

# Alva Clifford Groves

U.S. Army, Corporal

1932 - 1951

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Alva Clifford Groves was born to Alva and Alta Groves May 29, 1932, in Crown, West Virginia. One of nine children, Alva Clifford had seven sisters and one brother. Although born in Logan County, he spent most of his childhood and youth between Monongalia and Marion counties, West Virginia. His father, Alva, did not attend school and worked as a coal loader, then a “face boss” or foreman in the coal mining industry. When Alva Clifford enlisted in the U.S. Army, the family resided in Four States, West Virginia. Located in the southern portion of Marion County, Four States was a coal town operated by Four States Coal & Coke Company, a subsidiary of the Pittsburgh-Butte Company (Pittsburgh, PA).

At 17 years old, with his parent’s approval, Groves enlisted in the United States Army on September 19, 1949, and completed his basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky. Following basic training, Groves received a Military Occupation Specialty of light weapons infantryman. Light weapons infantrymen are those who physically carry their weapons, like the M1 Garand, the typical U.S. service rifle of World War II and Korea. Groves then reported to duty with Company D, 1st Battalion, 38th Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division.

Alva Clifford Groves’ regiment was alerted for overseas deployment to the Far East Command on July 9, 1950, from its permanent garrison at Fort Lewis, Washington, as part of a larger regimental combat team (RCT). Developed shortly before World War II in response to evolving methods of combat, RCTs usually consisted of an infantry regiment with additional specialized elements—such as artillery, engineers, or medical units—attached as required by the mission.

The 38th RCT boarded two troop transport ships in Tacoma, Washington: *USNS General Collins* (AP-147) and *USNS General Stewart* (AP-140). The 1st Battalion, to which Groves belonged, traveled on the *General Stewart*. Leaving Tacoma on August 5, 1950, the RCT had an uneventful



**Alva Clifford Groves in dress uniform  
before the Korean War. [Fold3.com](http://Fold3.com)**

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**Infantrymen load aboard the USS *General Stewart* (T-AP-140) in 1951, in a scene similar to what Groves would have experienced the year before. US Navy photo, NARA 80-G-433593**

nonstop voyage and landed at Pusan, South Korea, on August 19, roughly two months after the communist invasion of the country.

Groves and his comrades were not arriving in Korea for a routine deployment, but to join the defense of South Korea in a desperate hour. Soviet-backed communist North Korea had invaded on June 25, 1950, determined to unify the Korean peninsula for the first time since its division by treaties imposed after World War II. South Korean (Republic of Korea, or ROK) and allied American and United Nations (UN) forces had been caught by surprise, and retreated rapidly to a defensive perimeter around the port city of Pusan. This tiny pocket of resistance was all that stood between communist armies and the total conquest of Korea.

The 38th Infantry was quickly thrown into the combat zone. Only three days after docking in Pusan, Groves's regiment was ordered inland to UN positions along Naktong River, where they would relieve another U.S. Army unit from its entrenchments. The movement was so rapid, much of the troops' personal gear had to be left behind in "a vast pile" at the port. The 38th relieved the 21st Infantry regiment without incident, but quickly began experiencing many of the hardships for which the Korean War became known. Heavy rains poured down on August 23, and soon "the roads resembled a sea of mud, which at times had the consistency of thick glue or gumbo." Ammunition and food had to be carried to the troops by hand, since vehicles were too mired to move, or slid off the slick roads. Such episodes of extreme weather, which severely hampered military operations, repeated throughout the conflict.

On August 25, Groves's 1st Battalion launched its first attack of the war, seizing the town of Singha-dong with light casualties. D Company appears to have been held in reserve, so Groves may not have seen action that day. But even troops not directly involved in the fighting had little relaxation, as some 30,000 refugees were milling around in the regiment's area of operations causing "a considerable amount of tension," since the American troops had trouble discerning friend from foe.

Sporadic fighting continued, bringing the regiment's casualties to 70 killed, 201 wounded, and 48 missing by September 4. On the night of September 18, 1st Battalion repulsed four

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consecutive night attacks on their positions, then followed the rest of the regiment across the Nakdong in its first big offensive push. More UN forces had made a surprise amphibious landing behind enemy lines at Inchon, breaking the stalemate and sending the communist armies reeling back toward the North Korean border. According to medical records and a later *Fairmont Times* article, Groves was hospitalized for about a month in Kyoto, Japan during this initial campaign; why, or for exactly what periods of September-October he missed fighting with the 38th Infantry, is unclear.

By the time Groves's battalion advanced to the city of Suchon on September 30, they had been in nearly continuous combat for six weeks. It is unlikely anything could have prepared them, however, for the horrors Suchon soon revealed. About 200 South Korean city officials had been herded into a building, sprayed with gasoline, and burned alive. A patrol from Groves's battalion discovered the grisly remains, though Groves himself may have been in Kyoto at this time.

At least Corporal (CPL) Groves and his comrades were soon able to rest. The entire 2nd Division was taken off the fighting line and put in reserve on October 10, not to be ordered into action again until the end of the month. In action again through much of November, however, the 38th Infantry advanced steadily northward, sporadically encountering enemy resistance. The bulk of UN and ROK forces were moving in the same direction, approaching North Korea's border with China on the Yalu River.

Then disaster struck. Chinese troops poured across the North Korean border in a massive counter-offensive. UN military leaders were caught completely off guard, despite repeated warnings that Chinese forces were massing near the Yalu River. Ordinary soldiers like Alva Groves would pay the price.



**Soldiers of the 38th Field Artillery at drill in 1950, before the outbreak of war. The unit was part of the 38th Regimental Combat Team. Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, Central Arkansas Library System**

By November 25, the regiment's positions around the village of Changsang-ni were repeatedly probed and pressured by the enemy. Attacks increased that night. At 2:30 a.m., "Suddenly, from all parts of the regimental area, came enemy bugle calls and whistle blasts." Chinese troops had infiltrated behind and through the regiment's defenses, and soon individual companies were being overwhelmed. As day broke on November 26, large portions of the 38th were fighting "by platoons," indicating that command and control had broken down and small, isolated units were often completely on their own. Losses in



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his battalion's "A" Company were so heavy that the unit was written off as combat ineffective.

The following day, November 27, the 38th Infantry and two supporting ROK battalions were constantly attacked on three sides by two Chinese divisions. Individual companies were surrounded, then fought their way back to American lines. Sometime during these desperate hours, Alva Groves was captured. "It was strange to note," states the regiment's unit history, "that some prisoners taken by the enemy, after being unarmed [disarmed], were returned to our lines." Unfortunately for Groves, he received no such treatment.



**Men of the 3rd Infantry Division fire at Chinese troops in North Korea on November 27, 1950, the day Groves was captured. US Army Signal Corps photo #X/FEC-50-22454 (Forsyth)**

Alva Clifford Groves became a prisoner of war (POW) and was sent to a camp in Pyoktong County, North Korea, along the border with China. In total, 7,245 U.S. soldiers were captured during the Korean War and held as POWs. Nearly 40 percent of these prisoners—2,806—died in captivity, and the five camps in Pyoktong were particularly notorious for their deadly conditions. One captured officer, Lt. William Funchness of the 19<sup>th</sup> Infantry, estimated over 1,000 POWs to have died in Pyoktong Camp No. 5 in January 1951 alone. At one point, he recalls, "I saw three rows of frozen dead bodies 30 feet long, stacked four feet high."

It is not known at which of the Pyoktong camps Alva Groves was held, but it was the last place he would see alive. When an armistice was reached in July 1953, North Korean authorities released a list of POWs which confirmed the capture of Groves—and that he died of tuberculosis while in captivity on April 14, 1951. Tragically, conditions at the camps had just begun to improve around this time, as peace talks motivated Chinese and North Korean captors to treat the UN prisoners more humanely.

In the early 1990s, North Korea turned over human remains believed to be U.S. service personnel. Accompanying documents specified that some of the remains came from a North Korean POW camp in Pyoktong. In 2006, members of the Groves family submitted their DNA to the federal government's Central Identification Lab as part of a program to help identify remains of U.S. soldiers. Family DNA is tested for matches in the government's database. Finally, in 2014, the government notified the family of a DNA match. The remains returned

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by North Korea in the early 1990s included those of Groves. In August 2014, Alva Clifford Groves's family interred him at the West Virginia National Cemetery in Pruntytown—63 years after his death.

For his service, Groves was posthumously awarded nine medals and citations, including the Purple Heart, Prisoner of War Medal, Army Good Conduct Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Korean Service Medal with two bronze campaign stars, Combat Infantryman Badge, United Nations Service Medal, Republic of Korea-Korean War Service Medal, and Republic of Korea Presidential Unit Citation. He is also memorialized at the National Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., and on Court 6, Courts of the Missing, at the Honolulu Memorial located within the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu, Hawaii.



**A memorial motorcade for Alva Groves proceeds down Gateway Connector in Fairmont in 2014, when the veteran's remains were repatriated to West Virginia. *Courtesy of the Times West Virginian newspaper, photo by Tammy Shriver***

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## Resting Place

West Virginia National Cemetery  
42 Veterans Memorial Lane, Grafton, WV 26354  
(304) 265-2044

Section 2  
Site 538

Date of interment: August 7, 2014

## About the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Program of the Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. All biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in or near Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's earliest National Cemeteries, the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. When the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton in the community of Pruntytown. The same National Cemetery Administration staff cares for both facilities.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, and Grafton High School.

**Please refer comments or questions to the West Virginia Humanities Council**  
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