

# UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS *HISTORICAL COMPANY*

## “US Marines verses Tiger Hunters”

### The Korean Expedition of 1871, and The Battle of the Salee River

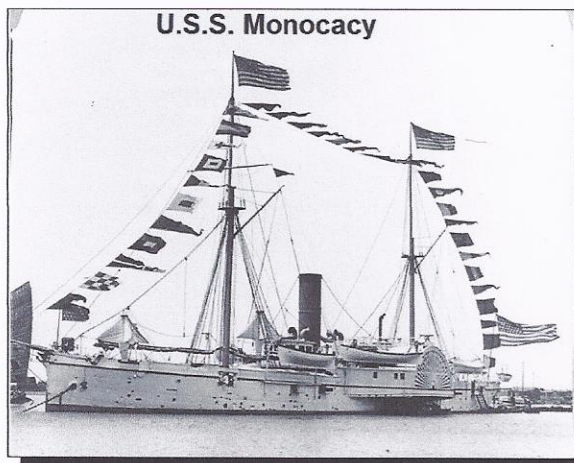
All Americans are familiar with the now famous landing of the 1st Marine Division at Inchon, Korea in September 1950, but little known or remembered is the first amphibious assault United States Marines and Navy Bluejackets made in Korean waters. Just a few miles from where, in the mid-20th Century the United States would launch a major amphibious offensive against the North Koreans, a mixed brigade of Marines and sailors of America’s Asiatic Fleet would land on Korean soil. In the battle that followed, Marines earned the first Medals of Honor to be awarded for foreign service. It was the Korean campaign of 1871.



On 23 May 1871, Rear Admiral John Rogers brought his Asiatic Fleet Squadron to anchor above the city of Chemulpo (modern Inchon), on the west coast of Korea. The squadron was comprised of five ships of varying class. The frigate *USS Colorado* was Roger’s flagship. The sloops *Alaska* and *Benicia* which were near sister ships, each 250 feet in length, heavily armed and boasting a powerful 60-pounder, rifled gun. Only two years old, they were the most modern ships of the fleet. The *USS Palos*, an iron-hulled, screw-driven tug had been converted to a gunboat and joined the Asiatic Squadron in 1870. En route it became the first US Warship to pass through the newly constructed Suez Canal. The *USS Monocacy* was a side-wheel gunboat that mounted six big guns and was capable of heavy bombardment.

Aboard Roger’s flagship, the *USS Colorado*, was the U.S. Minister to China, Frederick Low. Low had been sent to open diplomatic relations with the Hermit Kingdom of Korea and to chart the Salee River as the channel of the Han River between Kanghwa-do (island) and the Kumpo peninsula was then called.

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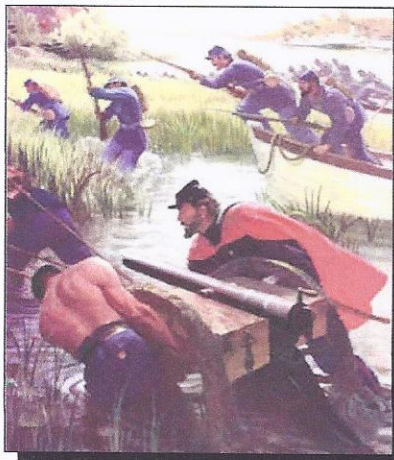
Preliminary negotiations were conducted with lower-ranking Korean officials on the thirty-first, and they were informed of the American's desire to survey the river. After waiting 24 hours and not receiving objections from the Koreans, the Navy dispatched their survey team. On 1 June four steam launches accompanied by the Gunboats USS *Monocacy* and *Palos* began working up the Salee River channel to mark the way to Seoul. As they came abreast of the fortifications on the heights of Kanghwa-do at the approaches to the Han River, the Koreans opened fire. The surveying party replied in kind, shelling the forts into silence, and returned to the fleet's anchorage.

Admiral Rogers demanded an apology from the Koreans. After waiting ten days for a response and receiving none, he organized a punitive expedition and tasked them with the mission of capturing and destroying the errant forts. Overall command of the expedition was given to Navy Commander L. A. Kimberly. His adjutant general was Lieutenant Commander Winfield Scott Schley, (A Frederick, Maryland native), who decades later would become a leading figure in the Spanish-American War. The landing force consisted of 686 officers and men including a Marine battalion of two companies and a battery of seven 12-pounder howitzers. Totalling 109 officers and men, the Marines would be under the command of the Asiatic Fleet Marine Officer, Capt. McLane Tilton. Although the Marines were anxious to see action and had been selected to serve as the expedition's advance guard, Tilton expressed concern about his Marines going into battle with obsolete muzzle-loading .58 cal. muskets instead of the Remington breech loading carbines carried by the bluejackets. Little did he know that the Korean weapons that would face him dated as far back as 1313 A.D.



Capt. McLane Tilton, USMC

On 10 June they commenced their landing on the mud flats of Kanghwa-do. Three forts, each with a walled water battery, overlooked the channel shore of Kanghwa-do. In the course of the operation the Americans christened them the Marine Redoubt, Fort Monocacy, and the Citadel. With men sinking up to their knees in mud, the assault could have been disastrous had not the *Monocacy* worked inshore and blasted the first two Korean forts into silence prior to the landing force disembarking from their boats being towed by the *Palos*.



The Marines thrashed through the muck and began working their way toward the southern most fort. Disgusted at the knee-deep mud, Capt. Tilton noted that the flats were "crossed by deep slices, filled with softer and deeper mud." Men lost shoes, socks, and even trouser legs to the mud, and the howitzers bogged down to their barrels.

Fortunately, the Koreans did not attempt to oppose the landing. Once the Marines reached firm ground Comdr. Kimberly ordered Tilton to advance on the first fort. At the Marine's approach the white-robed Korean defenders fled. Upon entering the works Tilton found the bastion

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deserted. He had the 54 guns the Koreans had abandoned spiked and advanced upriver toward the next fort while the navy bluejackets remained behind to create a redoubt and manhandle the American guns out of the muck.

Advancing to within a mile of the second fort, Tilton received orders to hold. It was evening before the bluejackets had dragged the howitzers ashore and closed with the Marine advance force. The Marines bedded down for the night on a wooded knoll with the seamen bivouacked a half mile to the rear.



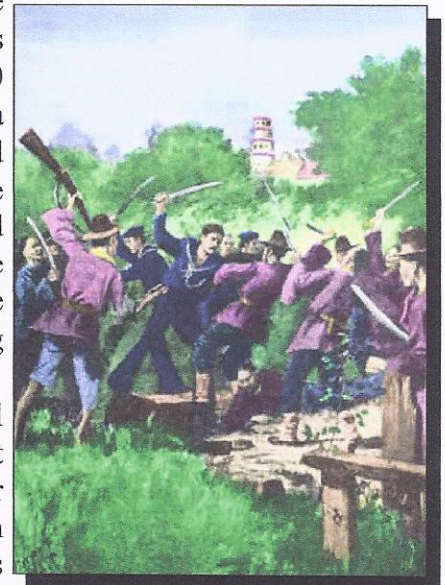
Fort Monocacy

At dawn the next morning the Marines advanced on the next fort, a chipped granite structure about ninety feet square. With fire support from the *Monocacy*, Tilton's Marines overran the walls but once again found the fortification deserted. After dismantling the battlements and spiking the guns Tilton directed his battalion toward the fort they had christened the "Citadel." This was the main fort that had fired upon the survey party.

The track between the first two forts had been relatively easygoing but the advance to the Citadel became extremely difficult. Tilton reported that "the topography of the country resembled a sort of 'chopped sea' of immense hills and deep ravines lying in every conceivable position." The situation became even more arduous when the column came under long-range musket fire from the hills to the Americans' left flank by a Korean force estimated in excess of 2,000. A few rounds from the howitzers, however, were able to keep them at bay.

The citadel, the strongest of the fortifications, was a stone redoubt atop a conical hill on a peninsula some two miles from its neighbor. The fort could only be reached by assaulting straight up a 150 foot slope. Tilton steeled his Marines for the assault. After a bombardment by the *Monocacy*, a storming party of 350 Marines and sailors with fixed bayonets dashed forward. Although the Marines were still armed with the M1861 Springfield rifled musket, which Tilton had dubbed "a blasted old Muzzle-Fuzzel," they quickly established fire superiority over the fort's defenders. As the assault force neared the summit, the Koreans hurled rocks at the Americans and began singing "melancholy" chants, which intensified as the brigade drew closer.

The first American into the citadel, Navy Lt. Hugh McKee, fell mortally wounded from both a musket fire and a spear thrust. The fort was later renamed "Fort McKee" in his honor. The Koreans stood their ground and the fighting became hand-to-hand. Capt. Tilton, Pvt. Hugh Purvis, and Corporal Charles Brown converged on the citadel's principle standard, a twelve-foot-square yellow cotton banner emblazoned with black Chinese characters signifying "Commanding General." For the next several minutes the fort's interior was a scene of desperate combat. Then the remaining defenders fled toward the river, under fire from the Marines and two howitzers. Many of the defeated Koreans would commit suicide for failing to successfully resist the interlopers.



A total of 223 Korean dead were counted in and around the Citadel. Only 20 wounded were captured. By the end of the operation 47 flags and 481 pieces of ordinance had been taken. In contrast,

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the American landing party lost three men killed and ten wounded. Six Marines, including Pvt. Purvis and Cpl. Brown, and nine sailors would earn the first Medals of Honor to be awarded for foreign service.

Successful as the expedition had been from a military standpoint, it was not a masterstroke of diplomacy. Subsequent communications with Korean authorities were entirely unproductive and on 3 July 1871 the American fleet withdrew. A treaty with Korea was not negotiated until 1882.



Marine Corps Eagle, Globe, and Anchor authorized in 1868

