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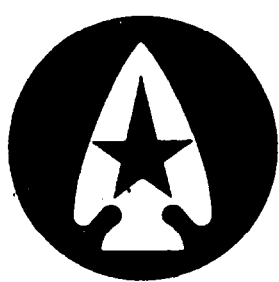
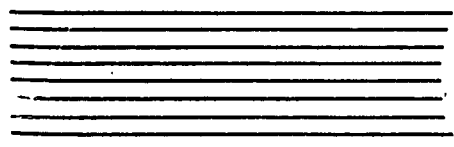
COMBAT DEVELOPMENTS COMMAND

DYNAMICS OF FIRE AND MANEUVER

(FIRMA III) (U)

FINAL REPORT

ACN 13986



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CASE STUDY #11

The Battle of Osan (Korea)

1. General. The Battle of Osan was the first engagement of the Korean War involving American troops. It was fought by a battalion-size force to delay the enemy's advance while its parent unit--the 24th Infantry Division--entered Korea through the port of Pusan and assembled around Taejon in early July 1950, soon after the beginning of North Korean Communist invasion of South Korea. The battle is of special interest because it illustrates the importance of fire-effectiveness, unit training, reliable equipment, leadership, and military discipline. The holding action at Osan revealed many weaknesses in the equipment and personnel of the American Army of 1950 and in its uses of fire and maneuver in a delaying action.

2. Background. On 25 June 1950 (local time), the North Korean Army (NKA) launched a surprise invasion of South Korea. When the forces of the Republic of Korea proved unable to contain this Communist onslaught, the United States intervened under the auspices of the United Nations. In late June the 8th Army occupying Japan mobilized its four divisions and ordered the 24th Infantry Division to prepare to move by sea to Korea. At that time the chief American concern was to keep control of the port of Pusan in friendly hands as the harbor which was most suitable for 8th Army's entry into Korea. General William F. Dean, Commanding Officer of the 24th Division, decided to send ahead of the division by air a small task force which would proceed north of Pusan and establish one or more road blocks to delay the enemy's advance. The rest of the division would be landed at the port of Pusan from whence it would move to defend the road junction at Taejon. At that time the task force would rejoin the division.

The task force organized by General Dean was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Charles B. Smith of the 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment. Task force Smith was assigned two under-strength rifle companies, part of a battalion headquarters company, two recoilless rifle crews, and two 4.2-inch mortar crews--in all about 400 men. The rifle companies had six 2.36-inch anti-tank rocket launchers (bazooka) and four 60 mm mortars. Each man was issued 120 rounds of .30-caliber rifle ammunition and two days' supply of C rations. Smith's command had a liberal sprinkling of combat-experienced officers, about a third of them having seen prior combat in either the European or Pacific theaters, but only one out of six of the enlisted men had previous combat experience. The rest were at best only semi-trained and averaged under 20 years of age.

On the morning of 1 July six C-54 transport plans began a shuttle movement of Task Force Smith to a small airport outside Pusan. That evening the assembled force moved by rail to Taejon where General Church of the Korean Military Advisory Group (KMAG) to the ROK Army ordered Smith's command to divide and to proceed to Pyongtaek and to Ansong. While the movement was in progress on 2 July, Smith and his staff moved in jeeps north of Pyongtaek for a personal reconnaissance toward Seoul. During that drive Smith spotted a good defensive position on the main highway just above the town of Osan which is about twelve miles above Pyongtaek. Upon his return, Smith recommended that his command be reunited at the Osan position. On 3 July General Dean arrived at Taejon and assumed command of all American forces in Korea. The following day he approved Smith's request to occupy the Osan position. At the same time he attached to Task Force Smith a battery of 105 mm howitzers of the 52nd Field Artillery Battalion and placed it under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Miller O. Perry. Perry's command numbered 140 officers and men and raised Task Force Smith's total to 540 when the latter moved out to occupy the Osan position on the night of 4 July.

3. The Battle. When Task Force Smith arrived at the Osan position at 0300 hours on 5 July, the troops began to dig earth-works in the predawn darkness. Smith's choice of positions was in a saddle breaking a long string of hills which crossed the highway at right angles. The main highway of Taejon passed through this saddle and a mile to the east the main railroad from Seoul also crossed the hill line; Smith intended to block both routes as long as possible. The town of Osan was two miles in his rear and the nearest friendly units were elements of the 34th Infantry Regiment twelve miles south at Pyongtaek and further east at Ansong. Smith's plan was to fall back upon either Pyongtaek or Ansong as circumstances dictated when his position above Osan became untenable.

Smith's main concern in the Osan position was defense against the attack down the highway. He deployed B and C rifle companies along the ridge-line to the east of the road with C's right flank refused along a finger ridge parallel to the railroad. One platoon of B Company was placed on the hillock west of the highway. One 75 mm recoilless rifle crew was placed just east of the highway where it passed through the saddle, and a second was located at the corner of C Company's front and its refused flank. The bazooka teams were concentrated near the road. Smith emplaced his two 4.2-inch mortars on the south slope of the ridge and about four hundred yards from its crest and behind B Company. The lighter mortars were placed immediately behind the ridge-line.

While Smith was preparing his infantry position, Perry's battery was emplacing about 2,000 yards behind the ridge-line and about 150 yards to the west of the highway. Five 105 mm howitzers were prepared for indirect firing, and one gun was shifted forward to a point about 1,000 yards behind the saddle. Perry allocated to this piece his entire supply of high explosive anti-tank (HEAT)

shells--exactly six rounds. The rest of the artillery's ammunition was anti-personnel high explosive (HE). Perry also organized four .50-caliber machine gun teams and four 2.36-inch bazooka teams from his service troops and sent them up to reinforce Smith's infantry. With their arrival, Smith calculated that he had 415 officers and men serving as infantry on the ridge-line and 125 officers and men serving with the artillery in the rear.

At dawn a light rain began to fall and the men ate their C rations in the drizzle. Despite the weather, observation of the highway north remained good. At 0700 hours Smith, looking through his binoculars northward, detected movement on the road in the direction of Suwon, about eight miles distant. Shortly thereafter the movement was identified as a column of eight tanks slowly proceeding toward Osan. At 0730 hours, the artillery forward observer (FO) alerted the guns in the rear to prepare for a fire mission.

The vehicles spotted by Smith were the first section of 33 Russian-made T-34 tanks belonging to the North Korean Army's 107th Tank Regiment. This unit was spearheading the advance of the NKA's 4th Infantry Division, and had encountered only trifling resistance from South Korean forces the two days previous. The tank crews were not aware that American ground forces had entered the war and consequently were not expecting serious resistance above Taejon. Following the tank column some miles to the rear were the leading regiments of the 4th Division, moving by truck and on foot, but the tank crews had orders not to stop until they reached Pyongtaek. Thus the NK tank column rode into the Osan position unaware that a serious fight was about to begin.

Smith withheld all fire on the enemy tank column until the vehicles were about 2,000 yards from his ridge-line position. Then he signalled Perry's battery to open and at 0816 hours the first American shell of the Korean War was fired. As a salvo of American shells burst on both sides of the road around the tank column, the enemy was at last alerted to the danger. The tank crews hurriedly "buttoned up" in their machines but made no effort to deploy off the road. Instead, they increased speed and continued on in column until the lead vehicle was about 700 yards from Smith's line. Then Task Force Smith's recoilless rifle team near the road fired one round and watched the shell bounced harmlessly off the T-34's frontal armor. The team fired repeatedly to no avail as the tank column chugged up the slope and the lead tank actually entered the saddle. When the lead tank was only fifteen yards away a bazooka team launched a 2.36-inch rocket only to see it bounce harmlessly off the steel hull. The tank swung its turret so that its coaxial machine-gun could bear and the team scrambled for cover. But before the machine-gun could open fire the 105 mm gun deployed as an anti-tank weapon a 1,000 yards away fired the first of its precious

high explosive anti-tank (HEAT) shells. The projectile ripped through the tank's armor and exploded. As the tank burst into flames, the three crewman attempted to evacuate the disabled vehicle through the escape hatches. All three were shot down by American small-arms fire, but not before one fired a burst of sub-machine gun bullets that killed an American machine gunner nearby--probably the first American to lose his life in the Korean War.

As the lead tank sat burning and immobile, the second in line maneuvered around it on one side of the road. The 105 mm gun with the HEAT shells barked again, smashing one of the treads of the tank. The T-34's 85 mm gun then replied with an exploding shell that wrecked the 105 mm gun and drove its crew to cover. The third tank in the column pulled around the two disabled vehicles ahead, followed by the others. As the formation moved down the road toward Perry's guns, the artillery Forward Observer gave warning over the field telephone only an instant before tank treads cut the cables stretched across the road. By then the 105 mm gun crews could see the enemy tanks and immediately shifted to direct fire. The guns blazed away as rapidly as the crews could load, and occasional red flashes on the approaching tanks indicated that hits were being scored. No tanks, however, were disabled by the high explosive shells and about 500 yards from Perry's position the six tanks deployed off the road and opened fire. The bursting tank shells quickly drove the demoralized gun crews to cover, but no direct hits were scored on the American guns. After the American fire ceased, the tanks returned to the road and proceeded toward Osan, nonchalantly passing the American pieces at one point only 150 yards away. As these vehicles disappeared to the south, more enemy tanks appeared at the saddle as Perry and several officers and NCOs attempted to re-man the guns. Shamed by their example, some enlisted men came out of hiding and rejoined the fight. In the next several minutes another body of tanks bypassed the guns, although some were hit only 150 yards from the 105 mm gun muzzles. The enemy did not deign to deploy off the road but fired back wildly as they careened by.

By this time thoroughly frustrated, Perry formed two bazooka teams and led them across the rice paddies and to a position near the road. Before the teams could open fire, a passing tank halted and fired a shell in their direction. A shell fragment struck Perry in the leg and forced the bazooka teams to take cover, but an American 105 mm shell shattered the tank's right track. When the crew attempted to evacuate the vehicle, Perry's bazooka teams shot them down with small-arms fire. The bazooka teams then carried Perry back to the battery. No more tanks appeared and the battle lulled at 0855 hours.

In the silence that followed Perry discovered that all signal communications with Smith's force on the ridge had been lost. The telephone cables had been cut by tank treads and the old radios were not working. Perry ordered a wiring party organized but

before it could begin laying cable, another enemy tank column was spotted passing through the saddle and rolling toward Osan. Once more Perry's crews fired vainly at the passing enemy vehicles, chagrined when shells only jarred most of them even at ranges down to 150 yards. Only one enemy tank was destroyed in this fusillade. Enemy tank fire was wild and inaccurate and no injuries were suffered on the American side. The last of the tanks passed at 1015 hours. A second and much longer lull now began.

From 1015 hours to 1115 hours Smith and Perry tried to repair their respective positions and to resist following enemy units. A jeep radio was repaired so that the Forward Observer could control Perry's guns from the front line again, and the failure of the enemy tanks to strike Task Force Smith from the rear indicated that it had been bypassed rather than encircled. Despite the heavy firing, few Americans had been hurt or killed as yet, but the failure of the artillery, rockets, and recoilless rifles to have much effect on the enemy tanks had shaken Smith's whole command.

At 1115 hours observers in Smith's line spotted an enemy column coming from Suwon. This turned out to be the vanguard of the North Korean 4th Division's 16th and 18th Infantry regiments. Each regiment numbered about 3,000 men and the entire column was preceded by three T-34 tanks. The column itself consisted of a mixture of trucks and marching infantry. The tanks which had earlier broken through Task Force Smith's road block had not contacted these following units which approached Smith's position in ignorance that opposition awaited them.

When the column reached a point about 1,000 yards from the ridge-line, the American infantry opened fire with machine guns, mortars, and rifles. Perry's 105 mm battery in the rear also commenced firing. A number of enemy trucks exploded and burst into flame, and some of the enemy infantry fell to the road. After the initial shock of contact wore off, the enemy reacted in disciplined fashion. The tanks returned the fire and slowly moved up both sides of the road until they were about 300 yards from the ridge-line. There they halted and methodically shelled the ridge-line near the saddle. Behind them the infantry regiments had deployed into the fields on both sides of the road. Then a force of about 1,000 men in skirmish lines moved forward cautiously, firing as they advanced. The fire from Smith's line proved too intense, however, and this frontal attack soon halted. The enemy continued a heavy fire with mortars and small-arms from in front of Smith's line, and small bodies of men were seen deploying to the east and west behind this screen. Smith correctly guessed that the enemy was preparing to probe his flanks in hopes of carrying out a double envelopment of his ridge-line position. Smith's refused right flank toward the railroad was secure against such

a maneuver, but his left--the single platoon on the hillock west of the highway--was vulnerable. Worse still, the jeep radio failed and Perry's battery had to cease fire for lack of forward observation.

At 1230 hours the platoon beyond the road reported enemy in company strength had appeared on an adjacent hill to the west and slightly south of the hillock on which the platoon was posted. Smith ordered the platoon to evacuate its position, cross the road to B Company, and then attempt to form a refused flank facing west. The platoon complied but the ground was unfavorable for defense against attack from the direction. The enemy, however, made no attempt to advance from his flanking position and contented himself with emplacing mortars on the hill and shelling the western end of Task Force Smith's ridge-line position.

In the meantime, Perry had sent out wiring teams in hopes of restoring forward observation to his now silent guns. The teams moved across the road to the east in hopes of laying cable through the fields to C Company's headquarters. Smith was unaware of this work or that his artillery would soon be back in action. When at 1430 hours large numbers of enemy troops were reported moving stealthily down the railroad, Smith decided his position on the ridge-line was becoming untenable. He ordered C Company to evacuate by moving down the finger ridge on which its refused flank rested, and to mount up on the jeeps and trucks parked at the base of ridge. B Company was to follow by dropping back directly behind the ridge while the platoon on its refused flank covered the withdrawal. Smith did not remain to supervise the execution of his orders but proceeded from his command post (CP) toward Perry's battery to brief his artillery commander. On the way he encountered the wiring parties sent out by Perry whom he ordered to return to the battery. He was surprised to find upon his arrival at the battery that all guns were still intact and that Perry's troops had sustained few casualties. Upon being informed of the task force's impending withdrawal, Perry ordered the breech-blocks and aiming gear removed from the guns and stowed in the trucks. His men then hurriedly mounted up, and, led by Smith and Perry in a jeep, set out for Osan.

Meanwhile on the ridge-line, the infantry's withdrawal had become greatly muddled. No one had been delegated to supervise the retreat in Smith's absence, and as C Company moved down the finger ridge near the railroad it became exposed to intense enemy flanking fire. No platoon was ordered to cover the retreat. B Company's withdrawal was also disorganized, and no one assumed responsibility to inform the single platoon covering the retreat when the company reached the trucks at the bottom of the ridge. men simply leaped aboard the nearest vehicle and drivers drove off in a cloud of dust toward Osan. Nearly all the heavy weapons

were cast aside and at least 25 wounded were abandoned. The enemy pressed his advantage by rapidly advancing to the ridge-line, overwhelming the single platoon there at about 1500 hours, and, then pouring withering fire down the southern slopes of the ridge. Significantly, most of Task Force Smith's casualties were suffered during this chaotic retreat.

The troops from the ridge-line who finally made it out either in vehicles or on foot headed toward Osan, following in the wake of the artillery column. Smith in the lead jeep guessed that the tanks which had bypassed Task Force Smith earlier in the day were headed for Pyongtaek. He, therefore, planned to take the road from Osan to Ansong. However, as his column passed through the streets of Osan, they unexpectedly came upon three parked T-34 tanks whose crews were resting beside the road. Fortunately, the North Koreans were as surprised as the Americans. Smith's jeep wheeled around in an 180 degree turn, and followed by his tatterdemalion column went careening through the streets of Osan until he spotted a side road which led to Ansong. Just outside of Osan on this road his column spotted American stragglers crossing the fields on foot and picked them up. The remnants of Task Force Smith reached Ansong at dark where they were taken under the protection of units of the 34th Infantry.

The Battle of Osan lasted approximately seven hours from the time the first shell was fired until the enemy occupied the ridge-line of the Osan position. Given the mission of Task Force Smith, it was not a total American failure since Smith's orders were to delay the enemy rather than hold ground. Certainly, Task Force Smith's presence at Osan interfered with the North Korean 4th Division's concentration at Taejon and delayed its arrival there by about half a day.

On the other hand, given the circumstances and the enemy's mistakes, Task Force Smith's casualties were probably unnecessarily high. When Smith took a muster of his command on 6 July at Ansong, only 185 men reported present. During the day stragglers reporting in raised the total to about 250 men. That night Smith reported that 150 men in his infantry force were either dead, wounded, or missing, and that Perry's artillery force had lost 31 officers and men. Captured enemy documents later revealed that the North Koreans had lost 42 killed and 85 wounded, mostly infantry. Four enemy tanks were destroyed in the Osan fight.

4. Comments.

a. Task Force Smith was hastily improvised for its mission, using mostly inexperienced enlisted men who had only a modicum of training and who were psychologically unprepared for combat. Short days before the Osan action they had been carrying

out routine occupation duties in Japan. Most of the men were quite young and probably many were immature and perhaps unusually dependent upon the leadership of their officers and NCOs. Any judgment of the Osan action must be qualified by these circumstances.

b. In contrast, the enemy was both better trained and indoctrinated for the fighting they had to face. One of the two regiments at Osan was formerly a part of the Chinese Communist Army and had seen action against Chinese nationalists troops in 1948 and 1949. All the North Korean units had been intensively trained for six months prior to the invasion of South Korea.

c. American equipment was below par at Osan. No anti-tank mines were available to the infantry in Task Force Smith, and only a tiny quantity of anti-tank (HEAT) shells were provided the artillery. The 2.36-inch rocket-launchers were not powerful enough to deal with T-34 tanks. It is interesting to note that while six HEAT shells disposed of two enemy tanks it required 200 ordinary high explosive shells to account for two more. American radios were old and faulty, especially jeopardizing command and control between infantry and artillery.

d. Under these conditions, it is a wonder that Task Force Smith managed to fight and hold its ground as long as it did. This was largely due to enemy mistakes, especially errors by enemy armor. The most serious was failing to mop up the task force after the American front had been penetrated early in the battle. This could have been done easily and speedily, given Task Force Smith's lack of effective anti-tank weapons. Secondly, the enemy tanks failed to contact and warn the following infantry regiments of the presence of the task force near Osan. The consequence was a virtual ambush of the North Korean infantry who suffered their greatest losses in this phase of the battle.

e. In terms of maneuvers, Smith selected a good defensive position and fought from it skillfully up to a point. The great width of his front further extended by a refused flank to the east made it impossible for his small force to cover the dominating hills west of the highway. His timely withdrawal of the platoon west of the road when the enemy infantry seized this high ground at least reduced the threat from that direction, although a refused flank just east of the highway could not neutralize it. Enemy maneuvers were soundly carried out with a large force laying down a base of fire on the American front and two bodies of troops attempting to flank the US line. This maneuver forced Task Force Smith to withdraw, and fire from these flanking groups inflicted most of the task force's casualties.

f. In terms of fire effectiveness the Americans were wholly outclassed by the numerous tanks of the first North Korean

force, thanks to the shortage in anti-tank artillery ammunition and ineffective anti-tank rockets. Terms were favorable between Task Force Smith and the tank-infantry force encountered next. The Americans had artillery support for a time while the enemy was restricted to tank guns and mortars. But American fire effectiveness was greatly reduced by signal difficulties between infantry and artillery that eventually cancelled out the US artillery advantage in the second engagement.

g. The poorest American showing was in the withdrawal stage, and significantly most American casualties were suffered at that time. Smith's personal absence and lack of control confused the withdrawal. It is unclear why he thought it necessary to contact Perry personally to notify him of his intentions, or at least why he did not appoint a subordinate to control and coordinate the withdrawal. The abandonment of equipment and disabled wounded appear to have been unnecessary. Tight control was especially important with young and largely inexperienced troops who might give way to panic. The general route which followed is at least in part attributable to a failure of leadership at the top.

5. Analysis of the Battle.

a. Intelligence.

US Intelligence was quite weak concerning the enemy forces approaching Osan. Although the US Air Force had command of the air, apparently no aerial reconnaissance was attempted. Enemy intelligence was even worse, since the forces engaged blundered twice into the American road block and were not even informed that the United States had intervened in the war. Both sides were therefore ignorant of the other's intentions and capabilities (para 4a).

b. Tactical Operations.

(1) Task Force Smith did not lack fire power for its limited missions, but its fire was effective only against infantry and "soft" transport. Fire effectiveness was severely reduced by lack of anti-tank shells for the artillery and the ineffectiveness of the recoilless rifle and rocket-launchers against T-34 tanks. Fire effectiveness was further reduced by the faulty signal communications equipment provided the Americans which reduced the artillery's role in repelling enemy infantry assaults.

(2) Task Force Smith's defensive maneuvers were effective up to the moment of withdrawal but then disintegrated into a chaotic route.

(3) The enemy had greater overall firepower in both phases of the combat but failed to exploit it properly until the second phase. Fire effectiveness was quite low in the first phase.

In the second phase, the enemy's maneuvers were skillful and had the desired effect of forcing Task Force Smith's withdrawal and inflicting heavy casualties.

(4) The Americans had dug in and had foxholes and shallow trenches for protection, but this did not match the protection afforded the enemy by his armor in the first phase. In the second phase, the earthworks were of more benefit against enemy small-arms and mortar fire and the North Koreans (except those in the three tanks) were more exposed.

(5) Although they possessed anti-personnel mines, the Americans either failed to lay out mine fields against infantry or did not have the time to do so. Their lack of anti-tank mines has been mentioned. The result was a failure to develop effective interference with enemy movements, either mounted or on foot (para 4e and 4f).

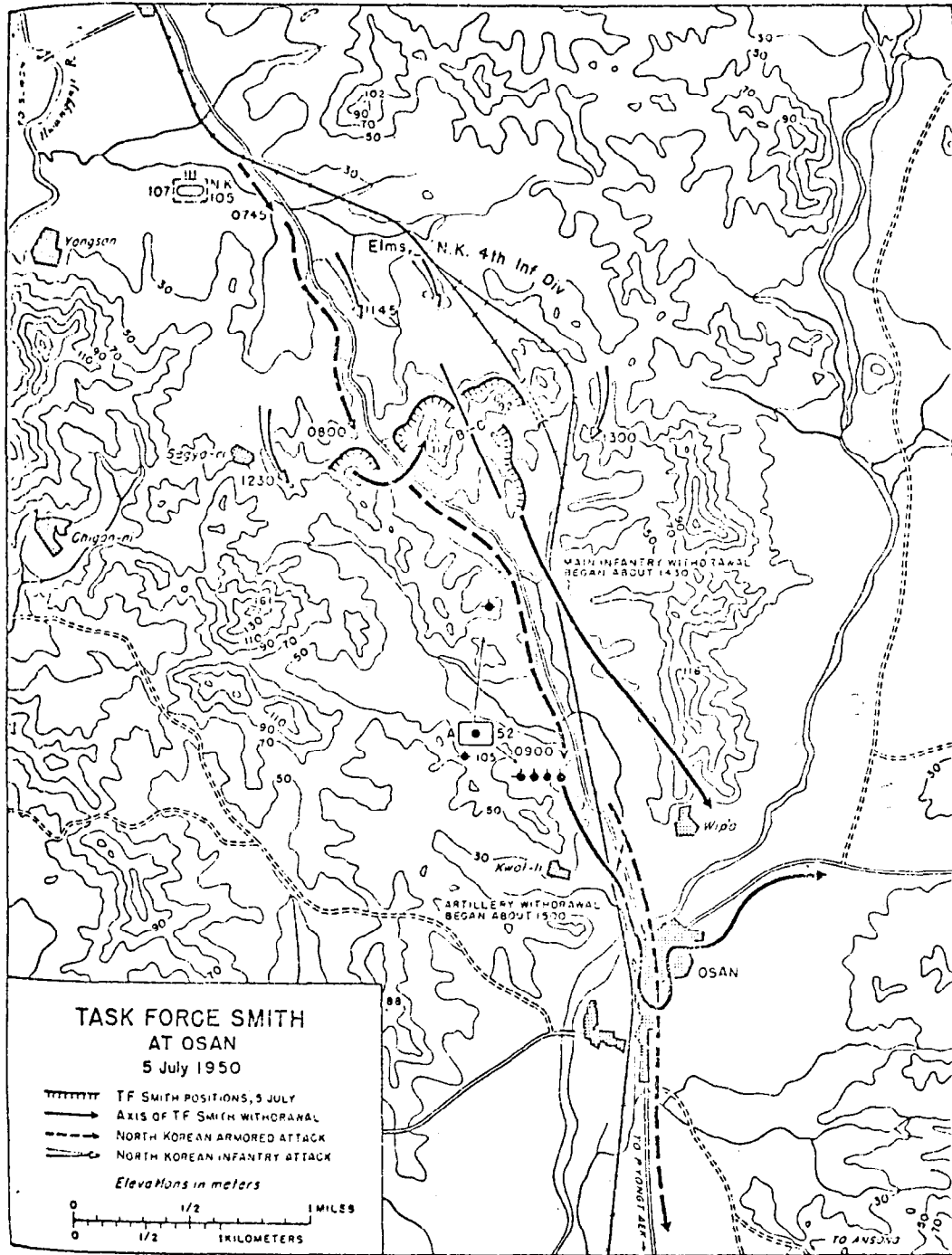
c. Command and Control.

American command and control was fairly good until the time of withdrawal except for signal difficulties with the artillery. At the time of withdrawal, it nearly collapsed. Enemy command and control was poor during the first phase of battle--indeed no central command seems to have existed. In the second phase, the enemy command and control was quite good. On balance then, the North Koreans seem to have come off better in this respect than the Americans (para 4d, 4e, 4g).

d. Combat Service Support.

The Americans were poorly provided with certain types of shells, radios, and field telephones. No resupply could be expected, but the quality and appropriateness of some of the ammunition and equipment is more in question than sheer quantity. Combat service support in these terms was inadequate. The enemy was nearly in all respects better supplied except that in the second phase he lacked artillery and was forced to rely on tanks and mortars.

Figure 1.



MAP

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