would do!

Not too good a picture but shows the nature of the river banks on the shoreline! Picture taken from North Bank of River.



But first was needed a troop, vehicle pontoon bridge to enable continuing ‘hot pursuit’ of retreating NK forces! A job for combat engineer bridge builders! Ergo, enter the 11th Engineer Combat Battalion, specifically “A” Company to which Wondo was assigned, and 72nd Combat Engineer Company, 5th RCT, to which Bob was assigned. Their task, build a Pontoon Bridge!

Wondo and Bob had no means of knowing each other then in 1950, nor can it be said with certainty that their respective duties in building the bridge may have had them ‘side by side’! Or, even within eyesight of each other! But, who knows—it could have been so! And, if it were so, then did fate again take a hand sixty-six years later? What we can know for certain (since their reminiscing in 2016 so revealed), is that they both vividly remember placing pontoons, anchoring them and laying the foundation and bridge planks. In short, though not knowingly working ‘side by side’—it could so have been!!



Picture of ‘Wondo’ and Bob’s ‘Pontoon Bridge’ Taken well after combat had moved North of Imjin River. ROK Mps took control of bridge to contain refugee usage..

(AND THUS, THE FIRST ‘PAIRING’?)

THE 'SECOND' PAIRING!

No matter how you may feel 'coincidence', 'fate' or 'luck' plays a role in the relations of human beings, 'en masse' or 'one on one' ----there are times when something occurs which defies any reasonable explanation! Our destiny, surely and/or seemingly, is not always just in our hands to fulfill!

When we were compiling the listing of 'readers' for the KATUSA KIA Reading Ceremony, as I described in the Introduction above, we compiled a listing of names of those who would read the KATUSA names in Hangul and those who would read the name again in phonetic English.

There was no particular attention paid to the 'pairing', except for the VIPs who read. Obviously, we 'paired' the VIP Hangul reader with a comparable level VIP phonetic English reader----protocol demanded such! For example, if VIP we 'paired' with VIP, if the Hangul reader was a KATUSA veteran or ROK Army veteran we 'paired' them with a KWVA veteran. If Korean or Korean-American civilian--we paired likewise!

But, the names were really chose at random. As we received a listing of potential readers we place them on either an Hangul or phonetic English list. When we received final confirmation that the reader would be show up' we refined the lists accordingly.

In brief, for the reader pairing (by category), we simply matched those listed by name and number on the Hangul reading list with their counterpart name and number on the phonetic English reader list! These respective lists had over fifty names on each!

The names were placed on the list as I earlier wrote, and confirmed that the individual so listed would, in fact, be present to read! As it turned out, OR FATE OR 'SOMETHING' (?) ORDAINED, Wondo and Bob were matching numbers on the Hangul/phonetic English respective lists! They 'paired' to read! How, why?????

(AND THUS, THE SECOND PAIRING!)

AFTERMATH

Their reading finished, one would assume

they each would go their separate ways to join others of their groups who were scheduled to read or had so finished. But, no, they instead chose to move to some chairs we had set up and avail themselves of a water or soft drink we had available for readers.

Not so intending, just by chance, after getting a refreshment they sat together. Wondo speaks only broken English and Bob no Hangul but, as Soldiers do, they exchanged 'a war story' about their respective experiences. And, thus came the Imjin River Pontoon Bridge of 1950!

COINCIDENCE, FATE, ORDAINED?

I'm not even going to go there! I'll leave it to those better able to explain the juxtaposition of time, events, happenstance and just plain unexplained coincidence, to determine the 'PAIRING' that happened!

What I can define however, is that, on 25 June 2016, two former Soldiers who may have 'bumped arms' sixty-six years ago---this past June the 25th, 2016----embraced 'arms around' each other,' because fate brought them together-----for, the 2nd time,---- PERHAPS? BUT SURELY, FOR THE 1st TIME!



Bob and Wondo for whom fate (?), chance(?), design(?), brought together twice (maybe), but surely by happenstance or divine intent, the first!

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