

# Ethic Under Fire

## Leader Displays Moral Principles During Korean War

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**W**hen the Korean War broke out in June 1950, the U.S. Army was ill-prepared. Members of the West Point Class of 1950, who had graduated earlier that month, were called back from leave to join deploying units headed for Japan and South Korea. They went without the benefit of Airborne or Ranger School, or even their basic branch school.

When a Korean People's Army force of over 100,000 soldiers, equipped with modern Soviet weapons, invaded the Republic of Korea with seven divisions, they overran the capital of Seoul, the much smaller light infantry units of the South Korean army and the initially deployed American Army units.

U.S. forces during the summer of 1950 conducted a tense but successful defense of the southern tip of the Korean Peninsula, known as the Pusan Perimeter. In September, Gen. Douglas MacArthur planned a brilliant flanking movement, conducting a successful amphibious landing at Inchon behind the North Korean lines, which enabled American and U.N. forces to rapidly drive the invaders back north up the peninsula.

In October 1950, as U.N. forces had driven the enemy all the way to the Yalu River and border with China, a quarter-million soldiers of the Chinese communist army suddenly attacked U.N. forces. The surprise Chinese intervention, supported by Soviet airpower, overwhelmed and triggered a retreat of U.N. forces. The U.N. forces and 8th U.S. Army counterattacked in an offensive that regained control of most of Korea, only to be driven south again to approximately the former prewar boundary along the 38th Parallel.

Throughout the next two years, fighting on rough mountainous and rocky terrain, U.S. and U.N. casualties were high. U.S. forces alone suffered 33,686 battle



COURTESY PHOTOS

Retired Col. David R. Hughes recalls his days in the Korean War vividly. **Inset:** Hughes as a West Point cadet.



deaths in Korea, another 2,830 non-battle deaths, 8,176 missing in action, over 3,746 prisoners of war and 103,284 wounded in action.

### Shipped Out

Infantryman David R. Hughes, a 23-year-old first lieutenant and recent graduate of West Point, had been in that war for a year already. He was among 670 graduates of the U.S. Military Academy Class of 1950, half of whom had been sent to combat without the benefit of their basic officer branch training before shipping out and reporting to units that were already engaged in combat. And where 40 of his classmates died.

Now 90 years old, Hughes tells his story:

“I was the company commander of

Company K, 3rd Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, in 1951. The unit had already been through hard combat defending Hill 339 on Sept. 28 after two rifle companies from two other 7th Cav battalions had failed. We held, but lost 14 men [killed in action] including Lt. Radcliffe, and the only soldier taken prisoner from the 3rd Battalion during the war so far. We left 77 dead Chinese on Hill 339 inside our original perimeter when we were ordered to attack and seize Hill 347 through an intervening Objective Rye. We were down to 130 men and five officers.

“On the 5th and 6th of October, we attacked and assaulted through the night, but all we had to show for it was the loss of two more officers and over 30 more wounded.

“Finally, on Oct. 7, 1951, we tried to assault Hill 347 where, unbeknown to us, a complete dug-in reinforced Chinese battalion hung on. We tried three times while I coordinated indirect fire and tank fire from my [observation

post], losing the only remaining officers besides me from Company K. When Sgt. McKenzie called me asking what to do, I said ‘Hang on.’ And ordering all my command group, forward observers, and even ... South Korean soldiers attached to my company to load themselves with grenades, we marched to the bottom of Hill 347. I ordered everyone to use ‘marching fire’ and get above the enemy trench line.

“The long and the short of it was we went up that hill firing at everything that moved, and I managed to be the first man on top, although my submachine gun jammed, and I threw it down. So, I threw grenades into the deep holes the enemy had dug for themselves.

“When the firing died down, I realized there were many, many Chinese soldiers still in their deep holes, while scores were dead or dying in the open trench line. One of my soldiers knew a few Chinese words, and he called into one tunnel and said to come out, we will not shoot them. Soon they started coming out; 192 Chinese soldiers were squatting in a circle on top, and we only had 15 armed men left from Company K. Several were tearful and cursing the Chinese who had killed or wounded their buddies down the hill. They had lost 85 percent of their fellow Americans. They were angry and wanted revenge. A sergeant advised me that with so few to guard so many, they would be better off just killing the Chinese soldiers.

“One of my soldiers shouted, ‘Let’s kill them all!’

“I admonished that sergeant and shouted back, ‘No! We do not shoot prisoners, we’re Americans!’ (I said that not because of the Geneva Conventions; not because any manual told me not to, but because I was still an officer, entrusted by the commander in chief to do what is right.) And I was an American who plays fair. A West Pointer with an embedded sense of right and wrong. That settled it. My men obeyed my order.

“We marched the 192 POWs down off Hill 347 at dusk toward the military police with trucks 2 miles away. The Chinese soldiers were led off the hill without incident.

“I was recognized later by a Distinguished Service Cross award. I would have preferred a unit citation for all that Company K accomplished that day. But that was not to be. But I vividly remember the values I upheld during the worst of days in my two-war career.”

### Principles on Display

Hughes’ Distinguished Service Cross citation reads in part: “Rapidly organizing all the able-bodied men about him, he moved forward to lead a new attack. [He] then single-handedly advanced against the enemy positions. Disregarding the concentrated fire of the foe, he charged to the crest of the hill, fired his automatic weapon until it no longer functioned, and then pressed the attack solely with grenades. His audacious assault completely demoralized the enemy and, as he moved among them fighting fiercely, his men charged up the slope and engaged the enemy in close combat. Imbued with his fearlessness, the [American soldiers] fought their way over the crest of the hill, inflicting heavy enemy casualties on the foe and securing the objective.”

Think about how many of the moral principles of the Army Ethic were demonstrated by Hughes and his men in this intense ground combat. The principles listed below, which come from Chapter 2: The Army Ethic of Army Doctrine Reference Publication 1: The Army Profession, are just a few:

- We serve honorably—according to the Army Ethic—under civilian authority while obeying the laws of the nation and all legal orders; further, we reject and report illegal, unethical or immoral orders or actions.
- In war and peace, we recognize the intrinsic dignity and worth of all people, treating them with respect.

- We lead by example and demonstrate courage by doing what is right despite risk, uncertainty and fear; we candidly express our professional judgment to subordinates, peers and superiors.
- We do our duty, leading and following with discipline, striving for excellence, putting the needs of others above our own and accomplishing the mission as a team.
- We accomplish the mission and understand it may demand courageously risking our lives and justly taking the lives of others.
- We embrace and uphold the Army Values and standards of the profession, always accountable to each other and the American people for our decisions and actions. ★

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## YOU IN ACTION

The Center for the Army Profession and Ethic (CAPE) at West Point invites contributions to its effort to illustrate The Army Ethic in Action. It is asking you to share your stories and reflections that will inspire all of us to honorably fulfill our oaths of service. Contact retired Lt. Col. Peter C. Kinney III at [peter.c.kinney.ctr@mail.mil](mailto:peter.c.kinney.ctr@mail.mil). For more about CAPE, visit <http://cape.army.mil>.