



# West Lothian and the Forgotten War

Experiences of World War II, National Service and the Korean War

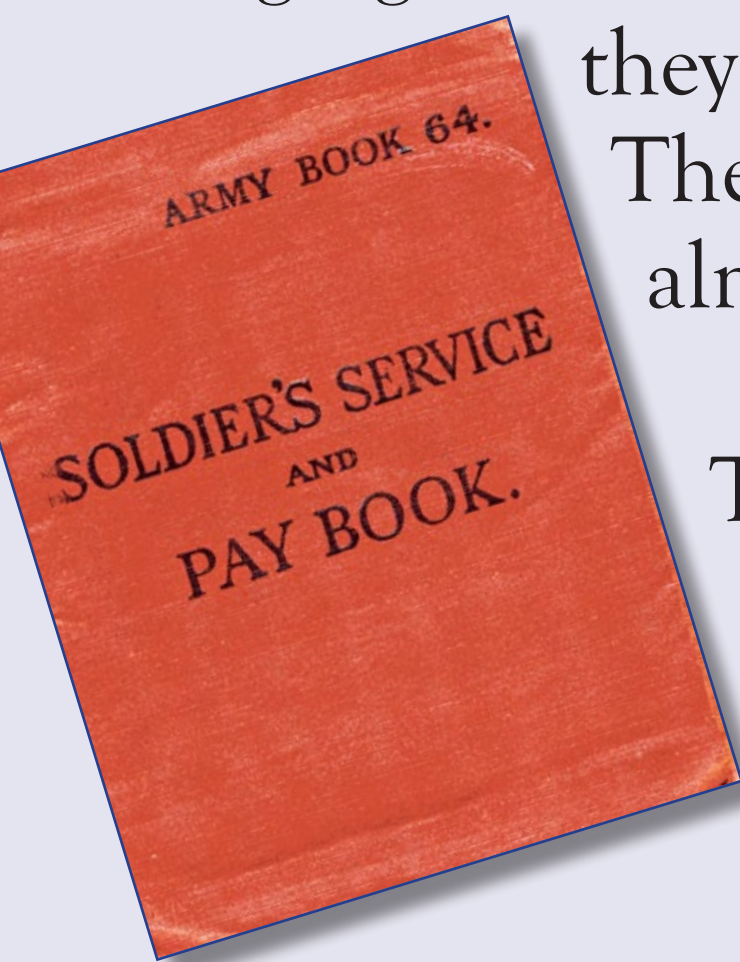
For about fifteen years after the Second World War, young men were still called up for a period of National Service. They were usually only 18 when they left home. The young men had no control over where they went with the Armed Forces or what they did. Some spent their time in barracks in the UK, others travelled to exotic places they would never otherwise have seen.

## National Service

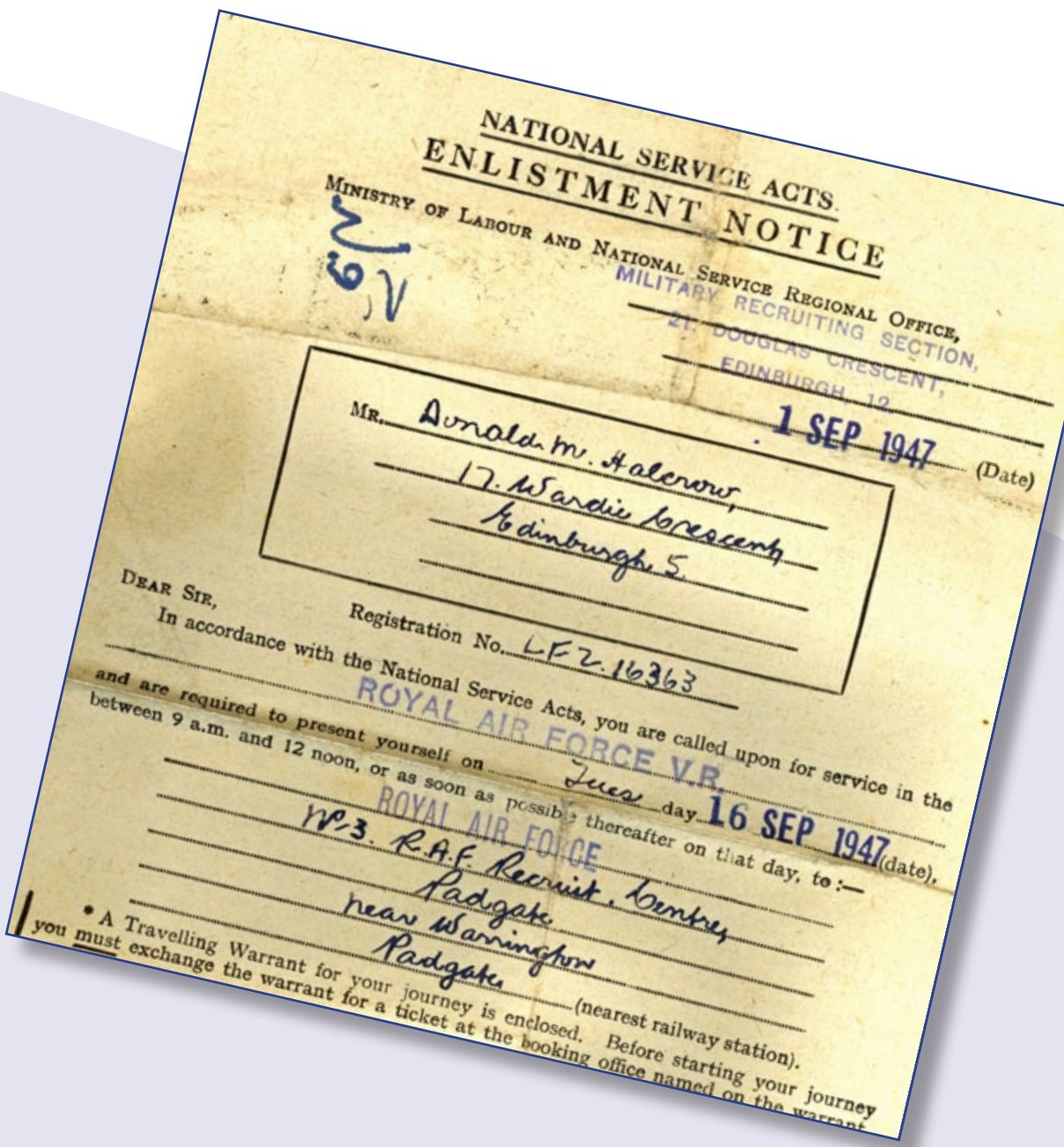
Between 1950 and 1953 over one thousand British soldiers, many of them 19-year-old National Servicemen, died in Korea. They gave their lives fighting for the United Nations to keep South Korea free from Communist rule.

National Service is seldom mentioned today. Sometimes politicians suggest bringing it back as an answer to youth unemployment or indiscipline. But they have no idea what National Servicemen really experienced. The sacrifices made by teenagers in the Korean War have been almost entirely forgotten.

This exhibition commemorates the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 and also pays tribute to the experiences of all National Servicemen who left home between 1946 and 1961 not knowing where or how they would serve.



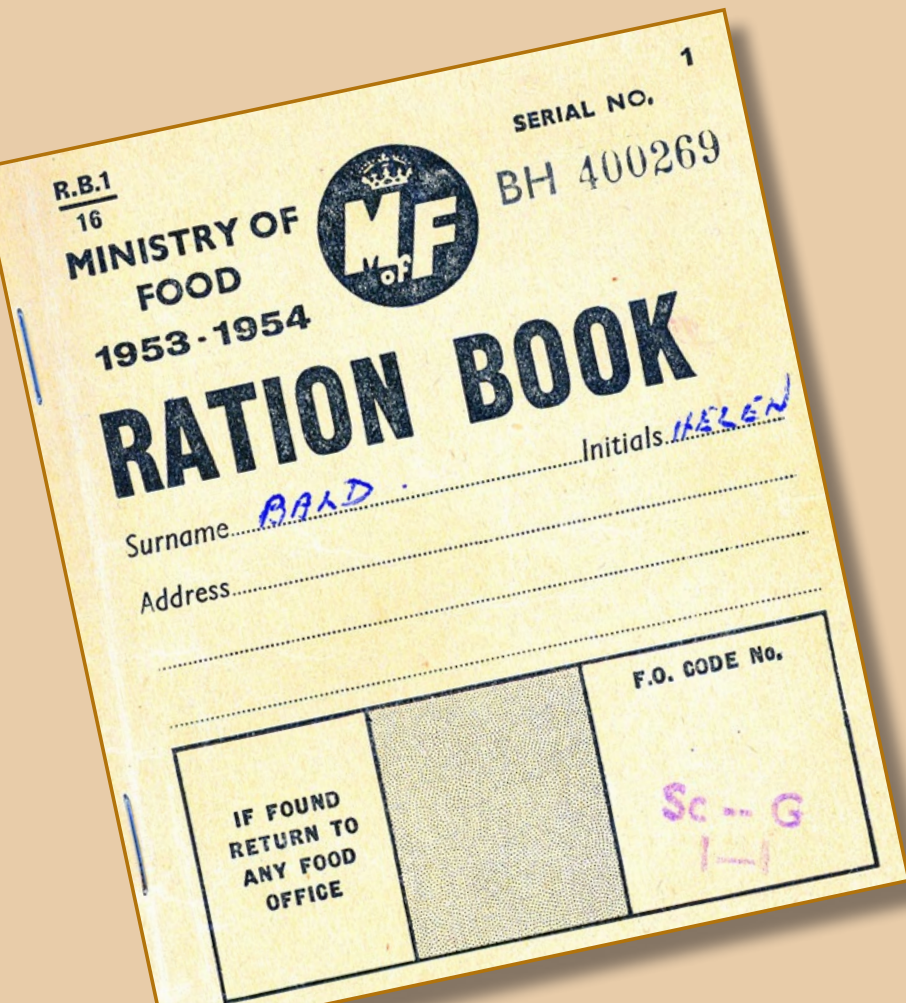
**Army Paybook**  
This paybook belonged to Peter Wilson, a National Serviceman from Broxburn. It contained a man's personal details, information about his training and lists of rules.  
Courtesy of Peter Wilson.



**Enlistment notice**  
This is the National Service enlistment notice telling Donald Halcrow to report to the RAF at Padgate on 16th September 1947. He also got a travel warrant for a train ticket from Edinburgh to Padgate and a postal order for 4 shillings (20p) in case he needed money on the journey.  
Courtesy of Donald Halcrow



**Welcome to Brussels**  
Some Second World War soldiers got a great reception when they arrived in Brussels to free Belgium from Hitler's rule.  
© Imperial War Museum



**Ration book**  
Rationing did not end for many years. Sweets were the last food to come off the ration in 1954. Coal was rationed until 1958.  
West Lothian Council Museums Service

## Memories of the Second World War

The National Servicemen of the 1940s and 50s were children during the Second World War. They experienced rationing, gas masks and the blackout. Members of their families were called up to serve in the armed forces. Boys heard stories of the war told by their fathers, uncles and brothers and expected to follow in their footsteps.



**Wartime children**  
A birthday party during the Second World War. Children thought rationing and air raid sirens were quite normal and got a lot of fun out of wartime.  
West Lothian Council Local History Library





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National Servicemen travelling to start basic training were often leaving their home areas for the first time. Their first days in the forces were often a shock.

## Basic Training

For the first few weeks National Servicemen were not allowed out of the barracks. Their waking hours were filled with training in fitness, drill, weapons and cleaning kit. They had to buy their own cleaning materials, especially boot polish and “Blanco” for cleaning webbing.

Discipline was very strict. The sergeant in charge of the recruits inspected them regularly. If he spotted even a very small mistake in someone’s clothes locker he might throw the soldier’s whole kit out of the window. Often a mistake by one member of the group led to the whole lot being punished.



### Cleaning boots

Boot cleaning did not only mean lots of polish and brushing. Recruits were supposed to be able to see their faces in the toecaps of their boots. To make the leather shiny enough, they had to use a hot spoon to press down the natural spots in the leather.

© Imperial War Museum

This seems unreasonable to us today but it forced the men to work together to get by. If one caused problems his mates would persuade him to toe the line.

Young soldiers had only 18 shillings (90p) to spend each week. They could buy some cigarettes and maybe a beer from the NAAFI shop or canteen. With so little to cheer them, they really enjoyed the banter and friendship of their mates, who were in the same boat.



### Cleaning living quarters

Recruits were responsible for keeping their living quarters clean. These two recruits are using heavy “bumpers” to polish up the barrack room floor.

© Imperial War Museum



### Recruits in barrack room cleaning kit

Scots Guards recruits hard at work cleaning their rifles or boots in their barrack room. Notice the narrow beds and the wooden lockers. At the end of each bed is a kit bag. Recruits sometimes had to go on long marches carrying this bag packed full. © Imperial War Museum



### Drill instruction

All recruits had to learn to march in step and carry out drill moves with their rifles. This was commonly called “square bashing” - most parade grounds were squares inside the barracks.

© Imperial War Museum



### Oswestry passing out 1

Peter Wilson photographed in the back row, 4th from left, with the rest of his fellow recruits after a fortnight’s basic training with the Royal Artillery at Oswestry.

Courtesy of Peter Wilson.



### Bren gun

Sam Kemp discovered he was a very good shot with the Bren gun – an automatic weapon pictured here. He won a medal for being best shot during basic training and went on to fire the same weapon on the front line in the Korean War.

© Imperial War Museum





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Most National Servicemen went into the army but some got into the RAF or the Navy. Where they were sent and the jobs they were given seemed to be a matter of luck. The luckier ones avoided war zones, but still travelled to new places and learned new skills.

## You began to enjoy it

Many National Servicemen did jobs which were the opposite of what they did in normal life. A steel moulder became a cook and a plumber ordered supplies and arranged travel tickets, while an art student learned how to load a plane with passengers and cargo so that it was safe to fly.



*John Shepherd served in the tropical climate of Hong Kong and was able to wear relaxed dress of combat trousers and a sun hat. But he always had to wear his army boots.*

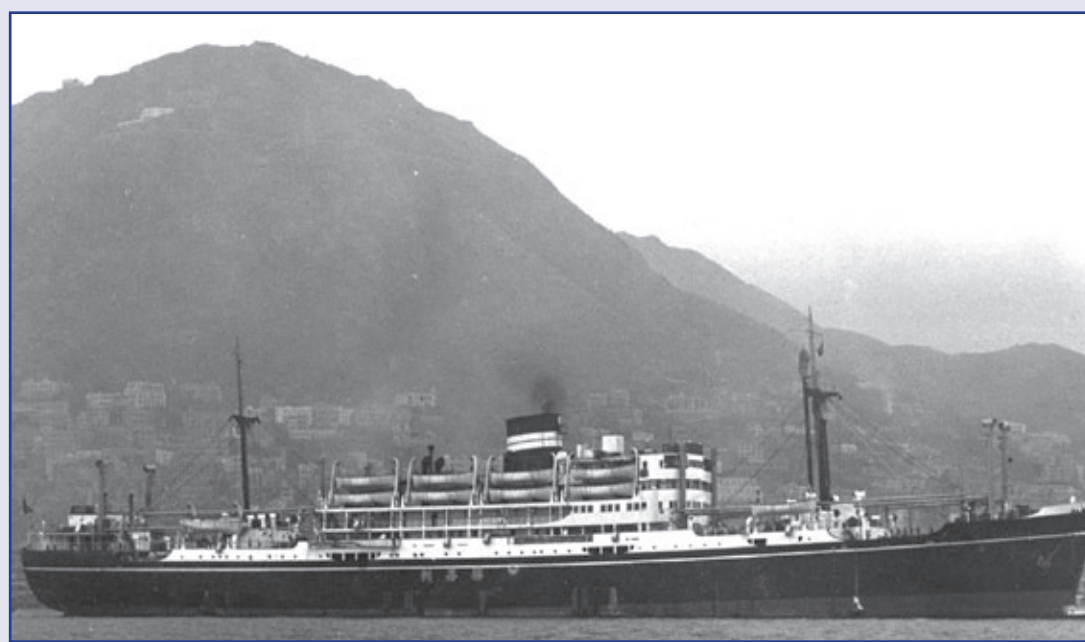
*Courtesy of John Shepherd*



### Team with cup

*Jim Ferguson with the Northumberland Command Army cooking competition trophy in 1954. He was a steel moulder in civilian life and never imagined that he would end up in charge of a kitchen winning prizes for cooking and baking.*

*Courtesy of Jim Ferguson*



### SS Sangola

*While he was stationed in Hong Kong, John Shepherd had the chance to go for a short cruise to Japan on the ship Sangola. He saw temples and gardens, but no war damage. It was only six years since atomic bombs had fallen on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.*

*Courtesy of John Shepherd*



### 25lb in olive grove

*John Shepherd was a cotton mill worker. In the Royal Artillery he had to work out how to hit a target with a shell from a 25 pound field gun. He calculated angle of the barrel and the amount of gunpowder needed.*

*© Imperial War Museum*

### Lads on Cyprus

*Donald Halcrow and his three mates on Cyprus in 1949. They were stranded by the withdrawal of RAF planes. Donald was flown back by Cyprus Airlines but his friends had to sail on a local fishing boat. It took a week. They were hungry, dirty and unshaven and out for revenge.*

*Courtesy of Donald Halcrow*



### Honest John missile

*Peter Wilson's Royal Artillery battery in Germany tested American Honest John missiles like this one. They had to be careful that the Russians did not pick up their position so they had to move 100 kilometres between firings. This was the "Cold War" when arm the Communist east and Capitalist west watched each other's every move.*

*© Imperial War Museum*



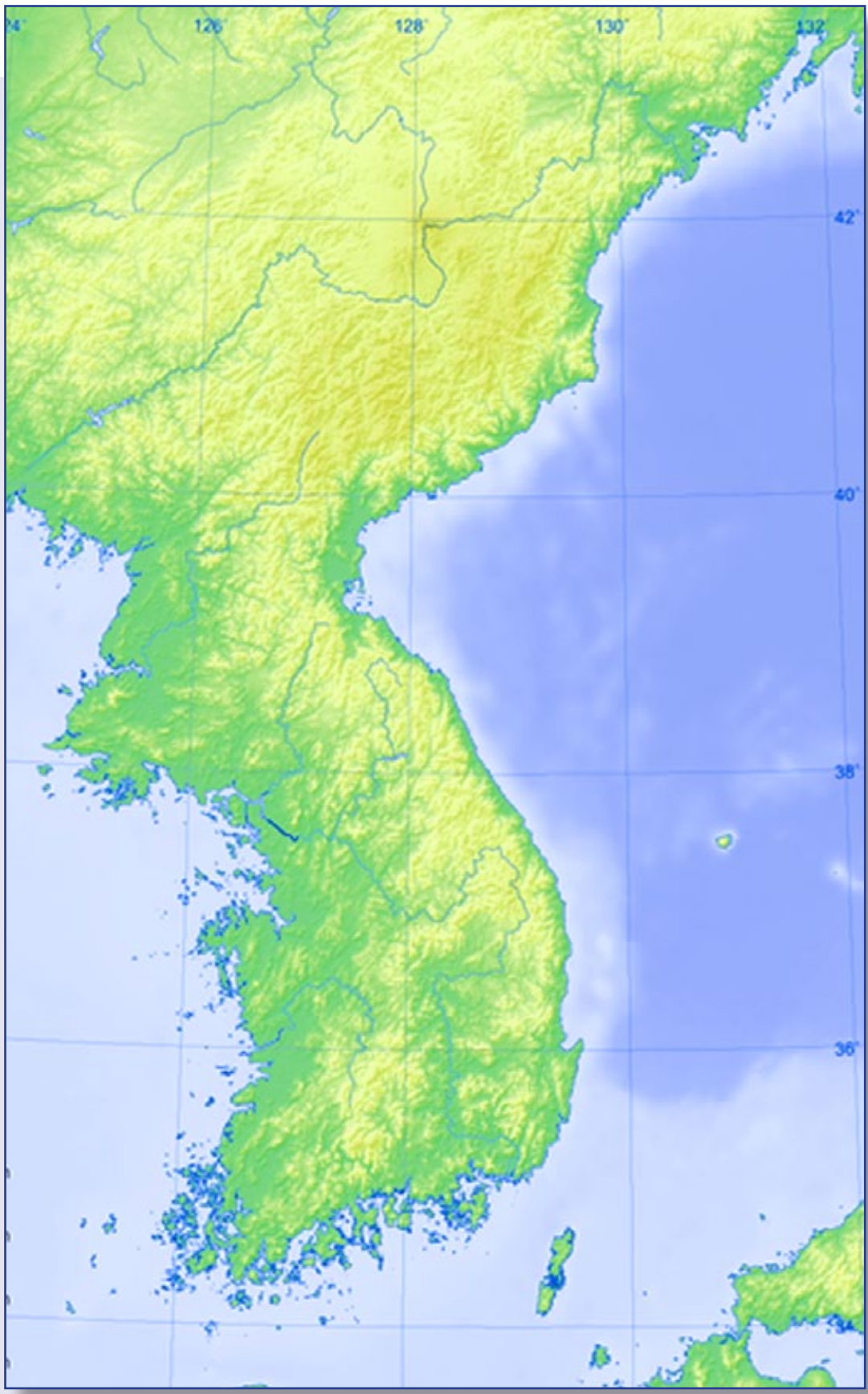




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Between 1950 and 1953 a large number of National Servicemen and regular soldiers were posted to Korea to fight for the United Nations. A few volunteered; most just went because they were sent.



**Korean Peninsula**  
*The Korean peninsula is a mountainous place surrounded on three sides by sea.*  
 commons.wikimedia.org

## Korea – Where’s that?

North Korean troops invaded South Korea on 25th June 1950. British soldiers were sent there as part of a United Nations force to help stop North Korea turning South Korea into a Communist state.

UN forces are usually sent to a country to keep the peace. This is the only time until now that UN forces were sent to a country to fight. Most of the soldiers had no idea where they were going or what the country would be like.

Korea is a small peninsula jutting south into the sea from the mainland of north-eastern China. It is roughly 400 miles long and lies to the west of Japan. A lot of the country is hilly with wide river valleys between.

Korea has four different seasons in the year. Winter is long and very cold with temperatures below zero across the country. After a short mild spring, summer brings a lot of rain and much higher temperatures. In August it gets hot (about 30 degrees) but the rain often makes it feel very humid and unpleasant. In September autumn brings in a lovely time of sunny, dry weather and lots of colour in the landscape.



**Civilians working the land**  
*Korean civilians working the land with simple tools. In the 1950s the country was mostly made up of mountains and farms.*  
 Courtesy of King's Own Scottish Borderers Museum

The most important food in Korea is rice and in the south the countryside is covered in paddy fields. There is no mining for coal or other minerals. Today Korea is a rich country with a big electronics industry but in 1950 it was a poor country.

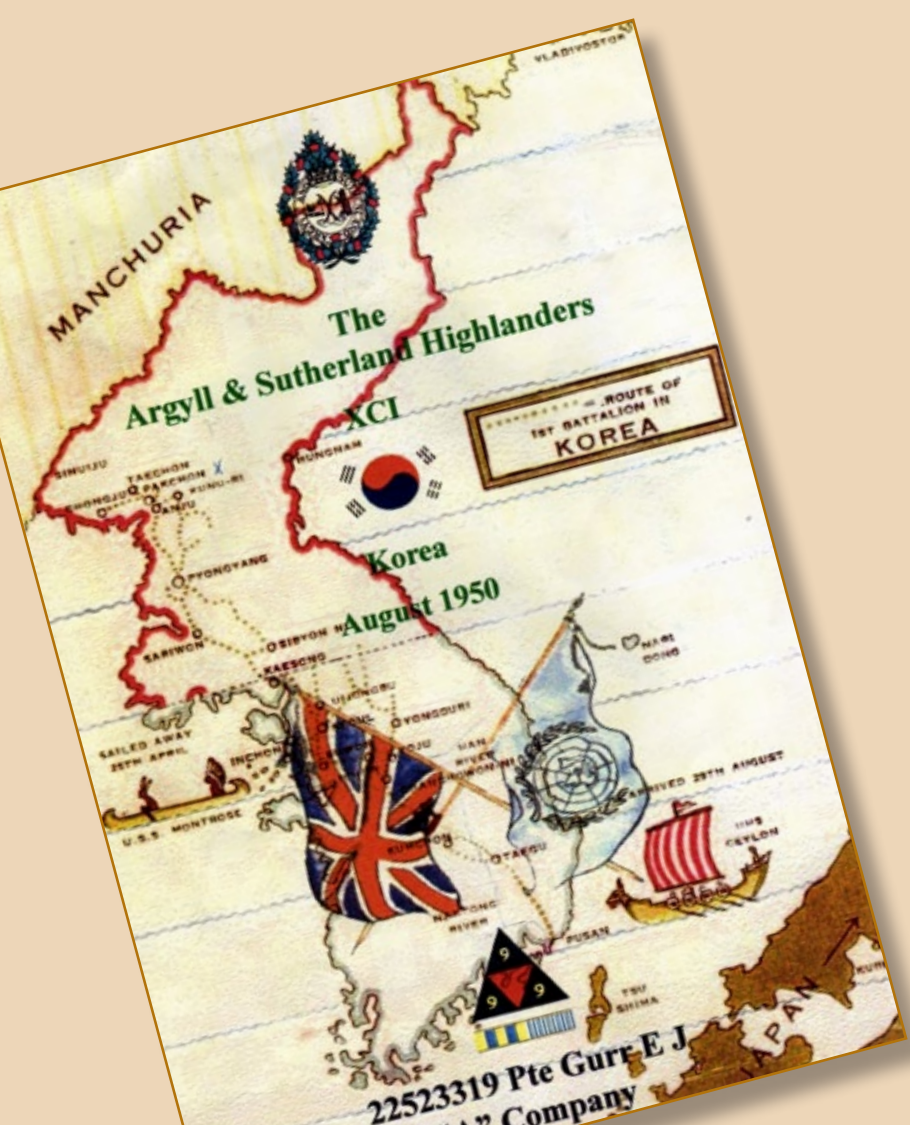
Korea escaped from Japanese rule in 1945, but was divided into two. The North took its lead from Communist China, while the South was a free democratic country supported by the USA.



**A long winter**  
*Soldiers on a snowy hillside in Korea. Winter temperatures were as low as minus 40 degrees and many men got frostbite.*  
 Courtesy of King's Own Scottish Borderers Museum



**Mortarmen in action**  
*Soldiers firing mortar bombs during a Korean summer. The temperature was around 100 degrees Fahrenheit.*  
 Courtesy of King's Own Scottish Borderers Museum



**This 1950 Christmas card shows United Nations forces arriving in Korea.** North Korea is outlined in red. The ship carrying the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders to Korea is shown as a Viking long boat. An American ship is shown as a Red Indian canoe.  
 Courtesy of Eric Gurr