

# "REFUGEES AT TARGET AREA:"

## New Evidence on Korean War Civilian Casualties

### Four Days in July

“There were so many refugees that it was impossible to screen and search them all... No one desired to shoot innocent people, but many of the innocent-looking refugees... turned out to be North Korean soldiers...”<sup>1</sup>

From July 26 to July 29, 1950, days after the U.S. 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division wrote these ominous words in its war diary, one of its battalions killed up to 400 South Korean refugees – men, women, and children – at No Gun Ri, near Yongdong. After a lethal air attack, the survivors fled in panic to a nearby railroad bridge, where they were submitted to four days of fire from mortars, machine-guns, and rifles. A 16-year-old girl remembered that “the planes came, raining down bombs and big bullets... People ran for the shrubs and trees. A lot of people died.”<sup>2</sup> A housewife described how “dirt and gravel rained down. Ox carts were burning... Dead bodies and cows were everywhere, spewing blood.”<sup>3</sup> The panicky, poorly trained, and ill-equipped Americans of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment had feared that the refugee crowd included disguised North Korean infiltrators. Despite an allusion in *The New York Times* and accounts in North Korean media, the No Gun Ri massacre attracted little attention as Communist and UN troops clashed in Korea for the next three years. Although survivors and relatives sought to tell their stories and seek redress from the U.S. government long afterward, traditional historiography on the Korean War mostly disregarded civilian suffering, focusing instead on the conflict’s military and political aspects.<sup>4</sup> However, in a series of reports beginning in September 1999, the Associated Press drew on wartime documents and soldiers’ and refugees’ accounts to break the story, winning a Pulitzer Prize and reigniting interest in a once-obscure subject. Since then, researchers have proven that the full story extends far beyond the four bloody days at No Gun Ri. Indeed, as Max Hastings writes, killings of civilians were common “at periods of special stress or fear, especially in the first six months of the war.”<sup>5</sup>

Using newly discovered documents from the National Archives and period news coverage, this article broadens the scholarly understanding of refugee deaths in the Korean War. It first reviews the context of No Gun Ri and major causes behind the U.S. military’s killings of Korean civilians during the July-August 1950 refugee crisis. Beyond that much-discussed period, this research sheds new light on the relatively under-examined second UN retreat

1 Quoted in Michael Dobbs, “War and Remembrance: Truth and Other Casualties of No Gun Ri,” *The Washington Post*, February 6, 2000, accessed December 30, 2018, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/nogunri020600a.htm>.

2 Quoted in Sang-Hun Choe and Reid G. Miller, “Korean villagers recall death and terror beneath a bridge,” *The Pulitzer Prizes*, September 29, 1999, accessed December 30, 2018, <https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/sang-hun-choe-charles-j-hanley-and-martha-mendoza>.

3 Quoted in *ibid.*

4 Donghee Sinn, “Records and the Understanding of Violent Events: Archival Documentation, Historical Perception, and the *No Gun Ri* Massacre in the Korean War” (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2007), 76-77, 90-91, 127-128; Sahr Conway-Lanz, “Beyond No Gun Ri: Refugees and the United States Military in the Korean War,” *Diplomatic History* 29, no. 1 (January 2005): 51. The official U.S. Air Force history has little to say about civilian casualties in tactical airstrikes, instead stressing the U.S.’ efforts to limit collateral damage in strategic bombing attacks. See Robert F. Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea, 1950-1953*, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983).

5 Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (New York: Touchstone, 1988), 287.

during winter 1950-51. In December 1950 and January 1951, desperation and fears of infiltration once more took hold of commanders and riflemen alike. The worsening battlefield situation, notions of military necessity, and difficulties distinguishing noncombatants from troops fueled harsh orders to stop refugee flows. Such challenges also contributed to air attacks on civilians, ambiguous targets, and commingled groups of soldiers and refugees. These recurring dynamics, present in both the summer and the winter crises, led to the deaths of untold thousands of civilians. Reports from fighter pilots and Mosquito air controllers offer vivid evidence of airstrikes on civilians, as well as instances when pilots refrained from attacking them. By presenting and analyzing this fresh documentation, this investigation redirects attention towards the 1950-51 winter crisis and notes further avenues for study. Finally, this paper considers how the Korean War highlights airpower's inherent dangers to civilians in today's conflicts.

## The Summer 1950 Refugee Crisis

As North Korean troops advanced south, displacing over a million people by August 1950, fleeing refugees crowded the roads, creating a new, serious challenge for UN forces. The mass exodus complicated military movements and raised worries of enemy infiltration.<sup>6</sup> Countless anecdotes abounded of infiltration and guerrilla tactics, typically involving enemy soldiers dressed in civilian clothes or advancing on U.S. positions behind the cover of refugees, sometimes firing on American troops.<sup>7</sup> Guerrillas were “the single greatest headache to U.S. forces,” complained General MacArthur's intelligence chief in early August; they were also active in the “red” Yongdong County, which included No Gun Ri village.<sup>8</sup> Journalist Don Whitehead put the predicament of U.S. troops bluntly: “The American soldier must harden his heart and coldly shoot down anyone wearing civilian clothes in the combat area — if he is to protect his own life in this war.”<sup>9</sup> Fighting against an often unseen enemy, U.S. soldiers were unlikely to gamble their lives on whether an approaching Korean was friend or foe. The instinct for self-protection probably motivated those who killed refugees to shoot first and ask questions later.<sup>10</sup> As a reporter observed in August 1950, soldiers menaced by both the North Korean army and a guerrilla threat “find it difficult to understand why the lives of a handful of Korean refugees are more valuable than their own.”<sup>11</sup> This morbid logic seems to have been pervasive.

It is tempting and cathartic to pinpoint a single, simple cause for No Gun Ri. Indeed, when looking back upon the killings, media outlets and the U.S. military frequently emphasized American troops' fears of infiltration and lack of training. More critical commentators highlighted the interaction of American racial prejudice and counterinsurgency methods

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6 Conway-Lanz, “Beyond No Gun Ri,” 55; Steven Lee, “The United States, the United Nations, and the Second Occupation of Korea, 1950-1951,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 7, no. 0 (March 16, 2009), accessed December 29, 2018, <http://www.japanfocus.org/-Steven-Lee/3457/article.html>.

7 Hastings, *The Korean War*, 81; Conway-Lanz, “Beyond No Gun Ri,” 65; Joseph Goulden, *Korea: The Untold Story of the War* (New York: Times Books, 1982), 170-171.

8 Quoted in Bruce Cumings, “Occurrence at Nogun-ri Bridge: An Inquiry into the History and Memory of a Civil War,” *Critical Asian Studies* 33, no. 4 (2001): 513-515.

9 Don Whitehead, “Failure to Kill Reds in Civil Dress Costs Lives of Soft-Hearted Yanks,” *The Los Angeles Times*, August 3, 1950.

10 See the quotes from Sebilian and Avery in Hastings, *The Korean War*, 241, 287.

11 Richard J. H. Johnston, “Korea Makes Plain the Vital Contrasts,” *The New York Times Magazine*, August 13, 1950.

in Korea.<sup>12</sup> The fatal events arose from a fateful confluence of factors, including serious military unpreparedness and successive defeats, refugee flows and concurrent fears of infiltration, and plain racism. The U.S. Army, honed in World War II, was a conventional force fighting unconventional opponents. As one sergeant explained, “We were trained to fight in the European style of position and maneuver... But this is a guerrilla war and we haven’t been trained for it.”<sup>13</sup> Archival documents, press reports, and veteran testimony paint a vivid picture of soldiers’ mindsets on the frontline. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Division’s 38<sup>th</sup> Regiment recorded that the mere presence of refugees put its personnel “on the alert waiting for some overt act of aggression.”<sup>14</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry’s commander, General Gay, publicly declared his suspicion that most refugees were guerrillas.<sup>15</sup> An ex-GI who served in the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry’s 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment recalled that a sergeant told his unit, “Anything that way that moves, shoot.”<sup>16</sup> The old soldier added, “You had to watch out for civilians at all times, because you didn’t know whether it was [an] enemy.”<sup>17</sup> As accounts of infiltration percolated through the ranks, so did the intense suspicion of Korean civilians and refugees.<sup>18</sup> While some skeptics have questioned the veracity of infiltration accounts,<sup>19</sup> U.S. forces sincerely believed them; these *expectations*, whether well-founded or not, strongly influenced American soldiers’ perceptions and actions. This mentality was partially institutionalized; a 1951 U.S. study noted that American soldiers “were instructed to be suspicious of any civilians in front line areas.”<sup>20</sup> Both the fluid military situation and official American policy shaped soldiers’ attitudes, contributing towards a climate of uncertainty and suspicion. This atmosphere helped trigger No Gun Ri and similar incidents.

## Orders

As unready GIs feared infiltration by disguised North Koreans, U.S. commanders authorized the use of lethal force against civilians. Along the front, units received severe – and often contradictory – orders for dealing with the fleeing refugees.<sup>21</sup> While it is difficult to pinpoint a precise order behind No Gun Ri, these commands put refugees in mortal danger. On July 24, the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry recorded that it had “dropped leaflets... telling people not to move to South but to move North” and that civilians in the combat zone would be considered enemies.<sup>22</sup> The prevailing theory was that if an area could be effectively cleared of refugees,

12 Suhi Choi, “Silencing Survivors’ Narratives: Why Are We *Again* Forgetting the No Gun Ri Story?” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 11, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 373-375, 379-380; Cumings, “Occurrence at Nogun-ri Bridge,” 515-516.

13 Whitehead, “Failure to Kill Reds in Civil Dress Costs Lives of Soft-Hearted Yanks”; Bevin Alexander, *Korea: The First War We Lost*, rev. ed. (New York: Hippocrene Books, 2000), 122.

14 38<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment Unit History, July-August 1950. In Korean War Project (hereafter, KWP) Record USA-122, Folder 060001, Box 06, File 01, accessed December 29, 2018, [http://www.koreanwar2.org/kwp2/usa/2id/004/USA\\_2ID\\_060001\\_0750\\_0850.pdf](http://www.koreanwar2.org/kwp2/usa/2id/004/USA_2ID_060001_0750_0850.pdf).

15 Don Whitehead, “6 American Divisions Could Whip Reds in Korea, Gen. Gay Says,” *The Evening Star*, July 27, 1950.

16 Glen Bailey interview by Grand Valley State University Veterans History Project, accessed March 25, 2019, <https://digitalcollections.library.gvsu.edu/document/27092>.

17 Ibid.

18 See Richard K. Tucker, “Cavalrymen in Korea ‘Sick of Withdrawing’,” *The Sun*, August 5, 1950.

19 Conway-Lanz, “Beyond No Gun Ri,” 55.

20 Headquarters Eighth U.S. Army Korea (EUSAK), “Monograph: Enemy Tactics,” December 26, 1951, Internet Archive, 118, accessed December 29, 2018, <https://archive.org/details/KoreanWarAfterAction>.

21 Charles J. Hanley, “No Gun Ri: Official Narrative and Inconvenient Truths,” *Critical Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (2010): 597-599.

22 1st Cavalry Division, “08 Telephone Report from the 1st Cavalry Division to Colonel Tarkenton (July 24, 1950),” No Gun

then anyone remaining could be safely assumed hostile. Civil affairs personnel, cooperating with the local police, would screen the incoming Koreans.<sup>23</sup> Of course, not all civilians were screened and evacuated successfully, a problem exacerbated by confused orders, a continuous influx of refugees streaming south, and the fact that General Gay “ordered the [Korean] National Police out of his area” entirely.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps the only constant was the authorization of lethal force. On July 26, the day the killings at No Gun Ri began, the AP reported that the Army “banned all Korean civilians from the narrowing battle zone. They will be herded... behind American lines. Any caught roving in civilian clothing may be shot.”<sup>25</sup> The South Korean government declared the same day “that any civilian ‘making enemy-like action’ would be shot.”<sup>26</sup> Finally, the U.S. Eighth Army (EUSAK) prohibited refugees from crossing the lines and ordered that “Movement of all Koreans in groups will cease immediately.”<sup>27</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry’s new refugee policy was complemented by subunits’ records, including one log reading: “Fire everyone trying to cross lines. Use discretion in case of women and children.”<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division was not the only unit alarmed by the refugees; such concern was widespread. General Kean of the 25<sup>th</sup> Division ordered on July 26 “that all civilians moving around in [the] combat zone will be considered as unfriendly and shot.”<sup>29</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> Division adopted a similar measure in August, granting commanders the prerogative to shoot refugees who moved at night or during combat.<sup>30</sup> The Marines closed their lines to refugees on August 4 out of fears of infiltration, with the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division warning that “any evacuees who get off the main roads and up in these hills will be shot.”<sup>31</sup> Most significantly, historian Sahr Conway-Lanz uncovered a July 26 letter from U.S. Ambassador to South Korea John Muccio to Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk. This key document, which surfaced during the furor over No Gun Ri, illustrates a generally accepted policy of firing on civilians. It mentioned that refugees approaching U.S. lines would “receive warning shots, and if they then persist in advancing they will be shot.”<sup>32</sup> Thanks in part to these orders and the harrowing stories of infiltration, U.S. soldiers “increasingly regard[ed] all as enemies,” as *The Times* commented in July.<sup>33</sup>

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Ri Digital Archive (hereafter, NGRDA), accessed December 29, 2018, <http://nogunri.rit.albany.edu/omeka/items/show/35>.

23 Department of the Army Inspector General, *No Gun Ri Review*, January 2001, University of Oregon, accessed December 29, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170325202500/http://library.uoregon.edu/ec/e-asia/read/nogunri.pdf>, 23-26. This report is highly controversial; see Hanley, “No Gun Ri.”

24 Hanley, “No Gun Ri,” 597-599.

25 AP, “Reds Fail to Entrance U.S. First Cavalry,” *The Washington Post*, July 26, 1950.

26 Quoted in Cumings, “Occurrence at Nogun-ri Bridge,” 522.

27 8th Army Headquarters, “09 Message from the 8th Army Headquarters to Front-Line Units (July 26, 1950),” NGRDA, accessed December 29, 2018, <http://nogunri.rit.albany.edu/omeka/items/show/12>.

28 8th Cavalry Regiment, “06 Communications Log of the 8th Cavalry Regiment (July 24, 1950),” NGRDA, accessed December 29, 2018, <http://nogunri.rit.albany.edu/omeka/items/show/11>.

29 Headquarters 25th Infantry Division, “17a GI Journal of the 25th Infantry Division Headquarters (Continued),” NGRDA, accessed December 29, 2018, <http://nogunri.rit.albany.edu/omeka/items/show/17>.

30 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division Command Report, July-August 1950, 47. In KWP Record USA-1, Folder 050001, Box 05, File 01, accessed December 29, 2018, [http://www.koreanwar2.org/kwp2/usa/2id/001/USA\\_2ID\\_050001.pdf](http://www.koreanwar2.org/kwp2/usa/2id/001/USA_2ID_050001.pdf).

31 United Press, “She Was So Pretty Those Marines Just Let Her Go,” *The Washington Post*, August 5, 1950; quote from William D. Blair, Jr., “Refugees Are Hard To Screen,” *The Sun*, August 7, 1950.

32 Quoted in Conway-Lanz, “Beyond No Gun Ri,” 58-59.

33 “Gravity of Korean Military Situation,” *The Times*, July 24, 1950.



## The Air Force And The Summer 1950 Refugee Crisis

Besides U.S. ground forces, the Air Force was also confronted with the refugee dilemma. Pilots emphasized the difficulty in distinguishing troops from civilians, the refugee crisis, and the infiltration concerns, and testified that they were directed to attack civilian groups.<sup>34</sup> More newly disclosed documents followed in the wake of the AP's 1999 report on No Gun Ri, including the Rogers memo. This message from July 25, 1950, stated, "The army has requested that we strafe all civilian refugee parties... approaching our positions... To date, we have complied with the army request."<sup>35</sup> While not a direct confirmation of the events at No Gun Ri, the memo bolstered the survivors' claim of Air Force strafing and established that such attacks were systematic. The same day, planes from the aircraft carrier USS *Valley Forge* attacked civilians as per the Army's guidance "that groups of more than eight to ten people were to be considered troops, and were to be attacked."<sup>36</sup>

The exact number of civilian victims may never be known. An official history conceded that "We killed civilians... fired whole villages with their occupants," but blamed the deaths on the Communists for concealing themselves among noncombatants, maintaining that air attacks killed ten soldiers for every civilian.<sup>37</sup> Writing privately, one correspondent described "hundreds of refugees killed by our strafing... women and children, mostly." He estimated that "when we strafe refugee columns on the road... we kill 25 civilians to every enemy soldier."<sup>38</sup>

Refugees or troops? The distinction between enemy soldiers and Korean civilians remained unclear, boding ill for the latter. As the U.S. advanced inland from Inchon in September, American aircraft hit sites on the Han River while people crossed, killing some dressed in white – the traditional Korean clothing.<sup>39</sup> When the North Koreans fled Pyongyang in October, many refugees retreating north were killed on the roads and in the city by airstrikes, according to a CIA intelligence report.<sup>40</sup> Clearly, a fluid battlefield also meant increased refugee movement, which increased the risk of civilian casualties. Whether U.S. forces were retreating or advancing, they made heavy use of airpower, endangering Korean citizens also on the move.

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34 Sang-Hun Choe, Charles J. Hanley, and Martha Mendoza, "Korean, U.S. witnesses, backed by military records, say refugees were strafed," *The Pulitzer Prizes*, December 28, 1999, accessed December 30, 2018, <https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/sang-hun-choe-charles-j-hanley-and-martha-mendoza>. See also Hastings, *The Korean War*, 255.

35 Advance Headquarters Fifth Air Force, "04 Memo from Colonel Turner C. Rogers to General Timberlake (July 25, 1950)," NGRDA, accessed December 29, 2018, <http://nogunri.rit.albany.edu/omeka/items/show/9>.

36 U.S. Navy Carrier Valley Forge, "05 Report of Operations for the U.S. Navy Carrier Valley Forge from Commanding Officer to Commander Seventh Fleet (August 2, 1950)," NGRDA, accessed December 29, 2018, <http://nogunri.rit.albany.edu/omeka/items/show/10>.

37 Quoted in Stanley Weintraub, *MacArthur's War: Korea and the Undoing of an American Hero* (New York: Touchstone, 2001), 71.

38 Quoted in Sinn, "Records and the Understanding of Violent Events," 129-130.

39 AP, "Endless Line Of Weapons Moving Up From Inchon," *The Washington Post*, September 19, 1950. Regarding airstrikes on "people in white" and refugees, see Choe, Hanley, and Mendoza, "Korean, U.S. witnesses, backed by military records, say refugees were strafed"; Taewoo Kim, "War Against an Ambiguous Enemy: U.S. Air Force Bombing of South Korean Civilian Areas, June-September 1950," *Critical Asian Studies* 44, no. 2 (2012): 223-224.

40 CIA Information Report, "Refugee and Detention Camps for Koreans in Manchuria," 9 Aug. 51, CREST, CIA-RDP82-00457R007800700010-5, accessed December 29, 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp82-00457r007800700010-5>.

## Winter 1950-51: Refugees Redux

The climactic November entrance of the Chinese into the war overwhelmed UN forces and forced them into a hasty retreat, sparking a profound military crisis. The Americans were faced with their old predicament as tens of thousands of Korean civilians once more took to the roads with their meager possessions. Masses of refugees on the roads complicated military traffic, and reports of Chinese soldiers masquerading as or manipulating civilians heightened U.S. troops' suspicions. In response to these renewed southbound refugee movements, the Eighth Army ordered on November 28 – much as it did in July – “that refugees be diverted before they could enter... [the] lines.”<sup>41</sup> When retreating from the Chosin Reservoir, having received fire from within a crowd of refugees, some Marines commented that “refugees worried them more than the enemy.”<sup>42</sup> On November 30 and December 1, Mosquito Strategy recommended preventing refugees from crossing American lines, while Mosquito Cobalt proposed “a line of interdiction... to stop movement of any people.”<sup>43</sup> As the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division's position grew more perilous, its contingency plans for an emergency retreat grew harsher. Blaming the Chinese for driving civilian refugees into its positions, the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry issued an order on December 1 “to repel all refugees from friendly lines.” Yet the sheer scale of the refugee crisis rendered this command mostly ineffective.<sup>44</sup> On December 23, the divisional fallback plan stipulated that refugees would be “carefully screened” and forbidden from using “military crossings” across the Han River, but the December 31 plan stated that refugees could not “cross front lines in any direction.”<sup>45</sup> On January 2, the 25<sup>th</sup> Division's General Kean, warning of refugee infiltration, ordered his troops to prevent all movement by firing in front of refugees – and at them, if need be.<sup>46</sup> Eighth Army commander General Ridgway instituted more stringent refugee policies in January 1951, indicating the renewed shift towards military needs over those of civilian refugees. Refugees would no longer be permitted to cross the front lines at will, and were instead funneled through checkpoints.<sup>47</sup> Leaflet drops urged Korean refugees to “return to your homes or move off roads to the hills and remain there,” informing them that anyone approaching UN positions “will be fired upon.”<sup>48</sup> Commanders were authorized to stop civilians with gunfire, if necessary, and any

41 Billy C. Mossman, *Ebb and Flow: November 1950-July 1951* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), 105.

42 AP, “8th Army Seen With a Toehold Left in No. Korea; Big Clouded Zone,” *The Washington Post*, December 13, 1950.

43 Mosquito Mission Report (McCally and Richardson), 30 Nov. 50, 6147th Tactical Control Group. In Mission Reports of Units During the Korean War Era 1946 – 1953, 6147th Tactical Control Group, 24 Nov. 1950 THRU 6147th Tactical Control Group, 4 Dec. 1950, Box 37, “Mission Rpt 30 Nov. 50, 6147th TCG Intel,” RG 342, Entry P 2100, NARA; Mosquito Mission Report (Trammall and Gooch), 1 Dec. 50, 6147th Tactical Control Group. In Mission Reports of Units During the Korean War Era 1946 – 1953, 6147th Tactical Control Group, 24 Nov. 1950 THRU 6147th Tactical Control Group, 4 Dec. 1950, Box 37, “Mission Rpt 1 Dec. 50, 6147th TCG Intel,” RG 342, Entry P 2100, NARA.

44 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division Command Report, 1 December 1950. In Unit Histories, 1940-1967, Cavalry Divisions, 1940-67, 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division (Activity Report, 1953) THRU 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division (Command Report, 1951), Box 1855, “Dec. 1950,” RG 338, Entry 37042, National Archives II (hereafter, NARA).

45 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division War Diary, 23 December 1950-31 December 1950. In Unit Histories, 1940-1967, Cavalry Divisions, 1940-67, 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division (Activity Report, 1953) THRU 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division (Command Report, 1951), Box 1855, “Dec. 1950,” RG 338, Entry 37042, NARA.

46 Roy E. Appleman, *Ridgway Duels For Korea* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1990), 55, 57.

47 AP, “But Battle Continues Around Communication Center; Fall Expected,” *The Sun*, January 8, 1951.

48 Quoted in Lee, “The United States, the United Nations, and the Second Occupation of Korea, 1950-1951.” Photos of the leaflets are on Suh Hee-Kyung, “Atrocities Before and During the Korean War: Mass Civilian Killings by South Korean and U.S. Forces,” *Critical Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (2010): 581.

ance would be shot.<sup>49</sup> While the flow of civilians eventually ebbed, trouble ensued later in January when refugees, having received the go-ahead from South Korean officials to return home, moved north again. Evaluating the chaotic month, a 38<sup>th</sup> Regiment officer advised that new troops “treat all movement to their front as enemy unless otherwise identified.”<sup>50</sup> Policies intended to maintain order on a chaotic battlefield thus put southbound refugees at grave risk.

## Winter 1950–51: Lethal Orders

While GIs on the ground struggled with civilian movements and suspected Chinese infiltration, so did American pilots – even if they were relatively immune to the infantry’s troubles. With UN forces once again falling back with crowds of refugees in their midst, the Air Force reportedly had orders in early December not to attack refugees “unless there is a really good indication that they are enemy forces in disguise.”<sup>51</sup> Similarly, in January, the Fifth Air Force announced that its pilots would consider unidentified people refugees if they were dressed in white or had not been observed changing clothes. They would be attacked if the Army identified them as troops in plainclothes.<sup>52</sup> Yet the imperative to stem the military crisis took hold, and as air operations intensified in support of ground troops,<sup>53</sup> targeting policies were evidently loosened – although the exact date is uncertain. Mosquito Mellow told a flight on December 1 that “as long as they were under a ground controller they could straff [sic] any refugees or people in white.”<sup>54</sup> On December 16, General Earle E. Partridge, commander of the Fifth Air Force, wrote: “During recent days... we have been attacking all males who are carrying arms or who are moving about in a manner which indicates that they are [a] potential enemy.”<sup>55</sup> These attacks sometimes hit innocents, Partridge acknowledged.<sup>56</sup> A journalist wrote on January 7 that all groups were to be strafed unless pilots saw them “balancing loads on their heads,” as women did.<sup>57</sup> Other January press reports record the Fifth Air Force’s orders to its pilots: strafe all men behind enemy lines.<sup>58</sup> These directives, which suggest either shifting orders or confusion, nevertheless signaled a tacit acceptance of air attacks on unidentified people or civilians commingled with troops. The results were undeniably lethal; reporters soon noticed the bodies of civilian strafing victims lying on the

49 Suh, “Atrocities Before and During the Korean War,” 580; Conway-Lanz, “Beyond No Gun Ri,” 71. On South Korean killings of suspected infiltrators, see Michael James, “Refugees Swarm South Into Seoul,” *The New York Times*, December 12, 1950. See also Goulden, *Korea*, 438.

50 S-2 Section, Headquarters 38<sup>th</sup> Infantry, “S-2 Evaluation for the month of January 1951,” 5 April 51. In 38<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment Command Report, January 1951, KWP Record USA-129, Folder 060003, Box 06, File 03, accessed December 29, 2018, [http://www.koreanwar2.org/kwp2/usa/2id/004/USA\\_2ID\\_060003\\_0151.pdf](http://www.koreanwar2.org/kwp2/usa/2id/004/USA_2ID_060003_0151.pdf).

51 Michael James, “Pilots Over Korea See Jammed Roads,” *The New York Times*, December 9, 1950.

52 Conway-Lanz, “Beyond No Gun Ri,” 64.

53 Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea*, 261-262, 276-278.

54 Fighter-Bomber Mission Report (799), 1 Dec. 50, 67<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Squadron. In Mission Reports of Units During the Korean War Era 1946 – 1953, 67<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Squadron, 15-30 Sept. 1950 (2 of 2) THRU 67<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Squadron, Dec. 1950 (2 of 2), Box 34, “67<sup>th</sup> Dec. 50,” RG 342, Entry P 2100, NARA.

55 Quoted in Blaine Harden, *King of Spies: The Dark Reign of America’s Spymaster in Korea* (New York: Viking, 2017), 119.

56 Ibid.

57 John H. Thompson, “Lack of Target Clips Wings of U.S. Air Force,” *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 7, 1951.

58 AP, “Yanks Make 12-Mile Gain And Retake Three Towns,” *The Washington Post*, January 16, 1951; Robert Eunson, “Furious Drive By U.N. Forces May Retake Highway Hub,” *The Washington Post*, January 10, 1951. The latter states that women and children were off-limits, while another report states that pilots were forbidden from attacking families and children. “Ground Retaken In Korea,” *The Times*, January 10, 1951.

roadside.<sup>59</sup>

## Winter 1950–51: airstrikes on civilians

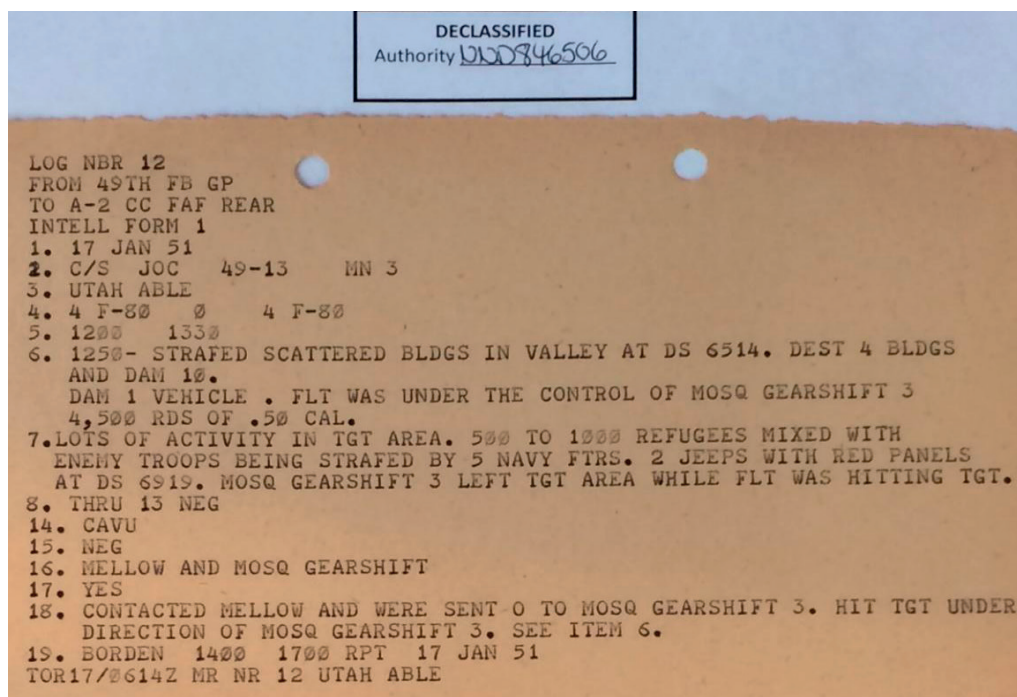


Fig. 1. Fighters strafed a group of refugees and troops on January 17, 1951. Source: NARA (note 72).

As the crisis peaked in December and January, pilots repeatedly targeted civilians and unidentified individuals – often mentioned in pilot reports as mysterious “people in white.”<sup>60</sup> December 1 – which featured 278 close-support sorties, the most of any day that month and since September 28 – was especially deadly.<sup>61</sup> The 7<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Squadron described killing 120 unidentified people – including some in white – despite observing neither uniforms nor weapons.<sup>62</sup> Pilots from the 9<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Squadron noticed soldiers in white clothes and reported, “Strafed villages... Estimate 75 to 100 troops *and/or civilians* killed” (emphasis mine).<sup>63</sup> Mosquito Rakeoff recorded a strike: “Refugees in road... Hit 1,000 in group but didn’t observe results. Good coverage.”<sup>64</sup> As thousands of refugees fled Seoul before its capture, UN planes informed the population that anyone “crossing the

59 Gene Symonds, “Feeding Babes, Mothers Die In Aerial Storm Of Bullets,” *Tucson Daily Citizen*, January 16, 1951; AP, “Yanks Make 12-Mile Gain And Retake Three Towns.”

60 On “people in white,” see the sources cited in note 40.

61 September 28 had 311. Fifth Air Force Operations Analysis Office, “FEAF Air Effort by Type Sortie, 1950.” In Project Files, 1948 – 1953, Catalogue of Special Projects Completed to Airfield Photos (Negatives), Box 180, “Inclosures,” RG 342, Entry P 29, NARA.

62 Fighter-Bomber Mission Report (#17), 1 Dec. 50, 7<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Squadron. In Mission Reports of Units During the Korean War Era 1946 – 1953, 7<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Squadron, Dec. 1950 (4 of 4) THRU 7<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Squadron, Feb. 1951 (2 of 3), Box 4, “7<sup>th</sup> Sq. Dec. 1950 4 of 4,” RG 342, Entry P 2100, NARA.

63 Fighter-Bomber Mission Report (#06), 1 Dec. 50, 9<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Squadron. In Mission Reports of Units During the Korean War Era 1946 – 1953, 9<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Squadron, Nov. 1950 (2 of 3) THRU 9<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Squadron, Dec. 1950 (4 of 4), Box 22, “9<sup>th</sup> Sqdn. Dec. 1950 4 of 4,” RG 342, Entry P 2100, NARA.

64 Mosquito Mission Report (Kelley and Traveis), 1 Dec. 50, 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group. In Mission Reports of Units During the Korean War Era 1946 – 1953, 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group, 24 Nov. 1950 THRU 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group, 4 Dec. 1950, Box 37, “Mission Rpt 1 Dec. 50, 6147<sup>th</sup> TCG Intel,” RG 342, Entry P 2100, NARA.



[Han] river would be shot,” subsequently strafing about 30 refugees who had attempted to cross.<sup>65</sup> Although they were not personally endangered by the refugees, airmen worried. On January 5, Mosquito Rakeoff fretted anxiously after witnessing suspected soldiers join a refugee column heading south from Seoul: “What to do about... armed groups in refugee movement???” Instructions PLEASE.<sup>66</sup> Mosquitos repeatedly designated refugee crowds as enemies,<sup>67</sup> suggesting a predisposition to consider them hostile until proven friendly. On January 1, Mosquito Rakeoff coordinated a 23-plane airstrike on 4,000 intermingled refugees and troops, killing “approximately 1000.”<sup>68</sup> Such attacks on civilians and soldiers were not isolated incidents. As the troubled observer pleaded for instructions on the 5<sup>th</sup>, two flights attacked a group of 3,000 refugees, having been told by ground controllers that half of them were enemies. Mosquito Cottonseed Special “counted 50 dead.”<sup>69</sup> Nor was the Air Force the only service that conducted these strikes. Pilots flying on January 17 witnessed a group of “500 to 1000 refugees mixed with enemy troops being strafed by 5 Navy fighters.”<sup>70</sup> South Korean government investigators have also identified Marine air units that attacked Korean civilians.<sup>71</sup> In what Taewoo Kim has aptly deemed a “war against an ambiguous enemy,”<sup>72</sup> the need to protect friendly troops tipped the balance toward policies that led to the deaths of civilians. When civilians and enemy troops were intermingled, refugee deaths were collateral damage: regrettable, but unavoidable. Faced with unidentified “people in white” or refugee movements potentially harboring the enemy, commanders refused to take chances that might have endangered their men. This meant further suffering for unfortunate Korean civilians caught in the worst place at the worst time. The bald numbers – 30, 500, 1,000, 3,000, 4,000 – must not obscure the profound human tragedy that they represent.

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65 CIA Information Report, “Conditions in Seoul during the Second Communist Occupation,” 24 Aug. 51, CREST, CIA-RDP82-00457R008100530006-2, accessed December 29, 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp82-00457r008100530006-2>.

66 The word was underlined three times. Mosquito Mission Report (Beattie and Marshall), 5 Jan. 51, 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group. In Mission Reports of Units During the Korean War Era 1946 – 1953, 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group, 19 Dec. 1950 THRU 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group, 6 Jan. 1951, Box 39, “Mission Rpt 5 Jan. 51, 6147<sup>th</sup> TCG Intel,” RG 342, Entry P 2100, NARA.

67 One example out of many: Mosquito Mission Report (Wiebold and Vargo), 4 Jan. 51, 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group. In Mission Reports of Units During the Korean War Era 1946 – 1953, 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group, 19 Dec. 1950 THRU 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group, 6 Jan. 1951, Box 39, “Mission Rpt 4 Jan. 51, 6147<sup>th</sup> TCG Intel,” RG 342, Entry P 2100, NARA.

68 Mosquito Mission Report (Hoog and Richardson), 1 Jan. 51, 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group. In Mission Reports of Units During the Korean War Era 1946 – 1953, 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group, 19 Dec. 1950 THRU 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group, 6 Jan. 1951, Box 39, “Mission Rpt 1 Jan. 51, 6147<sup>th</sup> TCG Intel,” RG 342, Entry P 2100, NARA.

69 Mosquito Mission Report (Rielich and Lehmann), 5 Jan. 51, 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group. In Mission Reports of Units During the Korean War Era 1946 – 1953, 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group, 19 Dec. 1950 THRU 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group, 6 Jan. 1951, Box 39, “Mission Rpt 5 Jan. 51, 6147<sup>th</sup> TCG Intel,” RG 342, Entry P 2100, NARA. For a report which may describe the same airstrike, see USS *Princeton* Combat Air Support Report for 5 Jan. 1951, Naval History and Heritage Command, accessed December 30, 2018, <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/dam/nhhc/research/archives/action-reports/Korean%20War%20-%20Carrier%20Combat/PDF%27s/cv37-5jan51.pdf>.

70 Fighter-Bomber Mission Report (#12), 17 Jan. 51, 8<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Squadron. In Mission Reports of Units During the Korean War Era 1946 – 1953, 8<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Squadron, Jan. 1951 (2 of 4) THRU 8<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Squadron, Mar. 1951 (4 of 4), Box 15, “8<sup>th</sup> Sq. Jan. 1951 2 of 4,” RG 342, Entry P 2100, NARA. This is the original, handwritten version of the document displayed as fig. 1; they are located together.

71 Suh, “Atrocities Before and During the Korean War,” 583.

72 Kim, “War Against an Ambiguous Enemy,” 205-226.

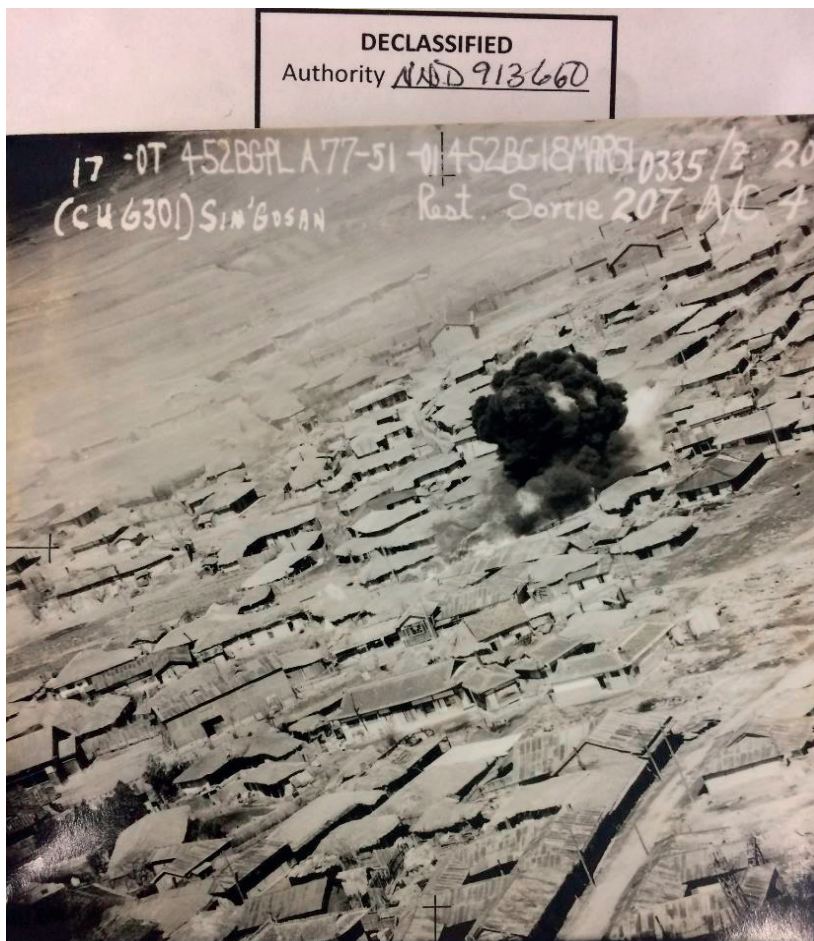


Fig. 2. American Airstrike on Sin'Gosan, North Korea, on March 18, 1951. Source: Photo 17, 18 Mar. 51. In Project Files, 1948-1953, Photo Prints, Nov. 1950 to Photo Prints, March 1951 (March 20-21), Box 181, "Photo Prints - March 1951: March 16-19," "18 Mar Village CU 6506 Prints 5, 10-13, 17, 20, 21," RG 342. Entry P 29, NARA.

## Decisions: to Strike Or Not to Strike?

Pilots' perceptions and individual decisions could make the difference between life and death for Korean civilians on the ground. Airmen tried to rationalize killing civilians (or "people in white") by describing them as "disguised troops" or claiming that they sheltered and supported the enemy.<sup>73</sup> Commanders made similar arguments to reporters to defend their airstrikes' high toll on noncombatants.<sup>74</sup> The task was psychologically easier for young men – who, as *Time* noted, "sometimes... had to look at the people [they] shot" – if they viewed it as proactive self-defense on behalf of their comrades on the ground. A 22-year-old flyer who had strafed "men in white" conceded that attacking civilians was unpleasant but added that "If we

had to kill ten civilians to kill one soldier who might later shoot at us, we were justified."<sup>75</sup> Another pilot said of using napalm: "The first couple of times... I thought afterward, Well, maybe I shouldn't have done it. Maybe those people I set afire were innocent civilians. But you get conditioned" after hitting apparent civilians "carrying ammunition."<sup>76</sup> Without such justifications, civilian casualties from air attacks may have been less prevalent.

Whatever pilots' directives and targeting prohibitions were, they exercised some discretion during sorties. U.S. planes frequently reconnoitered groups of people – often noting their gender composition, clothing, possessions, and movement – in attempts to discern their identities. This was sometimes inconclusive; during one mission on December 6, a flight southeast of Pyongyang "could not pick troops out among the refugees," and so did not

73 Quoted in John Darrell Sherwood, *Officers in Flight Suits: The Story of American Air Force Fighter Pilots in the Korean War* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 104-105.

74 Greg MacGregor, "Captive Reds Show Less Will To Fight," *The New York Times*, January 29, 1951.

75 Quoted in "Destiny's Draftee," *Time* 57, no. 1 (January 1, 1951): 23.

76 Quoted in E. J. Kahn, Jr., *The Peculiar War: Impressions of a Reporter in Korea* (New York: Random House, 1952), 131-132.

attack.<sup>77</sup> Airmen were not automata, and they reacted differently to different situations and orders, and sometimes even within the same context. On January 24, three F-80 jets refused to strike a village after observing women and children. Fifteen minutes earlier, two other planes had hit a village at the same coordinates and the people within, obtaining “excellent coverage.”<sup>78</sup>

Moreover, pilots may have had greater situational awareness than ground forces – including the Tactical Air Control Parties (TACPs) that “organized and controlled close-air-support strikes.”<sup>79</sup> This could help avert tragic errors. On January 17, TACP Necktie 14 requested attacks on villages behind the lines due to guerrillas. Yet when Mosquito Granite saw “only women + children” in one village, they did not strike it, instead requesting more information on targets behind the lines.<sup>80</sup> On the other hand, airstrikes conducted without sufficient knowledge of the target could have horrific results. While Mosquito Cobalt was directing a strike on January 11, an Army spotter plane, “Pickelbarrel,”<sup>81</sup> reported “100 troops on road S[outh] of Osan.” By their own account, the Mosquito crew warned Pickelbarrel that the targets “were not troops,” but TACP Diplomat 14<sup>82</sup> ordered the strike despite being about 12 miles away. The fighters then strafed the targets: “women + kids.”<sup>83</sup> Clearly, imperfect information (the “fog of war”) and individual decisions were two significant determinants of civilian casualties, and thus deserve scholarly attention.

## A Nuanced Picture

Still, the military made efforts to prevent civilian casualties, at least on paper. Reportedly, these actions included restricting air attacks on roads to military targets only, dropping warning leaflets, and setting out protocols for pilots to properly identify refugees. U.S. Army investigators studying No Gun Ri stated that Air Force pilots interviewed had been ordered to avoid attacking civilians.<sup>84</sup> In the *Valley Forge* airstrike, pilots refrained from strafing other groups of white-clad people in the fields who were ignoring planes.<sup>85</sup> Similarly, the infamous Rogers memo recommended that the Air Force not attack refugees “unless they are

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77 Mosquito Mission Report (Trammell and Gooch), 6 Dec. 50, 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group. In Mission Reports of Units During the Korean War Era 1946 – 1953, 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group, 5 Dec. 1950 THRU 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group, 18 Dec. 1950, Box 38, “Mission Rpt 6 Dec. 50, 6147<sup>th</sup> TCG Intel,” RG 342, Entry P 2100, NARA.

78 Mosquito Mission Report (Hopkins and Smith), 24 Jan. 51, 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group. In Mission Reports of Units During the Korean War Era 1946 – 1953, 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group, 20 Jan. 1951 THRU 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group, 28 Jan. 1951, Box 41, “6147<sup>th</sup> TCG Intel Mission Rpt 24 Jan. 51,” RG 342, Entry P 2100, NARA.

79 Kim, “War Against an Ambiguous Enemy,” 211. TACPs at command posts behind the lines were “unable visually to control an air strike from such a rearward location.” Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea*, 108.

80 Mosquito Mission Report (Simmons and Vargo), 17 Jan. 51, 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group. In Mission Reports of Units During the Korean War Era 1946 – 1953, 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group, 7 Jan. 1951 THRU 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group, 19 Jan. 1951, Box 40, “6147<sup>th</sup> TCG Intel Mission Rpt 17 Jan. 51,” RG 342, Entry P 2100, NARA.

81 See William D. Blair, Jr., “‘Pickle Barrel’ Guides F-51’s In Raid On Red Supply Dumps,” *The Sun*, August 18, 1950.

82 Around this time, Diplomat 14 was assigned to the 27<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 25<sup>th</sup> Division. See Suh, “Atrocities Before and During the Korean War,” 583.

83 Mosquito Mission Report (McKinney and Hopkins) with attached sheet, 11 Jan. 51, 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group. In Mission Reports of Units During the Korean War Era 1946 – 1953, 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group, 7 Jan. 1951 THRU 6147<sup>th</sup> Tactical Control Group, 19 Jan. 1951, Box 40, “6147<sup>th</sup> TCG Mission Rpt 11 Jan. 51,” RG 342, Entry P 2100, NARA.

84 Conway-Lanz, “Beyond No Gun Ri,” 64-65. However, see Hanley, “No Gun Ri,” 601-605.

85 U.S. Navy Carrier Valley Forge, “05 Report of Operations for the U.S. Navy Carrier Valley Forge from Commanding Officer to Commander Seventh Fleet (August 2, 1950).”



definitely known to contain North Korean soldiers or commit hostile acts.”<sup>86</sup> This suggestion was evidently not heeded. The Air Force’s January order excluded women and children, although Korean men were thus assumed to be Communist troops and designated as legitimate targets. “Refugees at target area, not hit,” notes a January 26 mission report from the 8<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Squadron.<sup>87</sup> As in other incidents detailed above, pilots were not blind to the harm they could – and often did – inflict on civilians; pilots who hit Korean civilians vomited at the awful realization.<sup>88</sup> An Air Force officer who had advocated strafing southbound refugees to prevent Chinese infiltration stressed that “I would not like to be on that mission.”<sup>89</sup> The U.S. military may have viewed killing noncombatants as necessary in crises, but hardly considered it desirable.

Much the same can be said for American ground troops. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Division apparently understood that removing refugees from the battlefield was the only way to protect the lives of both their soldiers and the Koreans. During the summer 1950 refugee crisis, the division ordered its subunits “to do all in their power to expedite the efficient evacuation of the refugees.”<sup>90</sup> When Ridgway authorized MPs on the Han River on January 3 to use lethal force against refugees, the men were told to fire warning shots first and only shoot the Koreans “as a very last resort.”<sup>91</sup> He justified these measures to South Korean officials by arguing that they would “save Korean lives by preventing enemy forces from using refugees” to infiltrate the lines.<sup>92</sup> Once the 38<sup>th</sup> Regiment learned of enemy infiltration towards the end of January 1951, it ordered additional checkpoints and more careful screening, rather than simply resorting to a lethal solution, as other units did.<sup>93</sup> Evidently, at least some soldiers sympathized with the refugees’ plight and tried to avoid causing them needless harm. There were alternatives; No Gun Ri and other killings were not inevitable.

## Unanswered Questions

This paper is hardly the final word on Korean War civilian casualties, and known incidents represent only the tip of the iceberg. Much fragmentary evidence remains to be corroborated through further investigation. What exactly was the U.S. Air Force’s targeting policy during the conflict, how did it change as the tide of war fluctuated, and how closely did pilots adhere to it? Does additional evidence confirm that civilians fleeing Pyongyang in October 1950 were endangered by U.S. airstrikes? To what extent did censorship affect media coverage of civilian casualties in the Korean War?<sup>94</sup> All these unanswered questions and more await the diligent efforts of other researchers. Archives are a vital source regarding civilian casualties during the Korean War, and undoubtedly contain more invaluable information, from war diaries and mission reports to radio logs and memoranda. Oral testimony and

86 Advance Headquarters Fifth Air Force, “04 Memo from Colonel Turner C. Rogers to General Timberlake (July 25, 1950).”

87 Fighter-Bomber Mission Report (#16), 26 Jan. 51, 8<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Squadron. In Mission Reports of Units During the Korean War Era 1946 – 1953, 8<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Squadron, 12 Nov.– 5 Dec. 1950 (2 of 3) THRU 8<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Squadron, Jan. 1951 (1 of 4), Box 14, “8<sup>th</sup> Sq. Jan. 1951 1 of 4,” RG 342, Entry P 2100, NARA.

88 Weintraub, *MacArthur’s War*, 71. See also Headquarters Eighth U.S. Army Korea (EUSAK), “Monograph: Enemy Tactics,” 112. A small minority may have enjoyed it; see Sherwood, *Officers in Flight Suits*, 105.

89 Quoted in James, “Pilots Over Korea See Jammed Roads.”

90 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division Command Report, July-August 1950, KWP, 47.

91 Mossman, *Ebb and Flow*, 202.

92 Ibid.

93 38<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment Command Report, January 1951, KWP, 22.

94 See Charles J. Hanley and Martha Mendoza, “The Bridge at No Gun Ri: Investigative Reporting, Hidden History, and Pulitzer Prize,” *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 5, no. 4 (Fall 2000): 114-115.



1950s news media also provide rich detail and subjective impressions often absent from official documents. Both top-down and bottom-up approaches are essential; while discovering orders is crucial, scholars should also consider the psychological factors affecting soldiers and pilots. Other research methods, such as mapping and corroborating U.S. airstrikes, and matching Mosquito reports against those of fighter-bomber squadrons and ground units hold promise. Nearly two decades since the AP's exposé, public attention may have moved on, but more scholarly attention is both welcome and necessary.

## From the Far East to the Middle East

This slice of history is not of mere academic interest. No Gun Ri may be dismissed as a relic of a bygone era, but collateral damage caused by air warfare is all too modern for the millions of civilians caught on the frontlines of contemporary conflicts. When enemy forces intermingle with noncombatants, desperation may drive their adversaries to extirpate the threat with minimized attention to collateral damage. In Korea, a massive influx of refugees – followed by harsh orders – precipitated the events at No Gun Ri, as well as air attacks on civilians during summer 1950 and winter 1950-51. When the lines were fluid, refugee flows complicated the military calculus. American treatment of civilians was correlated with military setbacks; when the battlefield situation worsened in the summer and winter of 1950, the need to protect the jeopardized U.S. position took priority, and refugee policy became increasingly strict. As airstrikes escalated, commanders tolerated civilian casualties for the sake of force protection.

Nearly seventy years after No Gun Ri, the U.S. continues to rely on airpower, in part due to its long reach, apparent efficacy, and politically uncontroversial nature. In their extensive investigation into the U.S.-led anti-ISIS air campaign in Iraq, Azmat Khan and Anand Gopal found that “one in five of the coalition strikes we identified resulted in civilian death, a rate more than 31 times” the official figure. Two culprits were “poor or outdated intelligence” and a system that “considered [Iraqis] guilty until proven innocent.”<sup>95</sup> These deadly dynamics, especially the latter, led to countless refugee casualties in the Korean War. The presumption of guilt creates an obvious self-fulfilling prophecy: If civilians are deemed to be enemies and attacked, then civilian casualty rates will thus be artificially low.<sup>96</sup> Another cause is the (sometimes-deliberate) proximity of enemy troops to civilians; ISIS fighters' use of “human shields” is comparable to the infiltration tactics practiced by North Korean and Chinese forces. In the Middle East, the results have been similarly grim; the monitor Airwars estimates that since August 2014, coalition firepower has killed at least 7,742 civilians in Iraq and Syria.<sup>97</sup> These casualties have occurred despite vast technological advances in U.S. airpower since the Korean War, including precision ordnance, real-time drone reconnaissance, and pre-strike computer modeling.<sup>98</sup> Despite the Pentagon's heralding of a historically precise air war, human error in wartime seems ineluctable, especially when coupled with intense pressure to defeat a loathed enemy – whether North Korean and Chinese communists or ISIS

95 Azmat Khan and Anand Gopal, “The Uncounted,” *The New York Times Magazine*, November 16, 2017, accessed December 29, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/11/16/magazine/uncounted-civilian-casualties-iraq-airstrikes.html>.

96 Khan and Gopal, “The Uncounted.” This problem also holds for CIA “signature strikes” in Pakistan's tribal areas; see Mark Mazzetti, *The Way of the Knife: The CIA, a Secret Army, and a War at the Ends of the Earth* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 290-291.

97 Airwars, “US-led Coalition in Iraq & Syria,” accessed April 20, 2019, <https://airwars.org/conflict/coalition-in-iraq-and-syria/>.

98 Khan and Gopal, “The Uncounted.”

jihadists.<sup>99</sup> Before politicians and commanders promise to bomb an adversary fighting amidst a vulnerable population, they should remember a troubling lesson from the Korean War: Airpower's true price is measured in civilian lives lost.

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<sup>99</sup> See Micah Zenko, "Human Soldiers Will Always Cause Human Tragedies," *Foreign Policy*, September 29, 2016, accessed December 29, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/29/soldiers-will-always-cause-human-tragedies-syria-afghanistan-war-isis-medecins-sans-frontiers-kunduz-military/>.

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