THE KOREAN WAR
Phase 4
25 January–21 April 1951 (First UN Counteroffensive)
22 April–8 July 1951 (ICF Spring Offensive)

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Chronology
25 Jan
Eighth Army counterattacks in Operation THUNDERBOLT, which starts in the west and gradually expands eastward.

10 Feb
In the west, 1st Corps is reinforced, as I Corps approaches the Han River.

11–13 Feb
Chinese forces attack X Corps, forcing advancing ROK units to fall back toward Wonsan.

13–15 Feb
Battle of Cheorwon.

18 Feb
Reports confirm an enemy withdrawal along the entire central front.

21 Feb
Eighth Army launches Operation KIWI, a general advance north by X and X Corps.

28 Feb
Enemy resistance south of the Han River collapses.

7 Mar
General Ridgway begins Operation RITUAL, the objective is Line Halftime, just south of the 38th Parallel.

14–15 Mar
UN troops enter Seoul, the South Korean capital.

31 Mar
Eighth Army is positioned along the Halftime line.

2–5 Apr
General Ridgway puts Operation RUGGED into action, the objective is Line Kangaroo, some ten miles above the 38th Parallel.

9 Apr
The 1st and IX Corps and the ROK I Corps reach the Kansas line, the two U.S. corps continue to advance further north.

11 Apr
General MacArthur is relieved as UNC commander. General Ridgway succeeds him.

14 Apr
General Van Fleet assumes command of Eighth Army.

22 Apr
The expected Chinese and North Korean spring offensive begins, not as strong as attacks in the west, but is directed at Seoul.

30 Apr
The enemy offensive is stopped just north of Seoul.

15–20 May
The Chinese and North Koreans resume the offensive, focusing on the east-central region; General Van Fleet launches a counterattack.

21 May
Eighth Army advances nearly to Line Kansas.

1 Jun
General Van Fleet strengthens the Kansas line and sends forces farther north, toward Line Wonsan.

23 Jun
The Soviet Union calls for armistice talks.

Behind a tank turret, a young patrol soldier of the 3rd Regimental Combat Team, 26th Infantry Division, prepares for the final advance of his unit across the Han River in February 1951. As the third phase of the Korean War—the CIA (Communist Chinese Force) Interception—came to a close on 24 June 1951, the United Nations Command (UNC) had come to the end of a series of tactical withdrawals. Starting in mid-December 1950, Lt. Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway’s Eighth Army had fallen back from the 38th Parallel, first to the South Korean capital of Seoul, then to a line below Osan and Wonsan. Meanwhile, Maj. Gen. Edward M. Almond’s X Corps had evacuated by sea on the west coast of France, where it became part of the Eighth Army. All the territorial gains in North Korea of the earlier phases of the war had been lost. But General Ridgway was convinced the enemy lacked the logistical system to mount offensive operations for an extended period, and he was preparing to begin a counteroffensive. This fourth phase of the war would largely shape the outcome of the conflict.

After two task forces had encountered little or no Chinese opposition in probes to the north, on 25 January General Ridgway launched Operation THUNDERBOLT, a larger but still cautious reconnaissance in force supported by air power. Resistance intensified at the end of the month, but it gave way in the west by 9 February. The next day UN forces advanced to and Kimpo airfield, and the U.S. I Corps reached the Han River. Meanwhile, on the central front, as the offensive expanded, the X Corps met increasing opposition, and the Chinese struck back on the night of 11–12 February, driving Republic of Korea (ROK) forces north of YongPyong. But when four Chinese regiments attacked the crossroads town of Chiwon-yang on the 13th, the U.S. 23rd Infantry and the French battalion conducted a successful defense for three days until the enemy withdrew. Ridgway regarded this effort as symbolic of the renewed fighting spirit of his command.

In the west the U.S. I and IX Corps gradually seized the areas up to the Han River, except for one enemy foothold between Seoul and YongPyong. By the 18th combat patrols confirmed that Chinese and North Korean troops along the entire central front were withdrawing. General Ridgway then began a general advance (Operation KIWI) by the IX and X Corps to pursue the enemy. By the end of the month the Chinese foothold below the Han River had collapsed. With the approval of General Douglas MacArthur, the UNC commander, Ridgway continued his attack north by launching Operation RUGGED on 7 March. The objective was a line designated Halftime just south of the 38th Parallel. On the night of 14–15 March, UN patrols moved into a deserted Seoul. By the end of the month Ridgway’s troops had reached the Halftime line.

The question now was whether to cross the 38th Parallel again. On 20 March the Joint Chiefs of Staff had notified General MacArthur that President Harry S. Truman was preparing to announce a willingness to negotiate on an end to the war. With the North Koreans and the Chinese, an announcement that would be issued before any advance above the 38th Parallel. MacArthur prompted that announcement by issuing his own offer to end hostilities, but one that included a threat to cross the parallel. President Truman never released his statement, concluding, however unorthodoxly, that perhaps MacArthur’s ultimatum would pressure the enemy to the negotiating table. He also told the decision on crossing the 38th Parallel to tactical considerations. Consequently, when Ridgway received intelligence about enemy preparations for an expected spring offensive, he began a new attack, with MacArthur’s approval, in early April. The objective was a line designated Kangaroo about ten miles above the 38th Parallel. By the 9th the U.S. I and IX Corps, and the ROK I Corps on the west coast, had reached that line, and the U.S. X Corps and the ROK IX Corps were nearing it. The I and IX Corps then continued their attack beyond Kangaroo. At the same time, on 11 April, President Truman notified MacArthur after the UNC commander said he would welcome the use of “force for victory” in Korea. Ridgway replaced MacArthur, and on 14 April Lt. Gen. James A. Van Fleet assumed command of the Eighth Army.

Eight days later four Chinese army groups and two North Korean corps began the enemy’s spring offensive, attacking most heavily in the west, with a major focus on recapturing Seoul. Widening in scope to previously prepared defenses several miles north of Seoul, General Van Fleet finally stopped the advance.

Or 15 May the enemy attacked again. Van Fleet had expected another offensive on the line of the assault in the east-central areas. By regrouping units and using unreplenished artillery fire, he stopped the attack on 20 May after the enemy had penetrated thirty miles. To prevent the Chinese and North Koreans from regrouping, Van Fleet immediately sent the Eighth Army forward. Meeting light resistance, the Eighth Army was just short of the Kansas line by 31 May. The next day Van Fleet sent part of his force farther north to a line designated Wisconsin in the west-central region known as the Iron Triangle. By mid-June the Eighth Army was in control of both the Kansas line and the Wyoming bulge.

Given this strong defensive position, Van Fleet was ordered to hold and fortify it while Washington waited for the Chinese and North Koreans to offer to negotiate an armistice. The enemy in turn used this lull to regroup and to build defenses opposite the Eighth Army. The days turned into weeks and small clashes. On 23 June, Jacob Malik, the Soviet Union’s delegate to the United Nations, called for talks on a ceasefire and armistice. When the People’s Republic of China ended Malik’s statement, President Truman authorized General Ridgway to arrange the talks. After a series of radio messages, the first armistice conference was scheduled for 10 July in the town of Kaisersong. The time of large-scale fighting was over.

The "Can Do Raider Company" of the 13th Infantry, 3rd Infantry Division, composed mostly of South Koreans with American advisers and NCOs, approaches Seoul. This company would be the first UN unit to reenter the city, March 1951.

The 2nd Battalion, 25th Infantry Division, moves up the coast road near Hwaseong, June 1951.

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25th Infantry Division advances the enemy position along the Han River to cut off enemy forces. By late March 1951.

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