



# MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION

## Korean Expedition, 1871

Throughout the late nineteenth century, Marines landed in such places as Egypt, Mexico, Cuba, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Panama, Nicaragua, Haiti, Trinidad, mainland China, Formosa (modern-day Taiwan), Korea, Japan, Samoa, Fiji, and the Hawaiian Islands. Most often, these landings were in response to rebellions, hostile governments, unrest, and natural disasters threatening American lives, property, and interests. Many constituted a show of force, where the sight of Marines dispelled the threat. Marines, however, occasionally engaged in combat to advance American interests in a foreign country, as they did in Korea in 1871.

Korea had forbidden virtually all contact with foreigners to insulate itself from Western imperialist interference. Occasionally, Americans who violated Korea's isolationist policies were



*Stormin Ft Chojin, Korea* by John Clymer.  
National Museum of the Marine Corps Art Collection

detained or even executed. In summer 1871, Frederick F. Low, the United States minister to China, traveled to Korea to negotiate opening the country to U.S. trade and ensuring the safety of Americans traveling there. Low arrived at the mouth of the Han River on Korea's west coast in May 1871 with ships of Navy Rear Admiral John Rodgers's Asiatic Fleet. Although Korean officials made clear that they did not consent to the Americans' presence, Rodgers sent a surveying party to examine the approaches to the capital at Seoul, which lay farther up the Han River. As the survey party approached the Han River, they came under fire from several forts.

Collect

Preserve

Promote

Support

For History Division publications, click [here](#)  
To learn more about History Division, click [here](#)





Korea refused to apologize for the engagement afterward, leading Rodgers and Low to retaliate.

On 10 June, about 105 Marines and 550 sailors landed to capture the forts. With the ships supplying gunfire support, Captain McLane Tilton led the Marines in spearheading the assaults, taking two without difficulty. The next day, Tilton led the Marines against the heavily fortified main fort of Kwangsonchin, nicknamed the “Citadel” by the Americans, after a naval bombardment. The fighting devolved into hand-to-hand combat, and the Marines succeeded in neutralizing the garrison and destroying the fort’s guns. Among the six Marines awarded the Medal of Honor during the assault were Corporal Charles Brown and Private Hugh Purvis, who made their way to the flagstaff and tore down the enemy flag during the fighting. Rodgers subsequently withdrew the punitive force on 12 June and departed Korea. Although the sailors and Marines successfully destroyed the forts, it took the United States another 11 years to establish a treaty with Korea.

- For more information, see:
  - *Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*