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The Chinese Communist Forces in Korea

Digested by the MILITARY REVIEW from an article by Major R. C. W. Thomas in "The Army Quarterly" (Great Britain) October 1952.

IN JUNE 1952, the strength of the Chinese Communist forces in Korea was estimated as having reached a total of nearly a million men. In the forward areas, elements of some eight Chinese armies are believed to be deployed, numbering at least a quarter of a million front-line soldiers. In addition, it has been reported that the enemy has available at least 500 tanks and 1,000 jet aircraft.

Organization

With regard to the organization of the Chinese Communist forces, it is usual for an army to consist of three infantry divisions, with a total strength of about 26,000 men. In turn, a division is made up of three regiments (brigades), each of three battalions. The total strength of a regiment is only about 2,800 men, but practically all personnel are combat soldiers. A Chinese battalion has an establishment of about 700 men, and is organized into three large rifle companies and a support weapons company.

Under the present static conditions, enemy armor appears to be organized into a number of individual units, as opposed to actual armored formations. These units consist of anything between 30 to 80 tanks, which are being used mainly as roving self-propelled guns.

Chinese Communist divisions have their own artillery battalion of 12 guns, while each army has a supporting regiment of artillery consisting of a further 24 guns. In addition, the enemy has organized a number of artillery divisions of four regiments, each of 36 guns. These regiments are placed in support of armies for specific operations.

As far as is known, the engineer and signal resources in the infantry divi-

sion are very limited. There is a particular lack of signal equipment, and the amount of telephone and radio equipment provided is totally inadequate. This makes it necessary for the enemy to employ a large number of runners to relay orders.

A Chinese division has very little mechanical transport and much use has to be made of mules and porters. Therefore, it is not surprising that in previous offensives the enemy has experienced considerable difficulty in maintaining his forward troops.

By Western standards, the Chinese Communist medical resources are very primitive, and casualties often have to be evacuated long distances by stretcher. This is in direct contrast to the rapid evacuation of United Nations casualties by helicopter and ambulance.

Weapons

The standard enemy infantry weapons are the rifle and the Chinese stick grenade. Other weapons carried in the platoon are the 7.62-mm light machine guns and the Soviet submachine carbines. Infantry battalions are equipped with 60- and 82-mm mortars, bazookas (imitation of the American 3.5-inch rocket launcher), 7.62-mm medium machine guns, Soviet antitank grenades, and possibly some 5.7-mm recoilless rifles. There appears to be no shortage of infantry weapons in the front-line battalions, but the enemy does not hesitate to use any United Nations weapons that may be captured. Probably because of difficulties of resupply, as opposed to actual availability, units have very strict orders not to waste ammunition, and supplies are often rationed.

Enemy armored units are equipped with the T34 medium tank, which mounts an

85-mm gun. This tank was the principal combat vehicle of the Soviet Union in World War II. As far as it is known, no *Josef Stalin* tanks have actually been used in Korea.

An artillery battalion in the infantry division is generally equipped with twelve 75- or 76-mm guns, while an artillery regiment in support of an army may consist of twelve 75- or 76-mm guns and twelve 122-mm howitzers, together with twelve 37-mm antiaircraft guns. With regard to the artillery divisions, these are made up of horse- and truck-drawn 105-mm and 152-mm guns. In addition, the enemy is known to have at least one rocket launcher regiment, armed with twenty-four 132-mm rocket launchers.

In the early days of the war, the enemy had very little artillery, but today he has remedied this deficiency and now has a considerable number of active guns deployed in support of his forward troops.

To sum up, it can be said that the enemy appears to be using a large and varied collection of weapons in Korea, which has been obtained from many different nations. While there seems to be no shortage of weapons, it is probable that the many different types that are being used create a considerable maintenance problem which will continue until some standardization can be achieved. If the conflict continues indefinitely, it is reasonable to suppose that eventually the enemy will be equipped entirely with Soviet weapons.

Chinese Communist Soldier

The vast majority of Chinese Communist soldiers are simple and illiterate peasants who all their lives have been faced with the problem of how to obtain enough food to keep alive. Therefore, when a man joins the army he is already physically tough and used to a life of hardship and poverty.

Conscription in the Chinese Communist forces is for an indefinite period, and a

soldier receives food, clothing, a small amount of pay, and an allotment of land, which is worked by his family in his absence. By Chinese standards, the pay, food, and clothing are good, and a soldier is probably better off than if he were still living at home as a peasant.

Since the majority of Chinese soldiers are illiterate, at times they are inclined to be very stupid and generally lack initiative, except in such things as field craft and improvisations, when their animal instincts are of use. The average Chinese has little technical aptitude and, therefore, there is considerable difficulty in finding suitable men to train as drivers, mechanics, and operators of mechanical equipment.

Although physically tough, ignorance of personal hygiene makes the Chinese soldier very susceptible to diseases such as typhus and smallpox. These diseases cause a high rate of nonbattle casualties.

Political education in the Communist doctrine is always an important feature in the training and life of every soldier, and throughout his service he receives continuous instruction at all levels.

Because of his hard upbringing, the Chinese soldier appears to be immune to the discomforts and privations of war, and he does not expect the normal amenities of life. Without being a complete fanatic, he is generally very brave, and does not reveal any great fear of death. Because he is used to authority, and submits easily to discipline, he soon becomes a good soldier, and an opponent who on no account should be underrated.

Tactics

When the Chinese Communist army made its first appearance in Korea, it was mainly an infantry force and woefully deficient of armor, artillery, and aircraft. However, today the enemy has remedied most of these deficiencies, including the building up of a large air force.

At the same time, the last 12 months has shown a notable change in enemy tactics. The much vaunted and long awaited sixth offensive has never been launched, and instead the enemy has been content to remain mainly on the defensive, except for local attacks against individual divisions, brigades, and battalions, with strictly limited objectives. In addition, probably because of the United Nations air superiority, the enemy now concentrates on remaining invisible during the day, and confines himself to night operations only. It is significant that, because of his skill in camouflage and concealment, it is by no means certain that a concentration of troops for an offensive will be detected, even with the continuous air reconnaissance that is maintained by the United Nations aircraft.

The most impressive feature of the capabilities of the enemy is his ability to dig, which he does all the time when he is not engaged in actual operations. He spends his entire time constructing miles of communication trenches, as well as numerous deep bunkers, many of which are three stories below ground.

With regard to the general tactics of the enemy, mass attacks to saturate the defenses by sheer weight of numbers have still been used in the limited offensives that have been made from time to time during the last year. However, now that the enemy has increased his artillery, and has air support, it is possible that in the event of another major offensive more skillful methods will be employed, in order to avoid the enormous casualties that are suffered by mass attacks.

In other respects the enemy has not employed any new tactics that are worthy of note. Generally speaking, the experiences of the United Nations infantry have once again confirmed the importance of the standard basic principles, such as the requirement for all-round defense,

the value of high ground, the necessity for digging and constant patrolling, and the need for good fire control and discipline.

Attack

Most of the recent attacks made by the enemy have been launched either at last light or under cover of darkness. The attacking forces are usually fresh troops who are assembled in rear areas and moved forward at night by a series of forced marches, often made on the double. During the day, these troops remain concealed in villages and deep valleys.

It is a common practice of the enemy to subject a position to be attacked to a series of minor probes sometimes extending over a period of several weeks. The aim of these probes is to seek out weak spots, and determine forward positions and the location of weapons. When the enemy is eventually ready to attack, he has then reverted to the usual oriental practice of launching mass attacks on a narrow front, seeking to saturate the defenses by sheer weight of numbers.

Today the enemy has the resources to support his operations by accurate and heavy artillery fire, which may start several hours before the infantry attack. The volume of fire increases steadily and eventually reaches an intense rate at H-hour.

When the enemy infantry troops attack they follow artillery concentrations very closely and on occasions have been known to occupy an objective before the artillery fire has lifted. Usually the enemy endeavors to take an objective by direct assault, supported by a simultaneous effort to envelop the position from the flanks. On other occasions he attempts to contain the forward defended localities while he passes other troops round the flanks to attack positions in depth.

Assaulting infantry are generally armed with submachine guns and grenades. Close-support fire is provided by mortars and medium machine guns, which

are moved forward with great speed. Directional tracer, flares, bugles, and whistles are used extensively to control and guide the attacking troops.

The enemy depends on artillery fire to destroy wire and mines. At the same time, Bangalore torpedoes and various home-made devices are often carried to make a gap in any wire that has not been breached.

Plans Lack Flexibility

Possibly because of a lack of communications, enemy plans do not appear to be very flexible. Therefore, if an attack becomes disorganized, the enemy is likely to break off the engagement soon after midnight and fade rapidly away to his own lines, to await the cover and protection of another night in which to try again. However, if he is successful, he digs in rapidly, brings up mortars and machine guns, and soon consolidates the position.

Defense

When defending, it has been found that the Chinese Communist forces are prepared to surrender ground which is not considered as essential to the defense of the main position. At the same time, the enemy endeavors to make the attacking troops deploy and suffer casualties, while acquiring this ground. However, when a determined attack is made to take vital ground he then defends very strongly.

The enemy seems to favor defense in depth on a narrow front, and he holds most of the small features running up to the main position. He does not occupy forward slopes by day, except possibly at the top of a feature where access is possible from the rear through tunnels. At night he occupies forward slopes with some light machine guns and riflemen, generally positioned halfway down a hill. More automatic weapons and riflemen are positioned behind in an intermediate position, with machine guns at the top. Mortars are located on the reverse slopes just

below the crest, with other mortars and machine guns on features to the rear.

In defense, the enemy never stops digging, and he is forever creeping nearer. Immediately on occupation of a feature, he sets to work to ring the position with a deep crawl trench, and then digs extensions that run out in all directions. He digs deep, and once the network of trenches is complete, he is able to concentrate troops at any given point without being seen. Weapon pits are generally from 6 to 8 yards apart and well camouflaged. Machine-gun emplacements are made large enough to take the entire crew. The enemy makes little use of wire, but Bangalore torpedoes and mines are often laid on obvious approach routes. Some use is also made of booby traps.

If a defensive position is overrun, the enemy withdraws to the next prepared position to the rear, sometimes leaving behind suicide parties to fire from holes and at the enemy from the rear, even after the position has been overrun. Patrols are also sent out to dominate likely approaches to the position and to keep the enemy occupied with small probing attacks against his main positions. Counter-attack plans are always prepared for every defensive position, and the enemy has shown himself capable of launching a two-company attack within 2 hours of a position being lost.

Patrolling

Because of United Nations air superiority in Korea, the enemy is forced to obtain most of his information from patrols. These vary in size from 4 to 20 men for reconnaissance, and anything up to a company for fighting.

Reconnaissance patrols move very quietly and use ground cleverly. Their main task is to reconnoiter wire and mine fields and to seek out routes through and around enemy main positions.

Fighting patrols carry "burp" guns and a quantity of grenades, and often they

appear to be deliberately noisy in order to draw fire, so that the position of weapons can be ascertained. They also seek to intercept enemy patrols to capture prisoners.

Air

Up to the present time the enemy has made little effort to use his air forces offensively, but his defensive capabilities have improved steadily since the outbreak of the Korean conflict. He has now established anti-aircraft guns round most important areas, as well as organizing an adequate early warning system.

Propaganda

The enemy makes regular attempts to influence the United Nations forces by propaganda, through the medium of leaflets and broadcasts over operational nets. Regular invitations are made to come and have friendly talks and enjoy the company of charming ladies, while for a period over Christmas even small trees were found in no-man's-land decked with cheap presents and leaflets. A number of letters reputed to come from prisoners are also found from time to time. For some reason, the enemy still seems to believe that he will achieve success with this type of activity.

Tactical Doctrine

Captured documents have revealed that the enemy has recorded certain practices of the United Nations forces, as tactical weaknesses.

Some of these practices are summarized as:

1. The regularity of attacking at first light.
2. Lack of familiarity with night operations.

3. Lack of familiarity with grenades.
4. Weaknesses in physical endurance.
5. Refusal of infantry to accept battle without effective fire from supporting arms.
6. Tendency of troops to abandon heavy equipment if cut off.
7. Reduced efficiency of tanks, artillery, and aircraft at night.
8. Tendency to bunch during an attack.

These observations are not without interest, as they reveal the fact that the enemy is ever seeking to improve his fighting effectiveness by exploiting weaknesses of his opponents.

Conclusion

The future developments of the conflict in Korea are still impossible to forecast, but until such time as an official armistice is signed it must be assumed that the enemy is still prepared and capable of fighting.

There is no doubt that the Communist army that now exists in Korea is a powerful machine. If it ever attempts another offensive to try to drive the United Nations forces out of the country, there will certainly be a major battle between two mighty armies which are both capable of doing considerable damage to each other.

In these days of a "twilight war" in Korea, the present strength of the enemy must not be forgotten, neither must a false sense of security be allowed to develop. There exists still a vicious and treacherous enemy and, whatever the cost, the United Nations forces must continue to remain vigilant and strong and ready to strike him down if again he attempts to threaten their security.