


This Month in NCO History: Sept. 1, 1950 - Holding the tank at Naktong Bulge

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NCO Journal

Sept. 1, 2016

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Master Sgt. Ernest R. Kouma, Medal of Honor recipient. (U.S. Army photo)

The light fog that enveloped the western shore of the Naktong River near Agok, South Korea, began dissipating at dawn Sept. 1, 1950.

As the sun dispersed the vapor, it revealed a grisly scene — scores of slain North Korean troops along with the lightly damaged remains of an M26 Pershing tank. During a brief lull in the chaos that had occurred for 10 hours, one man emerged from the iron behemoth. It was Sgt. 1st Class Ernest R. Kouma. The leader of a four-vehicle patrol from the 2nd Infantry Division was fatigued and hobbled by wounds inflicted during the firefight. He ambled out of the tank without facing enemy fire for the first time since the previous night. Kouma was placed in a truck and sent for medical treatment. He would go on to find a place in history as a recipient of the nation's highest military honor.

Kouma was part of A Company, 72nd Tank Battalion when it arrived on the Korean Peninsula with the rest of the 2nd ID in late August 1950. The division moved into line at the Pusan Perimeter, replacing the 24th Infantry Division, where U.S. forces were establishing a defensive line around the city of Pusan in southeast Korea after war broke out June 25. Kouma was part of two infantry squads from A Company that were holding a roadblock with the 9th Infantry Regiment near Agok, a small village at the base of a hill about 300 yards from the Naktong River and at the southern tip of the 2nd ID's boundary. The Soldiers were situated on a hill overlooking the town. The night of Aug. 31, Kouma took two tanks and two M19 Gun Motor Carriages on a patrol below the ridge line near the site of a ferry that traversed the river.

It was at this spot that the North Korean Army attempted to carry out an offensive to cut off a supply route between Daegu and Pusan. The enemy was unaware that the 2nd ID had relieved the 24th and expected to move over the Naktong River with ease. Behind that assumption a force of about 500 amassed on the side of the river opposite the small American patrol.

Kouma and his fellow Soldiers heard dogs barking in the darkness before a heavy mortar barrage began peppering their side of the river. A thick fog blanketed the river that night and the Americans couldn't see across the water. When the fog lifted slightly at 10:30 p.m., Kouma was stunned to see that not only were enemy soldiers laying a pontoon bridge across the river, they had nearly completed the task.

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He and his gunner opened fire, quickly destroying the bridge. But the battle was on as the North Korean soldiers began crossing the river en masse. After the infantry soldiers received orders to withdraw to higher ground, Kouma's opted to remain with his armored unit and act as rearguard for the infantry, according to his Medal of Honor citation. In the small arms fire that ensued, he was wounded in the foot while reloading the tank's ammunition. Despite his wound, he fought off another North Korean attack across the river with his machine gun.

Kouma's force was then ambushed by a group of North Koreans dressed in U.S. military uniforms. The impostors ran to Kouma's position and told him — in excellent English — that a large force was approaching his position. They then hurled grenades at the American vehicles as machine gun and rifle fire began pelting the tank from a bluff overlooking their position. Kouma was wounded in the shoulder during the exchange but he stayed in the fight, beating back repeated North Korean crossings with his machine gun. Several strong attacks came within feet of the tank, but Kouma was able to drive them back despite his wounds. Eventually, the other three vehicles withdrew or were neutralized, with Kouma staying behind. At one point, the tank was surrounded and he had to engage the North Koreans from outside the tank with machine-gun fire at point-blank range. Kouma held the Agok crossing site until 7:30 the following morning with him resorting to using his pistol and grenades to hold off his attackers after the tank's ammunition was expended.

The tank then withdrew 8 miles to the newly established American lines, destroying three North Korean machine-gun positions along the way. According to his citation, Kouma killed 250 North Korean troops, a number that surpassed the count of highly decorated Army soldier Audie Murphy, who was credited with 240 kills during World War II.

After he reached safety, Kouma attempted to resupply his tank and return to the front lines. Instead, the wounded soldier was ordered to evacuate for medical treatment. As he was being evacuated, Kouma again requested to return to the front lines, according to his citation.

Kouma returned to duty three days later. Not long after, he was promoted to master sergeant and sent to the United States where he was awarded the Medal of Honor by President Harry S. Truman on May 19, 1951, during a ceremony at the White House.

Kouma served as a tank gunnery instructor for the U.S. Army Armor School at Fort Knox, Kentucky, for the remainder of the Korean War. He retired from service as a master sergeant in 1971 after a 31-year career, which included stints at Fort Carson, Colorado, and Germany. Kouma originally enlisted in 1940 in his native Dwight, Nebraska, and saw combat in Germany while serving as a tank commander during World War II. He spent his remaining years in McDaniels, Kentucky. Kouma died Dec. 19, 1993, at the age of 74. He was buried at the Fort Knox post cemetery.