

NAKJI¹, OKSUSU² AND RED WINE
KOREAN SOLDIERS IN THE UN FRENCH BATTALION
AND CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGES DURING THE KOREAN WAR
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한국전쟁에 참전한 프랑스군 UN 대대 속에 있었던 한불 문화교류

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The integration of South Korean soldiers into the French Battalion of the UNO during the Korean War was an unexpected occasion for French and Koreans to meet, to live and to fight together. Although the deployment of French troops in Korea during the war was generally limited to the fighting areas, some of the French soldiers, mainly the officers and NCOs had, on some occasions, opportunities to meet Koreans and learn about their culture. Although these cultural exchanges were limited due to the war conditions and because of the language barrier, some of the Koreans and the Frenchmen found themselves in the situation of being able to discover each other's culture, perhaps for the first time in history.

Introduction

From January 11th, 1951 until the very end of the Korean conflict, the French Battalion of the UNO integrated about 170 Korean soldiers, thus making a rare opportunity to develop personal as well as cultural links between young French and Korean men, beyond the war. At first distributed between the French Battalion companies and services, the Korean soldiers were soon grouped into the 2nd Company, and became known as the “*compagnie mixte*”, where the soldiers were Korean, and the NCOs and officers were French. This small unit soon developed a unique culture made up of a pidgin of French and Korean language. Other Korean soldiers and interpreters were integrated into the medics and stretcher bearer's unit. From February to December 1951, some were even affected to a special unit in charge of protecting the French Forces' headquarters, a rare proof of confidence knowing that some of these Korean Soldiers not only came from the North, but that even some of them were formerly soldiers in the *inmin-gun*.

Whilst the French unit was replaced every year in accordance with a roll-over system, the Korean soldiers of the French battalion remained permanently alongside their new comrades, and only quit the unit in 1953, at the very end of the war.

The French UN Battalion is probably the most decorated single unit of the whole Korean conflict, gaining two Korean Presidential citations, two American Presidential Citations, many French Army citations and numerous medals from all the three countries, including the Silver Star and Combat Infantry Badge (CIB).

¹ Squid.

² Corn.

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1. The Korean War and the UNO French Forces

As a member state of the UNO with a seat at the Security Council, France was deeply concerned by the Korean Crisis. The French delegate, Jean Chauvel, supported the three UN resolutions which, condemning the North Korean Aggression, not only called the UNO members to give help and assistance to the Republic of Korea, but also founded the legal status of international military involvement of the 16 countries in the peninsula.

At the time, France was already at war. The Indochina war had re-ignited after an odd collection of crossed mistakes between the French government and Ho Chi Minh, from 1946. The Viet-minh had improved its forces, military material and was able to inflict heavy losses on the French Army.

Though colonial in its roots, the Indochina conflict became to be seen in Washington as merely an anti-communist struggle after Mao overran China in 1949.

With about 100 000 soldiers in Indochina, and the building of a modern army of eleven divisions in prospect to defend Europe, France was embarrassed by the repeated demands made by the United States to send military forces to Korea. A light frigate was sent to participate in mine-sweeping and the protection of convoys at the time of the Inch' on landing (September 15th, 1950).

But the question of sending ground forces, raised in July, was not decided upon until August, partly because of the instability of French politics. Finally, the French Government decided to send only a volunteer battalion, especially recruited from both the reserve and active service. After a strict selection and drill, the newly created "Bataillon Français de l'ONU" embarked in Marseilles on October 25th, to arrive in Korea on November 29th.

The French unit displayed strength and stubborn pugnacity in decisive battles such as Wonju, Twin Tunnels and especially the Chip'Yong-Ni battle. But the Battalion suffered heavy losses due to combat as well as the bitter cold. Then the idea came to send Korean reinforcements to the French unit, through the system of KATUSA. These Koreans, though unable to speak any French language, quickly proved to be excellent soldiers, especially in the Hill 1037 fighting.

The success of the integration of the Korean Soldiers to the French Unit not only very much surprised the US Army, but also contributed to boost the program of rearmament in Europe, as well as facilitating the attribution of military and financial aid for Indochina.

On January 11th 1951, 76 Korean soldiers were attributed to the French battalion⁵. Though attached to the French unit and wearing French insignia, these men were paid by the Korean government, according to Korean military regulations

Then, in March, one hundred more Korean soldiers came as reinforcements, after the tremendous battle of Hill 1037.⁶ On February 1st, a stretcher bearer unit of 30 men and a protection platoon of the French Battalion headquarters were created.

The battles fought at Chipy'ong-ni were especially hard at the beginning of February, and at first, the Korean soldiers were unable to fight. They suffered from deep stress under the bombing and spent the nights smoking cigarettes from the ration boxes, fearing to be captured by the communists, for some of them came from North Korea⁷.

When the Korean Soldiers were assigned to all the French Battalion companies, some of them were killed in action. On many occasions, their French comrades wanted to avenge

⁵ SHAT, 7 U 288 ; Historique du Bataillon.

⁶ Chef de Bataillon Barthélemy, document cité, p. 1.

⁷ Interviews with Im ùng-sang and Cho, South Korea, March 2005. Jung-Yeo. Cho was a defector from the Inmin-gun (North Korean Army), forcibly drafted immediately after he graduated from high school.

them, and a french volunteer, René Copin, 19 years old in 1950, enraged by the loss of one of his Korean friends, stood over a trench to fire against “the Reds”, and was severely injured. After about six months of surgery and convalescence, he finally volunteered for a new tour in Korea, eager to go back to Korea and meet his Korean friends and comrades.

At the end of February, Captain Goupil, an experienced officer who had fought the Japanese in Indochina in the 1940’s, was in charge of the Koreans. His “compagnie coréenne” soon became a tough combat force.

The bravery of the Korean soldiers in the French Battalion, their devotion towards their officers, their easy-going temperament and humor, all contributed to create not only an efficient military force, but also to tighten the strong links between the “bands of brothers”, French and Koreans, united in the same effort, against combat odds. They shared joy and pain, bread and tears, and often blood.

In June 1951, and until the end of the French Battalion’s deployment in Korea, the so-called “ROK Company”, which so far had acted as a reserve unit, was integrated into the battalion as the 2nd Company (B Company), soon famous through the battles of Hill 932 and Heartbreak Ridge.

Food

Visiting a ROK unit in the Winter of 1950, the French war reporter Paul Mousset had the opportunity to eat with the Korean soldiers, who had just killed a deer. The deer flesh was eaten raw, and Mousset made efforts to swallow it. But the worst was to come. “When they filled my mess tin with Kimtchih (sic), their national dish... the white barbarian sleeping inside of me sued for mercy”.⁸

Mousset was impressed by the appetite of the Koreans he met, not understanding that the meat, grilled by the men, was a moment of grace for them, as they did not like the American canned food very much.

Visiting the French Battalion’s Koreans, he also saw them killing two cows and a pig and eating it rapidly. “*And the next day, they did the same, cooking their ratatouille anew, swallowing large amounts of their national cabbage, the kimtchih (sic). Oh, with them, no problem of logistics! They are given the same rations as the Americans or us. But, as soon as they arrive in one of their villages, whatever the state of destruction they might find it, they dig into the ashes, and unearth the vegetable jars buried there at the beginning of Fall.... They can organize a meal, a Korean chop chop... after that, they can climb the hills without showing any signs of any tiredness*”⁹.

It is also noteworthy that the US combat rations did not suit French tastes either, at the time. They had canned food such as “Lima Beans”, “Beans and Frankfurters”, “meat balls”, hamburgers, “Chicken and Vegetables”¹⁰... but these were usually very difficult to cook, even after being plunged into boiling water for a while. “The main part of the can was still frozen” and the soldiers ate frozen beans, frozen chicken, and so on.

All the Battalion’s food was supplied by the US Army, and it was not to the French taste:¹¹ Spaghetti was cooked in a sweet tomato sauce whereas it was salted in France, like it is usually done in Italian cuisine. From the beginning, American food was quite strange for

⁸ Paul Mousset, *Parallèle 38*, Gallimard, Paris, 1951, p. 239.

⁹ Paul Mousset, *Parallèle 38*, Gallimard, Paris, 1951, p. 275.

¹⁰ Rations C 6 consisted in canned meat, vegetables, , biscuits, cocoa, powdered coffee .

¹¹ Michel Rossi, in *Avoir vingt ans à Chipyeong-ni*, evokes this cultural shock

the Frenchmen. A. Lemoine remembered a dinner at Camp Walker (Taegu) on December 2nd, 1950:

*“At the American canteen: eggs and bacon, beans, fruit and coffee with milk instead of red wine, which was not at all appreciated; Officers told us wine kegs were on the way.”*¹²

The absence of wine was one of the most difficult things to bear for the Frenchmen, isolated and so far away from France, in such a small unit. Eventually, red wine was shipped from France via Great-Britain. *“That is why French alcoholism contributed to British financial health! ».*¹³

“We had a lot of American corn, which we exchanged for some other food. When it was possible, a truck went to Seoul, to barter some food. The Koreans asked us what we wanted to get, and they were sometimes able to invite us. We had grilled squid, and other dishes alike, but no kimtchi”, remembered Colonel Pouvesle.¹⁴

Some of the Korean soldiers initiated the French into the delights of Korean food. Didier de Chazelles, who was in a combat team, told me he had only one opportunity to taste a very tiny piece of dried fish with his Korean comrades¹⁵. On the contrary, Dr Kim Yang-hee explained how his sergeant sometimes called him, saying, “Come on, Kim, we’re going to eat with the farmers’ ”. And they went to the countryside together, to find some farmers and get some Korean food by exchanging ‘C’ or ‘K’ military rations and tobacco. Of course, this was only possible when the battalion was resting behind the frontline¹⁶, and the medic unit¹⁷ was in an easier position to forage behind the lines.

Education and culture

Lieutenant Pouvesle (who retired as Colonel) was extremely impressed by the intellectual ability of his Korean soldiers. A few years previously, he had had to drill French trainees who, due to the World War, were hardly able to read and write. On the contrary, his Korean soldiers not only wrote and read Korean, but also Japanese, and sometimes Chinese. Some of these men, although they had been chosen from the most educated men available at the time, had accomplished their middle school terms and sometimes even their high school terms. Some of them even graduated from the Pyongyang High school, and had joined the South Korean army after many adventures, including being drafted into the North Korean army¹⁸

« Koreans are clever people, skillful people. All my men knew how to read and to write. They understood very quickly, even in the battlefield. There were also two NCOs who were in the Japanese army during the war. ». (Interview with colonel (ret.) Pouvesle, May 21st, 2001)

Generally speaking, the ROK soldiers who integrated into the French battalion had an excellent level of education, dealing in many fields, as Colonel (ret.) Fauvell-Champion points out:

« I had a medical student and another one studying Law. Very brilliant guys... Everyone was very attentive, eager to know us and they adapted very quickly to French

¹² A. Lemoine, *Un du bataillon français de Corée*, p. 78.

¹³ Col. Pouvesle, interview, May 2001.

¹⁴ Interview, May 2001.

¹⁵ Didier de Chazelles, interview, Korea, December, 2008

¹⁶ The *Pudae chigae*, was probably born during the war, by mixing American ham, Korean noodles or rice and hot spicy sauce together.

¹⁷ Dr Kim joined the batallion as a translator, then became medic attendant.

¹⁸ Case of Jo Jung-yeo.

commandment and maneuver culture. ... One of my Korean soldiers spoke to me on one occasion about Napoleon's imperial family, and knew about both the receptions given by Empress Josephine in Saint-cloud and battles of Austerlitz and Eylau ».

Colonel (ret.) Fauvell-Champion, letter, February 14, 2001

In fact, many of the Korean soldiers sent to the French Battalion had been especially selected by the Korean Army who could not drill enough officers and NCOs. So almost all the men who joined the French Battalion had at least completed mid-school or even, in some cases, High school. This decision was probably made after the KATUSA system encountered difficulties and failure due to language and formation weakness. Some of these KATUSA or more exactly, these Korean Reinforcements to the French Army, came from North Korea, and had even been, in some cases, formerly drafted for service in the North Korean *inmin-gun* for a while¹⁹.

« We did not speak the same language, so that contacts were limited usually to the needs of duty. However, *let's take for example my second, Bok, who was 31 years old and was the eldest. He was a very cultivated man, and I could appreciate his radiance; he spoke three asian languages, but I did not understand any!*

Concerning the second fellow I remember, Koun. He had read many books of French literature, but, in the Korean language!”²⁰

The war reporter Paul Mousset was also very surprised about the great knowledge of France these men had, concerning Napoleon, Joan of Arc, and also Jean Gabin, Simone Simon, or Danielle Darrieux!^{21 22}.

However, we should not assume that the Katusa were usually highly educated people. The French Battalion ROK soldiers were specially selected from other men through education criteria, for the Korean army authorities thought that educated people could adapt more easily to a foreign environment.

Usually, all the Koreans of the Battalion had reached a high level of education, so that they were far more educated than many French trainees at the same period. The World War had greatly disrupted the school attendance of French pupils whose teachers had also been drafted to the army.²³

The French officers, favorably impressed, did not know that most of the ROK soldiers sent to the US Army or in this case, to the French Army, had been strictly chosen according to their educational background. Most of the Korean soldiers “lent” to the French Battalion had accomplished their mid-school and sometimes even high school levels. The Korean Army authorities, learning lessons from the past experiences with the Katusa system, thought that the most educated soldiers would be able to adapt themselves more quickly to foreigners, which proved to be true²⁴.

Cultural exchanges in the « 2nd Company (Company B) »

The prolonged contact within the same unit, and in these particularly difficult circumstances, of the soldiers of the two countries, induced the emergence of a specific micro

¹⁹ Interview with Cho Chung-yeo.

²⁰ Robert Breuil, e-mail February 17, 2001

²¹ French movie stars of the 40's and 50's.

²² Paul Mousset, Op. Cit. p.276.

²³ Col. "Pouvesle, interview, May, 2001.

²⁴ Interviews with Im ùng-san and Cho Chung-yeo, march 2005.

culture in the « 2nd Company (Company B) », which also strengthened the fighting spirit of the group. Most of the French veterans remember their Korean fellows with deep affection and nostalgia.

However, between the fights, or at the rear, during moments of rest, the cultural, natural and daily exchanges created bonds of solidarity and friendship, born of shared ordeals. And the contact was made despite the mutual incomprehension resulting from the language barrier.

« *We never encountered true contact difficulties and we never thought about it at the time. ...*

In fact, there were a few key-words. We used them in a mixture of French, English and Korean languages. We learned it quickly. Of course, because of the war, the men were together all the time and osmosis worked rapidly.

Colonel (ret.) Fauvell-Champion, letter from February 14, 2001

1) Languages used

This permanent osmosis facilitated the cohesion of the group, and soon created something like a « band of bros » culture inside the « Compagnie deux » Words used were often repeated, concerning only useful vocabulary about tools and weapons, but delineated on the base of various languages.

About sixty years later, it is quite difficult for men to remember the vocabulary used at the time, and the French veterans had not learnt the Korean language very well on a written basis, so this is always an approximation.

“Key words were usually: Attention! At ease! target, etc. Men knew numbers in French, and French NCOs and officers also used some Korean words or phrases like: (I quote) *Agnan hachimnika (bonjour)*²⁵, *Kamsoun nida (thank you)*²⁶, *Tchi pap (rassemblement)*²⁷, *payi payi (rapidement)*²⁸ etc. *I cannot remember any comprehension problems, in fact.*”

Colonel (ret.) Fauvell-Champion, letter, February 26, 2001

However, the extraordinary pidgin of the « 2nd Company (Company B) » was not only made up of a mix of French, Korean and English languages, but since many French soldiers had served in North Africa before, they also used some Arabic words together with French and some English words.²⁹

Furthermore, the brief rest and recuperation sojourns of French soldiers in Japan gave them some vernacular Japanese expressions like: « *sukoshi* すこし », « *takusan* たくさん », and, perhaps the most important for young men, « *mousmé* むすめ » or girl³⁰.

All this contributed to building a strong “esprit de corps” inside the Compagnie 2, and « Colonel (ret.) Pouvesle decided to write his platoon note-book directly in *hangùl*³¹, for everything concerning his men’s names « *they could correct me easily* » he explained.³²

²⁵ Annyòng hashimnikka 안녕하세요 .

²⁶ Kòmapsùmnida ? 거맙습니다. Or kamsa hamnida 감사합니다 ?

²⁷ Chip hap. 집합

²⁸ Palli palli. 빨리 빨리

²⁹ Lieutenant Pouvesle’s article, in *Le Piton* May-June 1953.

³⁰ « a little bit », « a lot of », « girl » interview with Col. Pouvesle, 2001.

³¹ Korean Alphabet.

³² The Notebook was unfortunately lost in Indochina.

2) Cheerfulness and humor

During rest periods or sometimes between combat actions, the « happy few » of the second company enjoyed singing. The French soldiers learned to sing the famous “Arirang” which is something like an unofficial Korean anthem, and also the Korean Army song (*Yukkun-ga*), remembered as « Apùro ap’ùro » by Colonel (ret.) Fauvell-Champion³³, as the chorus begins with these words. The French soldiers also taught the Koreans French folk songs such as « Alouette, je te plumerai »

Whenever possible they sang and they organized barbecue parties. Everyone seemed to radiate a surprising good humor, and many visitors were amazed by this striking gaiety.³⁴

However, thanks to the radio broadcasting, they also sang some Japanese songs alongside. These songs were considered with nostalgia by those who enjoyed the opportunity to go on rest and recuperation in Tokyo.

The so-called ROK soldiers of the French battalion enjoyed joking and laughing, despite a few translation problems.

Some Korean civilians were also taken on as “irregular” soldiers by the 2nd Company (Company B), especially former “coolies” or *jiget-kun*, ammunitions bearers from the CTC (Civilian Transportation corps). These men usually volunteered for active service as fighters, and, since they were not paid for the service, the French Officers and NCO clubbed together to give some money to these men³⁵. These irregular fighters never appeared on ROK Army rosters. Some of them did not want to join the ROK Army, but preferred to join the French unit directly.

In addition, orphans, children separated from their families, irregular soldiers, alone or in groups, some of whom were older, were also welcomed, integrated, clothed, fed and even paid in exchange for some services.

“They called them the “boys” ... they took care of the cooking, the cleaning, a sort of servant, if you like. So all the non-commissioned officers and the privates had a “boy”; which was normally prohibited by the Division. But the French soldiers took a boy, they paid each of them ten to fifteen dollars a month, and they [the “boys”] were fed. Then they were dressed in uniforms, they cooked, they also did the laundry, washed the soldiers' shirts, and did the ironing, but if they ironed, they were given more money. So these boys there were earning more than us, the translators »³⁶.

The “translators” were a group of Korean students, who had learned some basic and formal French language. They benefitted, throughout their military life with the Frenchmen, from free lessons of French military slang, learning words like “debout là-d’dans” (Wake up), “au jus” (Coffee’s ready!), or “guitoune” (tent).

³³ Letter from Feb., 2001

³⁴ Lieutenant Pouvesle’s article in *Le Piton*, 1953

³⁵ General Barthélémy, interview, 2001.

³⁶ Dr Kim Yang-Hi, interview, 28 August 2003. “A young Korean was following the cook, one of those Koreans who attach themselves to passing troops,” wrote Paul Mousset, *Op. Cit*, p. 163. “A young Korean boy, called Mosquito, had preceded me near the stove. He had left his family in Seoul and had been following the battalion for a year. Why? I asked him. He hesitated, trying to find a way to express himself in my language...: “It’s okay, soldier...”. Jules Roy, *op. cit.* p. 289.

Otherwise, most of these "irregulars" of the French Battalion "decamped in November 1953". They were 15-17 years old, were not yet mobilized, but risked being picked up by the South Korean administration, which did not seem to suit them. "They left in the night »³⁷.

Epilogue

Today, French and Korean veterans are still sharing something unique, and the Korean "yongsa"³⁸ like in France with French veterans, their wives and their children or descendants have discovered Korea with curiosity and profound emotion. Thus, the families of the veterans are creating relays of memory and interest for Korea throughout France.

Some of the Korean veterans have fought to obtain the restoration of the French Monument in Suweon. Some welcomed me to their homes like an old comrade of their youth, trying to remember a few long forgotten words in French.

As old soldiers fade away, they are creating, through the Korean Association to maintain the Souvenir of the French participation in the Korean War and other foundations, a Path of Memory which, commemorating the French battalion's participation in the War, will open up new steps towards bilateral relations and friendship. Thus, beyond the tremendous experience of war, the French participation in the Korean war, has brought a rare opportunity for cultural and linguistic exchanges.

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³⁷ Interview with colonel Pouvesle, May 2001.

³⁸ Honorable word for « veterans ».