

THE FORGOTTEN “WEEKEND WAR”
A COMPREHENSIVE ACCOUNT
OF THE 1871 KOREAN EXPEDITION

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Introduction

The Korean War, 1950-1953, is often referred to as “The Forgotten War,” as it stands in the gargantuan shadow of two of America’s most documented wars, World War II and the Vietnam War. It is often taught and viewed as a small-scale “police action” amid the global theater, and as such, many of its lessons are scarcely learned. Among the American public, it is one of the least understood of America’s wars. It is ironic, then, that perhaps the very least known open American military conflict also occurred in Korea. The “Weekend War” of 1871 is scarcely mentioned in any textbooks, at any level, and is often left obscured among the backdrop of the numerous foreign landings made by the United States between the end of the American Civil War in 1865 and the beginning of World War II in 1941. Yet it marks a number of significant events in American history – in two days of fighting, fifteen men received the Medal of Honor, the first time it was awarded for action against a foreign enemy. What is perhaps the most significant aspect of the 1871 Korean Expedition is that it also marks a momentous turning point in American military strategy, as it is one of the earliest events signifying the United States’ shift from continentalism to expansionism.

Much of the material pertaining to this expedition is extremely insightful. These accounts, past and present, offer us many details and perspectives so that the scholar may gain some context. However, with that said, each of these accounts of the “Weekend War” often fail to provide totality, offering newly discovered facts but leaving out others. The purpose of this article is to offer a combination of all of these accounts, to provide the most complete and comprehensive account of the

expedition given the available knowledge so that we may better learn of it, and from it.

I. A Brief History of Korea's Foreign Relations to 1847

My dear Nannie, At Sea May 16th 1871.

My last letter gave you intelligence of our safe arrival in the beautiful harbor of Nagasaki, and this morning I commence another sheet to let you know we are really on our way to Korea, the fleet sailing & steaming in double echelon the flag ship leading, the "Alaska" & "Monocacy" on our right, & the "Benecia" and little "Palos" on our left, the sky above being as blue as Italy's own, and the sea as smooth as a lake; the sun shining over all with a warmth that makes us as happy & comfortable as we could wish to be. I hope what you have read in the papers about the Expedition has not alarmed you as I do not think we are to have any trouble to speak of, our mission being a peaceful one, and for the purpose only of exacting a reasonable promise from the Korean Govt. that Christian seaman wrecked on their coast may be treated humanely.¹ We have no knowledge of the country, and only very unreliable information in regard to the coast, as no surveys have yet been satisfactorily made; the only chart being one made of the vicinity of the Capitol, by the French Navy; The navigation will necessarily be somewhat dangerous but we all trust that by the exercise of great vigilance we will succeed in keeping off of rocks etc. My impression at this moment is, that the people will have no intercourse with us, and our journey will be so much love's labor lost. However the "denoument" will be fully recorded in this same sheet, if I have the opportunity and I sincerely hope my prophecy will not be fulfilled . . . Affectionately yours, McLane Tilton²

¹ Captain Tilton speaks in reference to the *General Sherman* incident of 1866, in which an American-owned merchant vessel was supposedly burned and its crew killed by Koreans.

² Letter, Charles A. Wood and Jack B. Hilliard, May 16, 1970, *Register of the McLane Tilton Papers, 1861-1914* (Quantico, Va.: Museum of the United States Marine Corps, 1970).

On February 15, 1845, the members of the 28th Congress first officially considered an American expedition to Korea. The mission was proposed by Representative Zadock Pratt (Democrat-N.Y.), in the interest of expanding U.S. commerce to Korea and Japan following commercial success in China. Pratt stated dramatically, “‘The day and the hour’ have now arrived for turning the enterprise of our merchants and seamen into the harbors and markets of those long-secluded countries,” going on to paint a vivid picture of Asian harbors in which the “star-spangled banner’ is recognised as an ample passport and protection” for any Americans.³ Notwithstanding Pratt’s boisterous declaration, the West knew very little of the Korean Kingdom at that time. The Chosun Dynasty of Korea had been extremely isolationist for centuries. What little foreign interaction they did have was largely unpleasant. They had been a tributary nation to China for centuries, fought a number of skirmishes against the Manchurians, and were periled by Japanese invasions during the Seven Year War in the 1590s.⁴

The first recorded interaction between Korea and the West occurred in 1628, when three Dutch sailors became shipwrecked in Korean waters. Korean citizens rescued and cared for the sailors, but the Korean government would not allow them to leave. Contrary to beliefs at the time, records show that the three sailors took on their Korean captivity in a manner akin to the Stockholm Syndrome, in which hostages gradually come to identify with their captors.⁵ Two of them later voluntarily fought and died in a Sino-Korean conflict and the third took a Korean name and lived the rest of his life out in Seoul. Another Dutch shipwreck in 1653 met the same consequences, though a few of the crew members later escaped.⁶ It is relevant to mention the history of hostage-taking in Asia as a form of securing foreign relations among different clans or states, though whether this factored into the Koreans’ reasoning is unclear; many scholars speculate that Korea simply wanted to deny the West any knowledge of the Kingdom.⁷ Whatever the case may be, events such as these led the West to

³ U.S. House of Representatives. *Extension of American Commerce – Proposed Mission to Japan and Korea*, 28th Congress, 2nd sess., H. Doc. 138, Serial 465, 2.

⁴ Homer B. Hubert, "The Enfranchisement of Korea," *The North American Review* 166, no. 499 (1898): 708-09. Thomas Louis and Tommy Ito, *Samurai: The Code of the Warrior* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2006), 36.

⁵ Douglas Sterner, *Shinmiyangyo: The Other Korean War*, 2002, <HomeOfHeroes.com>.

⁶ Sterner, *Shinmiyangyo*, 6-7.

⁷ Hulbert, "Enfranchisement," 709; and Sterner, *Shinmiyangyo*, 7.

view Korea almost mythically, informally declaring it the “Hermit Kingdom.”

Despite Pratt’s romantic claims, the Korean expedition was not carried out right away. For two years following his initial proclamation in 1845, accounts were gleaned and research conducted as to the details of the Korean Kingdom. Unfortunately for the Koreans, Hendrik Hamel, one of the escaped sailors from the 1653 shipwreck, had his personal journal published in 1666, giving the West their first clear glimpse of Korea.⁸ It is most likely that Hamel’s account played a substantial role in Secretary of State James Buchanan’s message to the president concerning “Oriental Nations with which the United States Have Not Made Treaties.”⁹ The message offered a brief, though relatively well-informed, account of Korea, including its politics, industry, commerce, language, religion, and culture. Despite the often racist and arrogant American disposition towards Asia at the time, the report speaks highly of the Koreans: “The upper class of the Coreans are highly educated, and they have a rich indigenous literature of their own.” The account of Korea concludes by mentioning the work of the French, who were significant to this operation as the only Western country to be involved in Korea. French priests had sent missions to Korea since the early 1800s, and though Catholicism had been met with skepticism among the lower ranks of society, it was largely welcomed by the intellectual class. Buchanan, going on the basis of French reports, stated that the French missionaries had been “successful in making many converts” and that the Korean upper class seemed “only to be waiting for the moment when they will be free to declare in [Christianity’s] favor.”¹⁰ Buchanan neglected to mention however, intentionally or unknowingly, that the French missionaries had suffered a number of persecutions in the largely anti-Christian Korea, most notably the execution of three French missionaries in 1839.¹¹

⁸ Hendrik Hamel, *Hamel's Journal: And a Description of the Kingdom of Korea, 1653-1666* (Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch, 2005).

⁹ U.S. House of Representatives, Letter from the Secretary of State Relative to the Productions, Trade, and Commerce of the Oriental Nations with which the United States Have Not Made Treaties, 29th Congress, 2nd sess., H. Doc. 96, Serial 500.

¹⁰ U.S. House of Representatives, “Oriental Nations,” 34.

¹¹ Hulbert, “Enfranchisement,” 708-09. Hulbert goes on to state, “France, beyond sending threatening letters, did nothing by way of reprisal, and this naturally gave Korea a false sense of security, for she thought that what France did not do she could not do.”

The Korean Expedition was put off for another thirteen years due to more significant matters, and then again for another five years due to the American Civil War, 1861-1865. Events picked up again in 1866 when the recently instated regent, King Taewongun, attempted to purge Korea of Christianity, executing nine French missionaries and killing approximately 8,000 Christian converts.¹² French officials demanded retaliatory action in defense of the other 500 French missionaries in Korea, and under the command of Rear Admiral Gustav Roze, a French expedition set forth for Korean shores.¹³ Before leaving China, a French foreign minister accompanying Roze sent an offer to the U.S. Consul in Peking for a Franco-American joint expedition, but it was declined. At the same time, Secretary of State William H. Seward had been planning a “power demonstration” off the coast of Korea, and attempted to coordinate such a joint expedition with a French ambassador in Washington, but Seward lacked public support, and neither men held the authority to order such an expedition.¹⁴

Admiral Roze reached Korean waters and immediately realized the need for more men, quickly turning around and sailing back to China to regroup and rearm. The Koreans, now warned of an impending attack, built up their defenses and prepared for the French expedition. When Roze returned, he sent a landing party of 450 men ashore on the island of Ganghwa, roughly twelve miles north of Inchon and twenty-seven miles west of Seoul, the Korean capital.¹⁵ The French forces assaulted Ganghwa City successfully, causing the Koreans to flee. The French spent the next 10 days looting the city of valuables while Taewongun assembled 10,000 troops across the river on the Korean mainland. Roze heard rumors of a Korean force landing on the southern tip of the island soon after and sent a

¹² Ibid., 710. Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 58. While Hulbert claims up to 10,000 converts were killed in the years following the French Expedition, Boot claims some 8,000 were killed before the expedition occurred. It is unclear whether they are speaking of the same incident, but it would make sense that converts would be killed *en masse* during the regent’s eradication campaign, which for the most part took place before Admiral Roze’s expedition.

¹³ Hulbert, “Enfranchisement,” 710.

¹⁴ Boleslaw Szczesniak, “Letters of Homer Crane Blake Concerning His Naval Expedition to China, Japan and Korea: 1869-1872,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 13, no. 1/2 (1957): 7. Sterner, *Shinmiyangyo*, 8.

¹⁵ Spelling varies among Western sources, but I have chosen to use “Ganghwa,” as it most closely resembles the phonetic pronunciation of the island’s name.

probing detachment. The detachment was attacked, routed, and the French troops set fire to Gangwha City and retreated to their ships immediately.¹⁶ The French fleet promptly sailed for home, cementing the Koreans' perception of superiority against the Western foe, this time not just in words, but in deeds.¹⁷

While Roze was making his way towards Korea, an international crisis occurred that dragged the United States into Korean affairs and gave Seward the support he needed for an American mission into Korea. In 1865, W. B. Preston bought the USS *General Sherman*, formerly the Confederate ship *Princess Royal*, and chartered the ship to a British trade company in China. The ship set out for Korea in the interest of opening trade in 1866, manned by a small number of Americans, along with Chinese, Malaysian, and Portuguese merchants.¹⁸ The ship sailed up a Korean river near Pyongyang, and after reaching out to the Koreans, received a prompt and polite response dictating that Korea did not trade with foreigners and to continue on to other regions. Instead of doing as asked, the *General Sherman* continued to sail up river, whereby the change in the tide essentially rendered the ship temporarily trapped. A Korean minister, Yi Hong-Ik, sent a message to the ship declaring that they had disobeyed his request and he must now notify the king. The ship later invited Yi back, whereby they kidnapped him, perhaps for a token of leverage should their lives become endangered, or simply as an act of aggressive posturing to deter the Korean government from any intervention.¹⁹

On August 31 1866, the *General Sherman* took another step towards aggression by firing upon a crowd of Korean soldiers and civilians on shore unprovoked, initiating a minor weeklong battle where civilians on shore threw rocks and soldiers attempted to set flaming "turtle boats" on a collision course with the ship. Finally, after numerous attempts, the soldiers succeeded and the *General Sherman* caught fire, killing most of the crew. The few survivors who made it to shore were beaten to death.²⁰ The fate of the crew remained a mystery to most Americans for a time,

¹⁶ Sterner, *Shinmiyangyo*, 13.

¹⁷ Hulbert, "Enfranchisement," 710. Sterner, *Shinmiyangyo*, 11-13.

¹⁸ There are many conflicting accounts of how many Americans were actually on board. Many accounts from the time imply the entire crew was American, but Szczesniak claims that the Americans numbered eight, while Sterner and Paullin both put the number at four.

¹⁹ Sterner, "Shinmiyangyo," 9-10.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 11. Later records from the U.S. Naval Archives indicate that the *General Sherman* may in fact have returned to the United States in 1868 and been placed back in service, though to date this mystery remains unsolved.

with the only accounts of its disappearance stating that the crew was mercilessly attacked and killed, a misconception that lasted for many years to come.²¹ Interestingly, while the *General Sherman* incident came to light in America and served as one of the primary causes behind the Korean expedition, almost no attention was paid by journalists to the case of the American ship *Surprise*, whose crew also wrecked off the Korean coast in June of 1866 and was subsequently rescued by locals, who then gave the men provisions and transported them north to China. The consideration of this fact perhaps would have led to a much milder picture of the Hermit Kingdom, but public uproar due to misinformed yellow journalism pushed the government to act for justice.

In January 1867, the USS *Wachusetts*, commanded by Commander Robert Shufeldt, arrived in Korean waters to investigate the disappearance of the *General Sherman*. Shufeldt sent a letter to the king inquiring as to the fate of the American vessel, but was told by a local minister that he possessed no knowledge of the ship. However, Shufeldt collected information from locals, and learned that the ship had indeed been burned, with its entire crew killed. Shufeldt then returned to China with this report, which fueled the wild public speculation of the *General Sherman* incident. In early 1868, an American minister was contacted by Catholic Korean priests in China, who reported that the *General Sherman*'s crew scuffled with locals while trying to protect Korean women, and then returned to the ship with two Korean officers, and were attacked and killed.²² The priests also mentioned possible survivors of the wreck in Korea, and subsequently the USS *Shenandoah*, under Commander John Febiger, was sent back to Korea to investigate this claim. Febiger reached Korea and came into contact with local authorities, including a Korean minister who carried the king's response to Shufeldt's earlier letter. In this message, the king offered the true account of the *General Sherman* incident, in which the crew were portrayed as the aggressors, though very little faith was placed in this account at the time.

What may be most remarkable about the investigation in retrospect is that, as Febiger sent some of his ships ahead to make

²¹ Hulbert, “Enfranchisement,” 710. Carolyn A. Tyson, *Marine Amphibious Landing in Korea, 1871* (Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Foundation, 1966), 3. As Hulbert states, “The natural result was that the officers and crew were all massacred by the mob.” Tyson also asserts that “brutal treatment accorded foreigners who were shipwrecked off [Korea's] coast” was commonplace.

²² U.S. House of Representatives, Message of the President of the United States and Accompanying Documents to the Two Houses of Congress at the Commencement of the Third Session of the Forty-First Congress, 41st Congress, 3rd sess., H. Doc. 1, Serial 1447, 336.

soundings of the waters (the only maps available at the time were very meager ones drawn by the French), one of his ships was fired upon by a Korean fortress. The ship was not hit, and returned unharmed to the fleet, which made its way back to China. The incident earned only a few sentences in the day's logs. However, the next time this occurred, it would promptly lead to war.²³

III. 30 May – 9 June 1871

Saturday night, May 20th We arrived yesterday evening at our present anchorage, which is about fifty miles from our destination, the high wind preventing us from approaching the land nearer then, and the fog today requiring us to remain as we are, with 360 feet of chain out. We are all quite jolly, and every day the crews of our fleet are exercised in the Infantry drill & firing with small arms. Some months ago a Schooner came up here to trade, and the natives are said to have cut them up, and pickled them, took them in the interior and set them up as curiosities! The French came

3 years ago to avenge their priests, who had been murdered, when they skinned a French doctor, and crucified him on the beach under the eyes of the Frenchmen who had been driven off, and who were unable to help their friends. Whether this is positively true or not I can't say; but you may imagine it is not with great pleasure I anticipate landing with the small force we have, against a populous country containing 10,000,000 of savages! My dear Nan will not read the above until our Expedition is at an end, else I am afraid it would scare her . . . as I read it over it does appear rather steep . . . Affectionately yours, McLane Tilton²⁴

In the speculation of the *General Sherman* incident, many were outraged, and the United States government immediately saw fit to send an expedition to Korea. Officially, the purpose of the expedition was to secure a treaty ensuring humane treatment of sailors shipwrecked in Korean waters. However, in retrospect, some of the earliest notes of a

²³ Charles O. Paullin, "The Opening of Korea by Commodore Shufeldt," *Political Science Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (1910): 471-473. Szczesniak, "Letters," 5-6.

²⁴ Letter, Wood and Hilliard, May 20, 1871, "McLane Tilton Papers."

growing American expansionism were visible, as can be seen in the orders given to Frederick Low, the American minister to China: “Should the opportunity seem favorable for obtaining commercial advantages in Korea, the proposed treaty should include provisions to that effect.”²⁵ Low was provided with copies of the American treaties with Japan as proper examples of what a Korean treaty should look like. This was appropriate, as Low would be working directly with Rear Admiral John Rodgers, commander of the Asiatic Squadron at the time, aboard the USS *Colorado*. Rodgers was coincidentally the nephew-in-law of Commodore Matthew Perry, who had so famously “opened” Japan to the West by his show of naval strength in Yokohama in 1854.²⁶ Rodgers openly emulated Perry’s work and hoped to mirror his uncle-in-law’s success in this new expedition. In fact, the expedition almost entirely occurred due to the push of Commodore Shufeldt, Rodgers’s senior, who also sought to be responsible for “opening the hermit kingdom” as a matter of fame and reputation.²⁷

However, evidence now suggests that many did not believe the expedition would succeed on its mission, including some men aboard the ships.²⁸ One of the mission’s most notable skeptics was geographer and anthropologist Walter Grinnell, who had declared his doubt of the expedition from its inception. Grinnell’s thoughts are especially significant, for he had journeyed through China and northern Korea on his own in 1871, and offered one of the most thorough accounts of the country available at the time. As Grinnell stated:

That the efforts of this country, now being made through Admiral Rodgers and Mr. Low, our Chinese minister, will prove more successful [than the French and Russian attempts], I greatly doubt. Suppose we appear off the coast with a powerful fleet and succeed in landing, we have no power to assure, our communications or of

²⁵ U.S. Congress, “Message of the President and Accompanying Documents,” 334.

²⁶ Boot, *Savage Wars of Peace*, 57-58. “One of [Commodore] John Rodgers Sr.’s sisters married the brother of Commodores Oliver Hazard Perry and Matthew C. Perry.”

²⁷ Lawrence H. Battistini, “The Korean Problem in the Nineteenth Century,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 8, no. 1/2 (1952): 51. As Battistini states, “Actually neither Evarts nor President Hayes had any interest in Korea, and the initiative for treaty negotiations with that country came entirely from Shufeldt, who was motivated by his own ambition for fame and the sincere belief that the treaty would redound to the advantage of the United States.”

²⁸ Letter, Wood and Hilliard, May 16, 1871, “McLane Tilton Papers.”

reaching the government at Livori, neither can we force the officials of the capital to come to our ships and to treat with us... We cannot force the government into receiving us, by bombarding a few harmless fishing villages... No, if we wish to sell our gray shirtings and our repeating rifles, if we covet her gold, her copper and her coal, and if we think her advantageous to swallow, we shall have to go to Sioori [Seoul], and to tell the Emperor so, in his own palace; and to do that we should have at least 10,000 soldiers for our traveling companions.²⁹

He also recognizes the political ambitions of the naval officers behind the expedition, as he mentions the United States' opening of Japan to Western trade. Grinnell, however, cites diplomacy and not naval strength as the key to opening Japan: "The opening of Japan was by no means an analogous case. Our triumph there was due to the personal courage, persistency and diplomatic adaptation of circumstances of our minister, Mr. Townsend Harris." Grinnell's insight would have proven invaluable to the expedition, but unfortunately, his article was not published until the following year, though it is highly questionable as to whether or not any leaders would have subdued their own hubris and heeded his advice.

On May 30, 1871, Rodgers's fleet arrived on the Salée River, only miles from the island of Ganghwa. The next day, the USS *Colorado* received Korean government officials of middle-rank, who were told by Frederick Low's subordinates that the minister would only speak to high-ranking officials who had the authority to negotiate treaties.³⁰ The Americans then stated to the Korean officials that they would be sending out a surveying party up the river, to sound the waterway. Korean officials received this information, but, perhaps offended by the discourteousness of their foreign visitor, neglected to explain to the Americans the strategic importance of the river and the subsequent level of security on it. A number of forts were manned along the shores of Gangwha, watching the waterway in hopes of defending Korea from any foreign incursion such as the French Expedition in 1866. Rodgers, however, ignorant of this fact, sent his small surveying party upriver on June 1.

²⁹ Walton Grinnell, "Journey through Eastern Mantchooria and Korea," *Journal of the American Geographical Society of New York* 3 (1872): 291-92.

³⁰ Tyson, "Korea, 1871," 3-4. U.S. House of Representatives, Report of the Secretary of the Navy, 42nd Congress, 2nd sess., H. Doc. 1, Serial 1507, 12.

As the party neared Gangwha, it was suddenly subjected to a barrage of cannon fire from the coastal fortifications. The ships struggled at first, but managed to return fire, eventually silencing the forts and returning to their squadron. When the smoke had cleared, two Americans were wounded, namely from operating their own cannons. Rodgers, finding this “insult” to the flag intolerable, began preparing his men for an amphibious landing on the next morning. However, he then decided to wait, giving the Korean government a ten-day period to offer an official apology. While many documents cite the unfavorable tides as the reason for Rodgers’s change of heart, one may also speculate that his role as not only a naval officer but also as an American diplomat factored into his thinking. Considering how much U.S. military action depended upon public opinion, Rodgers could have very likely considered the ten-day grace period not only as time for preparation, but as benevolent terms for peace on his part, a major factor in the Western *jus ad bellum*. The United States, especially given its democratic identity, has a long tradition of maintaining its image as the benevolent party in every conflict, particularly in the event of military action. Considering the American public’s general opinion at the time that Koreans (and all Asians, for that matter) were inferior and barbaric, it is very possible that Rodgers made this diplomatic move in order to bolster his own appearance and the United States’ image as the benevolent, superior, and civilized Westerner.

Rodgers and Low waited patiently for ten days, preparing for an ultimate assault on the island, while receiving no “official” apology. As the congressional report states, “no movement was made by Admiral Rodgers, nor was any explanation offered by the Coreans.”³¹ To the contrary, there was indeed an explanation offered as to why the ships were fired upon. When Low explained to a local Korean officer the demand for an official apology, the officer regretted the incident, but defended the actions of the forts, stating that Korean law forbade any foreign ship from passing through a “barrier of defense,” such as was found on the Salée.³² In the officer’s report to the king, he notes that not even Korean ships may pass through the strategically vital point without appropriate papers. The officer also sent a conciliatory gift of chickens to Rodgers, but the Rear Admiral refused it. To make matters even sorer for the American diplomats, the Korean king did send an official letter to them during this ten-day period, simply stating that he did not want to make any treaties,

³¹ Ibid., 12.

³² Paullin, “Opening of Korea,” 475.

and disputing their claims of Korean barbarism towards shipwrecked crews. Low, however, never responded.³³

IV. 10 – 21 June 1871

At anchor, near
Boisée I'd, Salée River, Korea
My Dear Nan,

4th of June 1871

We are all as hearty as bucks, and full of having a bang at the Koreans before very long...I was not with the [surveying] party, but you may be sure we all will be, when we make our next advance up the river, which we probably will very soon, and give them a good drubbing too, for firing upon our little vessels, without giving any warning. Indeed the people we have communicated with, altho' they did not say they would not fire upon us, should we continue up the River, let us infer they wouldn't, and we were obliged to return their fire to maintain a dignified position...Today we got a communication from the Head Man at the fort referred to, who stated that when Capt. Febinger of our Navy came up here, he did not make war on them, and didn't see why we wanted to come so far to make a treaty. They had been living 4000 years they said, without any treaty with us, and of course they couldn't see why they shouldn't continue to live as they do! Now I hope and trust my precious you won't go and get anxious, as we are quite able...and the next letter will tell you how we shelled them out and kicked their mud forts down the hill! . . . Most affectionately, Your husband,
McLane Tilton³⁴

At 1000 hours on Saturday, June 10, 1871, Commander Homer Crane Blake ordered Commander Lewis A. Kimberly's landing force of 451 Seabees under Lieutenant Commander Silas Casey and 100 Marines under Captain McLane Tilton ashore the island of Gangwha. The landing itself proved to be the most difficult obstacle of the day, as the men were forced to debark the ships far from shore due to low tides that presented a treacherous mud flat. Men persevered through the thick muck, dragging with them seven twelve-pound guns. Ordinary Seaman John Andrews later received the Medal of Honor, the first in American history for action

³³ *Ibid.*, 475; Tyson, "Korea, 1871," 4.

³⁴ Letter, Wood and Hilliard, June 4, 1871, "McLane Tilton Papers."

against an enemy of the United States, for directing the landing party and remaining calm as cannon shells landed around him.³⁵

As they made their way to solid ground, the assault began on “Fort Duconde,” the first of five forts. The Marines were assembled into skirmishing parties, and assaulted the fort after it sustained a short bombardment from American naval and land artillery. The Koreans defending the fort put up a very brief fight before fleeing, leaving the fort to be occupied by the Americans without the loss of a single man. The party sacked the fort, destroying the Koreans’ crude cannons and “Jingall” guns, before continuing on to the next fort, named the “Marine Redoubt.” The same order of events occurred, and the party again sacked the fort without losing a single man.

The landing party made its encampment for the night on the high inland ground above the forts, with the naval squadron anchored just off shore. At 0400 on Sunday, June 11, 1871, the assault continued north, where it easily subdued two more minor forts with the same results. As the marines and sailors regrouped their forces, they stood in the shadow of Fort Kwangsongbo, which they referred to as “The Citadel.” The fort was obviously the biggest of the five, and stood situated at the natural chokepoint of the river. As the Marines formed up for the assault, they took cover on the opposing slope of a large hill. In order to assault the fort, they would have to charge down the other side of the hill into a small valley and up another hill, on top of which the fort stood. When the Seabees had concluded forming up their ranks behind the skirmishing force and the ships were in position, the naval bombardment of the Kwangsongbo began, battering the fort while the American forces charged down the hill under heavy Korean fire and into the valley. The men regrouped in the valley under the Citadel, and the naval guns subsided.

When the force was prepared again, the artillery began a brief bombardment to further soften the objective, while the Koreans continued to lay down extreme suppressive fire. Among the defenders of the fort were the storied “Tiger Hunters,” members of an elite unit which required one to singlehandedly kill a tiger to be included, and who had also made oaths to die before letting any foreign power invade.³⁶ As the artillery stopped, the Koreans let out a rising war cry of horns, moans, and metal, frightening many of the battle-ready Americans. The order to attack quickly came thereafter, and the men began the assault of the Citadel, with

³⁵ Sterner, *Shinmiyangyo*, 19-20. Tyson, “Korea, 1871,” 5.

³⁶ Richard K. Kolb, “‘Tiger Hunt’ in Korea: during the 1871 Weekend War in Korea, Fierce ‘Tiger Hunters’ Defended the Hermit Kingdom to the Bitter End, Earning the Respect of Hardened U.S. Marines and Sailors,” *VFW Magazine*, March 2000: 38.

Marine Lieutenant Hugh McKee at the lead of the uphill charge. The Koreans mercilessly poured down lead at the charging Americans, but as the assaulting party neared the fortress walls, the Koreans were stuck reloading their guns, giving the Americans the brief respite in fire they needed to invade the fort.³⁷ The Koreans, however, did not let this technical misfortune slow them down – many resorted to desperately throwing rocks down on the heads of Americans, but this was not enough to prevent the assault.

As McKee climbed the wall, he was wounded by a Korean spear, and in continuing to push into the fort, was shot in the groin, and later died uttering the words, “Tell the dear beloved ones at home that my last prayer is for them.”³⁸ Three men would later receive the Medal of Honor for defending McKee throughout the attack so that he could be transported to medical facilities on the ships. Americans poured over the fort walls, engaging in desperate hand-to-hand combat against the Korean soldiers, who utilized swords, spears, and used their guns as clubs. Another recipient of the Medal of Honor, Landsman William Lukes, suffered from eighteen sword and spear wounds from the fight, such was the brutality of the fighting and the tenacity of both sides involved. The superior technology of the American military at this point was rendered useless, as much of the fighting relied solely on each man’s personal ability.³⁹

Marine Private James Dougherty, amid the fighting inside the fort, sought out and killed the Korean commander, who turned out to be the commanding general of Korea’s military, an action for which he received the Medal of Honor. Private Hugh Purvis and Corporal Charles Brown then succeeded in capturing the Korean colors (which demarked the Korean character for “generalissimo”), and McLane Tilton assisted them in raising the American flag, the first time it was raised in a foreign country.⁴⁰

³⁷ Szczesniak, Boleslaw. "Letters of Homer Crane Blake Concerning His Naval Expedition to China, Japan and Korea: 1869-1872 (2)." *Monumenta Nipponica* 13, no. 3/4 (1958): 318.

³⁸ Sterner, “Shinmiyangyo,” 29. Author’s Note: The Medal of Honor was, at the time, the only award given for bravery in battle. Also, it was only accorded to enlisted men; otherwise Lieutenant McKee most certainly would have received it for claiming the distinction of leading the charge.

³⁹ Tyson, “Korea, 1871,” 21. Captain Tilton included in his official report of the battle that he noticed many misfires among American rifles, and upon further investigation, found that faulty paper ammunition boxes had led to a mere 30-40% success rate in firing.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 20. The Korean flag was brought back to the United States and remains on display in the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, MD today. Recently, North Korea has expressed its desire for the flag’s return, and U.S. senators have

When the fighting ended after a few hours, the Americans had lost three men and ten wounded in the fighting, as well as one man who died of illness, while the Koreans had suffered a loss of 240 to 300 men between the bombardments and the assault. The Americans occupied the fort for the rest of the day, administering aid to wounded Koreans and taking tallies of the battle. In the two days of the land expedition, American forces had destroyed a total of 481 enemy cannons. The next morning the Americans embarked their ships, where they waited uneventfully for ten more days before departing Korea and returning to China.

V. Effects of the Campaign

US Ship “Colorado” off Isle Boisé, Corea, Asia

My dearest Nannie

June 21st, 1871

My last letter, No. 13, gave you an account of the firing upon our launches from the Korean forts in the Salée River, whilst engaged in making soundings. I suppose you have all been very anxious about us since, as no doubt the papers have been filled with all sorts of dreadful prophecies in regard to the affair. I am glad to say I am alive still and kicking, although at one time I never expected to see my Wife and baby any more, and if it hadn't been that the Coreans can't shoot true, I never should. It is all over now, and as I expected, we have failed to make any treaty with the Coreans. The local authorities near us return all our communications sent on shore to be forwarded to their King, and our Expedition so far as a treaty goes has turned out to be fruitless. We have not force enough to go to their Capital in the interior even if our government directed us to do so. The Country is beautiful; filled with lovely hills & valleys running in every direction and cultivated with grain of all kinds which even now is turning to the colors indicating ripening. Everything is pretty and green, and the little thatched villages are snugly built in little nooks, surrounded by pines & other evergreens. We had a dreadful time on our Expedition. The Corean soldiers fought like tigers, having been told by the King if they lost the place the heads of every body on Kang Hoa

suggested a trade, as North Korea also maintains the only surviving captured U.S. warship, captured during the Vietnam War. See *Pueblo Chieftain* (Colo.) article, April 20, 2007.

Island on which the forts stood, should be cut off. Poor Lieut. McKee who was such a beau at the Naval School was killed. I and one of my Corporals & one of the Marines of the "Alaska" captured the big yellow flag that flew over the fort...so you will no doubt feel glad that your old man gets a little credit without a hole through his skin, which by the by is about the color of a roasted chestnut at this present writing...I don't think any of us will be in any more danger during the cruise. As for me I am quite satisfied, "I have not lost no Coreans", and "I ain't alooking for none neither"- I want to go home! The way the "gingall" or match-lock bullets whizzed was a caution to all those innocents engaged in war. My precious girl I am one of those innocents, and I dont want to engage in any more sick business. We will leave here before long going across to Cheefoo, on the China Coast, from thence to Yokohama so when you get this you may rest assured that none of us are to lose our skins. . . . Affectionately McLane Tilton⁴¹

The expedition had a very significant impact not only on American-Korean relations for some years to come, but on American foreign policy as well. To be sure, the expedition succeeded in its military objective, but failed miserably in its overall political objectives. American diplomacy, in seeking a treaty with Korea to protect shipwrecked sailors and open trade, served only to sour Korean-American relations in their very first political contact with the country. And although the Americans succeeded militarily, they made the same fatal decision as the French had nearly five years earlier by failing to follow up their success with any further action. By retreating from Korean waters, the American expedition left in the Koreans the deeply-rooted conviction that it had scared off yet another of the Western powers. The Korean people, after the battle and even still today, often view the battle as a defiant and heroic "last stand" against foreign aggression.

Immediately after the Americans departed, the Korean king ordered signs to be posted around the country declaring, "The barbarians from beyond the seas have violated our borders and invaded our land! Should we not fight, accord must be made! Those who favor making a treaty betray their country!" In fact, Korea officially remained in a state of

⁴¹ Letter, Wood and Hilliard, June 21, 1871, "McLane Tilton Papers."

war with the United States for ten more years.⁴² Korean rhetoric raged, as seen in a proclamation of the king in 1871: “The smoke and dust of the vessels of Westerners cover the world with darkness, but the great light of the East enlightens it throughout eternity!” In a letter to Japanese delegates in 1872, the king’s government wrote, “We, Koreans, are a small country, but yet we have the courage to put into writing to you that Western barbarians are beasts. The above is intended as a direct insult to you and your allies-the barbarians.”⁴³ American rhetoric related the war just as passionately and nationalistically, with titles such as “Our Little War with the Heathen,” relating the Americans’ “Speedy and Effective Punishment of the Barbarians” in response to their “Treacherous Attack.”⁴⁴

Both sides viewed the encounter as a great victory, but in essence, both sides were the vanquished rather than the victors. Most of the journalism and even congressional reports on the expedition focused solely on the military expedition, perhaps intentionally seeking to place emphasis on the United States’ short-term success over its long-term failure. In the end, however, the prophecies of Tilton and Grinnell came true. As one reporter later critically declared, the U.S. government “sent a force altogether too large for the delivery of the message of peace and too small for the prosecution of war.”⁴⁵

Fortunately for the United States, a regime change in Korea brought with it a change of Korean foreign policy, and the Korean government initiated contact with the United States in the interest of a trade agreement in 1883. This time, however, American diplomacy seemed to have learned a lesson, arriving in Korea by raising the Korean flag and offering up a twenty-one gun salute. Commodore Shufeldt’s wishes were granted, but not without some hard work of his own mending misunderstandings from the 1871 expedition.⁴⁶ Trade negotiations were successful, and in 1885 the United States built an embassy in Seoul, and

⁴² Gordon H. Chang, “Whose ‘Barbarism’? Whose ‘Treachery’? Race and Civilization in the Unknown United States-Korea War of 1871,” *Journal of American History* 89, no. 4 (2003): 1361. Tyson, “Korea, 1871,” 3.

⁴³ Chang, “Race and Civilization,” 1361. Battistini, “The Korean Problem,”

47. Author’s Note: Chang also incorrectly translates the Korean term for the war, *Shinmiyangyo*, to mean “the barbarian incursion of 1871,” when in fact it simply means “the invasion (*yangyo*) of 1871 (*shinmi*).

⁴⁴ See *The New York Times*: July 17, 1871, August 23, 1871.

⁴⁵ Sterner, *Shinmiyangyo*, 30. Tyson, “Korea, 1871,” 7.

⁴⁶ See Battistini, “The Korean Problem;” Hulbert, “The Opening of Korea,” and Chang, “Race and Civilization,” for detailed accounts of Commodore Shufeldt’s efforts in opening trade between Korea and the United States.

also committed U.S. military advisors to help train the Korean Army upon their request.⁴⁷

Conclusion

The 1871 Korean Expedition is little known to most people, as it pales steeply in statistics and scale when compared to other more major- scale conflicts in American history. However, in the study of American military history as well as foreign policy, it presents a number of important lessons that should not be overlooked, regardless of the conflict's small- scale standing with a "hot" duration of two days and a casualty count of only fourteen men. Most importantly, the expedition marks a significant shift in the military strategy of the United States from continentalism to expansionism. While the navy had been landing sailors and marines abroad repeatedly in the "protection of American citizens and interests," this was among the first landing made with direct hostile intent against another sovereign nation. The United States government had begun to commit itself to a "roaming navy," capable of protecting American interests all over the globe, and Korea was one of the earliest examples of that theory in practice. This ideology remains an essential factor of American military strategy and foreign policy today, and as such, its earliest implementation in the "Forgotten 'Weekend War,'" successes and failures alike, deserves a much higher degree of attention from any serious diplomat, scholar, soldier, or student all the same.

⁴⁷ U.S. House of Representatives, Message from the President of the United States Transmitting a Communication from the Secretary of State Relative to the Desire of the Government of Corea to Obtain One or More Officers of the United States as Military Instructors in that Country, 48th Congress, 2nd sess., H. Doc. 163, Serial 2302.