

Survivors of Korean War massacre by US soldiers seek investigation

Esther Galen
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Four survivors of a US Army massacre during the Korean War are visiting the United States to press their demands for a full investigation into killing of hundreds of refugees, mostly women, children and old men, which took place July 26-29, 1950, three weeks after the war began.

They spoke with American veterans who had participated in the atrocity at No Gun Ri, during a "ceremony of reconciliation" held in Cleveland, Ohio last week. This was followed by a meeting with Pentagon officials in Washington, who agreed September 30 to open an official inquiry into the affair. The trip concluded with a public meeting in Los Angeles's Koreatown, the largest Korean-American community in the United States.

The bloody atrocity at No Gun Ri, a hamlet 100 miles south of Seoul, has been known in South Korea for decades, but a series of pro-US military dictatorships suppressed any public protest or investigation. The facts were kept secret in America as well, until several US veterans who witnessed the events gave interviews to the Associated Press this fall.

Six veterans of the 1st Cavalry Division of the US Army told AP they fired on the refugees at No Gun Ri and six others said they saw the shootings. Army units retreating through South Korea in the face of the North Korean offensive at the beginning of the war had been ordered to shoot civilians on the pretext that North Korean soldiers might be hiding among them. In the neighboring 25th Infantry Division, the commander told his troops that "all civilians seen in this area are to be considered as enemy and action taken accordingly." The Korean survivors say there were no North Korean troops within miles and the killings were not related to combat.

American soldiers from the 1st Cavalry Division

drove out the population from two villages near No Gun Ri, telling them North Koreans were coming. As the refugees neared No Gun Ri, US soldiers ordered them off the road and onto a parallel railroad track. US planes strafed the area, killing 100. Americans then directed the refugees into the railroad bridge underpass and after dark opened fire on them. One veteran, Eugene Hesselman of Kentucky, recalled that Capt. Melbourne C. Chandler ordered machine gunners to open fire, with the statement, "Let's get rid of all of them."

Veterans and survivors are haunted by memories of those three nights when 200-400 were massacred. "On summer nights when the breeze is blowing, I can still hear their cries, the little kids screaming," said Edward Daily, of Tennessee. Park Hee-sook, then a girl of 16, said, "I can still hear the moans of women dying in a pool of blood. Children cried and clung to their dead mothers."

The AP investigation into the killings at No Gun Ri also revealed other incidents when the US Army killed refugees by blowing up bridges and with machine gun and mortar attacks. On August 3, 1950, a US general and other army officers ordered the destruction of two bridges, as South Korean refugees streamed across, killing hundreds of civilians. One bridge ran across the Naktong River at Waegwan.

Earlier that day, 25 miles downriver at Tuksong-dong, 7,000 pounds of explosives blew up a steel-girder bridge crowded with women and children, old men, and ox carts with their belongings. Many also drowned trying to swim to shore. Commanders were enthusiastic about this operation. The 14th Engineers report noted, "Results, excellent."

These two incidents were not aberrations or the product of exceptional circumstances, but rather

characteristic of the entire American military intervention in Korea from 1950 to 1953, one of the bloodiest chapters in US history. While the Korean War evoked little domestic protest, compared to Vietnam, it was an even more concentrated explosion of military violence. At least two million Koreans died in the three years of fighting—a death toll equivalent to that caused by 12 years of American intervention in Vietnam.

In three years, American planes, naval guns and artillery rained down more shells and bombs on the Korean peninsula than had been expended in all of World War II. The American military tried out a new weapon on a wide scale—napalm—a jellied gasoline that attaches itself to burn wounds and keeps on killing for up to two weeks. As General Curtis LeMay, the US Air Force commander, later boasted, US warplanes "burned down every town in North Korea and ... killed off—what—twenty percent of the population of Korea as direct casualties of war, or from starvation and exposure."

The South Korean survivors of the killing at No Gun Ri sought acknowledgement and compensation for the attack over many years. They tried to file a compensation claim in 1960, but the US claims office in Seoul told them they missed a deadline. Korean police warned one survivor not to speak about the events.

In August 1997 they send a petition to South Korea's Government Compensation Committee. The US Armed Forces Claims Service responded that there was "no evidence ... to show that the US 1st Cavalry Division was in the area." In 1998 the South Korean committee rejected the case because it was filed after the statute of limitations expired. Now that the AP investigation has been published, the South Korean and US governments are setting up an investigation.

While the US military command was ostensibly cooperating with the demands for an inquiry, following the detailed and graphic accounts provided by the veterans, several Pentagon officials told the press the most immediate issue under discussion was a proposed blanket amnesty for all Americans involved in the atrocities at No Gun Ri and other Korean sites. This might be necessary in order to obtain testimony of survivors, they said, but would undercut US efforts to press war crimes charges in contemporary war zones such as the former Yugoslavia.



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