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Review NO GUN RI: A Military History of the Korean War Incident

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Robert L. Bateman. *No Gun Ri: A Military History of the Korean War Incident.* Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2002. xvii + 302 pp. \$22.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8117-1763-2.

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Challenging the AP: Clarifying the No Gun Ri Incident

Challenging the AP: Clarifying the No Gun Ri Incident

On July 26, 1950, American soldiers from the 2nd Battalion 7th Cavalry Regiment opened fire on Korean refugees near No Gun Ri in south-central South Korea. No one disputes this claim. However, the how and why of the events of that day have been hotly disputed since the Associated Press (AP) published a story on the incident in late September 1999. The AP reported that the soldiers of the 2nd Battalion had received direct orders to fire on the refugees and that between 300 and 400 Koreans died in the massacre, including 100 in strafings by the air force. In *No Gun Ri: A Military History of the Korean War Incident*, Robert Bateman enters the debate by claiming that while American soldiers did indeed kill civilians that summer day, they did so unintentionally and were largely acting in the “fog of war.” He then challenges the AP’s research and objectivity by asserting that it either carelessly or deliberately misled its readers. Bateman’s book represents sound scholarship and shows the danger of the AP’s shallow and incomplete research.

Bateman breaks his study into two distinct parts to describe what he considers to be the two different stories arising from the No Gun Ri incident and the AP’s story. In the first, he addresses the military history of the incident by examining the American units that were near No Gun Ri in late July 1950. He details their lack of training, inadequate leadership, and insufficient supplies. He then describes how the events surrounding the incident on July 26 unfolded. In the second part, he provides a primer on how historical research should be conducted by critiquing the methods utilized by the AP. He concludes that American soldiers did fire over the refugees’ heads to get them to stop and returned fire after being shot at by communist guerillas from within the refugee col-

umn. However, he stresses that the AP exaggerated the newness of the story and the casualties suffered by the refugees.

Bateman meticulously traces the situation that led to the incident in the first five chapters. He explores the division of Korea and the civil war that existed in South Korea in the late 1940s. He then examines problems faced by the U.S. Army, and the 7th Cavalry Regiment in particular, as the United States demobilized after World War II, yet raised its commitments around the world. The American occupation force in Japan, including the 7th Cavalry, was undermanned, undertrained, and undersupplied. Its men rarely trained in numbers above the platoon level and its best officers and men were transferred to other units immediately before the regiment was deployed to Korea. As a result, the soldiers that arrived in Korea in July lacked both training and leadership. To make matters worse, they were thrust into a battle that had already seen the destruction of several American and most South Korean units.

Bateman describes the fear and confusion that these young, poorly trained American soldiers experienced in the summer of 1950. On the night of July 25-26, the men of the 2nd Battalion believed they were under attack. In reality, the supposed enemy of that night was a lost American unit. Unfortunately, most of the men in the 2nd Battalion broke and ran, many of them abandoning their equipment. The next morning the battalion began to reorganize and recover its equipment. The men were still shaken, and there were growing fears that the North Koreans were trying to infiltrate the American lines by hiding in the many refugee columns. The situation turned tragic when the 2nd Battalion tried to stop a group of refugees approaching its position.

According to Bateman, the tragedy occurred because of a convergence of events. Poorly trained and

led soldiers were placed in a difficult situation; rumors were rampant that communist forces were using refugees to hide their movements; and several communists did fire upon the Americans from within the refugee column. After between thirty and ninety seconds of American return fire, up to thirty-five refugees had been wounded or killed.

If not for the AP's 1999 story, Bateman would not have written this book. However, the story piqued his interest because he had recently served as an officer in the 7th Cavalry. He knew personally one of the chief witnesses in the AP story, Edward Daily, and wondered how such an event could have occurred. As his investigation unfolded, however, he increasingly came to conclude that the AP's story was inaccurate and that much of its research was incomplete at best.

The first weak link in the story was the supposed order to shoot. Although Bateman found some such orders during the Korean War, the 7th Cavalry did not receive any order to fire on refugees in July 1950. Instead, it was merely told to *stop* the refugees from crossing its lines. This order led to the unit's firing mortar shells in front of the column and shooting rifles over their heads. Although these inadvertently caused at least a few casualties, there was no direct targeting of the civilians. Bateman also failed to discover any evidence of air force strafing missions within several miles of No Gun Ri in late July. There were missions in August along the railway line near No Gun Ri, but not earlier. Finally, despite the AP's report of hundreds killed, Bateman could find no graves in the vicinity of the incident. From Bateman's perspective, the AP story simply could not have been true.

In the second part of the book, Bateman evaluated the stories of the AP's three main witnesses, Edward Daily, Delos Flint, and Eugene Hesselman. His findings are shocking: "In reality, none of these three men were actually at No Gun Ri during the events of July 26-29, 1950" (p. 136). Bateman determined that each of these men either lied or had experienced a memory failure. Daily's case is most troubling because he claimed to have been an officer and

to have personally fired on the refugees. Bateman's investigation reveals that Daily never rose above the rank of sergeant and only served in the 7th Cavalry in 1951. Further, Bateman contends that both Delos Flint and Eugene Hesselman were wounded the night of July 25-26 and evacuated before the incident ever occurred. The AP, Bateman concluded, had relied on unreliable witnesses.

It is doubtful that anyone will ever describe the No Gun Ri incident in more detail or with more accuracy than Bateman. He has carefully marshaled his evidence and drawn conclusions based on his own military experience and scholarly training. A tragedy did occur on July 26, 1950. American soldiers panicked under difficult conditions and killed innocent civilians. Bateman, however, shows that their actions, although unfortunate, were understandable considering their lack of training, inadequate leadership, and the presence of communist guerillas within the refugee columns.

Only a few problems mar this impressive book. Although unintentional, Bateman's efforts to unravel the AP's story can cause the reader to forget that a tragedy did occur in late July 1950 near No Gun Ri. By Bateman's own estimates, up to thirty-five South Koreans died that day. Even if unintentional, those losses should always be remembered. Also, Bateman discounts the testimony of South Korean witnesses as being skewed by time and/or motivated by the desire for reparations. While these accusations are possibly true, Bateman should not have discounted them without making more efforts to determine their validity. Finally, Bateman includes a short, four-page section on the career of S.L.A. Marshall that has at best tangential importance to his story. His own account of Edward Daily's career provides sufficient evidence that some veterans have falsified their records.

Despite these few minor problems, Bateman has written a book that should be a valuable resource for scholars, the media, and the general public. He reveals the pitfalls of drawing conclusions from incomplete investigations and shows how true historical research should be conducted.

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