Sergeant George D. Libby,

Engineer NCO and Medal of Honor Recipient

By Dr. Barry W. Fowle

Sergeant George D. Libby, Company C, 3d Engineer Combat Battalion, 24th Infantry Division, was one of the first in the United States Army to earn the Medal of Honor during the Korean Conflict. Both Sergeant Libby and his commanding general, General William Dean, received the award for their actions on July 20, 1950.

The day the Korean Conflict began, on June 25, 1950, Sergeant Libby was stationed in Japan. He was assigned to Company C, 3d Engineer Combat Battalion. With the rest of his unit, Sergeant Libby was in Korea two weeks later, involved in a full-scale war.

War Begins

At 0400 on Sunday, June 25, the North Korean Army attacked south of the 38th Parallel into South Korea. The main objective was Seoul, the capital of South Korea, with secondary attacks to the west against Kaesong. In the center a column struck at Chunchon, and to the east a second column struck down the east coast road. Some enveloping amphibious landings from the Sea of Japan provided additional support.



North Korean forces seized Seoul on Wednesday, June 28. The retreating South Korean forces, and their American advisors, blew bridges over the Han River south of Seoul to contain the attacking North Koreans. The South Korean forces continued their withdrawal south of the Han, destroying bridges as they went.

The North Korean's main effort continued south of Seoul toward Taejon. Their secondary efforts moved from Chunchon toward Wonju and along Route 41, the east coast road.

Early on the morning of July 1, the 3d Engineer Combat Battalion received orders to be ready to leave Japan within 72 hours. The next day their advance party left for Pusan, Korea. Companies B and D, with elements of the Headquarters and Service Company and the medical detachment, departed on landing ships on July 5; Company A and the remainder of H&S Company sailed on July 6; Company C left Japan on July 9.

The U.S. forces' first contact with the North Koreans occurred on July 5, just north of Osan. Task Force Smith, an element of the 24th Infantry Division, tried to halt the flood of North Korean troops and tanks but lacked proper anti-tank weapons and ammunition. They failed and fell back.

The first good geographical delaying position for U.S. forces in western Korea was at the Kum River, north of Taejon, and troops were moved there as they entered Korea from Japan. Companies A, B, and D, 3d Engineer Combat Battalion, moved to Taejon in support of their regimental combat teams on July 8 but withdrew south of the Kum River four days later.

Additional reversals and withdrawals of the 24th Infantry Division occurred on July 14 and 15. Then, on July 19, Company C relieved Company D in support of



the 34th Regimental Combat Team's withdrawal from Taejon. Engineer troops from Company C suffered heavy losses as they withdrew from the city but performed heroically. In one incident, Private Charles T. Zimmerman lost his jeep to enemy mortar fire. Although wounded by a mortar fragment and 11 bullets, Private Zimmerman killed five enemy soldiers and destroyed two machine guns.

The Attack

On the evening of July 20, Sergeant Libby was commanding a combat patrol tasked to observe the North Koreans. He was to warn Company C in the event of an enemy approach. Sergeant Libby's instructions were to delay the North Koreans any way he could. The patrol moved forward and came under heavy enemy fire before running into an enemy road block. All members of the patrol except Libby were killed or wounded.

Libby took cover in a nearby ditch, waiting for the attackers to come within close range. He then began shooting, killing and wounding a number of them.

Several times Sergeant Libby crossed the road to give first aid to his wounded men, exposing himself to enemy volleys. The North Koreans threw up a heavy fusillade trying to wipe out Libby and his men.

Finally an M-5 U.S. artillery tractor came along, and Libby helped load the wounded men aboard. Although under intense enemy fire, he placed himself between the driver and the enemy.

Sergeant Libby was shot in the arms and body as the tractor continued through a nearby town, stopping along the way to pick up more injured men. As they approached another North Korean road block, Libby refused first aid and joined the battle. Although he received additional wounds, Libby continued to hold his position until he collapsed from loss of blood. He died later that day.

Medal of Honor

Sergeant Libby received the Medal of Honor posthumously. It read in part: "His dauntless courage and gallant self-sacrifice reflect the highest credit on himself and uphold the esteemed traditions of the military service."

General Maxwell D. Taylor, Commanding General of the Eighth United States Army, and the Corps of Engineers paid tribute to the heroic deeds of Sergeant Libby and his engineer comrades on July 4, 1953. General Taylor dedicated the Libby Bridge, a modern concrete structure built by the 84th Engineer Construction Battalion across the Imjin River. Major William C. Carter, S-3 of the battalion and project manager during the construction of the bridge, called it a "fitting memorial to a heroic engineer NCO."

Dr. Fowle is a historian in the Office of History, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, at Fort Belvoir. He has recently published two books about Army engineers in World War II.