

TRAIN WRECKERS AND GHOST KILLERS

Allied Marines
in the Korean War

by Leo J. Daugherty III

Marines in the Korean War Commemorative Series



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In praise of the British Royal Marines that had been attached to his command since mid-November 1950, Major General Oliver P. Smith, Commanding General, 1st Marine Division, wrote that their services in the recently concluded Chosin Reservoir campaign made “a significant contribution to the holding of Hagaru, which was vital to the [1st Marine] Division.” General Smith’s comments reflected the view held by many Marines, both officers and enlisted, of the fighting abilities of both their British cousins and their Republic of Korea Marine Corps allies. During the three years they fought together on the Korean peninsula, the British, Korean, and U.S. Marines forged bonds that still exist today.

A Distant War and the Royal Marines

In the early morning hours of 25 June 1950, mechanized and ground units of the North Korean Peoples’ Army (NKPA) rolled across the 38th Parallel into the neighboring Republic of Korea (ROK). Within 48 hours, President

Harry S. Truman placed U.S. forces in Japan on alert. Within a week’s time, elements of the U.S. Eighth Army, then on occupation duty in Japan, were rushed to South Korea to stem the North Korean invasion. As army soldiers, and later Marines of Brigadier General Edward A. Craig’s 1st Provisional Marine Brigade, fought the NKPA to the outskirts of the port of Pusan, the United Nations undertook a series of votes that not only condemned the North Korean invasion, but brought thousands of allied troops to the assistance of the beleaguered ROK. Among the troops assigned to the Korean theater was a hastily assembled unit of Royal Marines stationed in Great Britain and Malaya, where they were already engaged in a guerrilla war against Communist terrorists.

The deployment of Royal Marines to Korea came as the government of Prime Minister Clement R. Attlee announced its intention in the British Parliament to add to the forces being sent to Korea. While there was some disagreement with this decision among the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, and Chief of the Air Staff, Marshal Arthur W. Tedder, both of whom argued that “Britain was already engaged in active operations in Malaya as important ... in countering communist expansion as in Korea,” Admiral Lord Fraser of North Cape, the First Sea Lord, strenuously advocated for the dispatch of a brigade-sized force of Royal Marines to operate in unison with the U.S. Navy as a commando

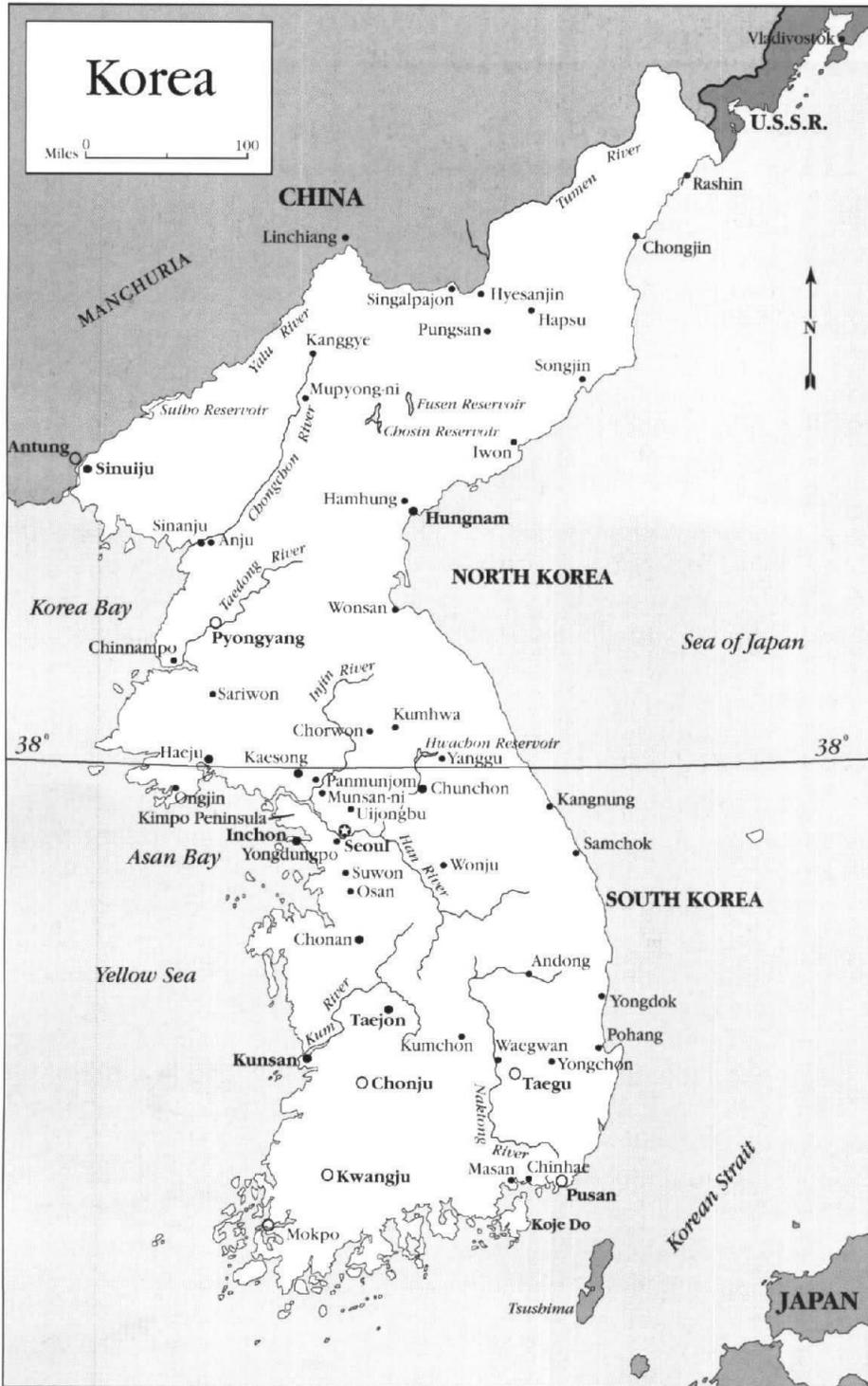
raiding force. Within two weeks of Lord Fraser’s decision, on 16 August 1950, a 300-man Royal Marine unit was formed and took the name 41 Independent Commando. “Independent” in the unit designation meant the commanding officer had sole responsibility for the unit and did not have to consult higher British headquarters on operational and logistical matters.

The commandos were drawn mostly from active duty units and individual Marine reservists preparing to depart for service in Malaya as part of 3 Commando Brigade. Under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Douglas B. Drysdale, a seasoned Marine veteran who had served with distinction as a member of 3 Commando in the Far East during World War II, 41 Independent Commando began preparations for service in Korea.

The Marines assembled at the Royal Marine Barracks at Bickleigh, Devon, site of the commando school, where they received the customary inoculations and issue of uniforms prior to their deployment to the Far East. Initially, 41 Commando drew from three separate contingents. The first, organized from volunteers and reservists in the United Kingdom, was flown from Bickleigh to Japan in civilian clothes to conceal the ultimate destination and employment. The second group comprised volunteer sailors and Marines drawn from the British Pacific Fleet. This group already had begun an intensive period of training even before the main body of Royal Marines

ON THE COVER: *Members of the 1st Korean Marine Corps Regiment man a .50-caliber machine gun in fighting near Hongchon, Korea.* National Archives Photo (USMC) 127-N-A156476

AT LEFT: *Royal Marines take up positions during a raid to destroy enemy supply routes near Songjin, North Korea.* National Archives Photo (USN) 80-G-428515



character and proud lineage, American military officials permitted the Royal Marines to retain their unique green berets. As the Royal Marines trained on weapons familiarization, small unit tactics and raiding techniques, and conducted physical fitness exercises, Admiral Joy decided to use them as a raiding force along the enemy's long and vulnerable coastline.

Organization and Training

Like many U.S. Marines sent to Korea as part of the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade, the majority of men recruited for 41 Commando were World War II veterans, although there were a few new recruits and navy volunteers. Many, like Sergeant Major Trevor-Dodds, a European kayaking champion, were of "superb quality and spirit" and had volunteered for service in Korea. Each was a combat swimmer, demolitions expert, or heavy weapons specialist. These talents proved useful

VAdm C. Turner Joy, USN, Commander, Naval Forces, Far East, a proponent of amphibious raiding and other special operations, was instrumental in the deployment of the Royal Marines to Korea and their subsequent assignment to the 1st Marine Division.

National Archives Photo (USA) 111-SC352920



arrived from Great Britain and had been organized into a rifle section known as the Fleet Volunteers. The third group came from a reinforcement draft destined for 3, 40, 42, or 45 Commando in Malaya and was on board the British troopship HMT *Devonshire*, which had been diverted to Japan in early August. Vice Admiral C. Turner Joy, Commander, Naval Forces, Far East, and Admiralty

officials in London and Washington, D.C. decided the Royal Marines would operate with the U.S. Navy and Marines.

After arriving at Camp McGill, a U.S. Army base 50 miles south of Tokyo at Takehama and near the U.S. Navy base at Yokosuka, the Commando received a complete field issue of uniforms, weapons, and equipment supplied by the U.S. Army. To maintain their distinct

41 Commando Weapons and Equipment

When the British Royal Marine's 41 Independent Commando deployed to Camp McGill, Japan, in early August 1950, they carried with them their standard British army issued weapons. To alleviate any logistical problem, the Commander, Naval Forces, Far East, and British military officials decided 41 Commando would be issued the same weapons as those issued to the U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Army. This practice not only simplified the replacement of damaged weapons and supply of ammunition, but enabled the Royal Marines to become familiar with U.S. weapons and facilitated their training activities.

Personal weapons used by the Commando included the M1 Garand semiautomatic rifle and M1 Carbines. Individual Marines (including their officers) preferred the reliable M1 Garand rifle, which held up reasonably well under extreme battlefield conditions in Korea, particularly during the Chosin Reservoir campaign. While many Marines originally preferred to carry the light-weight M1 Carbine because of the high volume of fire it could deliver, it proved extremely unreliable and was prone to malfunction in the sub-zero temperatures of

North Korea. The official submachine gun, which the British disliked, was the M3 .45-caliber "Grease Gun," similar to the 9mm Sten gun the Commando originally carried. A number of old 1926 Thompson submachine guns were acquired and used during raids. All officers and noncommissioned officers carried the coveted Colt .45-caliber pistol.

The standard Bren light machine gun gave way to the American Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR), which fired .30-caliber ammunition from a 20-round magazine and was organic to the U.S. Marine rifle squad. While the BAR became standard issue to 41 Commando, they nonetheless lamented the loss of their beloved Bren guns. Despite the problems the Commando had in maintaining the effectiveness and operability of their M1 Garands and BARs in the sub-zero cold of Korea, the weapons nonetheless proved reliable when properly maintained.

Leaving their Vickers machine guns behind, the Royal Marines employed the air-cooled, bipod-mounted M1919A4 light machine gun that came with a booster cup that enabled it to fire 900 rounds per minute. Other machine guns used were the air-cooled A4 .30-caliber ver-

National Archives Photo (USN) 80-G-438727



sion and M1917A1 water-cooled version on a heavy tripod. The heavy weapons group initially used the M1919 machine guns, although they switched to the M1917, which was comparable to their Vickers machine guns. The Marines also employed the Browning M2 .50-caliber machine guns for use on the islands in Wonsan harbor and for targets inland.

U.S. Marines issued 41 Commando the standard 60mm mortars without a tripod, as well the 81mm mortars, which proved far more effective than its standard 3-inch mortar. To battle the thick-armored enemy T-34 tanks, the Royal Marines received both the 2.36-inch "bazooka" rocket launchers and the 3.5-inch rocket launcher. The Commando's heavy weapons group also employed several 75mm recoilless rifles, which they used with great effect against enemy emplacements and armored vehicles.

Communications gear was U.S. Marine standard-issue, at least a generation ahead of the British equivalent. The troop net radio was the short range SCR 536, which was shapped like a large handset with pull out antenna. The net set was the SCR 300, which they adopted as the

"British 31 Set." The ANG/RC 9 or "Angry 9," provided 41 Commando with long-range communications capabilities. The Angry 9's most notable characteristic was its ability to be powered by a hand crank.

Along with the standard U.S. Army fatigues, during the Chosin Reservoir campaign the commandos wore normal underwear, longjohns, blouse or Angola shirt, a woolen jersey, fatigue jacket and trousers, a pile-lined parka with hood issued to the U.S. Marines, underneath which they wore their traditional green beret, and ski mittens with woolen inner liners and leather outers. Of all the clothing items, the most unpopular was the standard-issue footwear, or shoepacks, which were rubber-soled and "gutta-percha, calf-length, lace-up" boots with felt insoles that were prone to become damp and cumbersome. These shoepacks contributed to many cases of frostbite as the feet would perspire and thus freeze when the temperatures dipped. Much of the original British-issue cold-weather gear came from stocks used during World War II, which often dated as far back as World War I when British forces briefly intervened on behalf of the pro-Czarist forces in Archangel during the Russian Civil War.

time and again during the raids along the North Korean coast. The choice of men with such specialized abilities reflected Drysdale's recognition for the need of such combat-related skills as the Commando assembled and prepared for battle.

As journalist and Member of Parliament Thomas E. Driberg said of the men of 41 Commando in his 20 December 1950 broadcast on British Broadcasting Corporation's Home Service:

These lads grew remarkably quickly into the mood and outlook that seem to be characteristic of this special kind of outfit: one might define it as a nonchalant self-sufficiency, a debonair assurance that is never arrogant, a self-mocking toughness. The common idea of Commando "toughness" is wrong. They are not muscle-bound supermen. Many of them are quite slight and trim—physically compact, mentally alert. Their training fits them perfectly for such jobs as they had to do.

The unit was organized into three rifle troops, B, C, and D, and a headquarters troop. Each rifle troop numbered approximately 45 to 50 men commanded by a captain, while the small headquarters troop consisted of administrative, motor transport, medical, communications, and a 20-man heavy weapons group. At the outbreak of the Korean War, 41 Independent Commando consisted of 300 men of all ranks. Its strength fluctuated during the first year of the war as the fighting became more intense and the number of casualties mounted.

While 41 Commando included men with different military specialties, only engineers and signalers continued to perform their specific duties. The remainder fought as riflemen. Unit organization of the Commando was ad hoc prior to joining the 1st Marine Division in November 1950. The heavy weapons group, which consisted of mortars, machine guns, and antitank weapons, as well as assault engineers, remained attached to the headquarters troop.

Of all the Royal Marine organizations, the heavy weapons group was the most flexible. The men assigned to this group were trained on all weapons in compliance with the standard Royal Marine emphasis on cross-training, which was designed to ensure that if one six-man team went down, the second could fill in without a lapse in covering fire. The value of such cross-training was evident during the defense of Wonsan Harbor when the heavy weapons group assisted the island garrison by manning the four mortars, four machine guns, and 75mm recoilless rifle on Hwangto-do.

Since the Royal Marines would be operating primarily with American forces, they were issued standard U.S. firearms and other field equipment, including what the British called "battle kit," or individual equipment. This alleviated the logistics problem of integrating British equipment within the U.S. Navy or Marine Corps supply system. The use of American uniforms and equipment made it easier to supply and re-



National Archives Photo (USN) 80-G-421628

Royal Marines line the deck of the USS Perch (ASSP 313) as the submarine leaves Japan for Korea. Commissioned in 1944, the Perch operated out of Hawaii and Australia during World War II and was one of only two submarines to receive the Submarine Combat Patrol insignia during the

Korean War. In the 1960s she conducted special operations in Vietnam and was decommissioned in 1971. The huge cylindrical watertight locker on the afterdeck stored inflatable boats and other equipment, prompting the nickname, "Pregnant Perch."

equip when replacements were needed. A handful of veteran Royal Marines had used American M1 Garand rifles during World War II and were familiar with its operation.

As the Commando prepared for battle, General of the Army Douglas MacArthur questioned the use of British Marines even before their first taste of combat. In a rather terse exchange with Vice Admiral Joy, MacArthur questioned not only the necessity and security of conducting such raids along the North Korean coastline, but also the use of the Commando instead of the Navy's underwater demolition teams (UDT). Joy, an admirer of the Royal Marines, responded:

The 41 Royal Marine Commando was formed and trained especially to conduct commando raids. Plans are ready for destruction of several key points between latitudes 40 and 41 on east coast.

Believe they can be executed without serious risk. Submarine crew and commandos are keen to fight and gain experience for evaluation of this type of organization.

Joy continued to defend the use of the Royal Marines as a raiding force and MacArthur eventually relented.

First Actions

In the stealth of night, a troop of 41 Commando boarded the transport submarine USS *Perch* (ASSP 313) for its first raid against an enemy railroad installation and supply line. Adhering to MacArthur's explicit orders forbidding the use of no more than 70 individuals, the 63 Marines of the troop adjusted to life on board the *Perch* and continued to train for combat.

Admiral Joy's statement that both American submariners and Royal Marines were "keen" for a

fight was substantiated in the comments made in the log of the *Perch* as the Commando prepared for its first operation from the submarine. Leaving Japan on board a specially outfitted high-speed transport, the Marines then transferred to the *Perch*, which had been assigned to carry them to the objective area. Even as the Marines sailed toward the enemy coastline, they continued an intensive, round-the-clock training program, in which they "quickly impressed the Americans with their enthusiasm and skill." The log of the *Perch* included more praise, noting:

These [Royal Marines] were experienced raiders with a "can do" attitude comparable to that of the *Perch*'s. They seemed to enjoy having more thrown at them than they could possibly assimilate in the short time available, and rose to the occasion by becoming a well-trained, and coordinated submarine raid-

ing team in a remarkably short time.

Royal Marine Fred Heyhurst was even more blunt in his remarks when describing the “remarkably short time” (two weeks) it took for American seamen and British Marines to become a formidable team. Heyhurst stated: “There was a tremendous spirit, to learn all we needed to know and get on with the job. We would get hang of one [U.S.] weapon and go straight out for another, whatever the time was. ... It was the best unit anyone could have joined.” Originally planned to provide relief for the allied forces, which had been pushed into a perimeter around Pusan, the raid was delayed approximately three weeks because of concerns about enemy lines.

There was, indeed, a short learning curve, as MacArthur’s planned Inchon landing drew near. Having been in the Far East only a month, the British Marines crammed weeks of training into days as a detachment of 41 Commando on board the British frigate *HMS Whitesand Bay* (F 633) prepared for its first action off the west coast of Korea, which came on the night of 12 September 1950. Intended to act in unison with a U.S. Army raiding battalion that never deployed, the detachment, commanded by Lieutenant Derek Pound and referred to as Pound Force, found itself attached to the 1st Marine Division, which was only hours away from landing at the port of Inchon on 15 September. Pound Force, designated a Special Activities Group by U.S. Army Major General Edward M. Almond’s X Corps, launched a diversionary raid against North Korean army elements at Kunsan. At the conclusion of the raid, the Commando reembarked on board

the *Whitesand Bay* and sailed into position off Inchon, where it came under operational control of General Smith’s 1st Marine Division on 17 September, two days after the Inchon landings. During subsequent actions ashore, Lieutenant Pound’s detachment of Royal Marines accompanied their U.S. Marine counterparts during the 1st Marine Division’s push to Seoul. Acting as a motorized reconnaissance force, the Commando drove as far inland as Kimpo Airfield. After seizure of the airfield, they rejoined other Royal Marines conducting hit-and-run raids against North Korean railroad and communications lines. Another team of Royal Marines served with a Marine air and naval gunfire liaison officer directing naval gunfire from the supporting British warships participating in the Inchon landing.

The Train Wreckers

With the South Korean capital under United Nations control, General MacArthur’s attention turned to the pursuit of the retreating NKPA. Both U.S. Marines and Royal Marines were withdrawn to prepare for a subsequent end run against the east coast port of Wonsan. While the 1st Marine Division reassembled at the port of Inchon, the Royal Marines reembarked on board their respective ships and sailed back to Japan for more training and to await further orders. While in Japan, 41 Commando participated in two major raids against a section of railway line along the enemy’s northeastern coastline between Chongjin and Hungnam.

As the *Perch* approached the first target area west of Tachon on the evening of 30 September, she

Royal Marines plant demolition charges under the railroad tracks of enemy supply lines along the eastern coast of Korea. During the raid, the Marines demolished a section of embankment under the rail line and concealed explosive charges with pressure activated detonators in two adjacent railway tunnels.

National Archives Photo (USN) 80-G-428242



was detected by enemy radar. With the landing party already in the rubber boats, disaster was narrowly averted when the motor on the skimmer refused to start. Enemy activity ashore soon made it clear that a trap had been set and the *Perch* re-embarked the Commando and withdrew.

The next morning, the *Perch* rendezvoused with the destroyers USS *Maddox* (DD 731) and USS *Herbert J. Thomas* (DD 883) to develop an alternative plan. The new plan called for the *Thomas* to create a diversion at the original target while the *Perch* carried out the landing at a second site. On the night of 1 October 1950, 41 Commando landed from the *Perch* on the coast above Hungnam and west of Tanchon, where a day earlier they had been forced to cancel a mission when a pre-landing reconnaissance of the objective area detected an enemy patrol boat guarding the entrance of two adjoining rail tunnels, which were the intended targets. Under cover of darkness and in a known mined area, the *Perch* drew close to shore. After a quick periscope survey of the coastline, the skipper of the submarine gave the OK to land the Commando. Numbering 67 strong, they boarded 10 black rubber rafts and paddled ashore. Lieutenant Colonel Drysdale assumed personal command of 41 Commando's first major raid against enemy supply lines.

The Commando stepped ashore unopposed. While one group of Drysdale's force hurriedly planted explosives beneath the steel rails of the targeted tracks, two other groups fanned out along the flanks to stave off enemy attacks. The demolitions were then detonated, resulting in a pile of twisted rails and a destroyed rail culvert. With the mission completed, the commandos were recalled to the



Photo courtesy of the Naval Historical Center
Fellow Marines and the ship's company gather on the deck of the Perch for the burial of Marine Peter R. Jones. For many Marines it was their first burial at sea. For some it was their first military funeral, but it would not be their last.

Perch. With one troop covering their withdrawal, the British Marines found themselves in a furious firefight with the fully alerted enemy. In the action that followed, they suffered their first combat fatality as enemy guards killed Private Peter R. Jones.

Later, while the *Perch* lay to in the Sea of Japan, a solemn ceremony was held on her afterdeck. On a stretcher covered by the Union Jack rested the body of Private Jones. Drysdale read a brief service and the body was committed to the deep. Eight Commando riflemen fired three volleys in tribute and the two American destroyers each paid their respects with a full 21-gun salute.

As was the custom, the captain of the *Perch*, Lieutenant Commander Robert D. Quinn, arranged for the ensign to be folded and sent to the next of kin. The ensign and Jones' medals are now displayed in the Royal Marines' Museum alongside the U.N. flag flown by the *Perch*.

Several days later, another force

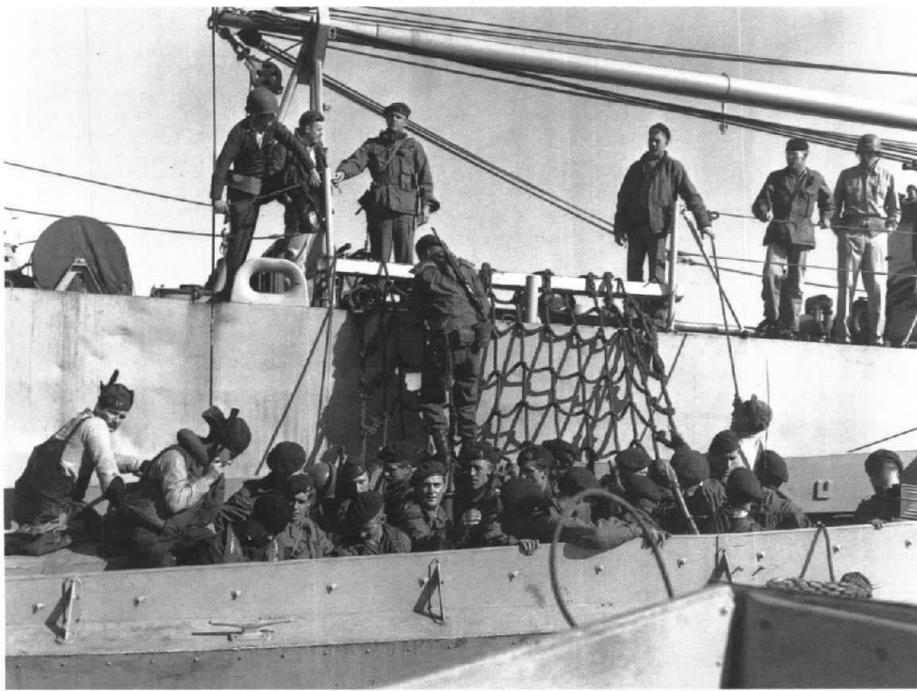
of 125 Royal Marines, under the command of 31-year-old Major Dennis L. St. M. Aldridge, embarked on board the converted American fast destroyer-transport USS *Bass* (APD 124) and USS *Wantuck* (APD 125), each of which came equipped with four landing craft that could accommodate 162 men. The significance of the raid was twofold. This was to be the first raid against the 120-mile stretch of North Korea's rail line, which ran along the northeast coast. It also was the first commando raid launched from a destroyer.

Once ashore in the objective area south of Songjin, approximately 80 miles from the North Korean border with the Soviet Union and even less from the Chinese border, the Marines split into a number of parties. The "powder-train" carried explosives up to a railway tunnel; demolition experts laid the charges and set the fuses; others guarded the beach and boats and checked out the buildings between the beach and railway. All went like clockwork.

Journalist Thomas Driberg, who accompanied the Marines, described the results:

We "got the hell out of it" as the Yanks say, as quickly as we could. It was a terrific moment for all the chaps—many of whom ... had never been in anything like it, the real thing, before when, halfway back to the ship, we suddenly saw the sky torn by a vivid orange flash, and the tremendous roar as the tunnel went up in the air and knew that our mission had been successful.

Unfortunately, the Marines suffered two casualties, the group's



Commandos from the USS Horace A. Bass (APD 124) load an assault boat for a raid on installations deep behind enemy lines. Commissioned in 1944, the Bass first saw combat at Okinawa and is credited with sinking a Japanese submarine in the final days of World War II. In addition to carrying out raids in Korea, she participated in the evacuation of Chinese Nationalist troops to Formosa and Vietnamese civilians from Haiphong to Cam Rahn Bay in the wake of the French defeat in 1954.

youngest Marine and a World War II veteran. Both were buried at sea. Despite the loss, the raid, which “involved transporting quantities of limpet mines and explosives ashore in rubber dinghies through the surf and currents,” was highly successful in disrupting enemy rail lines and soon gave rise to the nickname the Royal Marines proudly adopted as a trademark of their mission in Korea, “the train wreckers.”

As the navies assigned to the United Nations forces held supremacy in the waters off the Korean coast, attention now shifted inland as MacArthur’s forces drove further north in what appeared to be a war-ending offensive against the retreating NKPA. As the military situation on the Korean peninsula rapidly changed, so to did the mission of the Royal Marines. They regrouped and headed back to Camp McGill to reorganize and

train in small unit tactics, cold weather operations, and company and battalion weapons. The just-completed coastal raids would be the last in which the commandos would use rubber rafts. Following these two missions, the commandos

A bazooka team from 41 Independent Commando takes its position during a raid on enemy rail and supply routes near Songjin. The raids brought this vulnerable area of North Korea under all forms of naval attack.

National Archives Photo (USN) 80-G-428248



used landing craft in what they termed “dry ramp landings.”

In his postwar account of the services of 41 Commando, Drysdale noted the techniques used by his Marines had evolved from those used by the U.S. Marines during World War II, particularly those of Lieutenant Colonel Evans F. Carlson’s raiders, and had been adapted in Korea “to suit the prevailing circumstances.” Drysdale, who had been impressed with the use of submarines in raiding missions, later wrote: “it is enough to say that all who took part in the operation were deeply impressed by the obvious potential of a new form of submarine warfare.” He added that what made the raids an even greater success was the planning, cooperation between the naval and ground commanders, and the adequate time for training and rehearsal prior to launching the operations.

As U.N. forces pushed toward the Yalu River and the Royal Marines trained at Camp McGill, it was suggested the commandos be attached to the 1st Marine Division as a reconnaissance force. At first rejecting such a proposal,