



When Intelligence Made a Difference

— C O L D W A R E R A —

Winning with Intelligence

The Inchon Landing

by Gregory Elder¹

Ever present in military discussions are questions of force composition and force employment in winning battles. Force and its employment are significant in driving outcomes in combat. However, it is operational and tactical intelligence, not necessarily numbers, technology, or tactics that can have the most decisive impact on how forces are employed and how success is achieved in wartime operations. Intelligence can be a force multiplier. Considering the value of force, technology, and mass without placing a corresponding value on intelligence is a mistake. In Korea in 1950, intelligence gave commanders the knowledge of the battlefield (battlespace awareness) and the understanding of their foe to focus allied forces at the right place and time.

Inchon Landing: 15 September 1950

“Intelligence reduces the unknowns that planners must face and forms the basis for both deliberate and crisis action planning,” the *Naval Doctrinal Publication* points out.² In today’s terminology this is “intelligence preparation of the battlespace.” In the case of the amphibious assault at Inchon, an attack that led to the collapse of the North Korean army and the taking of some 125,000 prisoners, intelligence gathering and planning allowed US forces to overcome geographic disadvantages and take the enemy by surprise.

1. This is an edited version of Gregory Elder’s original article that appeared in *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 50, No. 2., 2006. Edited by Peter C. Oleson. https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol50no2/html_files/Intelligence_War_2.htm.

2. NDP2, “Support to Planning.”

On 25 June 1950 four columns of North Korean infantry and tanks under the command of Marshal Choe Yong Gun surprised the world by driving south and pushing South Korean and contingents of US forces to the southeast corner of the Korean peninsula. While winning a series of tactical successes, the North was unable to gain its strategic objective—command of all Korea—and was faced with the proposition of using all its remaining forces against the last allied forces holding the Pusan perimeter.

Through August and into September, the North threw 13 infantry and two armored divisions (98,000 men) at the Allies, necessitating the commitment of all UN reserves. And while the North suffered horrendous casualties, its tenacious attacks and acceptance of losses suggested a stronger force than they had.

General Douglas MacArthur, the supreme allied commander in Korea, considered a major counterstroke to catch Choe’s forces in a net. This would involve a two-pronged attack in which an amphibious landing would be made on the west coast. The amphibious assault was designed to sever Choe’s lines of communication and would be coupled with a break-out from the Pusan perimeter. Two questions, however, had to be answered: (1) Where should the landing occur? and (2) What forces could the enemy bring to bear when it began? The intelligence community set about answering these questions.

After a prototypical Intelligence Preparation of the Battlespace, MacArthur decided that naval forces could dramatically alter the course of the war by seizing Inchon, a major port on Korea’s Yellow Sea coast. Possession of Inchon would enable the allies to recapture a key air base, and mount a major ground offensive on Seoul which would cut off North Korean forces in the south.³

Inchon, however, was not ideal. The 45-mile-long approach from the open ocean to the landing area would be complicated by tides—which caused the water’s depth in the landing area to recede to dangerously low depths—and the proximity of several small islands occupied by North Korean forces. To be successful, the Allies would need to clear the islands, intelligence would need to be collected on water depths, and enemy troop strengths in the surrounding area ascertained. In addition, a forward reconnaissance element would need to be in place to provide eyes and ears to the Marines assigned to the assault. The assignment fell to a Naval Intelligence officer attached to the ROK Navy, LT Eugene Clark.

3. NDP2, “Support to Planning—The Inchon Landing.”

Clark, a veteran of the OSS, recruited local fishermen and partisans for his team. Deployed on the 26th of August, he and his team silenced opposition on most of the islands by 8 September and began a thorough reconnaissance of approaches and Inchon itself.⁴ Particularly crucial to success was the assessment of the depths and advice to planners on where and when to strike.

Clark and a companion measured tides and found that the mud flats initially selected for the attack were not suitable to withstand the weight of fully armed Marines. This critical piece of what today would be known as geospatial intelligence (GEOINT) averted what could have been a disaster, and the landing plans were modified to account for the findings.

Clark and his men also held key positions up to the morning of the attack and lit beacons to guide the lead elements of the assault force. While Clark was providing on-site intelligence, planners were aided by imagery and human intelligence. Aerial photographs and reports from former inhabitants were used in shaping the operational plans for the amphibious task force commander, RADM James Doyle and his staff. Taken with Clark's information, "intelligence helped Admiral Doyle select the best water approach, set the time for the amphibious assaults, and identify the North Korean Army line of communication as a critical vulnerability."⁵

Additionally, the intelligence estimates suggested that the North did not have forces enough in the area to offer significant resistance to the landing or to the recapture of Seoul.⁶

With a full understanding of what he faced, MacArthur told the Joint Chiefs of Staff that he could conduct a successful amphibious operation. Meanwhile, he and his staff developed a concept of operations that would allow for concentration of force, and surprise, against a most vulnerable enemy point.

This comprehensive planning bore fruit on 15 September, when the allied amphibious task force launched its initial assault from the sea. By the 19th, the 1st Marine Division seized the air base at Kimpo and began the assault on Seoul. U.S. Army troops pushed out from the Inchon beachhead and on the 27th linked up with their comrades advancing north from the Pusan perimeter. Two days later, the Marines

captured Seoul. Thus, by skillfully incorporating intelligence into operational planning, in a little more than two weeks, allied forces were able to oust the invaders from the Republic of Korea.⁷

The role of intelligence in the Inchon landing is significant if for no other reason than it showed how central it is to planning a victorious campaign. Intelligence at Inchon was not happenstance, but a conscious and necessary task assigned by leadership; before MacArthur could determine how to employ his forces, he first had to know whether he could attack or not and where he could attack if it was possible. By emphasizing intelligence, MacArthur conducted a masterful offensive and avoided an American Gallipoli.

Conclusion

Battle is a physical activity and requires force. And yet, to speak of force without associating a corresponding value to intelligence is akin to speaking of a boxer without eyes or a brain. Additionally, "employment of force" is hollow without an understanding of where, in what conditions and geography, and against whom to employ force.

Success in the physical act of battle requires well-trained soldiers who are properly equipped, led by strong leadership willing to use force against a clear objective, employing it correctly and sacrificing when necessary. But it also requires foresight, analysis, eyes and ears, and the development of a playbook on how to win—it takes intelligence. Therefore, just as historian John Keegan correctly states that "Knowledge of what the enemy can do and of what he intends is never enough to ensure security," so too, having superior forces equipped with better technology is no insurance for victory when opposing an enemy that invests in intelligence.⁸ Absolute power does not win absolutely.

How successful would the Inchon landings have been if intelligence had not warned of the mud flats on the approaches to the proposed landing sites?

Intelligence "failures," too, tell of the significance intelligence plays. Pearl Harbor, Tet, or, the attacks of September 11th, do not diminish the importance of intelligence but rather demonstrate the impact of not placing sufficient emphasis on it. As General Hugh Shelton, former chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, noted in 2000: "Successful employment of modern weapons systems, new operational concepts, and innovative combat techniques—particularly those

4. Peter Harclerode, *Fighting Dirty: The Inside Story of Covert Operations from Ho Chi Minh to Osama Bin Laden*. London: Cassell & Co., 2001, 171–73.

5. NDP2, "Support to Planning—The Inchon Landing."

6. Carl H. Builder et al., "Command Concepts: A Theory Derived from the Practice of Command and Control" (MR-775-ORS). Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1999, 8.

7. NDP2, "Support to Planning—The Inchon Landing."

8. John Keegan, *Intelligence and War: Knowledge of the Enemy From Napoleon to Al-Qaeda*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 2003.

involving forces that are lighter, faster, more agile, and more lethal—also depends on rapid, precise, accurate, and detailed intelligence.”⁹ It behooves the planner, the operator, political and military leadership, and members of the Intelligence Community to understand this and not relegate intelligence to a secondary status as authors such as John Keegan have suggested. The strongest boxer cannot defeat the foe he hasn’t studied or cannot see.

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9. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Joint and National Intelligence Support to Military Operations (JP 2-01), (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, November 2003), V-14.