

= Ernest R. Kouma =

Ernest Richard Kouma (November 23 , 1919 ? December 19 , 1993) was a soldier in the United States Army during World War II and the Korean War . He rose to the rank of Master Sergeant and received the Medal of Honor for his actions on August 31 and September 1 , 1950 , during the Second Battle of Naktong Bulge in South Korea .

Born in Nebraska , Kouma grew up on a family farm before enlisting in the US Army in 1940 . Kouma served as a tank commander during World War II , seeing combat in Germany with the 9th Armored Division from 1944 to 1945 . After that war , Kouma served as part of the occupation force in South Korea and Japan .

On the outbreak of the Korean War , Kouma commanded an M26 Pershing tank in the 2nd Infantry Division . While fighting during the Battle of Pusan Perimeter along the Naktong River , Kouma commanded his tank as it single @-@ handedly fended off repeated North Korean attempts to cross the river after units around it had withdrawn . Wounded twice , Kouma killed 250 North Korean troops in this action .

After receiving the medal , Kouma served as a recruiter and remained in the Army for 31 years , retiring in 1971 . He lived in Kentucky until his death , and is buried in Fort Knox , Kentucky .

= = Biography = =

Ernest Richard Kouma was born on November 23 , 1919 , in Dwight , Nebraska , to a farming family . He spent much of his early life on the family farm before enlisting in the United States Army in June 1940 .

= = = World War II = = =

When the United States entered World War II , Kouma was trained as a tank crew member . He was assigned to the 9th Armored Division . The Division landed in Normandy late in September 1944 , and moved to the front lines on October 23 . Its first mission was patrol duty in a quiet sector along the Luxembourg @-@ German frontier . When the Germans launched their winter offensive , the 9th Armored Division was quickly involved in the Battle of the Bulge with next to no experience . The Division saw very heavy action at St. Vith , Echternach and Bastogne , its units , unprepared to counter the offensive , fighting in widely separated areas .

The 9th Armored Division made a stand at Bastogne and held off the Germans long enough to enable the 101st Airborne Division to dig in for a defense of the city , resulting in the Battle of Bastogne . After a rest period in January 1945 , the 9th Armored Division made preparations for a drive across the Roer River . The offensive was launched on February 28 , and the 9th smashed across the Roer to Rheinbach , sending patrols into Remagen . The Ludendorff Bridge at Remagen was found intact , and was seized by elements of the 9th Armored Division minutes before demolition charges were set to explode on March 7 , 1945 . The division exploited the bridgehead , moving south and east across the Lahn River toward Limburg , where thousands of Allied prisoners were liberated . The Division drove on to Frankfurt and then turned to assist in the closing of the Ruhr Pocket . In April it continued east , encircled Leipzig and secured a line along the Mulde River . The division was shifting south to Czechoslovakia when the war in Europe ended on V @-@ E Day in May 1945 .

Following the end of the war , Kouma decided to stay in the Army . He was moved to South Korea for occupation duties before being moved to Japan for the post @-@ war occupation of that country . Eventually , Kouma was assigned as a tank commander in A Company , 72nd Tank Battalion , 2nd Infantry Division , which was stationed at Fort Lewis , Washington . By this time he had a home in Penobscot County , Maine when he was not at Fort Lewis .

= = = Korean War = = =

Following the outbreak of war between North Korea and South Korea on June 25 , 1950 , the United States mobilized a large contingent of troops to send into the beleaguered country . Initially , units occupying Japan were called into the country , but forces were eventually dispatched from the United States . In August 1950 , Kouma , who was then a Sergeant First Class , sailed for Korea along with much of the 2nd Infantry Division . It arrived there in late August and was moved into line at the Pusan Perimeter , where US troops were fighting a tight defensive line around the port city of Pusan .

The North Korean People 's Army , meanwhile , was preparing for a September offensive by capturing the Miryang and Samnangjin areas to cut off the US 2nd Division 's route of supply and withdrawal between Daegu and Busan . However , the North Koreans were unaware that the US 2nd Infantry Division had recently replaced the US 24th Infantry Division in positions along the Nakdong River . Consequently , they expected lighter resistance ; the 24th troops were exhausted from months of fighting but the 2nd Division men were fresh and newly arrived in Korea . They had only established their lines shortly before the North Koreans began the attack . The North Koreans began crossing the Nakdong River under cover of darkness at certain points . On the southern @-@ most flank of the US 9th Infantry Regiment river line , just above the junction of the Nam River with the Nakdong , A Company of the 1st Battalion was dug in on a long finger ridge paralleling the Nakdong that terminates in Hill 94 at the Kihang ferry site . The river road from Namji @-@ ri running west along the Nakdong passes the southern tip of this ridge and crosses to the west side of the river at the ferry . A small village called Agok lay at the base of Hill 94 and 300 yards (270 m) from the river . A patrol of tanks and armored vehicles , together with two infantry squads of A Company , 9th Infantry , held a roadblock near the ferry and close to Agok . On the evening of August 31 , A Company moved from its ridge positions overlooking Agok and the river to new positions along the river below the ridge line .

= = = Medal of Honor action = = =

That evening Kouma led the patrol of two M26 Pershing tanks and two M19 Gun Motor Carriages in Agok , along the Nakdong River . Kouma placed his patrol on the west side of Agok near the Kihang ferry . At 20 : 00 a heavy fog covered the river , and at 22 : 00 mortar shells began falling on the American @-@ held side of the river . By 22 : 15 this strike intensified and North Korean mortar preparation struck A Company 's positions . American mortars and artillery began firing counter @-@ battery . Some of A Company 's men reported hearing noises on the opposite side of the river and splashes in the water .

At 22 : 30 the fog lifted and Kouma saw that a North Korean pontoon bridge was being laid across the river directly in front of his position . Kouma 's four vehicles attacked this structure , with Kouma manning the M2 Browning .50 @-@ caliber machine gun atop the tank . As the gunner fired the tank 's main cannon , Kouma sank many of the boats attempting to cross the river with his machine gun . At 23 : 00 a small arms fight flared around the left side of A Company north of the tanks . This gunfire had lasted only two or three minutes when the A Company roadblock squads near the tanks heard over the field telephone that the company was withdrawing and that they should do likewise . Kouma instead opted to act as a rearguard to cover the infantry . He was wounded shortly thereafter in the foot reloading the tank 's ammunition . He quickly fought off another North Korean attack across the river with his machine gun .

Kouma 's force was then ambushed by a group of North Koreans dressed in US military uniforms . Kouma was wounded a second time , in the shoulder , as he beat back repeated North Korean crossings on his machine gun . Several strong attacks came within meters of the tank , but Kouma was able to drive them back despite his wounds . Eventually , the other three vehicles withdrew or were neutralized , and Kouma held the Agok crossing site until 07 : 30 the next morning with his tank . At one point , the tank was surrounded and Kouma had to engage the North Koreans from outside the tank with machine gun fire at point blank range . After the tank gun 's ammunition was expended , Kouma used his pistol and grenades to hold off the North Koreans . The tank then withdrew 8 miles (13 km) to the newly established American lines , destroying three North Korean

machine gun positions along the way . During his action , Kouma had killed an estimated 250 North Korean troops . His actions in this fight alone surpassed the highly decorated US Army soldier Audie Murphy , who was credited with 240 kills during World War II , and who had been the second most decorated US soldier in the war .

Once he returned to his unit , Kouma attempted to resupply his tank and return to the front lines . Instead , the wounded Kouma was ordered to evacuate for medical treatment . As he was being evacuated , Kouma again requested to return to the front lines .

= = = Subsequent career and retirement = = =

Kouma was returned to duty three days later . Shortly thereafter , he was promoted to Master Sergeant , and evacuated to the United States , to be presented with the Medal of Honor for his actions . Originally , Kouma had been awarded the Distinguished Service Cross , but that award was upgraded to the Medal of Honor .

On May 19 , 1951 , Kouma was presented the Medal of Honor by US President Harry S. Truman in a ceremony at the White House . He got his medal alongside Carl Dodd and John Pittman , two other 2nd Infantry Division soldiers who were awarded the medal . After being awarded the medal , Kouma served as a recruiter in Omaha , Nebraska . Kouma then spent the remainder of the Korean War as a tank gunnery instructor for the US Army Armor School at Fort Knox , Kentucky .

Following the end of the war , Kouma remained in the Army . He served a second tour of duty as a recruiter , and then two tours as a tank commander , first at a unit in Fort Carson , Colorado , and then with a second unit in Germany . Though he remained in the Army for 31 years , Kouma did not see combat after his time in Korea . Kouma retired in 1971 at the age of 52 , and lived a quiet life in McDaniels , Kentucky , after retirement . Kouma died on December 19 , 1993 , and was buried in the Fort Knox post cemetery . The Tank Platoon Gunnery Excellence competition at Fort Knox was subsequently named in Kouma 's honor . There is a dining facility named in his honor at Fort Knox on Eisenhower Road .

= = Awards and decorations = =

Kouma was decorated several times during World War II . His decorations included the following medals :

= = = Medal of Honor citation = = =

Kouma , along with Dodd and Pittman , were the first soldiers to be awarded the Medal of Honor in the Korean War who were present for the presentation of their medals . It was reported the other nine soldiers who were awarded the medal , were done so posthumously . Unbeknownst to the public , Major General William F. Dean , who had been awarded the medal for actions in the Battle of Taejon , was actually a prisoner of war in North Korea .

Rank and organization : Master Sergeant (then Sergeant First Class) U.S. Army , Company A , 72nd Tank Battalion

Place and date : Vicinity of Agok , Korea , August 31 , and September 1 , 1950

Entered service at : Dwight , Nebr . Born : November 23 , 1919 , Dwight , Nebraska

G.O. No . : 38 , June 4 , 1951 Citation :

M / Sgt. Kouma , a tank commander in Company A , distinguished himself by conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty in action against the enemy . His unit was engaged in supporting infantry elements on the Naktong River front . Near midnight on August 31 , a hostile force estimated at 500 crossed the river and launched a fierce attack against the infantry positions , inflicting heavy casualties . A withdrawal was ordered and his armored unit was given the mission of covering the movement until a secondary position could be established . The enemy assault overran 2 tanks , destroyed 1 and forced another to withdraw . Suddenly M / Sgt. Kouma discovered that his tank was the only obstacle in the path of the hostile onslaught .

Holding his ground , he gave fire orders to his crew and remained in position throughout the night , fighting off repeated enemy attacks . During 1 fierce assault , the enemy surrounded his tank and he leaped from the armored turret , exposing himself to a hail of hostile fire , manned the .50 caliber machine gun mounted on the rear deck , and delivered pointblank fire into the fanatical foe . His machine gun emptied , he fired his pistol and threw grenades to keep the enemy from his tank . After more than 9 hours of constant combat and close @-@ in fighting , he withdrew his vehicle to friendly lines . During the withdrawal through 8 miles of hostile territory , M / Sgt. Kouma continued to inflict casualties upon the enemy and exhausted his ammunition in destroying 3 hostile machine gun positions . During this action , M / Sgt. Kouma killed an estimated 250 enemy soldiers . His magnificent stand allowed the infantry sufficient time to reestablish defensive positions . Rejoining his company , although suffering intensely from his wounds , he attempted to resupply his tank and return to the battle area . While being evacuated for medical treatment , his courage was again displayed when he requested to return to the front . M / Sgt. Kouma 's superb leadership , heroism , and intense devotion to duty reflect the highest credit on himself and uphold the esteemed traditions of the U.S. Army .