

The “Blackbeard of Yonghung Do”

Accurate intelligence of Incheon and its water approaches was absolutely vital to the success of Operation Chromite, and no one did more to provide that information than Lieutenant Eugene F. Clark, a daring and resourceful naval officer.

The staffs planning Chromite needed detailed information on the Incheon harbor, the local tides, the waterways leading to the port and enemy defenses. While UN forces fought to hold the Pusan Perimeter, South Korean naval forces raided the peninsula’s west coast and occupied Yonghung Do, an island only 14 miles from Incheon.

Far East Command decided to dispatch a reconnaissance team to the island under Lieutenant Clark. This 16-year veteran had joined the Navy as an enlisted man, earned a commission and commanded an LST and a transport after World War II. Because Clark knew that Incheon was the actual site of the forthcoming UN invasion, he decided he would kill himself rather than divulge that information if captured by the enemy. During the operation, the lieutenant carried a grenade with him everywhere because he believed it to be “more certain than . . . a pistol.”

His small team included two South Korean interpreters, both of whom had served as officers in the Japanese military during World War II, and an individual identified in one account as a “U.S. Army major” but who may have been a

member of a U.S. intelligence agency.

Clark’s team landed on Yonghung Do on 1 September and quickly organized a force of local men and boys to keep watch on the nearby enemy-held island of Taebu Do. As a gesture of good will, Clark dispensed rice and dried fish to the islanders. Clark, who later said he felt like Blackbeard the pirate, equipped Yonghung Do’s one motorized sampan with a .50-caliber machine gun and armed his men with carbines and submachine guns. To acquire information about the enemy, the team seized local fishing sampans-interrogating crewmen who generally professed loyalty to South Korea-and explored Incheon harbor. Clark’s young Korean comrades also infiltrated Incheon, Kimpo air base and even Seoul and returned with valuable intelligence.

Clark informed Tokyo that the Japanese-prepared tide tables were accurate, that the mud flats fronting Incheon would support no weight and that the harbor’s sea walls were higher than estimated. Clark also reported that Wolmi Do was heavily fortified and studded with Soviet-made artillery pieces. Grateful naval planners incorporated these facts into the landing plan.

The North Koreans were aware of Clark’s presence on Yonghung Do, but they sent only small parties to the island to investigate. On 7 September, however, two days after several British ships bombarded Incheon, the enemy sent one motorized and three sailing sampans loaded with troops to Clark’s hideaway. South Korean

A Time Of Deception and

As important as it was to provide friendly forces with current intelligence, it was absolutely vital to deny the enemy information on the UN landing site. Without the element of surprise, the Marines, sailors and soldiers might find a heavily armed and dug-in enemy waiting for them at Incheon.

To prevent such a catastrophe, MacArthur’s command





lookouts spotted the approaching boats, so Clark and his men got their "flagship" underway. As the antagonists closed on one another, a 37-millimeter anti-tank gun mounted in the bow of the Communist motorized craft opened up. A shell splashed well in front of Clark's sampan. Undeterred by this poor shooting, and in "Nelsonian style," Clark directed his flagship to close to within 100 yards of the enemy squadron. His .50-caliber machine gun raked two of the North Korean vessels, sinking one and demolishing another. Witnessing this slaughter, the remaining boats fled the scene.

After Clark reported this engagement to headquarters, the destroyer *Hanson* (DD 832) showed up to take off the team. Clark, who had not asked to be extracted, instead requested *Hanson's* skipper to pound Taebu Do. *Hanson* blasted the island with 212 five-inch rounds, and Marine Corsairs covering the destroyer also bombed and strafed the North Korean lair.

The team stayed on the island and continued their mission. Clark scouted Palmi Do, an island centrally located in the approaches to Inchon, and reported that Canadian raiders had only damaged

Lieutenant Eugene F. Clark, standing at the far right, on Yonghung Do. Pictured with him are his interpreters, several of his young followers and, probably, a South Korean navy officer.

OPAR Manson & Cagle Papers

the lighthouse beacon. Tokyo ordered Clark to relight the lamp at midnight on the 15th. On 14 September, Clark's team left Yonghung Do for Palmi Do and repaired the light.

Meanwhile, the North Korean commander at Inchon sent a contingent to wipe out the bothersome force on Yonghung Do. At dusk on the 14th, the enemy troops crossed the mud flats from Taebu Do to Yonghung Do. The Communists overwhelmed the island defenders and executed over 50 men, women and children.

Clark avenged their sacrifice for the UN cause when he activated the beacon atop the lighthouse at midnight on 15 September. With this light to guide them, the ships of the Advance Attack Group safely threaded their way through the treacherous approach to Inchon.

In recognition of his heroic work off Inchon, the Navy awarded Lieutenant Eugene F. Clark the Silver Star and the Army presented him with the Legion of Merit.

Uncertainty

staged an elaborate deception operation. The purpose was to encourage the North Koreans to believe the landing would occur at Kunsan, 105 miles south of Inchon. FEAF bombers began isolating Kunsan on 5 September by bombing roadways and

bridges leading to the port. On 6 September, Admiral Andrewes's cruisers and destroyers bombarded Kunsan, a day after shelling Inchon. During early September, planes from HMS *Triumph* and *Badoeng Strait* hit railroads and bridges from Kunsan north to Pyongyang. Meanwhile, ROK navy small boats raided enemy positions along the west coast. Disinformation was also part of

the deception effort. On a Pusan dock, Marine officers briefed their men about the landing beaches at Kunsan despite the numerous Koreans within earshot.

As the actual landing date came closer, activity near Kunsan increased. In addition to the regular FEAF attacks, on 11 September B-29 bombers struck Kunsan's military installations. During the night of 12-13 September,

Air Force Douglas B-26 Invaders of the 3rd Bomb Group (Light) fire rockets at boxcars and other targets in the rail yard at Iri, near Kunsan. Attacks like this one were intended to deceive the North Koreans about the true site of the forthcoming allied amphibious landing.

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Navy Art Collection

"Scratch One," by Navy combat artist Herbert Hahn, depicts carrier planes dropping bridge spans in the campaign to deny enemy front-line units supplies and reinforcements.

the British frigate HMS *Whitesand Bay* (F 633) landed U.S. Army special operations troops and Royal Marine Commandos on the docks, who made sure the enemy knew of their short presence ashore.

FECOM worked even harder to keep the true destination of Admiral Struble's task force secret. With men, supplies and ships concentrating in the ports of Japan and at Pusan, there was no way to hide the fact that an amphibious operation was about to take place. So widespread was the speculation that the press in Japan referred to the impending landing as "Operation Common Knowledge." Confirming MacArthur's worst fears, in early September, counterintelligence agents uncovered a North Korean-Japanese spy ring. When the leader of the ring was arrested, he

had a copy of the Chromite operation plan. No one knew if he had been able to transmit the plan to Pyongyang.

Not only were UN commanders uncertain about how the North Koreans would react to an amphibious assault, but also how the Chinese and Soviets would respond. Communist ships and aircraft operated from bases that were only 100 miles from UN fleet units in the Yellow Sea. The 80 submarines of the Soviet Pacific Ocean Fleet at Vladivostok also posed a potential threat. U.S. submarines, surface ships and patrol aircraft, based on shore and afloat, maintained a constant watch in the Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan to detect any hostile activities.

Anxiety rose on 4 September when the radar picket destroyer *Herbert J. Thomas* (DDR 833) picked up an unidentified aircraft contact

heading from Port Arthur in Manchuria toward the UN task force in the Yellow Sea. Air controllers vectored a flight of four Fighter Squadron 53 Vought F4U Corsairs from the combat air patrol toward the intruder. Thirty miles north of Task Force 77, the Corsair pilots saw one twin-engined plane dive and head for Korea. The flight leader, Lieutenant (jg) Richard E. Downs, closed on the suspicious aircraft. It was an American-made Douglas A-20 Havoc light bomber, many of which were provided to the USSR in the World War II lend-lease program. The A-20, emblazoned with the red star of the Soviet air force, suddenly fired at Downs. After receiving permission from *Valley Forge*, Downs opened up on the "hostile." Downs overshot the target, but his wingman riddled the bomber and sent it slamming into the ocean. When crewmen from *Herbert J. Thomas* recovered the pilot's body, they confirmed that he was a Russian. Leaders in Washington and Tokyo wondered if this event presaged Soviet and possibly Chinese intervention in the war.