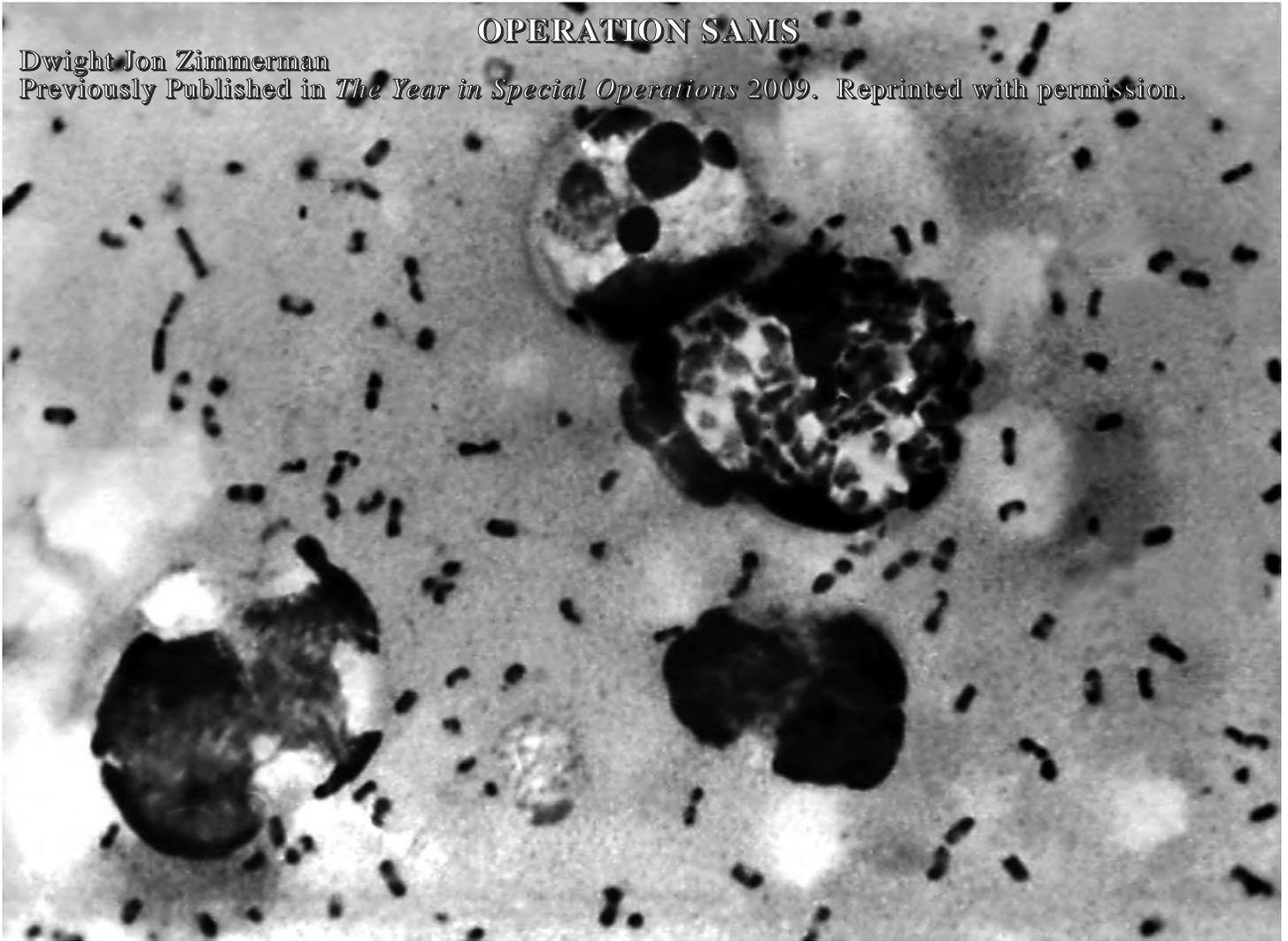


OPERATION SAMS

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A smear showing the feared barbell-shaped yersinia pestis bubonic plague bacteria.

“If we find that this disease is for sure the bubonic plague, then I’ll have no other choice than to order the immediate and complete withdrawal of our troops from the Korean Peninsula.” – General of the Army Douglas MacArthur



BG Crawford F. Sams, an unlikely Special Operator for a single, extremely important, mission.

parallel and invaded democratic South Korea. North Korea’s leader, Kim Il Sung, dreamt of uniting all of Korea under his banner; and he almost succeeded. But U.N. troops, led by General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, successfully stopped the North Korean advance at the Pusan Perimeter and then routed the communists with the dramatic amphibious landing at Inchon. After MacArthur ordered his troops north, it appeared that Korea would become a united country – but under South Korean rule. But that dream also was shattered when, on Oct. 19, 1950, the first contingent of more than a million troops of the “Chinese People’s Volunteers” – in reality the Chinese Communist People’s Liberation Army – crossed the Chinese/North Korean border of the Yalu River. This force brought two things into North Korea. The first was 260,000 troops to help North Korea fight the United Nations troops. The second was contagious diseases.

News of the first became brutally evident in November 1950, when the Chinese troops attacked the outnumbered American and South Korean units and forced a long retreat out of North Korea that did not end until those troops stabilized a defensive line south of Seoul, the South Korean capital. But news of deadly contagious disease outbreaks did not reach MacArthur's headquarters until January 1951. As it was preparing a counteroffensive to drive the communists completely out of South Korea, CIA-controlled agents operating behind enemy lines began sending reports of disease epidemics among the military and civilian populations in the communist controlled territory.

When the allied troops recaptured Seoul and advanced to the 38th parallel, they discovered a civilian population decimated by epidemics of typhus, smallpox, and typhoid. In addition, thousands of captured Chinese and North Korean troops were found to be ill with these and other contagious diseases. Reports quickly made their way to MacArthur's top medical officer, Chief of the Public Health and Welfare Section of Supreme Command Allied Powers (SCAP) Brig. Gen. Crawford F. Sams. Some reports indicated that entire villages were wiped out by disease. He also received transcripts of prisoner debriefings. In a 1979 interview, Sams recalled that the POWs stated such things as, "Half my unit's sick. [Men] turned black when they were dying." Mentions of victims turning black shortly before their death particularly worried him. It suggested that bubonic plague – "the Black Death" – was in Korea.

When the United Nations troops entered the Korean theater of operations, they were vaccinated for a variety of diseases they were expected to encounter. The one exception was bubonic plague. Bubonic plague vaccines then available conferred immunity for only a short duration. As a result, vaccinations for the disease were conducted on an as-needed basis. Because the plague threatened both the United Nations troops and approximately 23 million civilians in South Korea and it would take time to produce sufficient vaccine to inoculate everyone, confirming the presence of bubonic plague became a top priority.

In February, as news of the epidemic outbreaks became generally known, the North Koreans and Chinese Communists launched an aggressive propaganda campaign regarding them. According to Peking Radio and the *People's Daily*, the United Nations forces were conducting biological warfare – dropping canisters filled with insects carrying cholera and other diseases and that germ bombs and artillery shells were being used to infect civilians and troops with smallpox and plague. Kim Il Sung demanded that U.N. commanders Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway and MacArthur be tried for this crime against humanity and he issued an emergency decree calling for the National Extraordinary Anti-Epidemic Committee and other bureaucracies to destroy the insects. At the same time, the communist authorities refused requests to allow independent health inspectors from the International Red Cross and other humanitarian organizations into the infected areas.

MacArthur and his commanders knew the charges that they were conducting biological warfare were false. The truth was that North Korea's rudimentary healthcare system had collapsed under the combined weight of thousands of in-

fecting troops spread throughout the country, a large displaced population, contaminated water, unhygienic living conditions, and other problems. Before he could refute the charges, MacArthur needed proof – an unimpeachable firsthand report from the most senior medical authority possessing experience in dealing with bubonic plague. Only one man in the entire theater fit those criteria: Sams.

Sams' early military career was rather eclectic. Born in East St. Louis in 1902, he enlisted in the Army during World War I and served one year. In 1922, while attending the University of California at Berkeley, he enlisted in the California National Guard as a private. A year later, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the infantry. He transferred to the Field Artillery and in 1925 graduated from the Field Artillery School at Fort Sill, Okla. Wishing to pursue a medical career, he resigned from active duty in December 1925 with the rank of captain. While attending medical school, he was re-commissioned first lieutenant, Field Artillery Reserve. Upon receiving his medical degree in 1929, he was commissioned first lieutenant, Medical Corps, and ordered to active duty; within two years he accepted a commission in the regular Army Medical Corps. In 1941, he became the first medical officer and one of the first line officers to qualify as a U.S. Army paratrooper. During World War II, Sams saw service in Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. In October 1945, Sams, now a colonel, was assigned to be SCAP's top medical officer. Three years later, he was promoted to brigadier general. Over the years, Sams gained vast experience in broad-scale public health issues. He treated bubonic plague epidemics in December 1941 in Haifa, Jaffa, Palestine, and later in Port Said, Egypt. It was this personal experience that was needed now.

Having gotten the ball rolling by alerting the senior members of MacArthur's staff of the possible outbreak of bubonic plague, Sams was not about to take to the sidelines now and he volunteered to lead the mission into North Korea. On the one hand, since he was the only medical doctor with hands-on experience dealing with the disease, it made sense.



Sams treating a Japanese encephalitis patient. His experience treating bubonic plague epidemics was vital to the operation.

But the political stakes of such a move were enormous. If the theater's surgeon general, and a general officer, were killed or captured during the operation, the communists would achieve an immense propaganda coup. Nonetheless, MacArthur agreed and signed off on it.

Reports indicated that bubonic plague victims were concentrated in hospitals in and around the North Korean port city of Wonsan. A joint CIA and Navy

operation was quickly organized. The CIA's Z Unit, based in Tokyo and led by Maj. Jack Y. Canon, was in overall command. Leading the small team into North Korea was one of the Navy's most outstanding junior officers in the war, Lt. Eugene F. Clark. Clark, who entered the Navy during World War II, was a mustang, commissioned from the ranks. Described as having "the nerves of a burglar and the flair of a Barbary Coast pirate," Clark led the reconnaissance team on Yonghung-do Island in Flying Fish Channel in advance of Operation Chromite, the amphibious landing at Inchon on Sept. 15, 1950. For his role in Chromite, he was awarded both the Silver Star and the Legion of Merit. Clark received a second Silver Star for the Sinuiju Operation, a series of CIA-sponsored intelligence gathering raids up the west coast of North Korea. It was in this operation that Clark became the first to discover Chinese Communist troop presence in the country.

Assisting Clark would be Lt. Cmdr. Joung Youn of the South Korean navy, who had helped Clark at Inchon and in the Sinuiju Operation. Like Clark, he also received two Silver Stars and the Legion of Merit for his role in those missions. Joining them would be a third Korean, a native of Wonsan and the chief of the Wonsan area spy network, known by the nom de guerre "Ko."

Every mission needs a name, and in honor of the general who initiated it and who would accompany them, Clark christened the mission Operation Sams.

Operation Sams began at the end of February 1951 when the team boarded at Pusan an APD – one of four high-speed transports that the Navy had refitted for special operations missions. This particular APD also included the kind of medical laboratory Sams would need. Needless to say, everyone connected to the mission was properly vaccinated. As the APD made its way north, nine teams were inserted in the Wonsan area. Their purpose was to provide real-time reconnaissance and other assistance to Clark's team once it landed. The mission itself was simple: Upon landing (at night), Sams would be taken to where there were infected patients. One would be selected and brought aboard the APD. If for some reason transporting the patient was not possible, then Sams would conduct on-the-spot examinations and draw enough blood samples for later analysis.

Operation Sams encountered problems almost immediately after the APD rendezvoused with the destroyer *Wallace L. Lind* (DD 703), tasked with supporting the mission, off Wonsan. The seas in the area during this time of the year are often rough, and for almost two weeks the ships were forced to remain on station, a situation made perilous by harbor mines that broke free from their moorings and floated out to sea.

During this time, the team established a forward base on one of the islands off the coast of Wonsan where the CIA had a secret base to monitor its agent network in the region. Clark began conducting reconnaissance, attempting to find a suitable landing site. Unfortunately, the communists, fearing another Inchon-style amphibious assault, had constructed an in-depth defense network along the beaches and harbor of Wonsan that included mined beaches, barbed wire, and gun emplacements. Several times their scouting boats came under fire. Sams, meanwhile, was examining the island's inhabitants. He discovered many cases of typhus and smallpox. From the survivors he learned that epidemics of these and

other diseases had been so severe that only about 10% of the population had survived. Then, the team discovered that an even greater danger awaited them on the mainland. The communists knew Sams was coming.

During his search for a suitable landing site, Clark also attempted to establish radio contact with the recon teams. It was then that he received devastating news. Of the nine teams sent out, all but two men from one team had been captured or killed. Their radios also picked up North Korean People's Army (NKPA) broadcasts that cited Sams by his name and rank and gave some details of the operation – information that could only have been provided by captured members of the recon teams. Despite the increased danger, the team decided to continue with the mission.

Clark finally found a promising landing site south of Wonsan, near the small village of Chilbo-ri. Final arrangements were quickly made. The *Wallace L. Lind* would take them to Chilbo-ri, where they would transfer to a whaleboat. Once the whaleboat neared the shore, the team would transfer to a black, four-man rubber raft that the whaleboat towed and paddle onto the beach. There they would rendezvous with the two surviving agents.

On the night of March 12, the team left the island, boarded the *Lind*, and headed south. After the destroyer got into position beyond radar range about 20 miles off the coast, the team transferred to the whaleboat. As the team approached the coast, one of the Korean agents on the whaleboat established radio contact with the agents on the mainland who gave landing instructions. But Clark and the others became suspicious when the agents on the mainland proved unable to give the correct responses to code words transmitted from the whaleboat. The decision was quickly made to abort the landing that evening and return to the *Lind*. The team subsequently learned from a radio message sent by the two surviving agents that they had been in contact with communist troops using one of the captured walkie-talkies. Had the Operation Sams team continued ashore, they would have landed in a trap.

The team now had to make the toughest decision of the mission. The captain of the *Lind* recommended that the entire mission be scrapped. He felt that if they continued their chances of survival were nil. But Sams insisted that one more try must be made. Clark, Youn, and Ko also volunteered to make another attempt.

The next night, the *Lind* once again got into position 20 miles opposite Chilbori and once again the Operation Sams team embarked for shore. As the whaleboat approached the coast, the men could see the lights of a truck convoy heading down the coastal highway toward their landing site; the convoy was also spotted by naval aircraft flying a night mission. Suddenly the ground shook with the sounds of explosions as the airplanes bombed and strafed the convoy. The possibility of encountering dispersed communist troops who had abandoned their trucks, in addition to avoiding the regular patrols, added yet another complication to the mission. As the team paddled the rubber raft toward shore, Sams later noted, "it was with some trepidation that we finally approached the beach." This time they were successful in establishing contact with the two agents and, upon receiving final instructions, safely beached.

The team linked up with their two agents and a small group of other Korean CIA agents. Sams was taken to a cave located a few yards from the village. There he began interrogating agents who worked as hospital staffers and had seen the patients suspected of carrying bubonic plague. Meanwhile, Clark, Youn, and some of the other agents silently ambushed and eliminated a North Korean patrol in the village. Sams was then able to conduct examinations of patients in Chilbo-ri. He discovered that the village itself had been turned into a makeshift hospital whose medical support service ranged from primitive to non-existent.

Sams had hoped to spend two additional days in the area, visiting other villages in order to gather as much information as possible. But the agents based in North Korea dissuaded him, stating that the risk of discovery and capture was far too great. Nonetheless, Sams was able to confirm epidemics of typhus, typhoid, and smallpox. And most importantly, he determined that there was no evidence of bubonic plague. As it turned out, the “Black Death” plague was actually a virulent form of smallpox known as hemorrhagic smallpox. The reason it was mistaken for bubonic plague was because it also causes the body to turn black as the victim nears death. Though circumstances prevented him from bringing back a body for further lab study, Sams later said, “I felt confident in my clinical diagnosis of the cases.”

The team successfully returned to the *Lind* the following evening. After they reboarded the ship, Sams radioed a brief message to headquarters in Tokyo summarizing his findings. Upon his return to Tokyo, Sams submitted a full

report of his mission. In addition to an official announcement released to the international press, Sams presented his medical findings to a special United Nations commission and other public forums. Though the communists would continue their propaganda campaign with additional charges, the Operation Sams mission had effectively destroyed the accusations’ credibility. And because Sams had proved that bubonic plague was not in the theater, U.N. forces could continue operations without the risk of encountering that deadly disease.

In the following weeks, through his own findings and additional confirmed reports, Sams was able to determine that because of North Korean inability to control the epidemics, the North Korean prewar population of 11 million had shrunk to about 3 million people.

The success of the mission resulted in decorations for Clark, Youn, and Sams. As it turned out, Operation Sams was Clark’s last mission in Korea. He soon left the theater on a new assignment. In recognition of his efforts on the mission, he was awarded the Navy Cross. Clark retired from the Navy in 1966 with the rank of commander and died in 1998 at the age of 86. Youn was awarded his third Silver Star. He went on to participate in more special operations missions in Korea. In 1970, he retired from the service due to wounds suffered in the war and moved to the United States. Sams was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. Sams returned to the United States in 1951 and retired from the Army in 1955. He died in 1994 at the age of 92, and was buried at Arlington National Cemetery, Va.

USS *Wallace L. Lind* during the Korean War. The ship would face heavier seas than this during Operation Sams.

