

BRIDGING THE GAP:

U.S. ARMY ENGINEERS OBSERVE SOUTH KOREAN RIVER-CROSSING OPERATIONS

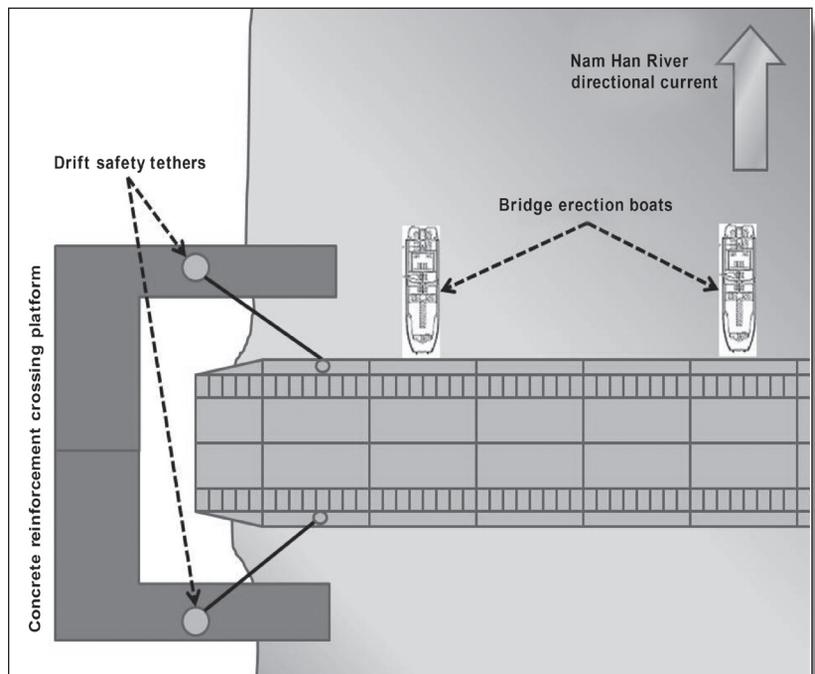
By Major David W. Noble

As Republic of Korea (ROK) Army helicopters hovered overhead and smoke vehicles concealed the farside of the Nam Han River, U.S. Forces Korea engineer and infantry Soldiers observed the 7th Corps of the Third ROK Army river-crossing exercise in Yeosu, South Korea, in November 2011. The U.S. contingent, joined by the Combined Forces Command engineer, traveled from all over the Korean Peninsula to witness the event. Exercise Guardian Nation combined an annual division level training exercise with elements from the 7th Corps of the Third ROK Army, including—

- Armor.
- Aviation.
- Chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear.
- Engineer.
- Field artillery.
- Infantry.
- Signal.

Bridging Rivers in Korea

The terrain in Korea offers many challenges to military units attempting to maneuver there. The most significant obstacle to maneuver may be the



Preconstructed concrete platforms aid ROK training while also protecting the riverbanks.

many rivers that cross the Korean landscape. In Korea, a unit's ability to rapidly cross a river while under enemy observation and fires is crucial to success. The requirement



Bridge erection boats maneuver pontoons while smoke obscures the farside from enemy observation.

to synchronize the efforts of reconnaissance assets and maneuver, artillery, signal, and engineer units is daunting. Any opportunity to train on river-crossing operations is vital to success.

ROK Army engineer leaders linked up with U.S. leaders to fly to the ROK Army 7th Corps training exercise command center. The U.S. contingent included members from the Joint Security Area; engineers from U.S. Forces Korea; and representatives from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Far East District. For that day's mission, engineer units were ordered to emplace a 275-meter float bridge across the Nam Han River at Yeosu. Infantry and chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear elements were to be ferried across the river first to provide farside security and obscurity. Once in place, the engineer mission was to erect a float bridge so that infantry and armor elements could continue the offensive. Throughout the operation, Cobra helicopters would provide close air support. The operation was to be complete within a few hours. The U.S. and ROK observation element quickly moved from the briefing sessions to the training site.

Activating the Plan

When the observation team arrived, the mission was already in motion. Cobra helicopters were providing nearside security while smoke units obscured the engineer approach. Ferrying operations had already transported several infantry elements across the river to establish security. Engineers shifted into building the float bridge, while armor units held position in a nearby staging area. Within an hour, units were crossing the completed bridge and moving forward against enemy forces.

Supporting the Training Effort

The Korean government installed a series of concrete-reinforced crossing platforms along the Nam Han River as a permanent training fixture to assist the

ROK Army in conducting river-crossing operations. The series of platforms, spread along several kilometers of the river, provided engineer and maneuver units with a variety of crossing locations to train. The platforms were designed to reinforce the riverbanks at the points where heavy vehicles drove onto float bridges to cross the water obstacle. The concrete platforms were only designed for entry locations on the nearside of the river, while compacted trails were constructed at farside exit points. As a safety measure, metal tethers and heavy ropes were attached to the interior bays to reinforce the stability of the bridge against the river current.

Strengthening Ties

When the mission was complete, ROK engineers had emplaced 41 interior bays across the Nam Han River. All ROK units worked cohesively to ensure that the mission was a success. The opportunity for U.S. leaders to observe ROK training proved beneficial for many reasons. The demonstration of U.S. interest in ROK training—especially engineer-related tasks—strengthened the importance of river-crossing operations. Observing their ROK counterparts in a field environment strengthened the U.S. leader confidence in their allies' abilities to perform under pressure. Finally, the collaboration between U.S. and ROK Army engineers strengthened the tactical and operational communication between the two militaries. 

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