One old man
At age 73, Kim Il Sung looked more like an old man than a god, but such thoughts did not trouble the leader of North Korea’s Communist Party. After more than a half century of brutal guerilla warfare, Party infighting, and authoritarian rule, “The Great Leader” was finally secure in his position. With a son, Kim Jong Il, waiting in the wings to take over, and the devotion of the people guaranteed by a ruthless national discipline and oppressive police power, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea was in good hands.

Only one thing remained for the veteran Communist-cum-deity: reunification. Ever since the failed gamble of 1950, Pyongyang had endured a humiliating American presence on the peninsula, a permanent imperialist enclave that every day reminded Kim Il Sung of his one time failure. Almost as galling, the Combined Forces Command to the south reminded the North Korean leader of the debt Pyongyang owed Beijing, for it was Chinese soldiers that had stopped MacArthur’s drive to the Yalu, and the Chinese never forget. For the proud North Koreans, such obligations were a bitter pill. What was worse, the “paradise” of communist North Korea was rapidly imploding. Starvation was ever a threat, and the complete lack of a functioning economy belied the propaganda coming out of Pyongyang. Kim’s dream was in danger of turning into a nightmare.

Everything would change, though, if the North could sweep across the DMZ and topple the Western lackeys in Seoul. Such fantasies had occupied much of the Great Leader’s thoughts over the past three decades, but always the dreams shattered on one cold, hard reality. The United States would simply not permit Pyongyang to win a war in Korea. Beyond the land, air, and sea forces in South Korea and Japan, the Americans had vast resources in Europe and the United States that would flow into the South to stem the tide of a Northern invasion. Quite possibly, too, the Americans might let the Republic of Korea forces push north in their own attempt at reunifications, and who knew if this time Beijing would come to Pyongyang’s rescue once more? If the Chinese did come, the price would almost certainly be too high to bear.

A quandary, then. All the application of Marxist dialectic, chuche self-reliance, and homegrown pomp and circumstance couldn’t get beyond the cold, hard fact of American power. On its own, Kim Il Sung believed, the North could deal with the weak and decadent South. It was the Americans with their high-tech firepower and massive air armadas that were the real obstacle to the liberation of Korea. At age 73, Kim Il Sung was a committed realist, but now he was starting to look for miracles. He wanted reunification as his monument to history; without that, there would be something missing from his legacy.
The Chance

History has a way with irony, and nowhere was this truer than in the events that led up to the 1985 struggle for Korea. In 1950, the United States was initially afraid that the invasion of South Korea was but the prelude to a wider, global war with Communism, to be spearheaded by a Soviet assault into Western Europe. That never happened; while known of and tacitly supported by the USSR and China, the 1950 North Korean attack was a solo operation; American nuclear power and the global correlation of forces discouraged both Moscow and Beijing from too much adventurism. In 1985, though, the situation was reversed. With American attention focused on the surprise Warsaw Pact assault in Germany, North Korea seized its opportunity. In a neat reversal of the fears of 1950, the communists used American distraction in Europe to facilitate an attack in Korea.

Though the Soviet Union had not coordinated its efforts with Pyongyang, the Warsaw Pact offensive on June 10 did not come as a complete surprise to North Korea. While China was caught unawares, so much so that an attack on Taiwan had to be considered and dismissed due to lack of preparedness, North Korea had long suspected something was up. Worried about operational security, Moscow had kept an incredibly tight lid on Operation RHINEGATE, issuing combat orders by hand only hours before the first shots were fired. Still, Pyongyang’s intelligence sources, working on intuition honed by decades of hair-trigger tension along the 38th parallel, had picked up indications that something was in the air. Not trusting either Moscow or Beijing, they had kept their suppositions to themselves, particularly after the Soviets successfully pulled off their LUXOR and BAUXITE operations in the Middle East and Yugoslavia.

As soon as the North Korean intelligence service suspected that the new Soviet leader Belinskii was considering active Soviet military action against NATO, an emergency meeting of the Politburo in Pyongyang convened. As usual, the only vote that really mattered was Kim Il Sung’s, but he was more than willing to entertain the bold, aggressive suggestions of Colonel Jong Do Rhee, the Army’s chief operational planner. Rhee’s plan was breathtakingly simple. If, as anticipated, the Russians committed themselves to a full-scale attack on Western Europe, the Americans would be forced to focus their full attention on halting the Warsaw Pact short of the Rhine. In the meantime, the DPRK would have a perfect opportunity to redress the historical anomaly of 1953. Without full American support, the South would crumble before the communist onslaught. In less than two weeks, Rhee promised, the puppet regime and its American allies would be thrown into the sea.

It took Kim Il Sung only moments to make up his mind. His entire life had been one big gamble, from the time he first picked up a rifle to each and every trade negotiation with a hostile West. Even “Great Leaders” don’t live forever, he knew, and here was his one big chance to put the capstone on an incredible life. To be the great liberator of Korea—that was a goal worth nearly any price. The decision made, the Politburo adjourned. Operation CHUCHE was a go.
The plan
Like its creators goals, the plan for Operation CHUCHE was brutally simple, and in keeping with the Korean word’s meaning of “self sufficiency.” An overwhelming surprise attack, backed by the full weight of North Korea’s substantial Special Forces establishment and its air force, would strike across the DMZ and destroy the South Korean forces opposing it. The goal would be to isolate and bypass Seoul, in order to drive forcefully to the south and west to surround and cut-off the capitalist forces and force them to sue for peace, a peace that would be tantamount to surrender to Pyongyang.

To make this happen, two things were necessary. One, the attack had to move rapidly and with extreme violence, inflicting as many casualties on the South Korean forces as possible, and gobbling up as much territory as was feasible, for maximum shock value. Two, the Americans had to bleed. With reinforcements from Europe impossible, and most of the American reserve earmarked for NATO, the 2nd Infantry Division was the main bulwark of American power in Korea. Destroying it would not only open the road to Seoul, but would also demoralize the South Koreans and make it that much more likely the United States would be unable or unwilling to stop a negotiated cease fire beneficial to the North.

Operationally, CHUCHE was fairly simple. The first to cross the DMZ would be engineers opening the series of tunnels the North Koreans had stealthily built over the past three decades. Emerging from the foothills of the Taebaek Mountains and at various other spots along the front line, the man-made caves would allow reconnaissance and even whole armored units to emerge a mile or two behind enemy lines. Then, following a massive barrage from the Echelon’s artillery, the front line infantry formations supported by the infantry divisions’ tank battalions would crash through the DMZ and into the South Korean positions on the other side of the minefields that had been a feature of the area since 1953. The fighting was expected to be brutal and deadly, but the weight of numbers would give the North an edge; most of its units were nearly twice the size of southern formations.

North Korean Forces
However you looked at it, for Pyongyang to succeed they would have to have an edge. Kim-Il Sung and his generals were utterly convinced in the superiority of the communist soldier to his capitalist counterpart, but something more was needed. Somehow, the bulk of the allied forces had to be kept from joining the fight. Even so, there was reason for confidence; the communist forces on the DMZ were substantial. The front line forces of the 1st Operational Echelon, consisting of the 1st, 5th, 2nd, and 4th Corps, plus the 1st and 2nd Artillery Corps, formed a line from Kaeson in the west to Kuum-ni in the east, and were to deliver the initial blow. The force was formidable, with 16 infantry divisions, four armored brigades, seven light infantry brigades, 12 artillery brigades and four anti-aircraft units. A total of 105,220 fighting men, 3096 guns and 2156 vehicles faced the
Combined Field Army and 1st Republic of Korea Army across the DMZ, and would be the spearhead for the Communist assault.

FIGURE 1: DPRK 1st Corps

FIGURE 2: DPRK 5th Corps
FIGURE 3: DPRK 2nd Corps
FIGURE 4: DPRK 4th Corps
Waiting to push through the chaos created by the opening assault was the 2nd Operational Echelon and its 30,000 or so troops. At the same time, North Korea’s numerous special forces troops would make themselves felt. An airborne force of five brigades would land behind the ROK lines, seizing bridges and high ground in the area to the west of Seoul [0615_08: Han River Airborne Operation]. Simultaneously, amphibious forces would land at Inchon [0615_07s: Rude Awakening], to capture the port and pin down the South Korean garrison east of the capital. It was a daring but potentially rewarding gamble; either the effort would cause untold confusion in the ROK and US ranks, and hamper efforts to reinforce the DMZ line, or it would throw away the flower of the communists’ elite warrior formations.

Once the first wave of infantry had ripped holes in the ROK line [0615_03: 1st Corps Sector, 0615_04: 5th Corps Sector, 0615_05: 2nd Corps Sector, 0615_06: 4th Corps Sector], the armored and light infantry brigades of the 1st Operational Echelon would exploit through the gaps, moving rapidly into the allied rear. North Korean light infantry units had many of the characteristics of motorized cavalry, and were admirably suited for such an exploitation role. While the communist armor wasn’t state of the art, it would generally be a match for the Korean and American M-48 and M-60 tanks. The US didn’t waste its best armor in Korea; the M1s were back in Germany facing the much more formidable armored threat of the Warsaw Pact.
By the end of the first 24 hours of fighting Pyongyang expected to have taken the first line of cities behind the DMZ, a line of towns running from Munsan in the west, through Yonch’on to Ch’orwon and Kumhwa and over to the eastern coast at Kojin-ni. By that time the 1st Operational Echelon would probably be in need of rest and refitting, and it would be the job of the 2nd Operational Echelon to pick up the slack. This highly mobile formation of 27, 473 men, 1860 vehicles, and 162 guns consisted of two mechanized and one armored corps Concentrated in the eastern half of the peninsula north of the DMZ, 12 to 25 miles behind communist lines, it would move up to the front during the first day of combat, and continue the attack on day two. Pyongyang hoped these fresh troops would help push the North Korean spearheads to the outskirts of Seoul, and take the crucial towns of Uijongbu and Tongduchon from the American 2nd Division.

With any luck, Kim Il Sung’s generals thought, by day three their forces would begin flowing around the South Korean capital. By then the assault formations of the 1st Operational Echelon would have recovered enough to continue their advance down the peninsula. If necessary, Pyongyang could commit the 30,000 or so men of the 2nd Strategic Echelon, though the generals would rather keep this reserve of mostly infantry ready to meet any Allied riposte from the sea. Even though Europe would claim most of the US attention, the 3rd Marine Division at Camp Courtney on Okinawa was almost certain to make an appearance in Korea, and the communist leadership had few illusions about their ability to keep the US Navy from going wherever it wanted to.

The Defenders
Opposing the communist juggernaut was the Combined Forces Command, established in the late 1970s to coordinate US and ROK military action. The United States had long planned to fight two regional wars at once, though many critics had questioned the ability to actually do this. Operation CHUCHE would put the two-war theory to the test.

US Forces
Without a doubt the anchor of the allied defense in Korea, and the formation that would carry the brunt of the American contribution to the war, was the US 2nd Infantry Division, a unit with a long and glorious history in the US Army. The “Indianhead” division had its origins in World War I. Formed in 1917 in France, it fought successfully at Belleau-Wood, Soissons, and Mont Blanc, as well as the Meuse-Argonne battles. During WWII the unit landed at Omaha Beach on June 6, 1944 and saw combat throughout the rest of the European war, including substantial action during the Battle of the Bulge. In July 1950 the Indianheads arrived in Korea from their Fort Lewis, Washington base to help stem the advancing North Korean forces, and was the first division to break out of the United Nations’ Pusan perimeter. It left Korea in 1954, and after a transfer to Alaska the division was inactivated in 1957.
Reactivated in 1958 and based at Fort Benning, Georgia, the 2nd Infantry Division remained at that location until 1965, when it was transferred back to Korea to beef up US defenses there. After helping the Republic of Korea forces deal with increased communist incursions and harassment, the division settled in to a long and seemingly permanent stint as America’s front line soldiers along the DMZ. In 1985 the division had been in South Korea for two decades, and knew its defensive mission by heart. A tough, well-trained outfit, the division was unique in the US Army in that it was the only major unit deployed in what could reasonably be argued was an imminent combat zone. As such, its state of readiness was high with a combat strength on the ground of 4,160 men, 36 guns, and 250 vehicles. With its headquarters at Tongduchon the division straddled the main highway to Seoul, with the 3rd Brigade at Munem to the west and 1st and 2nd Brigades at Tongduchon. The division’s artillery was concentrated around Uijongbu, with one battalion of 155mm howitzers detached at Munsan closer to the front.

With its helicopters and over 100 tanks, plus a substantial artillery component, the 2nd Infantry Division was the key force blocking the road to the South Korean capital. The US 8th Army also included the 17th Aviation Brigade at P’yeongtaek, with airborne infantry, and the 2nd Engineer Group, with battalions near P’yeongtaek and Kimpo. It was a powerful force, but it was only the tip of the iceberg. Some five Tactical Fighter Wings of the US Air Force were either in Korea or earmarked for its defense as well. And as planned, the American contingent would grow dramatically in the first five days after a communist attack. In addition to a Marine Division, the American command hoped to introduce a full Army Corps and supporting troops into the fray as well. What the communists hoped was that these forces would arrive too late or not at all, drawn off to reinforce Europe as NATO fended off the Warsaw Pact assault.

FIGURE 5: US 2nd Infantry Division Deployments
Republic of Korea Forces
Despite the substantial US contribution, the bulk of the defensive forces in South Korea were naturally from the Republic of Korea itself. South Korea fielded a large conscript army that was reasonably well trained and physically tough, with some 132,000 combat personnel. (All strengths are combat strengths; actual unit sizes including non-combat personnel were substantially larger.) The bulk of these were in the Combined Field Army, consisting of the 58,496 men of I, V, and VI ROK Corps, plus the Capital Corps. The 36,958 combat troops of the II, III, and VII ROK Corps made up the 1st ROK Army, while the much smaller Combined Forces Command held the 1st ROK Marine Division, a helicopter unit, and the Korean Rangers. Backing up these men, most of who were stationed along the DMZ or in and around the capital Seoul, were the 30,100 soldiers of the Reserve (Militia) Corps.

While the ROK force was competent enough, most of its units were of indifferent quality, a nearly inevitable by-product of a large conscript army. Some, like the Marine units, were excellent, while others, like the politicized Capital Division, were decidedly sub-par. The Koreans were relatively well equipped, with TOW anti-tank missiles and adequate if not spectacular armor support, though most of its artillery units consisted of older, towed systems of light to medium size. Most of the South Korean army, with the exception of its reserve forces, was deployed along the DMZ. With the center of Seoul and its 10 million
people less than 30 miles from North Korea a forward defense was not an option, but a necessity.

The V ROK Corps, of the Combined Field Army, held the western flank of the ROK line with 17,000 men. To its right, holding a position from the Han River just east of Munem to through Munsan along the DMZ half way to Yonch’on, was the I ROK Corps. From there the VI ROK Corps held a northerly bulge of the front line from Yonch’on to north and east of Ch’orwon, where the VII ROK Corps of the First ROK Army took over with its positions centered on Kumhwa. The III ROK Corps held the southwestern flank of the Taebaek Mountains, while the II ROK Corps held the southeastern flank and the line all the way to the ocean at Kansong. The corps of the Combined Field Army had armored brigades attached, a benefit not enjoyed by First Army units, but other wise most of the Korean formations were quite similar. There were also five ground attack wings of the ROK Air Force, equipped with American jets.

The total combat strength of the Republic of Korea, then, at the time of the June attack stood at 132,600 fighting men, 2898 guns, 2789 vehicles and helicopters, and 350 planes, on paper a fair match for the 158,157 men, 3951 guns, 4625 vehicles and helicopters, and 257 planes of the North Koreans. These numbers represent actual combat personnel; when all personnel were included, the North Korean military could muster some three-quarters of a million men, to just over half a million for the South.
FIGURE 6: ROK V Corps
FIGURE 7: ROK I Corps
FIGURE 8: ROK VI Corps
FIGURE 9: ROK VII Corps
FIGURE 10: ROK III Corps
FIGURE 11: ROK II Corps
It was Kim-II Sung himself who came up with the solution. It had long been assumed that any North Korean assault would have Seoul as its objective. The South Korean capital was a prize of immense strategic, political, and economic value, and its 10 million or so citizens represented a substantial chunk of the total southern population. The city’s proximity to the DMZ made it an obvious target as well, and its command of the major north-south communications lines gave it substantial military importance. Yet an assault on Seoul posed as many problems as it solved. Urban warfare on the scale needed to conquer the city would exact a fearsome toll on the infantry formations of the communist army, and prolonged fighting would inevitably destroy much of Seoul’s economic value. Worst of all, the city would act as a sponge, soaking up North Korean combat power and preventing aggressive exploitation to the south.

There was another option, though, one that traded the immediate propaganda benefit of capturing the enemy capital for longer-term strategic gains. What if the North Korean army bypassed the city? Instead of committing most of the premier units in the communist army to a costly “Stalingrad on the Han” battle, what if Pyongyang merely screened off Seoul, and pushed mechanized forces around the south of the city to the sea? Such a thrust, if
backed by enough second echelon or worn-down first echelon infantry to form a cordon, would have the dual benefits of isolating the capital and trapping substantial South Korean forces. The South Koreans would inevitably defend the city to the death, and would prepare by concentrating as many troops as they could spare for the expected urban battle. Maybe, if the North was lucky, some American units too might be trapped in the Seoul pocket as well.

With a huge chunk of the capitalist army trapped against the sea in Seoul and points south, the mobile forces of the North Korean army could run riot through western and south-western Korea, driving to airfields and ports in the south of the country that bolstered the allied military force. With any luck, it would be a repeat of 1950, with reinforcing American units forced to huddle in a small perimeter around Pusan in the southeast, and scattered Republic of Korea forces reduced to hasty defenses and desperate battles for survival. In such a situation, who could doubt that the Americans, beset by the Warsaw Pact in Europe, would be amenable to a cease-fire in place? Once stopped, the fighting could not easily be resumed, and the North would have its great victory.

The key, then, was to quickly bypass Seoul and drive deep into South Korea, destroying as much allied military capability as possible before American reinforcements could arrive. There were two main flaws with this approach, both of which Pyongyang appreciated. One was the danger of another Inchon landing, where the American Marines would slam into the coast west of Seoul and cut off the penetrating communist forces. The other was American air power, which could make a long southern march a hellish affair of burning vehicles and blown bridges. For both contingencies, the North Korean leadership had what it felt were effective counters. As part of the initial assault on the South, North Korean Special Forces would themselves land at Inchon, freezing in place the ROK defenders and turning the coast into an impregnable bastion against any American riposte. The US Air Force was harder to deal with, but two things bode well for the communist plan. A rapid thrust down the peninsula stood an excellent chance of overrunning the air bases the American relied on for most of their tactical air support, and the raging war in Europe offered an even better chance of siphoning off the cream of American air power. As a bonus, Pyongyang hoped that intense diplomatic pressure, combined with judicious use of terrorist attacks might dissuade the Japanese from offering full support for American air and naval efforts in support of South Korea.

American Angst
When the war in Europe ignited, the United States was taken by surprise, to a degree not seen since Pearl Harbor. Even so, recovery was rapid, and long-standing plans for reinforcing Europe went into operation more or less smoothly. Naturally, most of the American intelligence community was focused on the European situation in the first few days of the war, with few resources left to monitor the rest of the world. Having learned something of a lesson, however, from the recent Soviet initiatives around the globe, not everyone at the CIA, NSA,
and DIA was fixated on Germany. Satellites still monitored other potential hot spots, though less frequently than before, and contingencies for two war and one and a half war options were dusted off and reviewed. Locally, military commands outside of Europe went to heightened states of alert, to guard against out of area Soviet actions as well as regional threats.

The Eighth United States Army in Korea immediately went on a high state of alert, on top of its generally active peacetime posture. The South Korean forces, particularly the Combined Forces Command and the Combined Field Army, as well as the ROK 1st Army, also increased their alert status, though Seoul hesitated to begin the call up of reserves unless and until more definitive indications of war appeared. The economic disruption that full mobilization would entail, on top of the turmoil caused by the war in Europe, would have severe consequences for economies across the Pacific, and there was a natural reluctance to take such steps unless absolutely necessary.

North Korean operational security, however, was excellent, and while alert intelligence officers in the 2nd Division and certain Korean formations began to suspect something was up, there was no smoking gun, no unequivocal indication of an imminent attack. Thus, when the communist artillery thundered into action on June 15th [0615_01: The Frontier of Freedom (campaign)], the North Koreans achieved a large measure of strategic surprise. On the tactical level, however, the high state of readiness of the allied forces mean that surprise was much less complete. The ROK forces offered bitter resistance along most of the front, though in some areas surprise and the ferocity of the North’s assault shattered the defending units. Adding to the confusion was the deployment of thousands of communist infiltrators, commandos, and terrorists throughout South Korea, who engaged in various acts of sabotage, disinformation, and deception. While most of these actors were eventually killed—only a few dozen were actually captured alive—they managed to cause significant disruption while they lived.

**The Dragon Roars**

At first, the initial attacks of the communists seemed to achieve nearly everything Pyongyang had anticipated. The lead units of the North Korean strike force cut through the Combined Field Army’s I and VI ROK Corps, ripping gaping holes in the allied line. Across the breadth of the peninsula, communist artillery pounded South Korean positions, while parachutists, infiltrators and sea borne commandos made the allied rear areas as dangerous as the front lines. For the first four days the 1st Operational Echelon ground through the defenses on the DMZ, pushing back the defenders, reaching the outskirts of Seoul in force by 19 June, when the battle to isolate the capital began in earnest [0617_01: The TDC Corridor, 0617_02: A ROK and a Hard Place, 0618_01s: ROK, Paper, Scissors, 0618_02: Choppers at Ch’unch’on, 0619_01s: En-Passant on the Han]. By 20 June the communist forces were bypassing the city and heading south, leaving thousands of ROK soldiers trapped in a huge pocket of nearly
Eastern Front proportions [0621_01: Hold the Line, 0625_01s: Grinding Halt].

FIGURE 13: North Korean Landings at Inchon, 15 June
FIGURE 14: Airborne Drops on the Han, 15 June
That day also saw the first use of chemical weapons, and marked a turning point in the conflict, though few noted it as such at the time. While the first week of the war seemed to be an unmitigated success for Pyongyang, in truth things were much worse than appeared. While the initial communist assault had driven the ROK forces off the DMZ, it had failed to actually destroy many of the South Korean formations guarding the frontier. Instead, remnants and even whole units had gradually withdrawn, filtering back through the rough terrain of central Korea to reform and reconstitute behind the front line. With limited strategic reconnaissance resources and little aerial scouting capability, the North Koreans were unable to accurately track the bulk of the retreating formations. Though some front line officers remained unfazed, choosing to believe their own propaganda about the unstoppable people’s offensive, more sober minds worried about what they could not see. Careful analysis of the DMZ battlefield revealed far too little evidence of destroyed South Korean units, and far too much evidence of successful withdrawals. Too, the allied artillery had been phenomenally effective, with the numerous South Korean and American batteries raining a storm of 105mm and 155mm shells on the attackers. Too much of this artillery had managed to displace south, leaving Pyongyang nervous about what might happen a week down the road if the offensive were to stall for any reason.

The use of chemical weapons, to clear a position blocking the main north-south road past Seoul, was a measure of the concern Pyongyang felt. Using
chemicals was seen as a calculated gamble. The Americans were unlikely to use nuclear weapons, with the ongoing war in Europe and sky-high tensions around the globe. Effective chemical reprisals would depend on the Americans being able to firm up the front enough to develop worthwhile targets, and in any event North Korean soldiers were, to some extent, expendable. They had also been indoctrinated to believe that chemical and even nuclear attacks were an inevitable part of warfare, so the psychological effect of any chemical attack, the communist generals believed, would be minimized. Still, the introduction of chemical weapons firmly committed the North to an all or nothing posture. After gassing South Korean and American soldiers, there would be little chance of gaining a compromise peace should the offensive falter.

For the moment, though, the communist juggernaut rolled on. Pyongyang committed its 2nd Strategic Echelon forces on the night of June 21/22, sending them down the main highways deep into South Korea through the remnants of the initial invasion force. Progress was best in the west, where by 28 June the 815th Mechanized Corps had reached the mouth of the Kum near Changhang, southwest of Soch’on. There it ran into an amphibious assault by the 9th Marines (3rd Marine Division) [0628_01: US Marine Changhang amphibious operation]. Though checked at the Kum, the communist line by 29 June stretched along the river into the central part of the country, though it slowly bent north as it moved east. The ROK forces near the Sea of Japan had fallen back grudgingly, and the North Korean attack had found the going hard. In some places, two weeks after the initial assault the communists were still a scant dozen miles south of the DMZ; the South Korean forces that had escaped the opening salvos of the war were now making themselves felt as they stiffened the allied line.

Payback
For all of its fury, the North Korean attack had finally hit its high-water mark. Seoul was isolated, ringed by ruins and suburbs contaminated by chemical attacks. The American and South Korean forces trapped in the city remained a threat to the communist rear, and the rising fortunes of NATO in the war against the Warsaw Pact after 22 June had resulted in more supplies and support for the allied command in Korea, while in Pyongyang expectations of aid from Moscow were rapidly ebbing. Worse, the US 9th and 25th Infantry Divisions had arrived in South Korea, and the allied command wasted no time in getting them into the fray. On the night of 28/29 June, the US divisions passed through the ROK lines to launch a dawn attack near Ch’ungju, some 100 kilometers SSE of Seoul. The allied counteroffensive was beginning, and now Pyongyang would reap the whirlwind [0629_02: Turning the Tables, 0629_01s: Coup de Grâce, 0629_03: Left Hook at Taejon, 0629_04: A Slap on the 'Han', 0629_05: ROK Steady, 0629_06: Charge of the Light Brigade].
FIGURE 16: Situation 29 June
Smashing through the by now depleted and logistically strained North Korean lines, the allied attack bulled its way up the peninsula towards Seoul, breaking through the communist encirclement late on 1 July. An amphibious landing on 28 June near Inchon assisted the overland offensive, distracting the communists and bolstering the morale of the encircled allied forces in the capital city. A counterattack by the communist forces on 29 June [0702_01: Too Little, Too Late], near Chunghowong, failed to cut off the penetration, leaving the North’s mechanized forces in the west isolated and rapidly running out of fuel and ammunition. Growing allied air superiority, decreasing levels of supplies in the North, and the improvement of the situation in Europe all combined to put Pyongyang in a very difficult position. Across the front line, a rejuvenated South Korean army pushed strongly at the overextended communist lines, making local gains that were sometimes significant. Meanwhile, the North Korean soldiers finally began to show the strain of three weeks of constant warfare. As an army designed to fight and win a rapid, decisive victory, the North Korean army was ill-suited for a lengthy battle of attrition. And, as it turned out, neither was the North Korean state itself.
Pyongyang realized the war was effectively lost when the allied forces broke the encirclement of Seoul, though some in the communist capital had begun doubting as early as 20 June when it had become necessary to use chemical weapons to break the stubborn ROK defenders on the road south of Seoul. Like a snake that lives on after its head is severed, though, the North continued to fight, gradually pulling back in the east even as the bulk of its forces in the west of the peninsula were captured or destroyed. This portion of the war saw some very aggressive Allied efforts to finish off the Communists as well. [0708_01: No Fear] The final days of the war saw enormous destruction wreaked on South Korea, as the withdrawing communists destroyed or carried off anything and everything they could, and perpetrated untold atrocities on the South Korean population. Likewise, despite the apparent overrunning of many communist positions, very few prisoners wound up in South Korean hands; it was a bad time to be a communist soldier or a South Korean civilian.
The fate of North Korea's leaders was hardly better than that of their soldiers or the citizens of the South, however. As if to balance the karmic load of the war, Kim Il Sung passed away "of natural causes" on the night of 7/8 July. Coincidentally, along with the Great Leader, most of the leading generals and officials of the government, including Colonel Jong Do Rhee, the mastermind of the war, also took sick and died all in the same night. The communist leader's son, Kim Jong-Il, took formal control of the government that requested and was granted a cease-fire on 8 July. The new leader assured the United States that he had always opposed his father's "rash decisions," and though no one believed him, it didn't really matter. The terms of the agreement made it clear the days of a communist government in Pyongyang were numbered. With the end of the war in Europe two days earlier, and the collapse of communist fortunes in that blood and unsuccessful undertaking, the future of red regimes was clearly bleak all over the world. While it seemed amazingly incongruous, the world soon got used to the image of Kim Jong-Il shaking hands with legions of Western officials and business men as Pyongyang slowly opened up to the outside world, and the Hermit Kingdom gradually moved into the modern age. It would be years before the two Koreas would become one, but that, too, was inevitable after the failure of Kim Il Sung's grand gamble.
The Second Korean War was one of the nastiest and bloodiest wars for its duration in the 20th century. The sheer ferocity of the attack, the density of troops on the battlefield, the terrain, and the use of mass infantry attacks by both sides resulted in tremendous casualties. In the end, it was the historical determinants of battle that decided the outcome—mass, firepower, and logistics. The communists failed to destroy the mass of the defenders along the DMZ, allowing the ROK forces to remain an army in being and to reconstitute themselves further south. The initial firepower advantage of the North ebbed as the battle moved south, and the communist artillery had to displace from its pre-war positions. Likewise, the North Korean air effort was good for only a few days of attacks before it smashed itself against the US Air Force and Navy jets and the extensive South Korean air defense system. In the end, it was logistics as much as anything though that decided the battle. As in 1950, the North Koreans found that the further south they went the harder time they had of supplying their forces. Interdicted from the air, harassed on the ground, and hampered by bad terrain and jammed roads, the communists were unable to sustain their invasion long enough or deep enough to force a decisive victory. Once the allied forces were able to catch their breath and reform, it was only a matter of time before their counterattack would prove decisive.

Ultimately, it was the failure of the Warsaw Pact to defeat NATO that sealed the fate of North Korea. Had the USSR been able to cross the Rhine and run NATO out of Germany, it is highly probable that the US would have been unable to reinforce Korea effectively, and it is also likely that Moscow would have been willing and able to send aid to its communist allies in Asia. Even then, though, it is doubtful whether the North Korean offensive would have had the result Pyongyang wanted. Recent revelations about Beijing’s planning and concerns during the period of the European and Korean wars hints at a plan by China to prevent a victorious Russia from turning its sights eastward; the great irony of it all is that had Pyongyang been victorious, they would likely have faced a Chinese coup de main in the North while they celebrated their victory in the South.