

The Battle of Hansan and the ‘Crane Wing’ Formation



Admiral Yi Sun-sin, having enjoyed a continuous run of successes since May 1592, was now engaged in the task of reorganizing and restoring his naval forces at his headquarters in Yosu. Hideyoshi meanwhile was anxiously looking for an opportunity to blot out the disgrace he had incurred in recent defeats at sea. His first task was to re-establish a safe supply route. This would necessarily involve the humbling of the Korean navy. With this in mind, he sent Wakisaka Yasuharu, one of his ablest generals, together with 70 ships and an elite detachment of his own troops to Ung-Chun as the First Fleet. The Second Fleet of 40 vessels under Kuki Yoshitaka, and the Third, under Kato Yoshiakira, later joined Wakisaka by Hideyoshi’s special command.

Aware of these developments, Admiral Yi assembled a fleet of 51 ships by combining the forces of Admiral Yi Ok-ki with his own, and set off for Kyonnaeryang where Wakisaka and his fleet were riding at anchor, and was joined by Admiral Won-Kyun on the way. He learned that the channel of Kyonnaeryang was an unfit place for battle, as it was too narrow and strewn with sunken rocks: his board-roofed ships, he reasoned, would be in danger of colliding with one another, and the nearby land would offer the enemy too near a place of refuge if they were defeated. He therefore decided to attempt to lure the enemy out into the open sea before the island of Hansan-do. Since Hansan-do lay between Koje and Kosong, and was thus remote from the safety of the mainland, the Korean navy would be at liberty to attack the enemy in safety, and the enemy, if they chose to swim ashore, would face death by starvation.

According to this plan, he positioned the greater portion of his warships near Hansan, and sent five or six Panokseon (board-roofed ships) into the Kyonnaeryang Channel. Seeing their meager number, the Japanese fleet set sail immediately to offer them battle. Yi then ordered the board-roofed ships to pull back as if in retreat toward Hansan, where the rest of the fleet was lying in wait. As expected, the Japanese fleet, elated by Korean navy’s feigned cowardice, redoubled their fire and began to give chase. Yi took care to maintain a fixed distance between his own ships and those of the pursuing enemy. When they emerged into the open sea, and had reached the agreed upon spot near the island, he shouted suddenly,

“Now, turn and face the enemy! Turn about in Hagik Chin★! Attack the flagship first!”

Immediately, the Korean fleet turned to face the Japanese and spread out in Hagik-jin, surrounding the foremost vessels in a semi-circle; these, before they knew it, were trapped with little room to maneuver, and little choice but to remain where they were and weather the storm of cannon balls and fire arrows which Yi’s ships now poured upon them. Seeing the fate of their comrades, the remaining enemy ships scattered and fled in all directions and in great confusion, pursued hotly by the Korean fleet. In this engagement, without any losses of their own, Admiral Yi’s

navy burned and sank 47 enemy ships and captured 12, leaving Wakisaka only 14 ships out of 73, a thousand men out of ten thousand.★

James Murdoch and Isoh Yamagata write in their book, *A History of Japan* as follows.

It [the Battle of Hansan] may well be called Salamis of Korea. It signed the death-warrant of the invasion. It frustrated the great motive of the expedition - the humbling of China; and thenceforth, although the war dragged through many a long year, it was carried on solely with a view to mitigating the disappointment of Hideyoshi.

Having suffered a catastrophic loss in this last serious gamble, Toyotomi Hideyoshi forbade sea battles to be fought against the Korean navy from then on. The Battle of Hansan, apart from being one of the three most glorious Korean victories in the Seven Year War-the other two being those won at Jinju and Haengju, both land battles-is also considered as ranking among the greatest naval battles of world history.

George Alexander Ballard (1862–1948), a vice admiral of the British Royal Navy, paid the following tribute to Admiral Yi's extraordinary achievements leading up to the Battle of Hansan in his book, *The Influence of the Sea on the Political History of Japan*.

This [the Battle of Hansan] was the great Korean admiral's crowning exploit. In the short space of six weeks he had achieved a series of successes unsurpassed in the whole annals of maritime war, destroying the enemy's battle fleets, cutting his lines of communication, sweeping up his convoys,...and bringing his ambitious schemes to utter ruin. Not even Nelson, Blake, or Jean Bart could have done more than this scarcely known representative of a small and cruelly oppressed nation; and it is to be regretted that his memory lingers nowhere outside his native land, for no impartial judge could deny him the right to be accounted among the born leaders of men. (p. 57)

The effects of Yi's latest victory were considerable: the Koreans were now the undisputed masters of the sea, and the Japanese on the Korean mainland were completely isolated from their country's support. Shortly after the battle, Pyung Yang was returned to Korean hands, with the aid of the Ming Chinese forces who had arrived to relieve the land army. Two months later Seoul was abandoned by the invaders, who were compelled to submit to a truce agreement. In recognition of his ample role in bringing about this happy outcome, Yi was instated as Tongjesa, that is, given the command of the combined naval forces of three provinces, which was then the highest honor in the Korean navy.