

## ***KLO ui Hangukchon Pisa* [Secret History of the KLO in the Korean War]**

Yi Chang-gon.<sup>a</sup> (Seoul: Jisungsa, 2005), 492 pp., illustrations.

**Reviewed by Stephen C. Mercado**

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Among the unknown veterans of the Forgotten War fought up and down the Korean peninsula during 1950–53, perhaps none remain so in the shadows today as those of the Korean Liaison Office (KLO). The book reviewed here is a collection of war stories from survivors of that covert organization. Because these Korean veterans gathered intelligence and executed special operations under command of the US Army, they suffered neglect and even persecution after the armistice. As Northerners with no military service record in South Korea, most survivors chose to live out their lives in the United States rather than suffer the indignities of postwar life among neighbors who shunned them as shirkers and officials who monitored them as suspected double agents. Dr. Yi Chang-gon, KLO veteran and vice chairman of the main KLO veterans association, wrote this work with Choe Kyu-bong, the association's chairman and a former KLO operations commander. The book comprises three main parts: Choe's memoirs, brief recollections of two dozen veterans, and Yi's story.

The KLO's origin lies in the bitter conflict between leftist and rightist forces in the Soviet and American zones of occupied Korea following the nation's liberation from Japanese rule at the end of the Second World War. Landowners, Christians, and other privileged northerners struggled in vain against the hostile

communist regime that Moscow imposed in Pyongyang. Many took refuge south of the 38th parallel in the US zone. From this displaced population emerged paramilitary "youth associations," whose members carried out terrorist operations in both zones, such as the assassination attempt of 1 March 1946 in Pyongyang against communist Korean leader Kim Il-song.<sup>1</sup>

Beginning early in the occupation, the US Army in Korea used these groups to gather intelligence in the Soviet zone. In 1948, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and its armed forces were established in the south. The following year, Maj. Gen. Charles Willoughby, G-2 for General MacArthur in Tokyo, secretly established the KLO in Seoul. With these developments came the end of the paramilitary youth groups; some of their members moved into the ROK military and police forces, and others joined the KLO.<sup>2</sup> Choe Kyu-bong, a Wonsan native active in the rightist White Shirt Society (WSS) in Seoul, cast his lot with the KLO after a period of service with the US Army Counterintelligence Corps (CIC).<sup>3</sup> Choe recalled with pride the many KLO intelligence reports on Pyongyang's war preparations and decried the lack of an audience for them in Tokyo or Washington.<sup>4</sup>

The KLO's wartime feats included preparing the way for the remarkable US amphibious assault at Inchon on 15 September 1950, which broke the back of the nearly successful campaign of the Korean People's Army (KPA) to conquer the south. Under US Navy Lt. Eugene Clark, operatives of the KLO served alongside

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<sup>a</sup> Names of Koreans are written here in conventional order, given name following family name. Apart from Seoul and the name of the publishing company, all Korean names in this review are rendered in the conventional McCune-Reischauer system, minus the diacritic marks.

members of Willoughby's clandestine operatives in his Z Unit, the US Army and Navy, and the CIA for several weeks to gather intelligence on mines, tides, water depths, and enemy fortifications, as well as other data required for the invasion of Inchon.<sup>5</sup> The night before D-Day, Choe, a KLO unit commander, participated with Clark, ROK Army Col. Kye In-ju, ROK Navy Lt. Yon Jong, and others in an armed assault to seize the lighthouse on Palmi-do, an island at the entrance to the port of Inchon, and to light the lamp at midnight. Choe, shot twice in the night attack on the structure, found in the darkness a missing piece of equipment that for some anxious minutes had left the team unable to turn on the guiding light. Thanks to Choe's efforts, MacArthur's amphibious task force saw the light and observed the Stars and Stripes flying from the lighthouse at dawn. For his part in the operation, Choe received an audience with MacArthur aboard the flagship *Mt. McKinley* and was given the flag that had flown from the lighthouse.<sup>6</sup>

The book offers glimpses of other wartime operations as well. Choe recalled KLO operatives in KPA uniforms going ashore in Wonsan as part of an effort to determine the accuracy of worrisome rumors of bubonic plague in North Korea. On Choe's orders, the men beached their craft, infiltrated a hospital, browbeat the staff into showing them the patient records, and left with two patients showing symptoms similar to those of the plague. Engaging a KPA patrol in a fire fight on their way back to the beach, the team lost a member to enemy fire before escaping.<sup>a</sup> Their operation helped medical experts to conclude that the rumored bubonic plague was in reality typhoid.

The book also abounds in details on the covert war in Korea. Choe recounted how he joined two US Army officers from Tokyo in spirited away Kye In-ju from a ROK prison in which he was facing a death sentence for dereliction of duty. The trio claimed that they

needed to take him to their jeep to record his confession on special equipment and then sped away before the surprised guards could stop them; Kye became the senior Korean officer in the KLO.<sup>b</sup> The book also touches on Tokyo's role in providing identification documents, uniforms, and other materials of agent authentication; an operation in which a KLO team recovered a downed Soviet MiG fighter for US technical analysis; and the acquisition of North Korean newspapers for use in psychological warfare operations. Among the many grim details appears a bit of humor, an episode in which a Korean-American interpreter informed Korean operatives training at an unnamed atoll in the Marshall Islands that their American instructor had just made a joke, that he would not be translating it, and that that they would all laugh with him on the count of three.

The KLO rose to great heights before its sudden end. Rooted in paramilitary groups of northern refugees working with the US Army CIC, the KLO grew during the war into part of an arrangement in which the US Army's Liaison Detachment oversaw both intelligence and partisan operations.<sup>7</sup> The signing of the armistice in 1953 cut KLO members off from their families and friends in the north. The US Army transferred the operatives that year to the ROK Army, which promptly turned most of them loose. Some of the short profiles of the two dozen veterans in the book include complaints of being "dumped into society" with no resources. Without public records of military service, and facing indifference and suspicion as northerners, most KLO survivors left for the United States, where a number banded together to form the KLO 8240th Army Unit Veterans Association, USA. Even Kye moved to California. Little remains of these veterans' legacy. At Palmi-do, a plaque dedicated to the memory of the KLO stands next to the lighthouse. In Norfolk, the flag that Choe MacArthur had given Choe at Inchon is on exhibit in a glass case at the MacArthur Memorial.

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<sup>a</sup> Separately, a team including Eugene Clark, Yon Jong, and Brigadier General Crawford Sams conducted a similar operation.

<sup>b</sup> Kye in his memoir wrote that he gained his freedom when a US Army colonel demanded his release in a telephone call to ROK Army Chief of Staff Chong Il-gwon. Whatever the details, Kye exchanged a prison cell for a privileged position in wartime US military intelligence.

This book lacks statistics, maps, government records, and a bibliography, all of which one finds in official US and ROK military histories of the war. It includes many photographs, however, and this reviewer finds most compelling a picture taken soon after the storming of the Palmi-do lighthouse. Lt. Clark, Lt. Yon Jong, Choe Kyu-bong, and Col. Kye In-je are

with other members of their team on a boat heading to the flagship *Mt. McKinley* in their moment of victory. On their faces appear expressions of triumph, relief, and fatigue. This and the book's other photographs give readers a greater sense of the triumphs and sorrows of Koreans who fought in the shadows.



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## Endnotes

1. See Andrei Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea, 1945–1960* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 25. The attempt failed when Soviet Lt. Yakov Novichenko fielded the assassin group's grenade, at the cost of his hand, an act later commemorated in the 1986 Soviet-DPRK film *Sukunda na Podvig* (Seconds Make a Hero).
2. One prominent case is that of Kim Tong-sok, who, leaving the Taedong Youth Association at his leader's recommendation to enroll in the Military Academy, became a leading intelligence officer of the ROK Army. See my review of Yi Son-ho and Chu Chong-yon, *Kim Tong-sok: I Saram!* (Seoul: Atukom, 2005) in *Intelligence and National Security*, 21:6 (December 2006): 1082–83.
3. For discussion of ties between the WSS and the US Army, also see Yi Wan-bom, "Paeguisa wa KLO ui Hwaldong ul Tonghaeso Pon Namhan Taebuk Chongbo Hwaldong ui Wollyu (1945–1953)" [Origins of South Korea's Intelligence Activities Against North Korea as Seen in the Activities of the White Shirt Society and KLO (1945–1953)], *Kukka Chongbo Yongu* (Journal of National Intelligence Studies), 3:1 (2010): 47–82. Elsewhere in the Far East in those years, the US Army was gathering intelligence via veterans of the defunct Imperial Japanese Army and Navy. See Michael Petersen, "The Intelligence That Wasn't: CIA Name Files, the U.S. Army, and Intelligence Gathering in Occupied Japan" in Edward Drea et al., *Researching Japanese War Crimes: Introductory Essays* (Washington, DC: Nazi War Crimes and Japanese Imperial Government Records Interagency Working Group, 2006).
4. One US Army historian described the problem as one of Tokyo intelligence officers who "had heard 'wolf' cried too many times" before Pyongyang's surprise invasion of 25 June 1950. See John P. Finnegan, "The Evolution of US Army HUMINT: Intelligence Operations in the Korean War," *Studies in Intelligence*, 55 No. 2 (June 2011), <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol.-55-no.-2/index.html>.
5. Detailed accounts of Inchon intelligence accounts come as well from Yon Jong, a Korean who had served in the Second World War in Japan's Kwantung Army before finding his way to Tokyo to work in G-2's Z Unit (commonly known as the Canon Agency, after commanding officer Lt. Col. Jack Canon). Yon, who settled in Tokyo after the Korean War, was behind General Willoughby's Japanese-language account, never published in English, of his intelligence service in occupied Japan, *GHQ Shirarezaru Chohosen* [GHQ Unknown Intelligence War] (Tokyo: Yamakawa Shuppansha, 2011, revised and expanded version of *Shirarezaru Nihon Senryo: Uirobi Kaikoroku* [Unknown Occupation of Japan: Willoughby Memoirs] Tokyo: Bancho Shobo, 1973). Yon also wrote an insider account of the Z Unit, with a foreword from Colonel Canon: *Kyanon Kikan kara no Shogen* [Testimony from the Canon Agency] (Tokyo: Bancho Shobo, 1973). Unlike Choe, Yon appears seemingly in every history, from Eugene Clark's own *The Secrets of Inchon* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2002) to John Toland's *In Mortal Combat: Korea, 1950–1953* (New York: Morrow, 1991). Choe, for his part, described Yon as an amiable man of questionable loyalties, adept at insinuating himself into the trust of others.
6. US accounts of Inchon that I have seen omit reference to Choe, but Col. Kye in his own memoir, *Maegado Changgun kwa Kye In-ju Taeryong* [General MacArthur and Colonel Kye In-ju] (Seoul: Dain Media, 1997), recalls Choe at Palmi-do and credits him with finding the missing piece of equipment. Moreover, the book under review here includes a photograph of the letter of appreciation MacArthur wrote Choe in 1957 for sending him the "Inchon Flag."
7. Finnegan, 84.