



# Battles of the First Turkish Brigade in the Korean War\*

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## I. Introduction

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After the outbreak of the Korean War, the United Nations urged member states to furnish assistance to South Korea in order for it to repel the unprovoked North Korean attack with the Security Council Resolution 83.<sup>1</sup> Turkey, under the rule of newly elected Democrat Party deeply contemplated about the Korean War and how Turkey ought to react to it. Turkey was in urgent need of sincerely demonstrating its commitment to the Western alliance since it failed to do so in World War II and lost the confidence of major Western powers. Therefore, Turkey answered the United Nations' call for assistance positively and became the second country to do so after the U.S.<sup>2</sup> Initially, the Turkish side planned to provide a full infantry division to demonstrate Turkey's full commitment to the cause of the United Nations.<sup>3</sup> However, after several deliberations with the U.S., it was decided that Turkey would send a brigade comprising 301 officers, 323 sergeants, 5468 privates, totaling 6092 personnel.<sup>4</sup> Korean War was the first foreign armed conflict Turkey took part in after its foundation in 1923.

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<sup>1</sup> "Security Council Resolution 83," June 27, 1950,

[https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/112027/files/S\\_RES\\_84%281950%29-EN.pdf](https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/112027/files/S_RES_84%281950%29-EN.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> George McGhee, *The US-Turkish-NATO Middle East Connection: How the Truman Doctrine and Turkey's NATO Entry Contained the Soviets* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), 77.

<sup>3</sup> Mesut Uyar and Serhat Güvenç, "One Battle and Two Accounts: The Turkish Brigade at Kunu-Ri in November 1950," *Journal of Military History* 80, no. 4 (2016): 1126.

<sup>4</sup> "Kore Harbi'ne Türk Kuvvetlerinin Katılmasının Hatırasına Kore'de Dikilecek Abide İçin Hazırlanan Anket... [Survey Prepared for the Monument to Be Erected in Korea in Memory of the Participation of Turkish Forces in the Korean War..]," August 17, 1973, 110-9-1-15 / KORE HARBİ (1950-1953), Ministry of National Defense ATASE Archive.

Preparations regarding the organization and assembly of the brigade began after the decision was made public on July 25, 1950. The most pressing issue for the U.S. side was the fact that Turkish Army did not fight a proper war after Turkish War of Independence. Major Generals of the U.S. Army, including General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, was concerned about Turkish Brigade's effectiveness in the battlefield and viewed Turkey's military contribution negatively.<sup>5</sup> However, this concern was not shared by the State Department which was quite eager of Turkey's and other nations involvement in the Korean War alongside the U.S.<sup>6</sup> Eventually, a compromise was reached when the U.S. side decreased Turkey's original suggestion of an full infantry division to a brigade which was accepted both by the U.S. Army as well as the Turkish government.

Turkey deployed a total of sixteen brigades to Korea until 1966 and maintained five honor guards until 1971, when the Turkish Army withdrew from Korea alongside the majority of United Nations forces.<sup>7</sup> Over the 21 years of the Turkish Army's presence in Korea, it actively participated in significant battles, including the Battle of Kunu-ri, Battle of Kumyangjang-ni, Chorwon-Seoul diversion; the Taegyewonni defense, the Barhar-Kumhwa and Battle of Nevada Complex. This article primarily focuses on two major battles in which the Turkish Brigade participated, Battle of Kunu-ri and Battle of Kumyangjang-ni, and compares the official accounts provided by the United States, South Korea, and Turkey. The official histories of the Korean War were compiled by Turkey, the Republic of Korea, and the U.S. after the

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<sup>5</sup> Uyar and Güvenç, "One Battle and Two Accounts: The Turkish Brigade at Kunu-Ri in November 1950," 1125.

<sup>6</sup> Memorandum by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Merchant) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Rusk), 19 July 1950 in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950: Korea* (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1976), 432–35.

<sup>7</sup> "Ministry of National Defense ATASE Archive, 110-9-1-15, 152-0-81."

signing of the armistice in 1953. In their article titled “One Battle and Two Accounts: The Turkish Brigade at Kunu-ri in November 1950,” Mesut Uyar and Serhat Güvenç examined the Kunu-ri Battle, primarily comparing American and Turkish official accounts. However, a comprehensive history of major battles Turkish Brigade took part in, considering American, Korean, and Turkish sources, is yet to be published. This article aims to fill that gap by comparing and contrasting primarily American, Korean, and Turkish official histories, intending to document the history of the Turkish Brigade's two major battles in the Korean War.

## II. Preparing for the Korean War: Formation of the Turkish Brigade

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Immediately after the announcement of Turkey's military participation in the Korean War, Turkish Armed Forces started the preparations for of the brigade. The main basis of the Turkish Brigade was formed by 241. infantry regiment in Ankara. However, other units from Istanbul and İzmir were also trained and attached to the brigade.<sup>8</sup> Turkish Brigade was periodically inspected by an American military assistance group. The first findings suggested a lack of preparedness in the engineering, medical, vehicle transportation and communication units.<sup>9</sup> Turkish military took the advices of American military officials very seriously and took necessary precautions to prepare the soldiers in the best way possible. While military preparations continued, Colonel Celal Dora was appointed as the regiment commander, and President

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<sup>8</sup> Bahtiyar Yalta, *Kunu-Ri Muharebeleri ve Geri Çekilmeler* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2005), 49–50.

<sup>9</sup> “I.Birleşmiş Milletler Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri Komutanlığı Birliklerinin Amerikalı Uzmanlarca Yapılan Teftişlerinde, Istihkâm, Sıhhiye, Oto Nakliye Bölükleri...,” August 25, 1950, 110-9-1-15 / KORE HARBİ (1950-1953), Ministry of National Defense ATASE Archive.

Celal Bayar appointed Brigadier General Tahsin Yazıcı to lead Turkish Brigade in Korea on September 9, 1950.<sup>10</sup>

The soldiers of the brigade were generally composed of volunteers. All of the soldiers were subjected to a health screening and those deemed unfit were sent back to their original units. From Turkish Armed Forces' archives, we understand that health criteria, among other, were quite tight and the Army aimed to select some of the best soldiers. The soldiers were vaccinated for contagious diseases. These soldiers were then trained by both Turkish and American specialists in their area of expertise.<sup>11</sup> The soldiers were generally provided with American equipment acquired through Marshall Plan such as M1 rifles. There are conflicting accounts in terms of the total soldier count of the first brigade. Commander of the Turkish Brigade Brigadier General Tahsin Yazıcı and Colonel Celal Dora suggested, in their memoirs that the total number was 5090.<sup>12</sup> However, a document in Turkish Armed Forces Archives which lists all of the brigades sent to Korea until 1971 shows that the number was 6092.<sup>13</sup> Since this document was prepared in 1973 by Turkish Armed Forces with all of the necessary updates at hand, it is most probable that the number count of this document is correct.

On September 18, 1950, Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, Commander of Turkish Armed Forces General Nuri Yamut and Minister of Defense Refik Şevket İnce visited Turkish Brigade in their training

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<sup>10</sup> "Kore'ye Gidecek Birliğe, Tuğg. Tahsin Yazıcı'nın Komuta Etmesi.," September 10, 1950, Fon Code: 30-11-1-0, Prime Ministerial Archives of the Republic of Turkey (BCA).

<sup>11</sup> "I. Birleşmiş Milletler Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri Komutanlığı'na Tuğgeneral Tahsin Yazıcı'nın Seçilmesi...", August 16, 1950, 110-9-1-15 / KORE HARBİ (1950-1953), Ministry of National Defense ATASE Archive.

<sup>12</sup> Tahsin Yazıcı, *Kore Hatıralarım* (İstanbul: Ülkü Basımevi, 1963), 23; Celal Dora, *Kore Savaşında Türkler, 1950-1951* (İ. Akgün Matbaası, 1963), 24.

<sup>13</sup> "Ministry of National Defense ATASE Archive, 110-9-1-15, 152-0-81."

quarters at Etimesgut, Ankara. In his speech to the soldiers, Menderes suggested that Turkey decided to participate in the Korean War for Turkey's future and all Turks were with the brigade. Commander of Turkish Armed Forces Yamut said: "You are going to the war. Your fame already reached Korea. Americans put up the banners 'Turks are here' in the weak parts of the front and gained strength from your name. My sons! I am sure you will fight thinking about Turks honor. I trust you. I will wait for your victory news."<sup>14</sup> Minister of Defense İnce, on the other hand, relayed his hope for a swift victory in Korea: "*Inshallah* the war will be over even before you reached Korea and then you can return Turkey safely."<sup>15</sup> The hope that war could end swiftly stemmed from the U.S. intervention. By mid-September, famous Battle of Incheon already started and the news of North Korean defeat in a variety of battle fronts reached Turkey. Therefore, soldiers started to think that they will not fight in Korea since by the time they reached, the war would be all over. The next day, Turkish Brigade started transferring to Iskenderun port, where American ships would take them all the way to Korea.

All of the units reached İskenderun port on September 24, 1950. On September 23, 1950, the units that reached İskenderun were assembled for the prayer of Eid al-Adha. All of the soldiers including the commander of the Turkish Brigade Brigadier General Tahsin Yazıcı participated in the prayer that was led by the brigade's *imam* Muhsin Örtülü. As it was the very last public event before the long journey to Korea, soldiers were encouraged by Muhsin Örtülü. He said:

Troops! You deserve congratulations. You shall be waging war in East Asia, just as our beloved Prophet said. As troops of a strong nation, you will fight for the noble causes of humanity in

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<sup>14</sup> Yalta, *Kunu-Ri Muharebeleri ve Geri Çekilmeler*, 55.

<sup>15</sup> Yalta, 54–55.

far-off regions instead of fighting within our borders. Never forget that you are the lineage of the great *Akıncıs*, who ran and battled for freedom and justice, taking their banner from continent to continent. Keep your hearts at ease; don't worry. You will honor your flag by carrying it from triumph to victory, just like your forefathers did. It is truly wonderful that you are fighting for freedom, justice, and human decency. Troops! Know well that a soldier is not called dead. Because a soldier does not die but becomes a martyr. To become a martyr means to attain the highest place in the eyes of Allah. Being a martyr is achieving eternal life. Those who survive also earn the honorable title of *ghazi*. Soldiers, the brave grandchildren of martyred and *ghazi* ancestors! May the help of Allah and the intercession of our beloved Prophet always be upon you.<sup>16</sup>

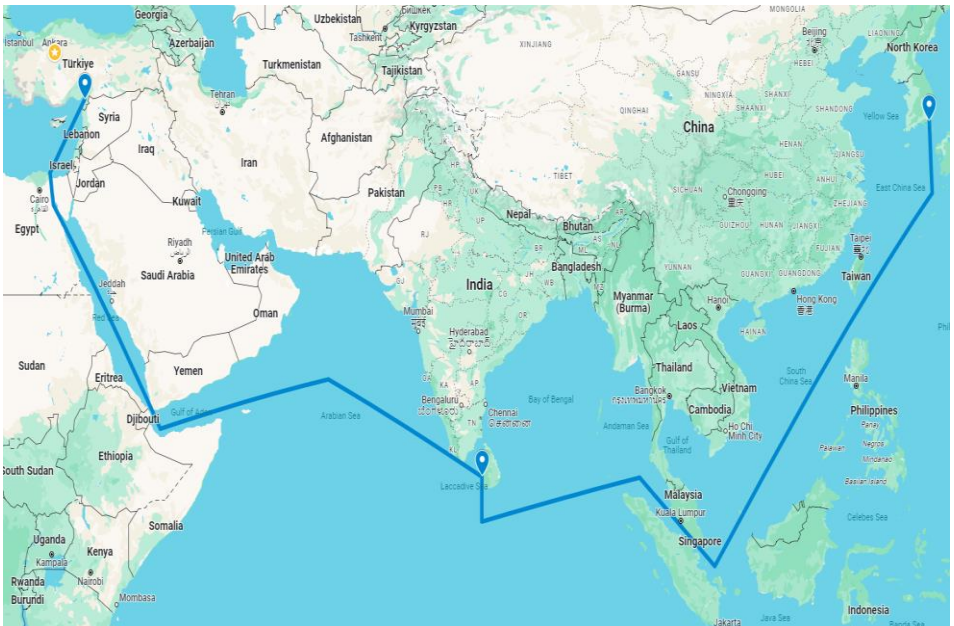
Örtülü's emphasis on the noble causes of humanity and depiction of the Korean War as a war similar to Ottoman *ghazas* are points that needs further investigation. After the end of the prayer, preparations for Turkish Brigade's transportation to Korea continued. Three American military ships namely: USS General J. H. McRae, USS General W. G. Haan and USAT Private Elden H. Johnson. USS General J. H. McRae left İskenderun on the night of September 25 followed by USS General W. G. Haan on September 26 and finally USAT Private Elden H. Johnson on September 29.<sup>17</sup> The ships passed through the Red Sea and made the only stopover in Colombo through which they reached Singapore and finally landed on Pusan, the final destination. Some of the major problems faced by the brigade in these ships were generally cultural. First and foremost, there was a lack of bread, one of the primary ingredients of every Turkish meal. This problem was solved by increasing the amount of potatoes served in every meal. One of the other

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<sup>16</sup> Yalta, 62–63.

<sup>17</sup> Yazıcı, *Kore Hatıralarım*, 85.

major problems was the usage of toilets. The soldiers were used to squat toilets while they were provided flush toilets. This problem was solved by training soldiers how to use flush toilets by their superiors.<sup>18</sup> Soldiers military training continued in the ships and especially target practices were done. On October 18, 1950, first units of the brigade landed on Pusan port.



**Figure 3.** Turkish Brigade's Route to Korea via Google Maps.

Bahtiyar Yalta, a lieutenant, describes his initial observations of Pusan and Koreans in general:

The main street of Pusan is covered in dust. Barefoot, with heads uncovered, dressed in old clothes, weary, sad, and with gloomy faces, men and women wander the streets. The city's population seems to have increased due to migration. There is a crowd of

<sup>18</sup> Yazıcı, 86–87.



unemployed and powerless people. After a lackluster welcome ceremony, we see poverty everywhere we look. Everywhere there is sorrow, fear, hunger, and haste. Almost everyone is begging. People sift through piles of garbage, hopeless and unemployed. There are hardly any vehicles on the streets other than military vehicles. The war has devastated the weak Korean economy... We got off at the train station. Children surrounded us. We were overwhelmed by the sound of children crying. They were asking us for food. We had entered a hellish situation. We were at a loss for what to do... We had never imagined encountering such a heartbreaking situation in Korea. At the station, we distributed the ration boxes given to us to the children surrounding us.<sup>19</sup>

### **III. Battle of Kunu-ri (Battle of the Ch'ongch'on River)**

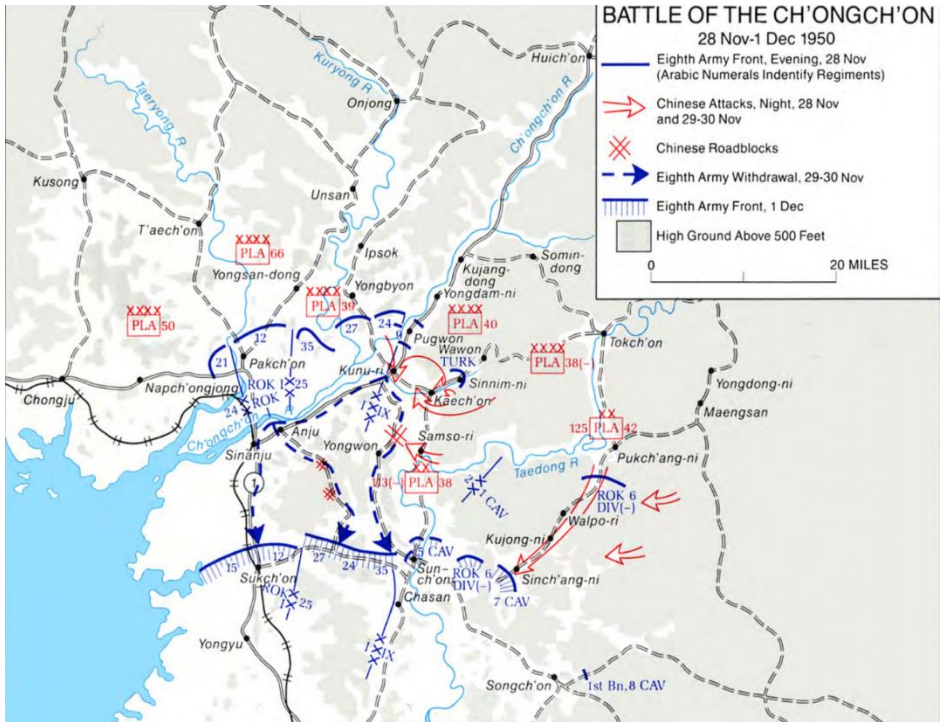
After reaching Pusan, the Brigade was sent to the city of Taegu, a central city about 100 km north of Pusan. The brigade reached Taegu on the night of September 20. In Taegu, the brigade was given its English moniker: “North Star.” There, the brigade received an accelerated military education from the American military officials and equipped with new military weapons. The brigade mainly trained for combat and guerilla actions. During its time in Taegu, the brigade was reorganized by Brigadier General Tahsin Yazıcı. The brigade’s 241st Infantry’s regimental headquarters was disbanded and three infantry battalions were directly connected under General Yazıcı’s command.<sup>20</sup> The decision was taken by General Yazıcı and it was not received well by the commander of 241st Infantry Regiment Colonel Celal Dora who openly criticized the decision and even wrote a letter of protest to Turkish Armed Forces from Korea in which Dora asked his withdrawal from the

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<sup>19</sup> Yalta, *Kunu-Ri Muharebeleri ve Geri Çekilmeler*, 126.

<sup>20</sup> Uyar and Güvenç, “One Battle and Two Accounts: The Turkish Brigade at Kunu-Ri in November 1950,” 1132.

war.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, this issue dragged on throughout Yazıcı and Dora's tenure in Korea and created two different camps of the brigade. At times, it threatened the unity of the brigade since both camps rarely communicated.



**Figure 4.** Battle of Kunuri (Ch'ongcho'on River)<sup>22</sup>

The first order received by the brigade on November 26, 1950, was from Major General John B. Coulter, the commanding general of the U.S. Army 9th Corps, that the brigade was attached to 9th Corps and it needed to secure the town of Tokchon, a mid-sized town North of

<sup>21</sup> Dora, *Kore Savaşında Türkler, 1950-1951*, 78–79.

<sup>22</sup> Billy C. Mossman, *United States Army in the Korean War Ebb and Flow, November 1950-July 1951* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1990), 106.

Pyeongyang, North Korea's capital city. At the time, the UN troops were on a mission to unify the Korean Peninsula and reach the Yalu River. Commander of the UN forces, General Douglas MacArthur suggested "you tell the boys that when they get to the Yalu (River) they are going home. I want to make good on my statement that they are going to eat Christmas dinner at home."<sup>23</sup> What MacArthur did not take into account was a decisive Chinese intervention to defend North Korea. This counteroffensive would totally change the nature of the Korean War and prolong the conflict two more years in the end.

Turkish Brigade left Taegu way before the receipt of General Coulter's order and reached firstly to Seoul, then Pyeongyang and finally Kunu-ri. Some of the troops travelled by train and some by motorized units. On November 26, 1950, Turkish Brigade received an order to proceed for the city of Tokchon and protect it but it encountered withdrawing South Korean soldiers who communicated the existence of a big enemy unit north.<sup>24</sup> On November 27, at 14:30, a new order was given which asked the brigade to secure Yongdong-ni, an area between Tokchon and Kunu-ri. General Tahsin Yazıcı concluded that his troops would not be able to reach Yongdong-ni and instead retreated to Wawon.<sup>25</sup> Mesut Uyar and Serhat Güvenç links this and other independent decisions of the General to him belonging to the "Prussian School" that did not see a problem in making drastic changes according to the circumstances of the field.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Washington Evening Star*, November 29, 1950.

<sup>24</sup> Yazıcı, *Kore Hatıralarım*, 156–57.

<sup>25</sup> "Genelkurmay Başkanlığı'na Sunulmak Üzere Hazırlanmış Kunuri Savaşı İle İlgili Rapor.," November 29, 1950, 110-9-1-15 / KORE HARBİ (1950-1953), Ministry of National Defense ATASE Archive.

<sup>26</sup> Uyar and Güvenç, "One Battle and Two Accounts: The Turkish Brigade at Kunu-Ri in November 1950," 1138.

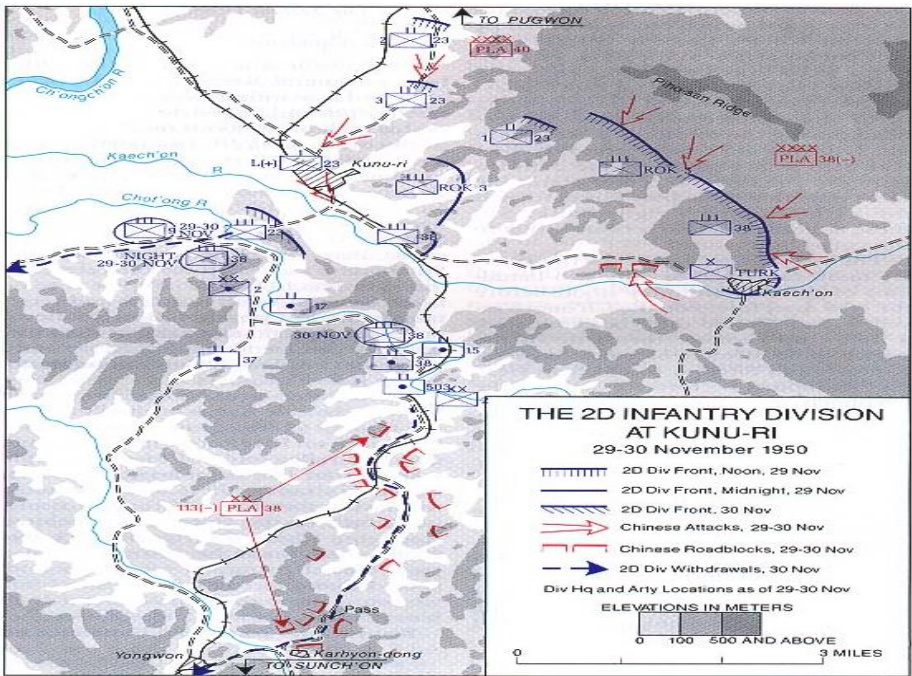


Figure 5. Battle of Kunu-ri<sup>27</sup>

After General Yazıcı’s decision, the brigade headed for Wawon. However, especially for the motorized units, it took around ten to twelve hours to turn their way around in the narrow pathways. The Reconnaissance Platoon was the first to be attacked by the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army (PVA) 342nd Regiment 114th Division on November 28 around 1:00 o’clock. Then, throughout the day, the brigade fought with the Chinese PVA. After the brigade started to suffer greatly under the continuous Chinese PVA attack, General Yazıcı decided to withdraw to Sinnim-ni, instead of defending Wawon. However, unable to retreat fully, the brigade was surrounded by PVA 340 and 342nd Regiment. The battle continued through the night and the brigade was only able to break the Chinese encirclement on the morning of November

<sup>27</sup> Mossman, *Ebb and Flow*, 110.

29.<sup>28</sup> Here, an interesting development occurred between General Yazıcı and Colonel Dora. Colonel Dora was of the opinion that the brigade should retreat further back but General Yazıcı wanted to defend Sinnim-ni. Colonel Dora, in his memoir, suggests that he communicated to General Yazıcı the need to regroup those soldiers further back from Sinnim-ni. To do that, Colonel, along with a couple of officers, withdrew firstly to Kunu-ri and then all the way to Pyeongyang.<sup>29</sup> General Yazıcı, on the other hand, argues that he did not allow Colonel Dora to withdraw, and that Dora's actions at that moment were not responsible.<sup>30</sup> Here, it is clear that the chain of command was seriously broken. Mesut Uyar and Serhat Güvenç posit that "both Yazıcı and Dora made terrible mistakes and fell short of standards expected of a commanding officer."<sup>31</sup> After breaking the encirclement, in the morning of November 29, Turkish Brigade was able to unite with the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division and was given the order to defend the right wing on the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division. However, after realizing the fact that U.S. divisions in its left-hand side started to withdraw, the brigade also started its withdrawal operation. During the operation of this withdrawal, on the night of November 29, Chinese PVA 114th Division again attacked the brigade.<sup>32</sup> Outnumbered, the brigade withdrew firstly to Kunu-ri and then Sunchon-Pyeongyang. When the units finally reached Pyeongyang, some of the American soldiers welcomed them very warmly. Private Mehmet Gürsoy recalls the scene:

All of the Americans were embracing us. They were saying 'Turkish number one.' For one moment, we thought they were mocking us. We lost our commander, we lost our battalion, we

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<sup>28</sup> "Ministry of National Defense ATASE Archive, 110-9-1-15, 6-0-54."

<sup>29</sup> Dora, *Kore Savaşında Türkler, 1950-1951*, 139.

<sup>30</sup> Yazıcı, *Kore Hatıralarım*, 177.

<sup>31</sup> Uyar and Güvenç, "One Battle and Two Accounts: The Turkish Brigade at Kunu-Ri in November 1950," 1139.

<sup>32</sup> "Ministry of National Defense ATASE Archive, 110-9-1-15, 6-0-54."

lost our unit. Later, we asked and learned that since the Turkish Brigade resisted, two American divisions were rescued from the siege. Still, we were devastated.<sup>33</sup>

Kunu-ri Battle was the most devastating for the Turkish Brigade throughout the Korean War. The casualties of the brigade were at a record high of 767 of which 218 died in action, 455 wounded, and 94 missing.<sup>34</sup> While the brigade was able to retreat back, its effectiveness throughout the war became questionable. While General Walton Walker, commander of the U.S. 8th Army presented fifteen silver and bronze medals to the brigade's personnel for its bravery throughout Kunu-ri Battle, the issue of Turkish Brigade's role especially in the Kunu-ri Battle became a focal point of discussion for both Turkish and American historians. Given that Turkish and American sources have been thoroughly compared in Mesut Uyar and Serhat Güvenç's article titled "One Battle and Two Accounts: Turkish Brigade at Kunu-ri in November 1950," this account will first summarize the main points of divergence between Turkish and American accounts. Subsequently, it will introduce the South Korean official histories of the Korean War (6.25 전쟁사) prepared by the Military History Institute of the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Korea (국방부 군사편찬연구소) to better analyze the details of the battle.

The U.S. military's official history of the Korean War's third volume entitled *The United States Army in the Korean War* written by Billy Mossman makes several suggestions regarding Turkish Brigade's combat effectiveness during the Kunu-ri Battle. First and foremost, the U.S. official history makes the claim that stumbling upon fleeing South Korean troops in Tokchon which belonged to the 6th and 7th Infantry

<sup>33</sup> Cem Fakir, *Şimal Yıldızı Son Kore Gazileri* (İstanbul: NTV Yayınları, 2010), 73.

<sup>34</sup> H. Erkilet, T. Bıyıklıoğlu, and H. Arun, *Kore Harbinde Türk Silahlı Kuvvetlerinin Muharebeleri (1950–1953) Özet* (İstanbul: ATASE Yayınları, 1959), 138.

Divisions, the brigade mistook them for Chinese troops and fought with them causing casualties to both sides.<sup>35</sup> Mainly based on oral history accounts, this description makes Turkish Brigade's numerous battles in Kunu-ri irrelevant and accuses it of committing friendly fire, a major mistake in any war. When Turkish official military history and other accounts are checked regarding the occurrence of this or a similar event, General Tahsin Yazıcı's memoir provides some insights. Indeed, Yazıcı recalls encountering fleeing South Korean soldiers and posits that the brigade closely examined them and came to the conclusion that they belonged to the 7th Infantry Division of South Korean Army. However, the fleeing soldiers were not answering some of the questions in detail, which caused some soldiers of the brigade to suspect their identities. Still, Yazıcı suggests that due to language barrier, the brigade could not communicate with them in a clear manner and had to let them go on their way.<sup>36</sup> In order to verify the authenticity of the American official history's argument, South Korean official Korean War military history is consulted. However, South Korean official Korean War military history does not mention of any direct combat between 6th and 7th Infantry Divisions and Turkish Brigade or a friendly fire issue.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, one may argue that the friendly fire theory put forward by the U.S. official military history is not persuasive mainly because there is no hard evidence that supports the theory apart from some oral history accounts.

The issue of miscommunication is also highlighted and the U.S. official history suggests that Turkish Brigade was not able to effectively carry out the orders given to it by the U.S. 9th Corps. In addition, General

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<sup>35</sup> Mossman, *Ebb and Flow*, 81.

<sup>36</sup> Yazıcı, *Kore Hatıralarım*, 65.

<sup>37</sup> 6.25 戦争史. 7, 中共軍 참전과 유엔군의 철수 [*History of the Korean War Volume 7 Chinese Intervention and UN Troops Withdrawal*] (서울 Seoul: 국방부 군사편찬연구소 Ministry of Defense Institute of Military History, 2010), 465–68.

Yazıcı's abovementioned Prussian style decisions to retreat without receiving a direct order was criticized and it is suggested that "regardless of repeated urgings from the American advisers" General Yazıcı decided not to follow General Walton Walker's orders line-by-line.<sup>38</sup> Here, a close reading of the U.S. official history may result in a conclusion that General Yazıcı's self-made decisions eventually led to the 2nd Infantry Division's right flank to be left vacant, which eventually led to more casualties of the U.S. side. While U.S. official history accuses Turkish Brigade of not following the orders line-by-line, Turkish official history accounts turn the blame to the U.S. Army for not providing the brigade much needed intelligence swiftly. Turkish official history accounts also view Yazıcı's decisions from a different angle and argue that General Yazıcı had the ultimate decision-making power since he was in field observing the changing conditions first hand. Therefore, following General Walker's orders line-by-line could result in devastating consequences.<sup>39</sup> General Yazıcı, in his report to Turkish Armed Forces regarding the Kunu-ri Battle, repeats the issue of "taking the initiative at hand" and decide on what to do during the tumultuous situation. The documents found in Turkish Armed Forces Archives makes it clear that General Yazıcı saw it fit to make certain decisions instead of waiting for clear instructions from General Walker.<sup>40</sup> When we turn our attention to the Korean official history account, it also recounts the U.S. official histories argument that General Yazıcı did not follow General Walker's orders line-by-line. However, the Korean official history sees merit in Yazıcı's decision to retreat from Wawon to Sinnim-ni since he was "facing the imminent danger of a blocked retreat route." This line of

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<sup>38</sup> Mossman, *Ebb and Flow*, 108.

<sup>39</sup> Erkilet, Bıyıklıoğlu, and Arun, *Kore Harbinde Türk Silahlı Kuvvetlerinin Muharebeleri (1950-1953) Özet*, 98.

<sup>40</sup> "Birleşmiş Milletler Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri Birliklerinin Başarısıyla Sonuçlanan Kunuri Savaşlarının Yer Aldığı 26 Kasım - 1 Aralık 1950 Tarihleri Arasını Kapsayan Hareket ve Muharebe Raporları...", December 5, 1950, 110-9-1-15 / KORE HARBI (1950-1953), Ministry of National Defense ATASE Archive.



positively interpreting Yazıcı's decisions continues for the retreat from Wawon to Sinnim-ni in Korean official history:

Having completed the defensive positions, the division was unexpectedly attacked by a Chinese Communist surprise assault at midnight on the same day. Infiltrating the rear of the division's position disguised as refugees, the enemy collaborated with North Korean forces, attacking vulnerable areas of the division. Turkish soldiers mounted vehicles, including tanks, and began a withdrawal towards Bongmyeong-ni. About an hour later, after receiving reports of the surprise attack from the mortar battalion, the division commander attempted communication, but there was no response from the main defensive position. Facing this situation, the division commander disregarded some suggestions for withdrawal and decided to establish a new defensive position in Bongmyeong-ni. After assessing the situation of the front-line battalions, he planned for the next operation. Following the commander's orders, approximately 150 assembled troops organized into companies to establish a new defensive position on the eastern hillside of Bongmyeong-ni. The division commander continued efforts to reinforce and strengthen the defensive position in Bongmyeong-ni while trying to rescue the isolated main force in Sinnim-ni.<sup>41</sup>

As can be inferred from the above passage, Korean official history seems to approach the whole battle in a more balanced way. Securing this balanced view was made possible by using newly released documents as well as compiled accounts. Therefore, according to the Korean official history, Turkish Brigade successfully slowed down the

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<sup>41</sup> 한국전쟁 전투사: 청천강 전투 [*History of the Korean War Battle of Chongchon River*] (서울 [Seoul]: 국방부 전사편찬위원회 [Ministry of Defense Institute of Military History], 1985).454.

rapid advance of PVA especially in Wawon.<sup>42</sup> Kim Jin Woo, a Korean military historian, in his article entitled “6·25전쟁기 터키군 참전에 관한 연구 - 참전 동기와 군우리 전투를 중심으로 (A Study on the Turkish Participation in the Korean War: Focusing on the Motivation behind the Turkish Participation and the Battle of Kunu-ri) suggests that Turkish Brigade’s “battles in Wawon-ni, Sinnim-ni, and Bongmyeong-ni, played a vital role in buying crucial time for the withdrawal of the U.S. 8th Army.”<sup>43</sup>

The abovementioned positive Korean perspective cannot be found in official U.S. military histories. Turkish Brigade is generally viewed in a negative point of view primarily because of the commanding officer, General Tahsin Yazıcı’s self-made decisions on field, which was unheard of for the U.S. officers. However, read alongside Turkish and Korean official history accounts, one can have a balanced perspective regarding Turkish Brigade’s battle experience in Kunu-ri. As Uyar and Güvenç suggested in their abovementioned article, commanding officers Yazıcı and Dora made mistakes during the course of the Kunu-ri Battle. However, one should also recognize the merits of the brigade, for which it received fifteen Silver Star and Bronze Star medals from General Walton Walker after the battle.<sup>44</sup>

The battle and its result reached Turkey thorough printed press. One of the most prominent points was that the press decided to describe

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<sup>42</sup> 한국전쟁 전투사: 청천강 전투 [History of the Korean War Battle of Chongchon River].460.

<sup>43</sup> Kim-Jin Woo, “6.25 전쟁기 터키군 참전에 관한 연구: 참전 동기와 군우리 전투를 중심으로 [A Study on the Turkish Participation in the Korean War: Focusing on the Motivation behind the Turkish Participation and the Battle of Kunuri],” 한국사연구회보 162 (2013): 87-128.

<sup>44</sup> Stanley Sandler, *The Korean War: An Encyclopedia* (London: Routledge, 2014), 339.

Battle of Kunu-ri as a great victory of the Turkish Brigade. *Cumhuriyet* reported that Turkish Brigade's heroism in Kunu-ri created excitement throughout the world. The news also conveyed the words of an American soldier who said that he has yet to see a soldier in Korea as brave as the Turks.<sup>45</sup> *Hürriyet*, on the other hand, transmitted that General Yazıcı was alive and Colonel Dora wrapped the flag of the brigade to his waist and opened the way for the brigade. A caricature depicted General Yazıcı in front of the soldiers shooting his gun while the soldiers killing the enemy with bayonet attacks.<sup>46</sup> *Akşam*'s headline read "Turkish Bayonet's Heroic Saga in Korea."<sup>47</sup> *Zafer*, on the other hand, suggested that the defeat was avoided only because of Turkish Brigade.<sup>48</sup> Last but not least, *Son Posta* printed a picture which depicted praying soldiers in a mosque for the Turkish Brigade in Korea.<sup>49</sup> The common point of more or less all print media reporting the battle was that they depicted the Kunu-ri Battle as a huge victory of the brigade. In addition, the U.S. forces were portrayed as the ones in need that were greatly helped by the brigade. While some parts of these illustrations were right, some parts were totally wrong as well. The most important aspect of all, however, was that they rarely mentioned the situation of the killed or lost soldiers let alone the wounded. These aspects turned into details that were addressed later. Through these kinds of reporting, the myth of "Turk in Korea" was created and reinforced.<sup>50</sup>

Turkish print press was not the only one covering the Turkish Brigade's Kunu-ri Battle. Starting from late November, the American

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<sup>45</sup> *Cumhuriyet*, December 2, 1950.

<sup>46</sup> *Hürriyet*, December 2, 1950.

<sup>47</sup> *Akşam*, December 2, 1950.

<sup>48</sup> *Zafer*, December 2, 1950.

<sup>49</sup> *Son Posta*, December 2, 1950.

<sup>50</sup> Gavin D. Brockett, "The Legend of 'The Turk' in Korea: Popular Perceptions of the Korean War and Their Importance to a Turkish National Identity," *War & Society* 22, no. 2 (2004): 109–42.

print press started focusing primarily on the Turkish Brigade and its battles against the Chinese PLA. Printing a picture of the Turkish Brigade in Kunu-ri, *The Guthrie Daily Leader* reported: “soldiers of the Turkish Brigade in camp near Kunu-ri, North Korea, are shown clearing their weapons in this picture taken on Thanksgiving Day. News dispatches say the Turks cut themselves out of a Red trap northeast of Kunu, killing more 200 Reds and capturing 200 others in a fierce bayonet charge.”<sup>51</sup> *The Hobart Democrat-Chief* depicted Turkish Brigade’s leader General Tahsin Yazıcı as “Turks tough commander” and added that he “refused to withdraw” against the Chinese PLA attacks.<sup>52</sup> *Berkeley Daily Gazette* reported “Turks Battle Valiantly on the Korea Front” and included Lieutenant Theodore Pickett’s evaluation of the Turkish Brigade. Pickett, who worked closely with the soldiers of the Turkish Brigade on their retreat from Kunu-ri said: “the captain of that company I took up there- he wants to attack. I couldn’t get him to come back.”<sup>53</sup> These kinds of reporting kept continuing throughout November and December of 1950. Since the UN troops were on the retreat, Turkish Brigade’s bravery was especially highlighted throughout all of the American print press. It seems that this widespread praise of the Turkish Brigade effected U.S. politicians as well. For example, On December 18, former Congressman from Illinois Charles S. Dewey counted Turkey as one of the primary areas in the world where the U.S. should aid. Dewey said: “the splendid record of the Turkish Brigade in the Korean fighting may be cited” for grounds on aid to Turkey.<sup>54</sup> On February 12, 1951, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State George McGhee specifically cited Turkish Brigade’s bravery and said: “look at the brave Turkish Brigade in Korea which would not have been sent had not Turkey been confident.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *The Guthrie Daily Leader*, November 29, 1950.

<sup>52</sup> *The Hobart Democrat-Chief*, November 29, 1950.

<sup>53</sup> *Berkeley Daily Gazette*, November 30, 1950.

<sup>54</sup> *Times Herald*, December 18, 1950.

<sup>55</sup> *Miami Daily News*, February 22, 1951.

Statements such as this one show that Turkish Brigade's battles in the Korean War indeed had a positive impact on Turkey's outlook, especially in the U.S. After the Battle of Kunu-ri, Turkey was started to be seen as a potential partner of the U.S. This perspective gained more traction when the news of Turkish Brigade's battles reached the U.S. through print media. An unintended consequence of Turkey's World War II era neutrality was the loss of credibility among the Western pact. Battle of Kunu-ri should be seen as one of the most important thresholds in repairing Turkey's outlook around the world.

#### **IV. Battle of Kumyangjang-ni**

After the battle of Kunu-ri, Turkish and American military officers started shifting the blame of defeat to each other. Some U.S. officers complained about the problems of miscommunication and posited that Turks were unruly in the sense that they did not follow the orders line-by-line. The Turkish side, on the other hand, complained that it was not adequately supplied throughout the battles.<sup>56</sup> Turkish Armed Forces tried to solve the issue of miscommunication by sending more translators and personnel who could communicate in English.<sup>57</sup> After reaching Pyeongyang, Turkish Brigade was firstly sent to Kaesong, then Sosari, an area in between Seoul and Incheon. In Sosari, the brigade was rehabilitated and reinforced by new weapons. On December 13, 1950, the brigade was attached to 25th Infantry Division of the U.S. Army and ordered to defend Kimpo, a town located around thirty kilometers north of Seoul.

In late December, General Tahsin Yazıcı received an invitation

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<sup>56</sup> Stanley Sandler, *The Korean War: No Victors, No Vanquished* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 114.

<sup>57</sup> "Birleşmiş Milletler Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri Komutanlığı'nda Görevli Tercümanlardan Biri Hasta, Diğeri Yaralı Olduğundan Tercüman Gönderilmesi," December 18, 1950, 110-9-1-15 / KORE HARBİ (1950-1953), Ministry of National Defense ATASE Archive.

from Korean President Syngman Rhee for a visit to Kyongmudae, the Presidential complex. General Yazıcı, along with Dr. Kamil İdil, Turkey's representative at the UN Commission on Korea, were received by President Syngman Rhee and his wife Francesca Donner Rhee. In his memoir, General Yazıcı recounts the time and suggests that the President and his wife received them like old friends. In the meeting, President Rhee started the conversation with Turkish Brigade's arrival to Pusan and turned his attention to the Battle of Kunu-ri. President Rhee extended his condolences for the soldiers that lost their lives in the battle and said that he followed the battle news all day and prayed for the brigade's safe return. In his memoir, General Yazıcı posits that he sensed the sincerity in the words of President Rhee since, during the conversation, President Rhee's eyes filled with tears.<sup>58</sup> When teas were served during the conversation, the Turkish side was reminded of Turkey with black breads served alongside their tea. General Yazıcı and Dr. Kamil İdil told the President's wife Francesca Donner Rhee that they were reminded of their villages with this black bread. After hearing their story, Francesca Donner Rhee specifically brought a whole black bread and gave them as a gift. General Yazıcı recounts that even though they wanted to leave earlier, President and her wife did not let them go, and they stayed in Kyongmudae, the Presidential complex, longer than expected.<sup>59</sup>

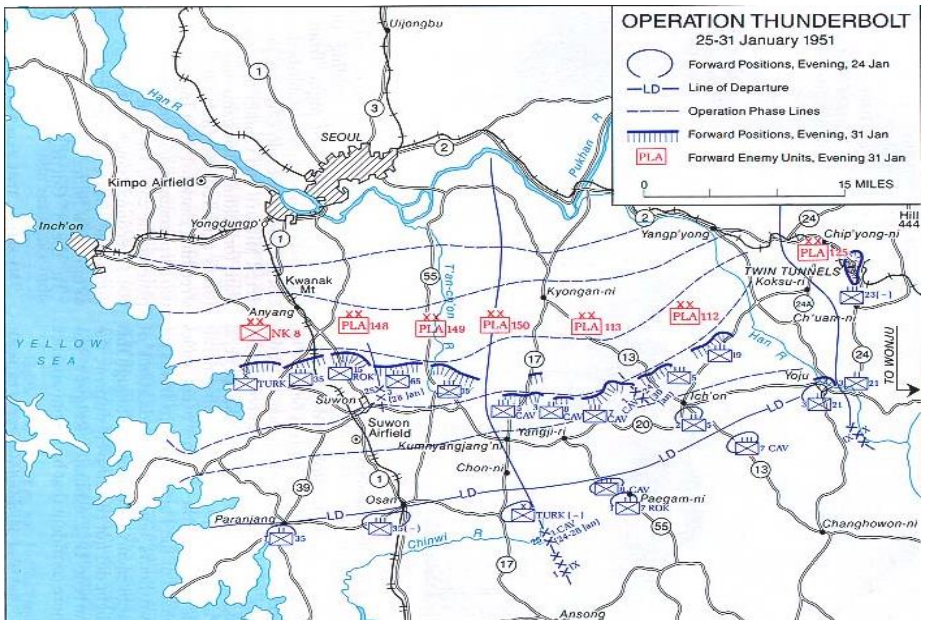
Not long after General Yazıcı's visit to President Rhee, on December 31, 1950, Chinese PVA launched its third Third Phase Offensive aiming to break the lines of the UN forces and forcing them out of the Korean Peninsula by invading Seoul. General Matthew Ridgway who became the commander of the U.S. 8th Army after General Walton Walker's death on December 23, ordered his troops to withdraw from their positions. Turkish Brigade, alongside 25th Infantry Division,

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<sup>58</sup> Yazıcı, *Kore Hatıralarım*, 249.

<sup>59</sup> Yazıcı, 250.

retreated all the way to the city of Chonan, about one hundred kilometers south of Seoul. On January 23, 1951, General Ridgway ordered the brigade to reach firstly Ansong, and the Kumyangjang-ni alongside the U.S. 25th Infantry Division.<sup>60</sup> The brigade was to participate in the Operation Thunderbolt, aimed to surprise attacking Chinese PVA troops by an unexpected offensive.



**Figure 6.** Operation Thunderbolt<sup>61</sup>

On January 25, 1951, the brigade reached Ansong where it was supposed to attack Kumyangjang-ni. The brigade was to attack with two major units: the left unit was led by Colonel Celal Dora and the right was led by Major Ziya Aydemir. On the right side of the brigade there was 15th Infantry Unit of South Korea and on the left side was 35th U.S.

<sup>60</sup> Yazıcı, 259.

<sup>61</sup> Mossman, *Ebb and Flow*, 241.

Regiment.<sup>62</sup> At 7:30 a.m. all of the units attacked altogether to the enemy positions. Both sides of the brigade received stiff resistance from the Chinese PVA units which were around three times the size of the brigade and by midnight, the left unit used cover and concealment effectively and approached the enemy positions, while two other platoons flanked from the west attacked the enemy leading to the successful capture of Hill 185. The right side of the unit was able to reach to Kumyangjang-ni town's northern side and fought with the Chinese PVA units located in the town.<sup>63</sup> However, in the night, General Yazıcı saw it fit to withdraw the unit to regroup further for an attack next day. In his memoirs, General Yazıcı recounts the time a diary was found on a Chinese PVA soldier belonging to a Turkish sergeant who died in Kunu-ri. The news of the found diary quickly reached all units and they realized that the Chinese units they were fighting against were the same that they fought in Kunu-ri Battle. This, General Yazıcı suggests, created a sense of revenge among all soldiers that fired them up in the ensuing battles.<sup>64</sup>

On January 26, the units attacked PVA positions at 7:30 a.m. again. The main aim of the left side of the brigade was to secure the strategic hill number 156 (151 in Korean sources) and the right side was to secure Kumyangjang-ni. The right side of the brigade again faced with stiff resistance and had to attack the enemy with their bayonets and eventually securing the control of Kumyangang-ni. Then, another Chinese PVA resistance occurred in the north eastern part of the occupied town, which was dealt with a new supply of troops. In the left side, the most crucial task was to secure the strategic hill number 156. The battle continued until sunset and the left-hand side of the brigade also had to attack the enemy with their infamous bayonet attacks. At the end of the day, both units of the brigade succeed in reaching their

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<sup>62</sup> Yazıcı, *Kore Hatıralarım*, 260.

<sup>63</sup> Yazıcı, 261–62; Mossman, *Ebb and Flow*, 243.

<sup>64</sup> Yazıcı, *Kore Hatıralarım*, 263.



targets.<sup>65</sup> During the three-day battle at Kumyangjang-ni, Turkish Brigade showcased its bravery in hand-to-hand combat and defeated the enemy. While Turkish sources indicate the enemy casualties as more than 1000, the Korean official history claims it was 474 in which 77 in Kumyangjang-ni and 397 in hill number 151 (156 in Turkish sources).<sup>66</sup>

After the Kumyangjang-ni Battle, Turkish Brigade's fame reached to all of the UN forces. The brigade was awarded Distinguished Unit Citation signed by President Harry Truman on July 11, 1951, for its heroism in the Battle of Kumyangjang-ni.<sup>67</sup> In addition, the brigade also received Presidential Unit Citation from South Korea on September 1952 for its heroic fighting in the Battle of Kumyangjang-ni.<sup>68</sup> After the end of Kumyangjang-ni Battle, on February 13, the Commander of the UN Forces General Douglas MacArthur visited the brigade to congratulate them for their victory. General MacArthur told General Yazıcı that most UN forces started to call Turkish Brigade as "B.B." At first, General Yazıcı and his right-hand man could not understand what B.B. stood for. Later, General MacArthur told him that it meant bravest of brave and best suited for Turkish Brigade in Korea. Flattered, General Yazıcı

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<sup>65</sup> Yazıcı, 267–72.

<sup>66</sup> 6.25 전쟁사 제8집 中共軍 총공세과 유엔군의 재반격 [History of the Korean War Volume 8 The Chinese People's Army's General Offensive and the UN Forces' Counterattack] (서울 [Seoul]: 국방부 군사편찬연구소 [Ministry of Defense Institute of Military History], 2011).239-240.

<sup>67</sup> John M. Vander Lippe, "Forgotten Brigade of the Forgotten War: Turkey's Participation in the Korean War," *Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 1 (2000): 97; "25 - 27 Ocak 1951 Tarihleri Arasında Düşman Kuvvetlerine Karşı Girişilen Harekâta Gösterdikleri Fevkalade Cesâret ve Kahramanlık Dolayısıyla Kore Türk Tugayı İle Bağlı Birliklerinin Amerikan Hükûmetince 'Üstün Birlik Madalyası' İle Taltif Edilmesi.," June 21, 1951, 110-9-1-15 / KORE HARBİ (1950-1953), Ministry of National Defense ATASE Archive.

<sup>68</sup> "이승만대통령주한터키군사령관 타신야지치 소장훈장수여 [President Syngman Rhee Confers Medal to the Turkish Military Commander in Korea, General Yazıcı]," 1951, CET0025566, 국가기록원 National Archives of the Republic of Korea.

thanked General MacArthur for personally visiting the brigade.<sup>69</sup> Kumyangjang-ni battle proved to be a chance for Turkish Brigade to win against the enemy that forced it to withdraw from position to position in Kunu-ri. The brigade used this chance perfectly by fighting against the enemy preparedly and following the military doctrine line-by-line. Therefore, regarding the Kumyangjang-ni Battle, we find very little controversy in comparison to Kunu-ri Battle. The only issue that comes to the fore is regarding the number of casualties on the Chinese side which is generally given as more than 1000 in Turkish sources. However, the Korean official history disputes this number and as mentioned above, claims that the casualties of the enemy was 474. The U.S. official history, on the other hand, does not provide the details of Turkish battles in the whole Operation Thunderbolt.<sup>70</sup>

Turkish Brigade took part in other big and small-scale battles after Kumyangjang-ni such as Chorwon-Seoul diversion, the Taegyewonni defense, the Barhar-Kumhwa attacks. The first Turkish Brigade that fought in the Battles of Kunu-ri and Kumyangjang-ni returned back to Turkey on July 15, 1951, and it was replaced by the second Turkish Brigade that arrived in Korea on July 2, 1951. On November 15, 1951, General Tahsin Yazıcı transferred Turkish Brigade's command to Brigadier General Namık Arguç and returned to Turkey. General Yazıcı retired from Turkish Armed Forces with the rank of a major general and entered politics on the side of the Democrat Party. Yazıcı was elected as a member of parliament twice between 1954 to 1960. After the eruption of a coup d'état in 1960, he was arrested and sentenced for five years. Later, Yazıcı was released from prison with a pardon.<sup>71</sup> Colonel Celal Dora, the vice- commander of the Turkish

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<sup>69</sup> Yazıcı, *Kore Hatıralarım*, 281–82.

<sup>70</sup> Mossman, *Ebb and Flow*, 243–45.

<sup>71</sup> Regarding Yazıcı's career see: Erhan Çiftçi, *Şark Cephesi'nden Kore'ye Bir Türk Generali Tahsin Yazıcı'nın Askerlik Serüveni* (İstanbul: Dergah, 2015).

Brigade in Korea also entered politics on the side of Republican People's Party in 1957. Controversies surrounded these two commanders of the brigade after their return to Turkey. They both blamed each other for failures in different times during the Korean War. With the publication of their memoirs, both commanders of the brigade replied to different accusations and conveyed the story of Turkish Brigade in Korea from their own perspective.<sup>72</sup>

Even after the ceasefire signed in 1953, Turkey continued sending brigades to Korea in case of the occurrence of a sudden war. Between 1950 to 1966, Turkey sent a total of 12 brigades to Korea. The last brigade returned to Turkey on July 15, 1966. After that point, Turkey decided to send honor guards since the possibility of a hot war in Korea decreased tremendously. Between 1966 and 1971, Turkey sent five honor guard units to Korea. The last of the honor guards returned to Turkey on June 30, 1971. According to the documents in Turkish Armed Forces Archives (ATASE), until 1971, Turkey sent 60,266 soldiers and other personnel to Korea. Turkish Brigades casualties until 1971 is as follows: 721 death, 2147 injured, 234 Prisoners of War (POW), 175 lost.

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## V. Conclusion

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Turkish Brigade and its Korean War experience is largely positively regarded in mass media records around the world. However, the conclusion of the Korean War and the compilation of official histories of the war written by different nations created issues that were not addressed earlier. One of the primary issues that concerned Turkish Brigade's Korean War experience was the description of the brigade in

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<sup>72</sup> Yazıcı, *Kore Hatıralarım*; Dora, *Kore Savaşında Türkler, 1950-1951*.

<sup>73</sup> "Ministry of National Defense ATASE Archive, 110-9-1-15, 152-0-81."

the U.S. official Korean War history. The U.S. official Korean War history account specifically criticized Turkish Brigade's performance in the Battle of Kunu-ri and suggested that there was a communication issue between the U.S. Army and Turkish Brigade. When American, Korean and Turkish accounts are investigated, it is found that this issue was mainly caused by different military cultures. General Tahsin Yazıcı who was educated in the Prussian school was a firm believer of the commander's authority in the field while Americans were expecting him to follow their orders line-by-line. The next major issue regarding Turkish Brigade put forward in the U.S. official history was regarding Turkish Brigade's alleged killing of South Korean soldiers by mistaking them with the Chinese PVA. When Turkish and Korean accounts are investigated, it is found that Turkish Brigade indeed encountered withdrawing South Korean troops but after learning the situation of the battle, the brigade let them go.

After the Kunu-ri Battle, Turkish and American sides shifted blame to each other regarding the causes of the defeat. While Turkish side argued that the Americans did not fully support them, the American commanders suggested that Turks were unruly and they did not follow orders given to them. Even though a common ground was found between Turks and Americans, mutual distrust must have continued until the Battle of Kumyangjang-ni. In this battle, Turkish Brigade fought against Chinese PVA on a hand-to-hand combat. The brigade became famous with its bayonet attacks and successfully secured the area around Kumyangjang-ni. The news of Turkish Brigade's victory in this battle reached even to the Commander of the UN Forces General Douglas MacArthur who personally visited the brigade and gave them the moniker B.B. (bravest of brave). An unintended consequence of Turkey's World War II era neutrality was the loss of credibility among the Western pact. Battle of Kunu-ri should be seen as one of the most important thresholds in repairing Turkey's outlook around the world.

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## Abstract

### Battles of the First Turkish Brigade in the Korean War

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This article examines Turkey's participation in the Korean War, focusing on the Turkish Brigade's role in two major battles: Kunu-ri and Kumyangjang-ni. Turkey's decision to join the conflict was motivated by a desire to demonstrate its commitment to the Western alliance after remaining neutral during World War II. Initially offering a full infantry division, Turkey ultimately sent a brigade of 6,092 personnel, marking its first foreign military engagement since its founding in 1923. This study compares official accounts from the United States, South Korea, and Turkey to provide a comprehensive history of the Turkish Brigade's involvement. It highlights discrepancies in these accounts, particularly regarding the Battle of Kunu-ri. The U.S. official history criticized the Turkish Brigade's performance and cited communication issues, which the paper attributes to differences in military cultures between Turkish and American forces. The Battle of Kumyangjang-ni proved to be a turning point for the Turkish Brigade's reputation. Their successful defense against Chinese forces, particularly their famous bayonet attacks, earned them recognition from UN Forces Commander General Douglas MacArthur, who dubbed them the "bravest of brave." This article argues that Turkey's participation in the Korean War, especially after the initial setback at Kunu-ri, played a crucial role in repairing its international credibility. This engagement had significant implications for Turkey's internal politics, fostering the growth of pro-Americanism and anti-communism within the country. Overall, this study aims to fill a gap in existing literature by providing a balanced account of the Turkish Brigade's Korean War experience, drawing on multiple national perspectives.