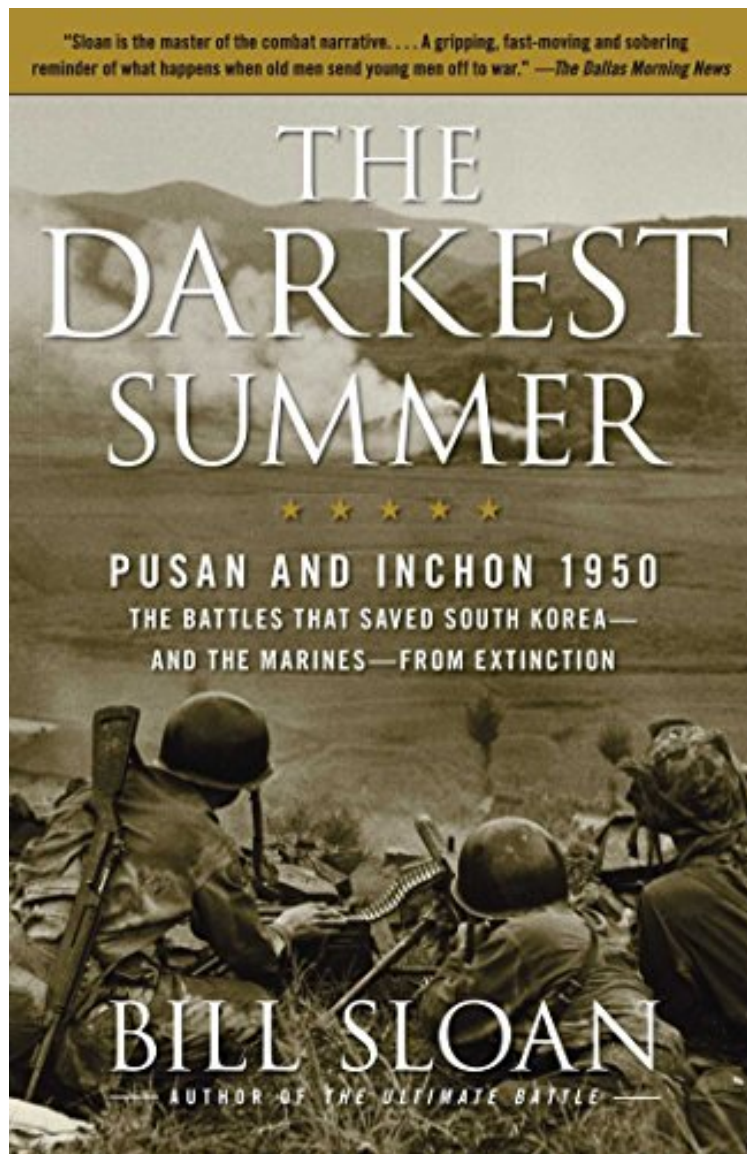


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The Darkest Summer: Pusan and Inchon 1950: The Battles That Saved South Korea--and the Marines--from Extinction

Bill Sloan

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Another Bill Sloan book about war, the guy really knows how to tell a good story and make you have some small idea of what the soldiers on the ground went through. This "little forgotten" was a near disaster for us and this book tells how lucky we were to have survived.

The Darkest Summer is the dramatic story of the first three months of the Korean War as it has never been told before. A narrative studded with gripping eyewitness accounts, it focuses on the fateful days when the Korean War's most decisive battles were fought and the Americans who fought them went—however briefly—from the depths of despair to the exultation of total conquest. Drawing on exclusive interviews with dozens of surviving U.S. veterans, it reveals how one ninety-day period changed the course of modern history and opens a unique and revealing window on an all-but-forgotten war.

""The Darkest Summer" is not only exciting reading -- a cautionary tale about Korea in 1950 -- but it should also make every sensible reader ask why it's a good idea to fight in faraway foreign countries like Korea, or Afghanistan today, without a plan for victory or an exit strategy." -- Michael Korda, author of "Ike""
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"The Darkest Summer" is a harrowing and heroic tale of Korean War valor. By interviewing U.S. Marines who fought at Pusan and Inchon, Bill Sloan transports the reader to ground zero in Korea. A truly riveting read." -- Douglas Brinkley, author of "The Wilderness Warrior""
In 1950, President Truman and others were in the process of a military reunifying and downsizing that would have essentially eliminated the U.S. Marine Corps. Then came Korea, and in the battles for Pusan and Inchon, the Marines did what had to be done. Bill Sloan, the premier chronicler of war at the ground level, tells the whole awful, bloody story in his superb "The Darkest Summer", a dead-on account that answers forever the question, "What is war really like?" -- Jim Lehrer, anchor of "The NewsHour" on PBS and author of "Oh, Johnny"
About the Author
Bill Sloan is a respected military historian and author of more than a dozen books, including Brotherhood of Heroes: The Ultimate Battle. He lives in Dallas, Texas.
Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Chapter 8 Nightmare on the Naktong
It was seventy-five miles from Hill 202 near Sachon to the town of Miryang, now threatened by an estimated 7,000 enemy troops, who had waded across the shallow Naktong River, towing crude rafts loaded with heavy weapons, vehicles, and supplies. By August 8, an entire reinforced North Korean regiment had established a bridgehead on the east bank of the river, which was the last natural barrier between the Communist army and Pusan. Over the next few days, the NKPA had steadily broadened its foothold until most of its crack Fourth Division -- the same unit that had shared in the capture of Seoul, then routed Task Force Smith -- was on the American side of the stream, opening a yawning gap in U.S. lines. The gap was in a cluster of rugged hills, where a sharp bend in the river surrounded a thumbshaped strip of land on three sides to form a topographical oddity that the Americans called the Naktong Bulge. Unless the gap could be closed, the main supply route between Pusan and the inland city of Taegu, headquarters of General Walker's Eighth Army, was in danger, and Taegu itself might be overrun. In his first attempt to dislodge the enemy troops, Walker ordered the recently arrived Second Infantry Division's Ninth Regiment, commanded by Colonel John G. Hill, to join elements of General John Church's 24th Division to create Task Force Hill. In addition to his own regiment, Hill was placed in control of all 24th Division units in Church's southern sector -- giving him a force equal to three full infantry regiments -- and ordered to assault the enemy bridgehead. To Walker's distress, however, the attack by Task Force Hill on August 11 met a reception

hauntingly similar to those encountered by previous Walker task forces. The attack lost its momentum and dissolved in confusion when the North Koreans attacked at the same time. Hill tried twice more, on August 14 and 15, but his troops ran into a stone wall of resistance, and bad weather deprived them of air support. During this interval, the enemy had spirited more than 100 machine guns, considerable artillery (including a number of American 105s seized at Taejon), and even several tanks across the river. Entrenched in the high ground and with superior weaponry, the NKPA force was simply too strong, and Hill was forced to break off the attack and take up defensive positions east of the enemy stronghold. By now, Walker's patience was frayed to the breaking point. He minced no words when he told Church, "I'm giving you the Marine brigade, and I want this situation cleaned up -- and quick!" On their arrival at Miryang on the afternoon of August 15, General Craig and his men confronted stakes that could not have been higher. The consensus among high-echelon UN commanders was that if Miryang fell, neither Taegu nor Pusan could be held. Walker himself pledged to fight in the streets if the enemy got into Taegu. "And you'd better be prepared to do likewise," he told one field commander, whose reticence and excuses brought Walker to the boiling point. "Now get back to your division and fight it! I don't want to see you back from the front again unless it's in your coffin." Meanwhile, by August 15, more than 400,000 Korean refugees had crowded into Taegu, and the ROK government, fearing its security could no longer be guaranteed in the city, packed up and moved to Pusan. In addition to the precarious situation at the Naktong Bulge, Walker faced serious problems all across the front. The First Cavalry Division, charged with anchoring a tremendously wide section of the front west of Taegu, had repulsed repeated NKPA incursions across the Naktong farther to the north but remained under heavy pressure from the enemy. In the far southwest, although the Marine attacks had left NKPA forces weakened and disorganized, Army lines continued to develop leaks after the Marines' hurried withdrawal from Sachon. On the east side of the peninsula, the ROK Third Division was forced out of the secondary port of Pohang-dong and evacuated under cover of American air and naval forces, then relanded farther south. With NKPA troops only a few hundred yards from its runways, the U.S. Fifth Air Force abandoned Yonil Airfield, its only base on the east coast, and moved its desperately needed F-51 squadrons back to Japan. The entire eastern front looked to be hovering on the verge of collapse. If there was any small shred of hope remaining, it lay with the Marines. As a British military observer attached to the 24th Division observed in a wire dispatched on the morning of August 16, as Craig's brigade prepared for its new mission, "The situation is critical, and Miryang may be lost. The enemy has driven a division-sized salient across the Naktong. More will cross the river tonight. If Miryang is lost...we will be faced with a withdrawal from Korea. I am heartened that the Marine brigade will move against the Naktong salient tomorrow. They are faced with impossible odds, and I have no valid reason to substantiate it, but I have the feeling they will halt the enemy.... "These Marines have the swagger, confidence, and hardness that must have been in Stonewall Jackson's Army of the Shenandoah. They remind me of the Coldstreams at Dunkirk. Upon this thin line of reasoning, I cling to the hope of victory." When the Marines reached Miryang, however, they were dragging their heels rather than swaggering. To a man, they were drained, hungry, caked with dirt, and red-eyed from lack of sleep. Many of the troops had had to march most of the previous night after a promised convoy of trucks failed to show up, and the forced journey, after days of heavy fighting, had been an ordeal for everyone. "By that time," recalled PFC Ben Wray, a native Texan and a BAR man in the First Battalion's Second Platoon, "we looked and felt like an old horse that had been rode hard and put away wet." During the withdrawal from near Sachon, the situation had been so hectic that Colonel Harold Roise, commanding the Second Battalion, received his only orders for the move scribbled on a scrap of paper. The terse message, written by Colonel Joe Stewart, Craig's operations officer, and left with a fleet of parked vehicles, read simply, "These are your trucks. Move to Naktong at once." After all this, Miryang proved to be an unexpectedly pleasant surprise. Compared to the sun-baked, unforgiving hills they'd just left, the picturesque village was the closest thing to paradise the Marines had seen since leaving the States. To Colonel Robert Taplett of 3/5, it looked like "a heavenly oasis" and "an ideal spot for a picnic," and Saturday Evening Post writer Harold H. Martin, embedded with the brigade, called it "the most beautiful bivouac in all Korea." "Our bivouac area was in a cool grove of trees on the grassy banks of the Miryang River, which would soon be our bedroom, bathroom, and laundry," Taplett recalled. "Everyone looked forward to our first night of uninterrupted sleep, a dip in the river, a change of clothes, and our first hot meal since leaving the USS Pickaway." After a dozen days of living and fighting in the same field dungarees, Taplett and his troops were, in his words, as dirty and smelly as "a herd of goats." They took to the river in droves while dozens of native women, recruited by unit supply officers and paid with wages of cigarettes, washed grimy Marine uniforms and laid them out on the riverbank to dry. Medical officers tried to warn the Marines that the pristine-looking stream might harbor potentially dangerous contaminants, but the warnings were ignored. Even normally cautious Navy corpsman Herb Pearce joined in the splashfest. But, as he observed later, "My enjoyment of the swim was lessened somewhat when I got out of the stream and discovered that some Koreans were busily skinning a dog in the water just around the bend from us." The Marines realized that their interlude of rest and rehabilitation would be brief and that another brutal ordeal loomed ahead. On August 16, barely twenty hours after their arrival at Miryang, they received orders to move west about twenty-four miles to the area of Yongsan, a village less than ten miles from the Naktong. This would be the jumping-off place for their attack. Intelligence reports indicated that the enemy was almost ready to break out of his Naktong salient, seize

Miryang, and split UN forces into northern and southern halves. Miryang lay astride the double-track railroad over which vital supplies flowed between Pusan and Taegu. If Communist forces gained control of the rail line or cut it, Taegu would be cut off from supply and reinforcement. That night, Fifth Marines commander Colonel Ray Murray met with Colonel Harold Roise, whose Second Battalion had been chosen to lead a frontal assault the next morning on Obong-ni Ridge, part of a jumbled mass of high ground held in strength by the NKPA. Roise's battalion would be followed by Taplett's 3/5, with Colonel Newton's 1/5, which had been badly battered in the fight for Sachon, in brigade reserve. "Obong-ni Ridge sprawled across the Marine front like some huge prehistoric reptile," wrote Marine historian Lynn Montross. "Its blunt head overlooked the main supply route...and the elongated body stretched to the southeast more than 2,000 yards before losing its identity in a complex of swamps and irregular hill formations." The ridgeline included half a dozen dominating peaks (identified by number, from north to south, as Hills 102, 109, 117, 143, 147, and 153), several smaller hills, and a succession of steep spurs, separated by deep gullies that ran all the way down to a series of rice paddies on the plain below. It presented a vast, demonic puzzle for the men of the Second Battalion's D and E companies assigned as the first Marines to climb it. "You must take that ground tomorrow," Murray told Roise. "You have to get on that ridge and hold it. Understood?" "Understood," Roise assured him. "This battalion goes on..."