

The Ghost Armies of Manchuria

By Patrick C. Roe

(Based on the book *The Dragon Strikes* by Patrick C. Roe)

By the middle of October UN Command forces were rushing northward in what they hoped was a final push to end the Korean War. North Korean forces were withdrawing in disarray, their resistance crumbling much faster than expected. On the East Coast ROK troops pushed rapidly north securing Wonsan on the 11th and Hamhung on the 17th. In the west the 1st Cavalry Division and the 1st ROK division reached Pyongyang in a dead heat on the 19th. By the 24th forces on both sides of the peninsula had reached the original stop line for non-ROK forces approved by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the line Chongchon River across to Hamhung. Troops of the X Corps were afloat off Wonsan; their landing blocked by mines; their cross peninsula dash to secure Pyongyang no longer needed.

Over this euphoria of apparent success loomed the threat of Chinese intervention. In Tokyo General Willoughby, MacArthur's G-2, continued to total up the increasing Chinese strength in Manchuria and repeatedly note their potential for intervention. But the conventional wisdom was stated in a CIA memorandum of 12 October prepared for President Truman:

"The Chinese Communist ground forces, currently lacking requisite air and naval support, are capable of intervening effectively but not necessarily decisively, in the Korean conflict...While full-scale Chinese Communist intervention in Korea must be regarded as a continuing possibility, a consideration of all known factors leads to the conclusion that barring a Soviet decision for global war, such action is not probable in 1950. During this period, intervention will probably be confined to continued covert assistance to the North Koreans."¹

One of the reasons given was: "From a military standpoint the most favorable time for intervention in Korea has passed."

MacArthur, on 17 October, apparently concerned that substantial North Korean elements might escape, without consulting the Joint Chiefs of Staff, issued instructions for an advance to a new stop line farther north into the mountains. The advance was to commence on his order.¹ Two days later he ordered all forces to make a maximum effort to reach the new line "prepared for a continued advance to the border of North Korea." On the 24th he lifted all restrictions on the use of UN troops and ordered his commanders to "drive forward with all speed and with the full utilization of all their forces" to the Manchurian border.

The following day UNC forces in the east and the west collided with Chinese Communist Forces. Unknown to MacArthur and his commanders and against all expectations twelve divisions of the Chinese Communist Army had commenced crossing into Korea with the objective of establishing a defensive line very close to that which had been chosen as the original stop line for UNC forces. The Eighth Army was brought to a halt.

Just over a month later the Chinese launched a major offensive which drove the Eighth Army back to Pyongyang and surrounded the 1st Marine Division at Chosin. But, by December 2nd the Chinese commander, General Peng Dehuai realized the Chinese attack at Chosin had faltered and, in the west the troops badly needed a respite. At 0500 that morning he ordered the armies in the west to halt their pursuit, to mop up the battlefield and rest for four or five days "in order to reorganize the troops, supply food and ammunition and prepare to fight on."²

Unaware of the exhausted condition of the Chinese, but fully aware of the condition of his own troops, General Walker, on 1 December, made one of the most crucial decisions of the war. He assembled his staff and told them:

"I have not been able to get MacArthur's headquarters to advise me of their intentions. In the absence of instructions, I shall assume that the tactical integrity of this army, on which the entire defense of Japan depends, is my paramount objective. I will give up any amount of real estate if necessary to prevent this army from being endangered."³

The following day Generals Doyle Hickey and Edwin Wright, the chief of staff and G-3 of the Far Eastern Command, representing General MacArthur, arrived in Walker's headquarters, reviewed the situation and approved Walker's

decision. The Far Eastern command intelligence summary for that day concluded that the Chinese were capable of seizing Kaesong, preventing the Eighth Army from reaching Seoul and destroying US field forces in Korea. A major factor in this estimate was the Chinese capability to reinforce with huge forces in Manchuria, forces which in actuality did not exist - the Ghost Armies of Manchuria.

UNC forces withdrew back below the Han River. The course and the outcome of the war was totally changed. Instead of reunifying Korea after shedding much additional blood we eventually settled for an armistice generally along the 38th Parallel. The Chinese Communists of the People's Republic of China were suddenly transformed from a rogue regime of doubtful legitimacy to a major player in the Far East. Few intelligence failures in recent history have had such drastic results. The effects are still with us today.

The Chinese Problem

When the war commenced the Chinese were as unprepared as were US forces, if not more so. The PLA was primitively armed and equipped. It has been described as a 1914 army without the artillery. It was tired from twenty years of war. Within the PLA heated debate raged over their ability to fight a modern military force. The great Chinese advantage was a huge reservoir of manpower. But the PLA was poorly disposed. The UNC forces might reach the Yalu before the full force of the PLA could be brought to bear.

The Chinese, as dedicated students of Sun Tzu, had one other great asset - guile. If the UN Command could be made to believe the Chinese had deployed only token forces, UNC forces could be led to advance into the mountainous where the terrain would offset some of the Chinese disadvantage. UNC forces could then be held there until additional Chinese reinforcement could arrive. Then a major counteroffensive might achieve great surprise and shock, perhaps decisively.

The solution was a coordinated campaign of deception. The objective was to make the initial CCF forces in Korea appear much smaller than they were; then, when the main offensive was launched, to make the available forces look much larger than they were. There is no single source which says this was planned and coordinated but the six elements of the deception plan did not all occur simultaneously by accident.

The key to the plan was to capitalize on American technological advantage and provide misleading order of battle information. A network of radio operators transmitting imaginary traffic were used to simulate additional units assembling in Manchuria. General Nie Rongzhen, the PLA's acting chief of staff during the Korean War, had practiced a variation of that technique in the Wutai Mountains of North China while withdrawing before a Japanese offensive in the spring of 1941. As will be seen, much of the CCF order of battle in Manchuria obtained by Willoughby had to have come from traffic analysis by ASA units. Had that information come from an agent network, or a highly placed agent, such a source would surely have been able to warn of large forces crossing into Korea. Deceptive plain text traffic, such as the announcement of Lin Piao as the potential Chinese commander in Korea supplemented the effort.

To make that deception work all movement into Korea had to be conducted with total secrecy. By moving only at night, maintaining a draconian march discipline, and using back roads and trails the Chinese were able to deploy some 220,000 men in Western Korea, initially, and 150,000 more later in Northeast Korea, without revealing their strength. Until the actual offensive began they totally escaped observation by aircraft. It was a superlative achievement.

Prisoners briefed to give misleading unit designations were an essential part of the deception effort. To provide a screen for their entry into Korea each of the 38th, 39th and 40th Armies, the first three entering in western Korea, formed a covering force by taking one battalion from each of the divisions in their army. The task forces were designated as the 54th, 55th and 56th "Unit." A prisoner from the 114th Division's contribution to the task force would identify himself as belonging to the 1st Battalion of the 54th Unit. Some of the prisoners apparently continued to identify themselves in that way even after they had rejoined their parent unit. This led to intelligence officer in the Eighth Army, and at FEC, to initially believe that they were faced only by task force units of regimental size.

Causing further confusion was the Chinese withdrawal starting on 6 November. Front line troops in the Eighth Army were startled to see columns of Chinese drawing back into the hills. On the road to Chosin, the 124th Division withdrew and the Marines secured the Funchillin Pass. In Washington, DC, General Bradley thought perhaps the Chinese had only intervened in moderate numbers and that these few had suffered such a bloody nose that they may have lost the

taste for battle. It was classic Chinese Communist guerilla tactics - luring the enemy in deep. General Peng Dehuai, the Chinese commander, explained it to his officers in homely terms; "In order to catch a big fish you have to let the fish taste your bait. "

Reinforcing the belief the Chinese were in limited strength and preparing to withdraw was the release of 27 U. S. prisoners just before start of their offensive on 26 November. Later in the war release of prisoners came to be recognized as an indication of an impending Chinese offensive.

Capping the deception plan was a diplomatic ruse. At the United Nations a resolution had been introduced calling on the Chinese to withdraw. The Chinese were invited to come to the UN and participate in the discussion. They declined, but did accept a previous invitation to debate US "aggression" in the Taiwan Straits. The delegation departed Beijing on 15 November and was due in New York on the 19th. Panikkar, the Indian ambassador to China, reported the delegation was empowered to discuss the entire question of Korea. This led to some relaxation of concern; a political settlement might be possible. But the Chinese delegation dawdled along the way and did not reach New York until after the Chinese counteroffensive had commenced, then delivered a blistering condemnation of UN action in Korea. There is little doubt that the delegation was a bit of misdirection, part of the overall deception plan. Panikkar was duped.

UNC Intelligence Resources

US forces, initially poorly prepared for combat, were equally unprepared to produce effective combat intelligence. Intelligence specialist teams, around which an effective intelligence system is built, were either absent or hastily formed from scratch, casualties of the lean postwar years. This was especially acute in the months following the Chinese entry. Prisoner interrogation, normally a very productive source, was crippled by lack of Mandarin speaking personnel. Interrogation had to be done through interpreters. Mandarin speakers were scarce, and those available had difficulty understanding CCF military terms.

At division level and below most intelligence was based upon the reports of patrols, front line units, prisoner interrogation, when language personnel were available, reports by both strike aircraft and light observation aircraft, and occasional translation of captured documents. In Northeast Korea, the reports of civilians provided much useful information but were not give much credence at higher levels.

At Eighth Army and X Corps, and particularly at the Far Eastern Command, there were other sources of information which had a limited distribution. The CIA, for example, produced "Intelligence Memoranda" and "National Intelligence Estimates" at the Secret level as well as Top Secret Situation Summaries that contained all-source intelligence.⁴ The Top Secret versions were made available to General Willoughby, MacArthur's G-2.

Other sources of information available at theater level included information from the Chinese Nationalists on Taiwan, the US Consul in Hong Kong, and other diplomatic sources. Information from Nationalist sources, forwarded directly to Far Eastern Command by the US military attache in Taipei, was suspect. Col. James Polk, Willoughby's executive, reported, "...no one trusted what they produced because it was invariably biased or self serving."⁵ The Communist takeover on the mainland had drastically limited American covert assets there, although the Nationalists still had some contacts.

In Korea Willoughby had established the Korea Liaison Office (KLO) in the summer of 1949 with the mission of penetrating North Korean governmental, military and industrial organizations.⁶ The reports of KLO agents were available to Eighth Army and X Corps. KLO agents occasionally provided some useful information but were not especially successful.⁷ They failed to give warning of the initial North Korean attack in June, and again failed to warn of the arrival of Chinese forces in Korea in October and November.

The Far Eastern Command Daily Intelligence Summary lists a Far Eastern Command Survey Group which was the cover name for what apparently were agents controlled directly by Willoughby. This was probably the remnant of the Navy "External Survey" group established in Manchuria after the close of World War II, which, in turn, was the remnant of a network established by Admiral Miles in China during World War II to assist in landings which were then planned on the Chinese mainland. During the immediate postwar period the Navy external survey group operated closely with the consulate in Mukden. The activities of this group were the cause of the arrest, detention and trial of US consul Angus Ward and his expulsion, along with the other American members of the consulate, in September of 1949.

Nothing in the daily intelligence summary or other reports gives any indication that the KLO or the survey group produced any useful indications of the Chinese intervention.

Aerial Reconnaissance

General MacArthur believed that aerial reconnaissance would warn of any large scale Chinese intervention. Meeting with the U. S. ambassador to Korea on 17 November MacArthur stated he was sure the Chinese Communists had sent 25,000 and certainly no more than 30,000 soldiers across the border "... they could not possibly have got more over with the surreptitiously covert means used. If they had moved in the open, they would have been detected by our Air Force and Intelligence."⁸ But the economy years had robbed the Air Force of much of its reconnaissance capability. Aside from the Mosquito AT-6 airborne controllers the 5th Air Force had no visual reconnaissance capability. Much of the effort of the three photo reconnaissance squadrons available was focused on the Yalu crossings where air efforts were concentrated in an effort to prevent Chinese crossing. What photo reconnaissance capability remained was limited to areas immediately adjacent to the main roads, which the Chinese avoided. A further limitation was a shortage of photo interpreters to read what coverage was available. Not until 21 November did MacArthur order the FEAF to conduct intensive reconnaissance of the area between Eighth Army and X Corps. By then the majority of the CCF reinforcements were already in place.⁹

Communication Intelligence

By far the most important source available at the Far Eastern Command, and possibly to Washington, was communication intelligence supplied by the Army Security Agency units, deployed in the Far East, and the Armed Forces Security Agency, the precursor of the National Security Agency. NSA has only recently released some general information on communication intelligence during the war, very little on methods, and none at all on actual product. With all sources of information on intelligence production in the Korean War being, like the NSA releases, limited and fragmentary, the full picture may never be known. Still, relying on what NSA has made available, together with a close scrutiny of intelligence reports and other material available in the National Archives and at the MacArthur Library in Norfolk, and by making some elementary conclusions, a fairly good picture can be developed and flaws detected.

The very successful and highly prized signal intelligence system built up during the World War II had, like much of the rest of the armed forces, been cut back. Intercept facilities in the Pacific region were relatively few. After WWII ASA had collected some Chinese civil communications. Beginning in March of 1950, after the Communists seized power, cryptologic efforts against mainland Chinese targets were intensified. But it took nearly two more years to develop effective processing of Chinese military messages.¹⁰ In the meantime efforts continued against Chinese civil plain text messages. That effort produced intelligence on the PRC economy, transportation and logistics, and the positions of some military units.¹¹ Prior to the Korean War AFSA employed eighty three analysts against the PRC. By November 1950 the number was 131 and by February 1951 it was 156, plus additional part-time assistance.¹²

At the start of the war there were two fixed ASA stations and three mobile units performing fixed station missions in the Pacific as follows:

8069th AAU - Clark- Stotsenberg, PI
8621st AAU - Tokyo
111st Signal Service company - Okinawa
126th Signal Service Company - Kyoto
51st Signal Service Detachment - Chitose¹³

The 50th Signal Service Detachment, whose mission was to monitor U.S. forces to enforce communication security, was diverted to wartime support. Steps were taken to provide signal intelligence capabilities to both the Eighth Army and X Corps. The 60th Signal Service Company from Fort Lewis, Washington, arrived in the Far East in early October and was assigned to support of the Eighth Army. A provisional unit, the 226th Signal Service Co and the 2nd Signal Intelligence Unit were attached to X Corps.¹⁴ In Tokyo Far Eastern Command was also provided with product developed by the British monitoring facilities in Hong Kong.¹⁵

Initial COMINT product was the result of plain text intercepts and traffic analysis. In fact, at many points in the conflict, traffic analysis, that is, the examination of message externals, often constituted the only form of signal intelligence for

Americans. Because of problems with mountainous terrain, there was no steady or reliable information from direction finding (D/F), which had been an important source of intelligence in World War II. It was not until 1952 that traffic analysis could detect from military communications when PRC units entered and left Korea. Much of the initial reconstruction of the PLA's order of battle (OB) came from traffic analysis.¹⁶

ASA units also had their problems finding Chinese linguists. The large Chinese population in the US produced few candidates since most American born Chinese spoke a southern dialect rather than the Mandarin used by the PLA radio operators. To fill the need a number of Chinese Nationalists from Taiwan were hired as civilians to work with ASA, although some special training was needed to acquaint them with the differences in military vocabulary between the Nationalists and Communists.¹⁷

Reading the plain text traffic produced some useful information and some misleading information. Early in the war a message from Shanghai identified General Lin Biao as the commander of PLA forces which would intervene in Korea. In actuality Lin Biao turned down the opportunity to command in Korea and Peng Dehuai took his place, yet intelligence agencies throughout the war, and some histories afterward, continued to list Lin as the PLA commander. Late September traffic carried the information that Zhou Enlai, the PRC foreign minister, had notified neutral diplomats that China would intervene in Korea if UN forces crossed the 38th Parallel. That information had arrived in Washington by the diplomatic route as well. And, as early as July, translation and analysis of civil traffic indicated that elements of the Chinese Fourth Field Army had moved to Manchuria. Later in September and October traffic analysis provided information that these forces had continued to move toward the Sino-Korean border. As will be seen, this was only partly correct and ultimately quite misleading.

An underlying obstacle to effective intelligence production at all levels, especially after the Chinese entry, was a lack of what is now being called "cultural intelligence." There was little detailed information on the history of the Chinese Communist Army and its leadership, tactics, logistics and organization, the kind of information that gives insight into the workings of the enemy and possible weak spots that could be exploited or special capabilities that should be guarded against. This lack was exacerbated by the cultural intelligence from "old China hands" that was badly off the mark, a prevailing contempt for the fighting qualities of the Chinese soldier.

Estimates of Growing CCF Strength

Beginning in October intelligence agencies at all levels noted some increases in Chinese strength in Manchuria and made the obligatory reference to their capability for intervention. In Tokyo the Far Eastern Command Daily Intelligence Summary reported increasing CCF strength in Manchuria, some of it near the Yalu Border.

21 September: 35 divisions confirmed - another 24 divisions possible
5 October: 38 divisions confirmed - another 24 divisions possible
24 October: 44 divisions confirmed - another 18 divisions possible¹⁸

By early October intelligence officers in Washington who had previously warned of Chinese intervention began to have second thoughts. Agencies differed over estimates of the strength of PRC units. CIA analysis tended to think that a reference to an army element meant the army had moved intact. Military intelligence officers began to doubt that entire armies had relocated. On October 4th the Army's G-2 issued an estimate saying although China's entry was not "wholly to be discounted", the evidence was insufficient to indicate such a development was "either highly probable or imminent." On the 5th the Watch Committee, a group chaired by the CIA, ventured that even though the PRC did have a large force on the border, intervention was less likely than previously believed because Beijing's propaganda supporting North Korea had diminished and the PRC leadership probably did not want to expose China to retaliatory U.S. air strikes.¹⁹

Evaluation of CCF Strength

Some prisoners captured in the initial fighting on the Chongchon front gave unit identifications according to the "unit" code for their organization. Initially Tarkenton, the Eighth Army G-2, and Willoughby, were deceived by the unit code. One prisoner, captured 6 November tried, unsuccessfully, to explain the deception. Liu Piao-wu was a company cultural officer. He explained that the change of designation had been made just before the Chinese entered Korea, changed specifically to confuse the Americans.

Not all prisoners got the word on the change in designation. A re-interrogation report by the 164th MIS Detachment on 8 November reported on nineteen Chinese prisoners. Six of them reported belonging to a division in the 40th Army, six of them the 39th Army and one the 66th Army. Only six mentioned belonging to some "unit," three the 56th Unit, two the 55th Unit, and one from some unknown unit.²⁰ Review of twenty-three PW reports found in the 8th Army War Diaries for the period 25 October through 6 November finds that only eight of those interrogated mention membership in a task unit. Nevertheless Tarkenton and Willoughby, stuck with the "unit" theory for the next three weeks.

Further study of those twenty-three interrogation reports shows something else quite interesting. Those with the closest ties to the Communist Party were more likely to give the deceptive "unit" identification. The former Nationalists, there were quite a number of them, were more likely to give their proper unit identification. That would lead to the conclusion that some of the prisoners were specifically briefed to be captured with misleading stories. Later in the war the Chinese did brief soldiers to be captured so they could bring instructions to the POW compounds.

Persistence in the "unit" theory seems to indicate that Willoughby and Tarkenton had some other highly credible source which outweighed the evidence from PW interrogation. This had to have been the intelligence coming from the radio units. Overlooked in the various estimates was the puzzle of finding task force "units" opposite Eighth Army, but fully formed regular divisions opposite X Corps in Northeast Korea.

On November 6th, both in the east and the west, the Chinese broke off their attack and mystifyingly drew back into the hills. The following day the DIS estimated total CCF strength in Korea to be the 54th, 55th, 56th units at 9,000 each, division sized, in Western Korea, and the 124th Division, at 6,700, in the Northeast Korea, for a total of 33,700.²¹ The mystery was why, with such huge strength in Manchuria there was so little in Korea? There were imaginative rationalizations.

In at a meeting of the Joint Intelligence Indications Committee agency representatives puzzled over the "lack of aggressiveness" on the part of the PRC forces. The intelligence officers who thought only portions of each army had deployed to Manchuria now used the same reasoning to estimate how many troops took part in the First Phase Offensive. The Watch Committee believed the Chinese had made only "piecemeal commitments of small forces...from various divisions of three different armies."

In addressing the question of task force units instead of fully formed regiments or division the committee reasoned the PRC wanted to promote "the fiction of volunteer forces but also...to create the impression of greater strength than was actually present."²² That was the exact opposite of what the Chinese successfully achieved, Amake a large force look small. "

The thinking of the CIA was that while there were huge forces in Manchuria capable of halting the UN advance or forcing withdrawal to defensive positions farther south, their initial effort was only to halt the UN advance and keep the North Korean regime in being on Korean soil.²³ In an estimate on 24 November the CIA believed the Chinese would simultaneously:

- a. Maintain Chinese-North Korean holding operations in North Korea.
- b. Maintain or increase their military strength in Manchuria
- c. Seek to obtain UN withdrawal from Korea by intimidation and diplomatic means.²⁴

Willoughby's conclusion was the units in contact had been token forces, only the vanguard of CCF forces which had the mission of holding off UN forces while the remainder crossed into Korea which was correct but irrelevant since the Chinese forces were already in Korea.²⁵ On the 25th, with the Eighth Army's renewed offensive under way he estimated the enemy strength in Korea as 46,693 to 70,935 in 12 divisions with an additional reconstituted North Korean strength of 82,779 and reported further:

There are some indications which point to the possibility of a withdrawal of Chinese communist Forces to the Yalu River or across the border into Manchuria. In unconfirmed reports, heavy casualties and the lack of a will to fight are given as possible reasons for such a move. Equally unconfirmed reports furnish a possible link with political factors which might well be influential in making such a decisions. The lull in fighting along most of the front, and the actual loss of contact in some sectors might well be indications that such an operation is underway. The report

of the return by the Chinese Communists of twenty-seven American PWs to UN lines could also be interpreted as a possible indication that the Chinese have plans to withdraw from Korea.

Those “unconfirmed reports” were very likely from plain text intercepts, deliberately deceptive.

In actuality the Eighth Army was facing a total of six armies, eighteen divisions, a total strength of some 220,000 to 240,000. In the east, three new armies of the 9th CCF Army Group with twelve divisions totaling 150,000 men had entered Korea undetected and were poised to assault the 1st Marine Division and then the remainder of X Corps.

That evening the Chinese struck Eighth Army in full force. Two days later the Chinese offensive began at Chosin.

In the days leading up to resumption of the UNC advance the basic assumption both in Washington and Tokyo had been that while there were huge forces in Manchuria there were only modest CCF forces in Korea. If the Chinese chose to intervene by reinforcing those forces the reinforcement would become known, it would take time, and would allow time for a re-evaluation of UNC plans. So the size and strength of the Chinese November offensive was a stunning surprise to the troops in the field, to Tokyo, and to Washington.

In the days following the Chinese attack Willoughby, the Army's G-2 and the CIA all assumed that the rest of the Chinese forces in Manchuria were pouring across the border to reinforce those CCF units already in Korea. General Bolte, the Army G-3, thought that with no reinforcement available we should withdraw from Korea. The UNC force could be destroyed - the entire US ground establishment. General MacArthur told the Chiefs that unless ground reinforcements of the greatest magnitude were promptly supplied him, the UN command, which was "mentally fatigued and physically battered" would be forced into successive withdrawals or into beachhead bastions with little hope of anything but defense. Unless there was some positive and immediate action on our part, he could only foresee "steady attrition leading to final destruction."²⁶ He told General Collins that without air attacks against China and no reinforcement UNC forces would have to be withdrawn from Korea and “should be done as soon as possible.” MacArthur thought the CCF forces in contact or available numbered more than 500,000, were backed by the entire war potential of the PRC, and were reinforced with rehabilitated North Koreans numbering 100,000, all supported by the logistic and advisory assistance of the USSR.²⁷

Willoughby's estimate of enemy strength jumped dramatically from his 25 November estimate. On the 6th of December he estimated 429,381 CCF and NKPA troops present in contact or on the immediate front of UN forces. He noted that the remaining twenty-four divisions, 204,000 troops, located along the Yalu were available as strategic reserves, with six more divisions along the far northeastern border. He reported to the Department of the Army “The bottomless well of CCF Manpower in Manchuria continues to overflow into Korea with an unrelenting surge.”²⁸

By the 9th of December Willoughby had identified what was believed to be twenty-seven divisions, with the possibility of another six, were in Korea and that an additional six would soon appear. These latter twelve, not in contact, would probably have been identified through traffic analysis. He thought the total might be 268,000 CCF troops in immediate contact with UN ground forces with a minimum of 550,000 additional within supporting distance, and an additional 200,000 expected soon to augment the 550,000. “From the above figures it can be readily ascertained that over a million CCF troops are poised as a threat to UN ground forces. This total does not include 160,000 NK troops (presently estimated) or 370,000 CCF militia in Manchuria.” They pointed, he believed, “...to the probability of unlimited Chinese commitment.”²⁹

Plans were underway for the withdrawal of all UN Command troops from Korea.

The Reality

What was the reality of the situation? Shu Gang Zhang in his book *Mao's Military Romanticism* has made an exhaustive study of available Chinese records and compiled the Chinese order of battle at various points during the war. It is the most authoritative OB available. Comparing the CCF units in Korea as reported by Zhang with the estimates in Willoughby's reports gives a picture of the actual Chinese situation.

Table One shows how Willoughby's estimates compare to forces the Chinese actually had in Korea.

The accompanying Table 2 shows the CCF armies Willoughby reported to be in Manchuria on 24 October, and how many of them actually appeared in Korea, then or later.

Four of those Chinese armies, the 38th, 39th, 40th, and 42nd, together with two armies Willoughby had not identified, the 50th and 60th, all originally designated the 13th Army Group, took part in the Chinese first phase attack in late October.

Those same six, with three more which had not been identified in Manchuria in October, took part in the 2nd Phase attack in later November, a total of thirty divisions, approximately 370,000 men.

The Chinese received no more reinforcements until March of the following year when three more of the armies supposedly identified in Manchuria in October, together with three more which had not been previously identified, appeared. By August of 1952, another army, plus three more previously unidentified, appeared.

But eight of those October armies of Manchuria, an estimated 200,000 men, never appeared in Korea during the entire war, and, given the difficulties the Chinese had of supporting their armies in Korea, may well have never been in Manchuria. Of the four armies Willoughby reported in his summary of 9 December, the 25th and 30th were never in Korea during the war and the 24th and 37th appeared much later. So, there were twelve CCF armies that did not exist, at least then, eight from the October 24th report, another four from the December 9th report. They were the “Ghost Armies of Manchuria.”

Even more confounding, by 12 December the three armies, twelve divisions of the 9th CCF Army Group were out of action, devastated by their fight with the 1st Marine Division, by air attacks, and by the terrible cold.³⁰ Song Shilun, the 9th Army Group commander said he needed 60,000 replacements. Not until April of the following year did one army, the 26th, from the 9th Army Group, appear on the line.³¹

So in December the Eighth Army was withdrawing south before the six armies of the 13th CCF Army Group. Originally with 240,000 men it had suffered heavy casualties. The 38th, 39th and 40th Armies had suffered 15,000 casualties each, the 42nd, 50th and 60th, about 5,000 each, a total of 60,000. Rather than being driven south by more than a million men, the Eighth Army was fleeing from eighteen tired, primitive, under-strength and poorly supplied divisions, totaling no more than 180,000 men but reinforced by reconstituted North Korean units and a small group of Chinese radio operators pretending to be the oncoming “Ghost Armies of Manchuria.”

There is no doubt that the Chinese, knowing of US reliance on signal intelligence set out to carefully and craftily turn that technological advantage against us. Just as the initial view of the Chinese was that they were poor fighters with no staying power, American hubris could not believe that a group they thought to be so primitive could even think of, much less mount such a deception campaign. It was a textbook application of the lessons of Sun Tzu:

When you are near make yourself look far away
When you are big make yourself look small
When you are small make yourself look big.

In the first phase offensive they used deceptive unit identifications, making divisions look like battalions. In the second phase they made six armies look like twenty. They succeeded all too well.

As a final note, this story of how the Chinese used our technological advantage to deceive us is not merely of historical interest. It is exactly the strategy the two Chinese authors, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui advocate in their very interesting book *Unrestricted Warfare*.

Table 1 - Estimate CCF Strength vs. Actual

Date	Intelligence Estimate of Chinese Strength		Actual Chinese Strength	
	In Korea	In Manchuria	In Korea	In Manchuria
21 Sep	None	9 armies (35 divisions)		4 armies (12 divisions) Unknown additional
24 Oct	None	12 armies (44 divisions) 6 armies (18 divisions)?	4 armies (12 divisions)	2 armies (6 divisions)
28 Oct	3 regiments		4 armies (12 divisions)	Unknown
8 Nov	3 division sized unit 1 division		6 armies (18 divisions)	3 armies (12 divisions) Unknown additional
25 Nov	12 divisions (70,935 men)		9 armies (30 divisions)	Unknown
28 Nov	21 divisions (127,000 men)			
1 Dec	22 Divisions 190,000 men	13 armies (49 divisions) 11 addition divisions ?		
9 Dec	11 armies (33 divisions) 2 armies (6 divisions)?		6 armies (18 divisions)	Unknown

Table 2 - Reported vs. Actual CCF Armies

Reported		Identified						Never Identified in Korea
FEC DIS	FEC DIS							
24 Oct 50	9 Dec 50	Oct 50	Nov 50	Apr 51	Aug 51	Sep 52	Jan 53	
13 th Army Group - 1 st Phase Offensive - 6 armies - 18 divisions								
38		38	38	38	38	38	38	
39		39	39	39	39	39	39	
40		40	40	40	40	40	40	
42?		42	42	42	42	42		
		50	50	50	50	50	50	
		60	60	60	60	60	60	
9 th Army Group - 2 nd Phase Offensive - 3 armies - 12 divisions ²⁰								
			20	20	20	20		
			26	26	26	26	26	
			27	27	27	27		
3 rd Army Group - 3 armies - 9 divisions								
				12	12	12	12	
				15	15	15	15	
				47	47	47	47	
19 th Army Group - 3 armies - 9 divisions								
63?				63	63	63	63	
64?				64	64	64	64	
65?				65	65	65	65	
20 th Army Group - 2 armies - 6 divisions								
67					67	67	67	
					68	68	68	
23 rd Army Group - 2 armies - 6 divisions								
	37?				36			
					37			
East Coast Command - 3 armies - 12 divisions								
46						46	46	
						23		
	24					24	24	
Other - 4 armies - 12 divisions								
							1	
							16	
							21	
							54	
	25?							25
	30							30
41								41
43?								43
45								45
38								38
55								55
56								56
66								66
70								70
17 armies	4 armies	6 armies	9 armies	15 armies	19 armies	20 armies	20 armies	10 armies
60 divisions	12 divisions	18 divisions	30 divisions	48 divisions	50 divisions	63 divisions	60 divisions	60 divisions

Notes:

1. CIA Intelligence Memorandum 12 Oct 50 in U.S. Department of State *Foreign Relations of the US: 1950. Vol VIII The Korean War*. Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1976 p 933. Hereafter FRUS.
2. Zhang, Shu Guang. *Mao's Military Romanticism: China and the Korean War, 1950-1953*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995 p 116
3. Blair, Clay. *The Forgotten War: America in Korea, 1950-1953*. New York: Random House, 1987 503 & n74 p 1037
5. FEC Daily Intelligence Summary 3007 3 Dec 50
4. "COMINT and the PRC Intervention in the Korean War" National Security Agency. No date. pp10-11. This is apparently a declassification of an article in *Cryptologic Quarterly* a Top Secret publication of NSA now available on the NSA web site. Hereafter referred to as COMINT.
5. Interview with Polk quoted in Blair, p 337
6. Report by LtCol Leonard J. Abbot to Willoughby dtd 18 May 1951 MacArthur Library RG3 Folder 2
7. Eighth Army PIRs No. 82, 89, and 90 dated 2, 9 and 10 Oct 50, I Corps PIR 54 8 Nov 50 and Eighth Army SitRep SitRep 292 101520 Nov 50 all contain reports of covert agents.
8. Schnabel, James F. and Robert J. Watson. *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy. Vol. III The Korean War. Part I.* Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1979 pp. 308-309
9. Futrell, Robert F. *The United States Air Force in Korea: 1950-1953*. Washington: Office of Air Force History. 1983. Revised edition
10. Hatch, David A. and Robert Louis Benson *The Korean War: The SIGINT Background*. October, 2000. National Security Agency. p 12. This is a preliminary monograph in signal intelligence during the Korean War available on the NSA web site. Hereafter cited as NSA Monograph.
11. COMINT . p 10
12. NSA Monograph p 8
13. Deptar msg W97801 2 Dec 50 to CINCFE NAR
14. NSA Monograph p 8 and Annex A, Task Orgn to Open O No. 6, X Corps 14 Nov 50 NAR
15. JCS to CINCFE 20 Mar 51, RG 90 MCAL
16. COMINT p 9 and NSA Monograph pp 8, 14
17. NSA Monograph p 14
18. FEC DIS 2934, 2948, 2967
19. COMINT p 15
20. 8A PIR 119 8 Nov 50 - PW Interrogation Report 164th MIS Det - correction sheet
21. FEC DIS 2982 8 Nov 50
22. COMINT p 15
23. CIA National Intelligence Estimate 8 Nov in FRUS p 1101

24. CIA National Intelligence Estimate 24 Nov 50 in FRUS 1220 ff
25. DIS 2983-2986
26. FEC msg C-50332 to JCS 3 Dec 50
27. Memo for Gen Collins 4 Dec 50
28. DA Telecons 4099 6 Dec 50 and 4105 7 Dec 50
29. FEC DIS 3013 9 Dec 50
30. Li, Xiaobing and Glenn Tracy (trans.) "Mao Telegrams during the Korean War: October-December 1950"
Chinese Historians Vol V. No. 2 (Fall 1992)
31. *An Evaluation of the Influence of Marine Corps Forces in the Course of the Korean War (4Aug50-15Dec50)* 2. vols. U. S. Marine Corps Board 1952