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The Armor Debacle in Korea, 1950: Implications for Today

ARTHUR W. CONNOR, JR.

“All we need is some men up there who won’t run when they see tanks.”

— Brigadier General John H. Church
to Lieutenant Colonel Charles B. Smith,
2 July 1950.

At the end of World War II, the US Army evaluated every aspect of its doctrine. The 1946 Stilwell Board, studying the role of the tank, concluded “that the best antitank weapon is a better tank.”¹ The concept of tank destroyers as a separate arm was discarded when the distinction between tank and tank destroyer faded with the introduction of the M-26 Pershing tank and its 90mm main gun. Tanks were added to the infantry regiment Table of Organization and Equipment (TO&E), and a tank battalion was made organic to each infantry division.

Budgetary strictures imposed after World War II, however, did not allow these units to remain operative, and many were simply deactivated. The 1949 Field Service Regulations reflected the changes that emanated from the combat experience of World War II, emphasizing that “no one arm wins battles.”² Thus when the North Koreans invaded South Korea on 25 June 1950, the US Army had a sound doctrinal approach to war, but it did not have the forces to support the doctrine. One notable result was the destruction of Task Force Smith on 5 July 1950 by the tank-led North Korean Peoples Army.

Lieutenant Colonel Charles B. “Brad” Smith led a small force from the 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division into South Korea on 1 July 1950. Consisting of two companies of infantry, two 75mm recoilless rifles, two 4.2-inch mortars, six 2.36-inch shoulder-held antitank rocket-launchers (“bazookas,” in the idiom of the day), and a six-gun battery

of 105mm artillery, Task Force Smith was airlifted into Pusan and then moved north to confront the enemy.

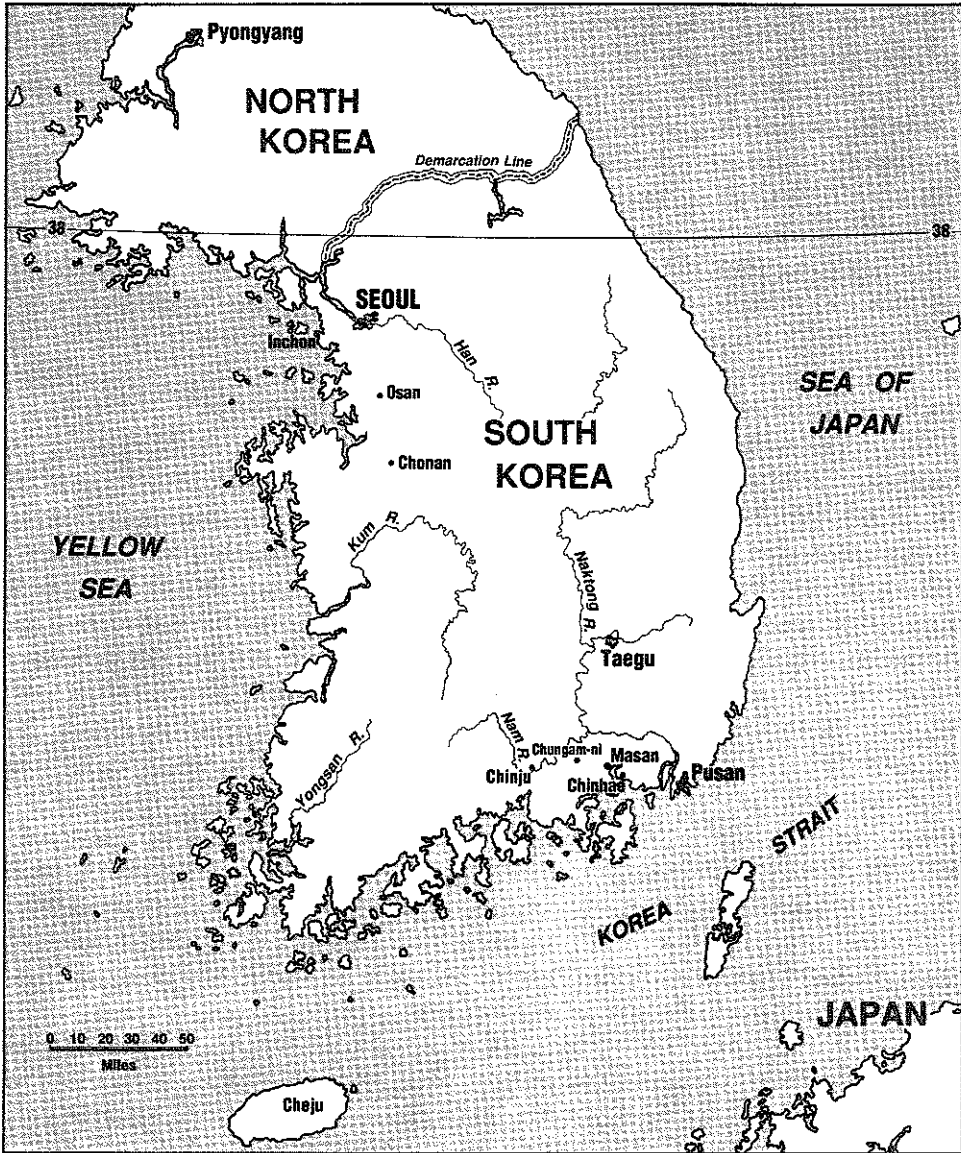
Posted into position north of Osan, the Americans met the advancing enemy on the morning of 5 July. At 0800 hours, the six howitzers began firing at eight Russian-built T-34 tanks that were bearing down on the task force positions. The tanks were impervious to the artillery fire, and recoilless rifle and bazooka fire also had no effect. Within two hours, 33 North Korean T-34 tanks had passed through the American positions, while Task Force Smith had been able to damage only two of the attacking tanks. A second wave of tanks cut through Task Force Smith an hour later, and at 1145 hours three tanks led the 16th and 18th Infantry Regiments of the North Korean 4th Division in an assault on the American infantry positions, routing them.

The Americans fled the scene of battle southerly as quickly as possible, disabling and abandoning their howitzers and heavy weapons. The next morning, the task force arrived in Chonan minus 150 men killed or missing.³ True to General Church's instructions, Task Force Smith did not run when the enemy tanks appeared, but it lacked any effective antitank weapon. The destruction of Task Force Smith precipitated a frenetic effort by MacArthur's headquarters, the Pentagon, and even Secretary of State Dean Acheson to procure the necessary armor for General Walton H. Walker's Eighth Army to fight effectively in Korea.

As the Army downsizes over the next several years in the wake of recent political events, it is imperative that emerging force structure be kept in alignment with prevailing doctrine. It has been recently suggested that the ground combat of the Gulf War was anachronistic, a throwback to the operations of Third Army in France in 1944, while "infantry legions on patrol are the stuff of superpower interventions" in the future.⁴ Such a myopic attitude is dangerous. Combined arms operations are essential to the effective implementation of AirLand Battle doctrine. A proper force mix must be found and maintained as the Army downsizes over the next few years.

At the end of World War II, the production of tanks in the United States ceased. The tank production lines either were disassembled or reconverted to civilian production. As Army appropriations fell after the war, the R&D budget for all types of automotive equipment (of which tanks were only a part) fell to an average of \$5,000,000 per year from 1945 to 1950. (In comparison, Chrysler Corporation spent an average of \$25,000,000 per year on R&D during the same period.⁵) The impact of this deficiency would be felt by Eighth Army in 1950.

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Owing to the austere budget imposed on the armed forces by Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson in 1949 and 1950, the Army was forced to reorganize its active divisions under a reduced-strength TO&E. For Eighth Army this meant the elimination of the third infantry battalion of each regiment and the reduction of the heavy tank battalion assigned to each division to only one active company. Additionally, the regimental tank company assigned to each of the infantry regiments was eliminated.⁶ Eighth Army, however, went even further than the reduced TO&E specified. Not only were the tank companies deactivated, the remaining companies were equipped with only the light M-24 Chaffee tank

instead of the medium M-4A3 Sherman tank or the newer M-26 Pershing heavy tank. The Eighth Army G-4 report indicates that “several queries” were made to the Zone of the Interior (United States) over the year preceding the start of the war requesting medium tanks, but “apparently this theater [Far East] did not possess the priority necessary to warrant [medium tanks] issue.”⁷

The rout of Task Force Smith reverberated from Tokyo to Washington. On the same day that the North Korean T-34s cut through the American line at Osan, the Eighth Army G-4 requisitioned 60 M-24 Chaffee light tanks and 54 M-26 Pershing medium tanks from the Department of the Army.⁸ At the time of this request, however, there were no tanks in production in the United States! Any tank sent to Eighth Army would have to come from active Army or Reserve units, or from storage. New tanks were being developed, but because of the budget limitations none had been tested and standardized. The Army was in the process of converting 800 M-26 Pershing tanks into M-46 Patton tanks, but none were readily available.⁹

In the Pentagon, Lieutenant General Matthew B. Ridgway, Army Assistant Chief of Staff for Administration, who in 1951-52 would see the problems in Korea face-to-face as Commander-in-Chief, confronted the task of procuring the tanks necessary to prosecute the war in that theater. On 13 July 1950, he approved several recommendations by the Chief of Army Field Forces dealing with tank production and procurement in the United States:

- That the tank development and procurement program be put on a crash basis.
- That the Army complete its conversion program of 800 medium M-26s to M-46s.
- That the Army build 300 more M-46s from hulls and turrets stored at Detroit Arsenal.
- That the Army convert 183 Medium M-45s with 105mm howitzer to M-46s with 90mm gun.¹⁰

Simple math shows that 1283 M-46 Patton tanks could have theoretically been available for use in Korea. What is not readily apparent, however, is that the logistical apparatus necessary to support these tanks did not exist in the Army force structure. The memorandum goes on to indicate that the T-41 light tank was to be placed into production as a replacement for the M-24, but no new model tank (excluding the M-46) would reach Korea before December 1952.¹¹ Eighth Army was on its own for the initial stages of the war.

With the effectiveness of the North Korean tanks apparent to the officers of Eighth Army, several improvisational ideas were bandied about in an effort to put a competitive American armor unit in the field. The first idea considered was the formation of a provisional tank battalion from the units in existence within the Army. The battalion would consist of the tank companies

of the 7th and 25th Infantry Divisions, and the Reconnaissance Company of the 1st Cavalry Division. The Eighth Army G-3 claimed that the "plan [could] be executed on order."¹² Despite the optimistic assessment, however, the efficacy of such an organization was doubtful.

Even though the tank companies were available to fill the combat role of the provisional battalion, none of the essential headquarters or logistical units existed. Even if it had been possible to obtain the personnel and equipment for the headquarters from the divisions of Eighth Army, the battalion still would have consisted only of the same war-weary M-24 light tanks that were of dubious value in fighting the Russian-made T-34 tanks of the North Koreans.

Another Eighth Army plan, however, produced more tangible results. A check of the tanks on hand in the depots of Japan yielded three M-26 Pershing medium tanks with engine and electrical problems.¹³ In the wake of the disaster of Task Force Smith, it was decided to rebuild the tanks and form them into a provisional tank platoon in an effort to get them into battle as soon as possible. The 8064th Heavy Tank Platoon (Provisional) was organized on 10 July 1950, consisting of the three M-26s manned by Lieutenant Samuel R. Fowler and 19 men from the 1st Cavalry Division.¹⁴ Additionally, another provisional unit, the 8066th Mechanized Reconnaissance Platoon, was formed from men out of Kobe Base, Japan, who had previous armor experience. It consisted of five M-8 "Greyhound" armored cars, used by the military police in Tokyo for crowd control, with a captain as the platoon leader, a first lieutenant as his executive officer, and 25 enlisted men. The 8066th arrived in Pusan in the middle of July ahead of the 8064th, moving to Taegu to guard the newly arrived Eighth Army Headquarters.¹⁵

On 12 July 1950, Lieutenant Fowler's men and their three tanks set sail from Yokohama for Pusan. They arrived four days later, the first American medium tanks in Korea. On 27 July, the three tanks moved by rail to Chinju in the southern sector of the now rapidly diminishing United Nations perimeter. The North Korean 6th Division was pushing the 19th Infantry Regiment back toward Masan when the 8064th arrived at the Rail Transportation Office in Chinju at 0300 hours on the 28th. The tanks had chronic problems with overheating engines, as their fan belts were stretching out of shape after running only a few hours. Fowler pleaded for new belts, and attempts were made to fabricate them in Japan, but the belts were either too long or too short.¹⁶ Other attempts were made, but the end result of the efforts to get new fan belts to the M-26s at Chinju saw Lieutenant Fowler and the tankers of the 8064th making do with what they had.

The North Korean 6th Division entered Chinju on the morning of 31 July. A train with flatcars was sent to evacuate the tanks and Fowler's men that morning, but it never made it to Chinju.¹⁷ Lieutenant John Winters and the Headquarters section of the 8066th (one M-8 armored car, one two-and-

a-half ton truck, and one jeep) were waiting at the Rail Transportation Office in Chinju for the train to evacuate the three M-26s and themselves. When the train did not arrive in the morning, Lieutenant Winters decided that it was not coming and moved his unit out of Chinju on the road toward Masan. After coming to a blown bridge only a few miles out of the village, the M-8 and jeep negotiated a bypass, but the truck became stuck and had to be winched across. They made it back to Masan safely.¹⁸

At noon on the same day, the fighting in Chinju died down, and Lieutenant Fowler decided to remain at the rail station for the train to extricate his platoon. At approximately 1300 hours, a group of North Koreans moved up the rail line toward the American tanks. A firefight ensued, with the tank .30 and .50 caliber machine guns hammering the enemy soldiers. Lieutenant Fowler was wounded in the exchange of small arms fire, which killed or wounded all of the enemy force.

The tanks immediately moved out on the road to Masan that the 8066th Headquarters section had taken earlier in the morning. Coming to the blown bridge, the men abandoned the tanks and made a litter for Lieutenant Fowler. Suddenly, North Korean soldiers began firing at the dismounted tankers. Master Sergeant Bryant Shrader was the only member of the platoon still aboard his tank when the firing began. He returned fire with the .30 caliber machine gun of his tank; then he started it and drove toward the group of Americans now seeking cover in the streambed. Six men were able to get into the tank by crawling under it and through the driver's escape hatch into safety. Shrader moved his tank back toward Chinju, where the engine overheated at the bridge over the Nam River. Abandoning the tank, Shrader and his six men moved west toward Masan, where they eventually passed through 25th Division lines to safety. All of the men left at the bridge were either killed or captured, with Lieutenant Fowler one of the dead.¹⁹

The 8066th Mechanized Reconnaissance Platoon survived the fiasco at Chinju only to meet a fate similar to that of the 8064th two days later. Attached to the 1st Battalion, 29th Infantry, the 8066th was ambushed while participating in a reconnaissance in force westward from the village at Chungam-ni back toward Chinju on 2 August. Four of the platoon's armored cars were destroyed, and Lieutenant Winters was killed.²⁰

The two provisional platoons led an evanescent life in combat in Korea. They were the product of a desperate command seeking a solution to the enemy armored threat. Hastily organized, operating equipment they had never trained on, and haphazardly committed to combat, the 8064th and 8066th failed to attain even a modicum of success, despite the heroics of individuals. Both platoons reflected the relative unreadiness of Eighth Army as a whole to deal with a ready force such as that of North Korea. Seen from this perspective, the two provisional platoons performed in a predictable manner.

The final stop-gap measure introduced by the Eighth Army's staff was the formation of the 8072d Provisional Tank Battalion. Activated on 17 July 1950 at Camp Drake, Tokyo, it was to be equipped with the M-4A3 Sherman tanks being rebuilt by ordnance personnel.²¹ Officers and men were flushed out of all units in Eighth Army to man the new battalion. The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Welborn G. Dolvin, would retire in 1975 as a highly decorated lieutenant general. On 12 July 1950 he was on the golf course at Fort Benning, Georgia, when a messenger handed him orders diverting him from his original assignment in Austria to Korea and command of the 8072d.²² Since there were not enough personnel in Japan to man the battalion, nine officers and 146 enlisted soldiers were sent from the 2d Armored Division at Fort Hood, Texas, to join the five officers and 65 soldiers from Eighth Army.²³

Lieutenant Colonel Dolvin arrived in Japan on the 19th of July to find that his soldiers came from all specialties in the Army, including a few who had been working in the PX.²⁴ With the situation in Korea critical, Dolvin was under tremendous pressure to get his first company into combat as soon as possible. Like the provisional platoons that had preceded it into combat, the 8072d Tank Battalion's first company would become another victim of the parsimonious nature of prewar defense spending, as four of ten tanks were lost in the company's first day of combat in the same ambush that claimed the armored cars of the 8066th.

On 28 July, Company A shipped out of Japan, landing in Pusan three days later. Only 14 days after activation, the lead elements of the battalion arrived in Korea, where they moved into combat the following day. The battalion's war diary reflects the result of this hasty deployment:

1 August 1950, fifteen days after its activation, the 8072d Medium Tank Battalion found itself spread between Camp Drake, Tokyo, Japan, and Masan, Korea, only a portion of its personnel and equipment ready for combat, understrength in personnel, only partially equipped, no training having been accomplished, and with only promises of additional equipment and personnel, and time to accomplish the needed work and training to ready itself for combat.²⁵

With the North Korean 6th Division supported by the 83d Regiment of the 105th Armored Brigade pressing its attack in the southern sector of the Pusan Perimeter, time was a luxury Eighth Army could not afford to give the fledgling battalion.

On 4 August the remainder of the 8072d Tank Battalion arrived in Pusan, and three days later Department of the Army redesignated the battalion the 89th Medium Tank Battalion. Owing to a quirk in the TO&E under which the 89th was formed, Lieutenant Colonel Dolvin had four tank companies instead of the three normally assigned to a tank battalion of an infantry division.²⁶ Dolvin hid this fact from Eighth Army headquarters and used the

confusion to keep his D Company out of combat. He then trained the company in a secure area in the perimeter near the village of Chinhae. Dolvin did not use D Company in combat until 5 September, when it was sufficiently trained. The TO&E quirk allowed the 89th to rotate companies out of the line during late August and into September for rest, maintenance, and training.²⁷ Dolvin's actions serve to illustrate the extreme measures that had to be taken to redress the years of neglect suffered by America's heavy forces.

While Eighth Army struggled to field armor formations, the Pentagon tried to field tank battalions that could be shipped to Korea. In July 1950, the 6th Tank Battalion was pulled from the 2d Armor Division, and two other battalions were formed from the school troops stationed at Forts Benning and Knox. The 70th Tank Battalion, formed at Fort Knox, consisted of the same *mélange* of men and materiel that characterized Dolvin's 8072d Tank Battalion. Two companies were equipped with M-4A3 Sherman tanks from Rock Island Arsenal, and the third company was actually equipped with M-26 Pershing tanks that were sitting on concrete pedestals around the post at Fort Knox! These "monument tanks" were taken down from their mounts and shipped westward on 17 July 1950, along with the rest of the hastily formed battalion, less than five days after activation. The battalion landed at Pusan on 7 August 1950 and went straight into combat—"a complete bunch of strangers with no training."²⁸

Problems also plagued production lines in America, as tank production was restarted after years of dormancy. Building a tank requires a long lead time. Thousands of parts must be manufactured and assembled. Specialized tools and dies are required, as are skilled engineers and workers. Because of the extensive time required to retool and reenergize American tank production during the Korean War, more troops were using the World War II vintage Sherman tank than the newer M-46 Patton as late as October 1952.²⁹ The M-46 was not a new tank from the ground up. It was simply a new turret mated to existing World War II vintage M-26 hulls. Had the Army not been in the process of converting 800 M-26s into M-46s, it is likely that only World War II era tanks would have reached the battlefield prior to 1953.

When tank development and production was placed on a crash basis in 1950, a plethora of onerous side-effects manifested themselves on the battlefield. Even though the M-46 conversion was started before the war began, many of the technical problems had not been remedied. On 12 February 1951, the 64th Tank Battalion, one of two battalions in Korea equipped with the M-46 at this time, had 35 of its 58 tanks break down on a road march. Thirty of the M-46s were lost because of a problem with the engine oil cooler fan that adequate testing would have revealed.³⁰

The final morass of problems confronting initial Eighth Army armor operations in Korea was logistical in nature. In an effort to fill out Dolvin's newly formed 8072d Tank Battalion and the battalions en route from the United

States, every tank available anywhere was employed. The amalgam of disparate types of tanks would create a serious strain on an already attenuated supply system both in Eighth Army and in the United States. B Company of the 8072d Tank Battalion consisted of M-26 tanks taken from the Hawaii National Guard, while the other three companies were equipped with M-4A3E8 Shermans.³¹ The 6th Tank Battalion was equipped with the M-46 Patton tank, while the 70th and 72d Tank Battalions also had a mixture of M-26 and M-4A3 companies. The 1st Marine Tank Battalion and the 73d Tank Battalion had only M-26 Pershings in their companies, but all of the battalions had M-4A3 Shermans with dozer blades, as well as M-32 recovery vehicles that were based on the Sherman chassis.³² It was possible, therefore, for a single tank battalion to have three or four different types of tanks and armored vehicles. Additionally, it was not unusual for these same tanks to have different types of engines powering them.³³

Another serious handicap was the lack of trained ordnance support personnel within the divisions. Since the medium tanks in the divisions of Eighth Army had been deactivated before the war, the ordnance companies had no experience with the types of tanks they were called on to support.

Confronting all of the unit commanders in the opening months of the war were the mechanical problems caused by the age of the tanks in use. Numerous mechanical failures hampered armor operations in Korea from July 1950 through January 1951. Over 60 percent of all tank casualties experienced by American forces were the result of mechanical breakdowns during this period, with only 11.5 percent of the total losses attributable to the enemy. Almost as many tanks, 11 percent, were lost to enemy mines.³⁴ The fact that the Pershings and Shermans were veterans of World War II largely explains the high incidence of mechanical failure, with the power plant being the greatest single cause. The engine of the M-26 was the least reliable, as Lieutenant Fowler and the men of the 8064th had discovered in the first month of the war.³⁵ Finally, there simply were not enough trained tank mechanics in theater to handle the crushing workload presented by the mechanical problems. The situation was not rectified until 1951, when heavy ordnance companies could be mobilized and sent to Korea.³⁶

As the US Army moves into an era of reduced funding and smaller force size, it is imperative that the Korean War experience not be repeated. If we truly are to have no more Task Force Smith's (or 8064th's, 8066th's, or 8072d's), then extensive thought must be given to design of a force structure that supports doctrine and maintains flexibility. Downsizing should not mean the elimination of certain formations or branches merely because they seem too expensive or too heavy to maintain. Commanders should not be asked to take monument tanks and fight a war. Likewise, vital training should not have to take place under enemy fire.

While there is little doubt that small actions in the Panama and Grenada mold are the more likely type in future contingencies, this does not eliminate the possibility of an operation such as Desert Storm. I have no desire to predict the likely opponent to be faced next by the US Army, but I do caution against a force structure that prepares for only one type of conflict. Desert Shield might not have transitioned so nicely into Desert Storm if the paratroopers of the 82d Airborne Division had had to fight the tanks of the Republican Guard without the M1A1s and Bradleys of VII Corps, or if there had been no industrial base to produce or support the heavy vehicles.

It is not possible to create an effective combined arms armored force without a concomitant industrial base. It is not just a matter of building tanks. We must be able to manufacture repair parts and the intricate electronic components needed in today's fighting vehicles. At the start of the Korean War, tanks were found that by dint of heroic improvisation could be used in combat, but the infrastructure required to support them did not exist in either the Army force structure or the civilian industrial base. How would the battalions of VII Corps have performed in the Kuwaiti desert if more than 30 tanks per battalion had broken down on the armored sweep around the Iraqi flank? Instead of using the M1A1, what if the American tank battalions had been equipped with M-48 and M-60 tanks that had been sitting at Anniston Army Depot or Fort Knox for five years?

In his memoirs, General J. Lawton Collins lays the blame for the general unreadiness of the Army to fight in Korea clearly on the leadership in Washington. He accuses himself, General Omar N. Bradley (Chairman of the JCS), President Truman and his Administration, and the Congress for failing to estimate realistically the needs of the military.³⁷ The Army's Chief of Military History at the time, Major General Orlando Ward, suggested that "popular sentiment against a large standing military establishment" was also to blame for the debacle that befell Eighth Army.³⁸

When the US Army was committed to combat in Korea in July 1950, no one asked Lieutenant Colonel Brad Smith if the force structure in place at the time supported the combined arms doctrine he would be called upon to follow on the field of battle. The type of war fought in Korea was neither predicted nor expected by the soldiers and civilians in the defense establishment. General of the Army Douglas MacArthur described Smith's mission as "merely an appearance of force—an arrogant display of strength."³⁹ But arrogance did not stop the oncoming North Korean tanks, nor will it stop a determined enemy tomorrow.

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27. *Ibid.*; 89th Tank Battalion War Diary, September 1950, WNRC, Box 3751.
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