

CHAPTER 20 Korea, the war that was never properly declared or concluded

When 75,000 troops from the Soviet-backed Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the north of the peninsula poured over the 38th parallel dividing north and south on 25 June 1950, the first military action of the 'Cold War' commenced. In broader terms, the invasion of the pro-Western Republic of Korea represented a conflict between international communism and the west. A multi-national military force, the United Nations Command (UNC), was dispatched to the Korean peninsula in response to North Korea's act of aggression, which was regarded as a violation of the principles enshrined in the Charter of the world body. This military intervention was classified as a UN-led 'police action', and hence was not preceded by any declaration of war.

Given that the Korean situation in 1950 was seen in the west as a microcosm of a worldwide ideological conflict, it was taken seriously, and volunteers from western countries came forward to support the military effort against the communist north. Appointed by the UN to lead the military response to the North Korean incursion, the United States provided the bulk of the funding and most of troops. Years before, the Korean peninsula had been invaded by the Japanese, and after the surrender of Japan in August 1945, Korea was divided between the north, controlled by the Soviet Union, and America, responsible for the south.

In August 1950 the South African Government made no. 2 Squadron of the South African Air Force (SAAF) available to the United Nations as a contribution to the Allied war effort against communist North Korea. *South Africa's Flying Cheetah's in Korea* by Dermot Moore and Peter Bagshawe describes many of the actions by the SAAF's no. 2 Squadron between 1950 and 1953.

The North Korean invasion had triggered a regional conflict in which ideologically opposed world powers such as The People's Republic of China, established in 1949, and the United States of America, took sides along communist versus pro-capitalist lines. US troops had crossed the 38th parallel into northern Korea, but eventually retreated back to that point, still the official boundary between North and South Korea today. The military situation developed into a stalemate, followed eventually by an armistice some three years after the conflict began.

The Korean Armistice Agreement was signed by the warring parties in July, 1953. This was not a peace agreement as such, but rather a cessation of hostilities pending further agreements, and approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations. Participating nations failed, however, to arrive at any firm proposals or declarations of a peace agreement at the Geneva Conference which followed in 1954. Consequently the terms of the Armistice Agreement had to remain in force until a proper agreement was arrived at – something that proved elusive over the ensuing decades. North Korea attempted in 2013 to withdraw from the long-standing Armistice Agreement, but this was rejected by the UN. Tensions between North and South Korea have continued to the present day – one of the consequences of the conflict of 1950-1953 having never been satisfactorily concluded.