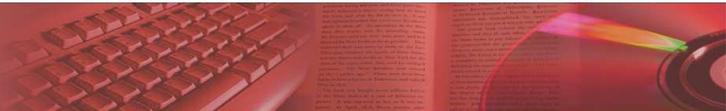


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**S. P. MacKenzie.** *The Imjin and Kapyong Battles, Korea, 1951.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. xii + 292 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-00908-1.

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**Published on** H-War (January, 2015)

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In April 1951, British and Commonwealth (Australia, New Zealand, Canada) troops engaged the Chinese along the Imjin and Kapyong Rivers near the 38th parallel of the Korean front. Commonwealth forces established blocking positions on the high ground of the Kapyong Valley to thwart the southerly Chinese advance. An almost exclusively British regiment attempted to block the Chinese advance south along Route 11 on the Imjin River. Since 1951 the Imjin and Kapyong battles have become prominent markers of national military cultures and collective memories about the Korean War in Canada, Australia, and Great Britain. Historian S. P. MacKenzie of the University of South Carolina offers an in-depth tactical analysis of the two battles with specific attention to how leadership, terrain, unit training, intelligence, soldiers' morale, and enemy behavior influenced the course of each engagement.

MacKenzie notes that few historians have previously explained British, Canadian, and Australian efforts at Imjin and Kapyong. Those that do exist, he acknowledges, approach the battles from a nationalistic stance by lionizing one side at the expense of the other. For example, Commonwealth historians contend that because Australians and Canadians sustained fewer casualties at Kapyong than the British suffered at Imjin demonstrates the superiority of Commonwealth fighting effectiveness, vigor, morale, and training. Most current understandings and explanations of the battles derive from war museums, military cultures, and national narratives that shape collective memory about the Korean War in all three countries.

Throughout the volume, MacKenzie discerns why the

British 29th Independent Infantry Brigade sustained far more casualties than its Australian and Canadian counterparts at Kapyong. A sizable portion of British casualties came from the 1st Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment which suffered heavy casualties after the Chinese People's Volunteer Army pinched the salient and surrounded their defensive positions. The Glosters who survived four days of intense fighting became prisoners of war. Other regiments including the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers and the Royal Ulster Rifles sustained heavy casualties during the fighting. MacKenzie essentially argues that a perfect storm of factors coalesced at Imjin—poor intelligence, vacillating and complacent Corps and Division leadership, environmental factors, Chinese chicanery and stealth, and malfunctioning equipment—that made possible severe British losses. He concludes that there was no single decision or individual commander to hold responsible for what went wrong [among the British]. In some respects those who fought at Kapyong were simply luckier than their counterparts on the Imjin (p. 222).

A prologue and conclusion convey much of MacKenzie's explicitly analytical work, while he divides the rest of the volume into two parts that cover the day-by-day actions that occurred on the Imjin and at Kapyong. This structure allows MacKenzie to create a fluid narrative of events that judiciously draws on the diaries and memoirs of veterans to convey the fear, bloodshed, courage, cowardice, and contingencies that men experienced in the moment.

MacKenzie's incisive commentary on soldiers' vacillating morale during the two battles comes across clearly

throughout the volume. Here MacKenzie challenges previous arguments about why the British suffered far more casualties at Imjin than the Canadians and Australians at Kapyong—namely that the British deployed conscripts and recalled disgruntled reservists who collectively degraded the[ir] fighting quality—while the Canadians and Australians relied on ideologically committed volunteers (p. 16). As MacKenzie notes, these previous histories assume that low morale equated with poor fighting effectiveness (i.e., far more shirkers, insubordination, and chaotic retreat). To be sure, MacKenzie finds that most British reservists became disillusioned and bitter because they had less than six weeks until the end of reserve obligation. That the men left well-paying careers, had served time during the Second World War, and jeopardized their family's financial security only added to their anger. But the reservists brought with them the intangible lived experiences of combat between 1941 and 1945 and were (mostly) inured to the chaos and violence of battle. That would allow the British, especially the Glosters, to press on against overwhelming odds and high casualty rates.

The Australian and Canadian volunteers, on the other hand, suffered from the same morale problems often attributed to the British conscripts and reservists. MacKenzie suggests that few volunteers held profound ideological commitments to the war—few, in fact, knew where Korea was on a world map. “Personal commitment” and not “philosophical commitment” convinced men, irrespective of nation, to enlist in the armed forces (p. 20). Commonwealth men escaped poverty, boredom, found meaningful employment, sought out adventure, wanted to prove themselves as men. MacKenzie demonstrates that Commonwealth men held no special affinity for the

Korean people or their plight—their motives—were usually personal in nature, and the mere fact of signing on did not guarantee a better soldier than a reservist or conscript (p. 21). Few problem soldiers actually witnessed combat as Commonwealth and British armies successfully winnowed out the physically and behaviorally unfit. The problem that degraded fighting capabilities among the UN forces was a foolish aura of complacency caused by overconfidence—a false sense of security that led Commonwealth and British commanders and soldiers to dismiss Chinese fighting capabilities. Not to mention that faulty wireless radios that operated sporadically in the rugged, mountainous terrain of central Korea further hamstrung communications between infantry, mortar, and artillery units in the heat of battle.

While MacKenzie crafts a cogent narrative of the battles and offers important insights into morale, motivation, and the perennial question of whether conscripts or volunteers make better soldiers, the author's focus on the minutiae of tactics and troop movements occasionally muddies the important analytical work that he does within each chapter. This is a problem exacerbated by the odd placement of tactical maps with the book's interior plates and photographs. Without the aid of detailed maps in each chapter, most readers who are not well versed in military history (especially tactical histories) will find themselves perplexed, if not completely confused about what took place during the battles. Still, MacKenzie has crafted an excellent history of Imjin and Kapyong that future scholars working in memory studies, Korean War-era military history, and coalition warfare can draw on for important insights.

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**Citation:** Joshua Akers. Review of MacKenzie, S. P., *The Imjin and Kapyong Battles, Korea, 1951*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. January, 2015.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42310>



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