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FORGOTTEN NO LONGER

Donald Chisholm

Terry, Addison. *The Battle for Pusan: A Korean War Memoir*.
Novato, Calif.: Presidio, 2000. 233pp. \$19.57

Roe, Patrick C. *The Dragon Strikes: China and the Korean
War, June–December 1950*. Novato, Calif.: Presidio. 2000.
466pp. \$34.95

Edwards, Paul M. *To Acknowledge a War: The Korean War in
American Memory*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2000.
176pp. \$69.95

Mathew Ridgway apparently originated the sobriquet “forgotten war” in his 1967 book *The Korean War*, a parable intended to instruct about Vietnam. It was an apt label, for not only was the Korean War undeclared, it followed in the long shadow of national weariness from World War II, involving only a fraction of the number who fought in that war. The U.S. population and economy were never fully mobilized to support American efforts in Korea, and the ambiguous conclusion to the conflict was less than satisfying to a nation that historically prefers black-and-white beginnings and endings in armed conflicts.

Although forgetting Korea might be entirely understandable, apart from honoring the memory of Americans who fought and died there, other sound reasons suggest that it is well to study its lessons. The Korean War was the first war prosecuted against a communist opponent. It was the first American land war on the Asian continent. It was the first war to be prosecuted under the aegis of the United Nations, and it constituted the opening armed aggression in the Cold War by the Soviet Union and its sometime Chinese ally.

Wars (and Korea is no different) typically generate a wide range of accounts written for an equally broad variety of reasons. These accounts tend to appear in

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waves over time. First come the journalistic reports written and published during the actual conflict, along with “instant” histories produced by military public affairs officers. These in turn are followed by the first-person narratives, oral histories, and biographies of pivotal figures, along with the official, popular, and professional histories. Inasmuch as history tends to reflect the values and concerns of the society and era

during which it is written (as opposed to the era *about* which it is written), different emphases and interpretations also emerge with the passage of time.

Thus with the fiftieth anniversary of the Korean War's onset, the concomitant aging of its veterans, heightened interest in reunification of the Korean Peninsula, availability of formerly classified U.S. documents, and the opening of Soviet and Communist Chinese files has come a surge of new accounts of that conflict.

As Samuel Eliot Morison observed nearly four decades ago, "Personal narratives of wars by statesmen, generals, and admirals are fairly numerous; but accounts by private soldiers and ordinary seamen are exceedingly rare, although of high value to historians and great interest to general readers."* We are fortunate indeed to have such an account from Addison Terry, who was a second lieutenant of field artillery in the 7th Infantry Division when he suddenly found himself in Korea in early July 1950 as a forward artillery observer in the 25th Division's 27th Regimental Combat Team in the Pusan perimeter—until August, when he was wounded and evacuated. Terry penned his memoir while convalescing. He put the manuscript aside, only to discover it forty-seven years later while going through old files in the family barn. Except for minor editing and some new introductory material, Terry's account remains as fresh and immediate as it did when he was an observant twenty-three-year-old junior officer.

Terry's tale evokes what must be the near-universal experiences of the infantryman at the pointy end of the spear in a hard-fought conflict—periods of quiet punctuated by relatively short violent episodes and tactical movement; great effort simply to effect the basic requirements of existence, such as eating, sleeping, and sanitation; exposure to the extremes of the elements; and very little sense of the larger context within which orders are being received and executed. The depth and breadth of perspective inevitably truncate, while release is found in small pleasures like canned peaches in the rations or a shave with hot water.

The Battle for Pusan is the bookend to Joseph Owens's memoir of his experiences from Inchon to Chosin as a 7th Marines weapons platoon lieutenant (like Terry, Owens was wounded), and James Brady's similar account in *The Coldest War* of his own experiences as a young Marine officer in Korea. Terry's work also compares favorably to Robert Leckie's record of life as Marine rifleman on Guadalcanal, Eugene Sledge's *With the Old Breed*, and James Fahey's chronicle, *Pacific War Diary, 1942–1945*, of a seaman's experience in a World War II light cruiser. As such, the book is entertaining for the general reader and tremendously instructive for the junior officer who would like a better understanding of what real combat feels like.

* Samuel Eliot Morison, foreword to James J. Fahey, *Pacific War Diary, 1942–1945* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), p. ix.

Patrick Roe's experience began as a young intelligence officer in the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, a position that offered him a broader view of the conflict than most other junior officers (Terry, for example) were afforded. Like Terry's work, *The Dragon Strikes* constitutes an attempt to make sense of the events in which Roe was caught up, particularly during the months of October through December 1950. Rather than a memoir, however, Roe has produced a remarkably well written and insightful historical analysis of the role the Chinese played in Korea, simultaneously tempered and given texture and passion by his own experience. In this, he surpasses Russell Spurr's earlier work on the same subject in *Enter the Dragon* (Newmarket Press, 1998). Relying on a mixture of primary documentary sources and published works, *The Dragon Strikes* provides a cogent, penetrating, and nuanced analysis of the key actors, their beliefs and motivations, and the events that led to China's participation in the war, and the particular means by which it actually intervened.

Such analyses of our opponents are undertaken but rarely, in part because of the understandable desire to tell the story from *our* perspective, and in part because of the difficulty of accessing reliable information about *their* perspective—language differences render the task difficult; defeated foes are either dead or only selectively cooperative at best (the post-World War II U.S. Navy technical mission to Japan commented, for example, that the officials it interrogated remembered only what they chose to remember), entirely uncooperative at worst; and key documents rarely survive (the Japanese destroyed many of their plans and orders for their final defense of the Philippines). Unvanquished foes such as the Chinese, of course, need not be accessible at all, particularly since they remain active opponents.

However, if somehow Roe's book had become available just after the war, it would have done much to improve our practical understanding of our foe. Nonetheless, we should be grateful to have it now. Roe describes the events that led to the Chinese intervention in Korea, particularly the role the Soviets played in that decision, and the internal dynamics among the top Chinese leadership with respect to the intervention and prosecution of the war. Remarkably, Roe's analysis reveals that the Chinese developed and executed brilliant plans while simultaneously committing stupendous blunders based on a gross misreading and underestimation of American resolve and military capabilities, which derived apparently from the extreme insularity of their leadership, from Mao on down. At the same time, Roe provides a fast-paced narrative of the military operations in the mountains of North Korea, which he effectively integrates with his account of upper-level Chinese decision making. This is a unique book, well worth reading.

Now for the book *To Acknowledge a War*. Author of two previous annotated bibliographies on the Korean War, Paul Edwards has this time penned a work that is neither history, historiography, nor annotated bibliography. Although containing pieces of each, this ambitious tome attempts to understand the specific ways in which Americans remember the Korean War, or perhaps more properly, as Edwards contends, fail to acknowledge the war, if not completely forget it. Edwards believes this American attitude has prevented an effective understanding of the war, clouding American national security decision making. He makes specific statements about the particular ways in which given aspects of the Korean War (such as the air war) are described and analyzed, along with assertions about how wars in general are remembered. He concludes that substantively, the Korean War provided a “useful, even pragmatic model, one that was eventually used in the Persian Gulf War. The Korean War was fought with conventional (not nuclear) weapons, a limited war in terms of both anticipated success and deployment, and of a primary (and primarily political) goal.”

Edwards’s perspective is an interesting one with much promise, but this relatively short book (a monograph really) remains better in the contemplation than in the execution. It attempts to cover too many aspects of the Korean War in too few pages. Perhaps Edwards could not decide what the book was to be about. Given its broad goals, this reviewer was puzzled by the substantial attention the book tenders to certain subjects of lesser importance—for example, Lieutenant Eugene Clark’s reconnaissance of Inchon Harbor prior to the landing—while it says little of the combat readiness of American occupation troops in Japan. This book would have benefited from a sharper focus on no more than a couple of themes. If, as Edwards avers in his introduction, the Korean War was a “major factor in establishing the modern concept of the limited war,” he would have been well served to pursue this premise systematically and thoroughly, along with one or two others, and omit other lines of exposition.

With further passage of time our willingness to address and analyze the Korean War and its lessons for present and future national policy should only improve. Ironically, because the passage of time also means that those who fought in the war will soon be gone, our ability to perform that analysis will be increasingly constrained. These three volumes, Patrick Roe’s especially, have added measurably to our understanding.