



FACT SHEET



Marines of the 5th and 7th Regiments, who repelled a surprise attack by three communist Chinese divisions, rest before resuming their breakout from the Chosin Reservoir, December 1950.

The Chosin (Changjin) Reservoir Campaign

November 25 - December 6, 1950

It was Thanksgiving 1950 at North Korea's Chosin Reservoir, and nighttime temperatures plunged to 30 degrees below zero. The ground was frozen solid. Night fell at 4:30 p.m., and light did not return for nearly 16 hours. This was an inhospitable place, even for the battle-tested men of the 1st Marine Division and the Army's 7th Infantry Division, some of whom had fought through the worst of World War II.

Five months earlier, on June 25, the North Korean People's Army (NKPA) invaded South Korea, shattering the five-year-old peace. President Truman's response was swift and decisive, as was that of the newly formed United Nations. U.S. air and sea assets were committed immediately, and ground troops were committed June 30. Army General Douglas MacArthur was put in charge of the U.N. Command, which included combat and medical units from 22 nations.

At first, the NKPA moved down the Korean Peninsula with relative ease. But on Sept. 15, MacArthur launched his brilliant amphibious landing of X Corps at Inch'on, deep behind enemy lines. The landing of the 1st Marine Division opened the door for an allied victory. The Army's 7th Infantry Division came ashore and fought beside the Marines to recapture Seoul. Within weeks, the North Koreans were pushed back across the 38th parallel.

Once there, American and U.N. leadership, civilian and military alike, decided to keep fighting all the way to the Yalu River, North Korea's border with China, intending to destroy the NKPA and unify the two Koreas under South Korean President Syngman Rhee. The allies were on the offensive, and most believed they would be home by Christmas. But Chinese leaders, with a large standing army, warned more than once they would intervene if U.N. forces crossed the 38th parallel.

Not Ready for War

The U.S. military was not ready for a ground war. After World War II and the debut of the atomic bomb, the Army and Marine Corps were rapidly demobilized. Equipment budgets were slashed. In its new role as a peacekeeping force, the Army of June 1950 was ill-equipped, understrength and poorly trained. The Marine Corps, suffering a similar lack of resources, had continued to train for combat.

As the Marine Corps and Army prepared to cross the 38th parallel, MacArthur ordered Lieutenant General Walton H. Walker's Eighth U.S. Army up the west side of the peninsula. MacArthur divided X Corps, commanded by Major General Edward M. Almond, landing the 1st Marine Division (under Major General O.P. Smith) at Wonsan on Oct. 26 and the Army's 7th Infantry Division (commanded by Major General David G. Barr) at Iwon on Oct. 29.

The Army's 7th Infantry Division was least prepared for war. It had been stripped of many experienced officers and NCOs to fill the three divisions that first deployed to Korea.

Although orders changed many times, the plan was for the Marines to attack from Yudam-ni at the Chosin Reservoir, moving north and west, and ultimately meet the Eighth U.S. Army and cut off the NKPA in a pincer movement. The 31st Regimental Combat Team (RCT), composed of elements of the 7th Division, would attack northward along the east side of the Chosin. The 3rd Infantry Division (under Major General Robert H. Soule) would hold the areas of Wonson and Hungnam and keep the roads open.

These forces would not have communication with one another —X Corps and Eighth U.S. Army had a mountain range between them, while the reservoir separated the Marines from the 31st RCT. MacArthur's commanders were outraged that the forces were divided —and therefore vulnerable — but their protests accomplished nothing.

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First Enemy Engagements

As the allied forces moved north, the Chinese first hit them in early November. Aerial reconnaissance pilots reported Chinese forces massing on the Yalu, and by mid-November, Chinese strength at the Yalu was estimated at 300,000, but MacArthur discounted these reports.

These early battles were intense but brief; the Chinese retreated into the hills as quickly as they appeared. The Chinese Communist Forces' (CCF's) first offensive tested allied capability and put the Eighth U.S. Army and X Corps in check until the Chinese were ready for a more massive engagement. This tactic of pulling back lured the Americans deeper into enemy territory. Time was on China's side: While American units moved through North Korea, a pleasant October autumn became an early, bitterly cold winter.

Uneasy about the Chinese threat, Smith moved the 1st Marine Division north carefully, keeping his units close together to avoid being separated. He stockpiled supplies and ammunition and stationed units along the division's main supply route (MSR) to keep it open. In all but ignoring MacArthur's order for speed, Smith incensed Almond.

Colonel Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller, commander of the 1st Marines, would hold the MSR. His 1st Battalion held Chinhung-ni at the base of the Funchilin Pass; the 2nd Battalion was with Puller at Koto-ri, 11 miles up the road; the 3rd Battalion would support Smith's headquarters at Hagaru-ri, at the base of the reservoir.

The 31st RCT, East of Chosin

On the east side of the reservoir, the 5th Marines (under Lieutenant Colonel Raymond L. Murray) protected the Marines' right flank until they were relieved by Army Lieutenant Colonel Don Faith's 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry. Before moving toward Yudam-ni to join the 7th Marines, Murray warned Faith about the enemy presence and advised him to keep his forces tight.

By Nov. 27, more elements of the 31st RCT, commanded by Army Colonel Alan D. MacLean, arrived east of the reservoir. The 31st RCT was hastily thrown together — composed of whichever units could move to replace the 5th Marines soonest. These included the 1st Battalion of the 32nd Infantry, the 3rd Battalion of the 31st Infantry, the 57th Field Artillery Battalion and the 31st Tank Company. The 2nd Battalion, 31st Infantry never made it to the reservoir.

Faith moved his men far forward to occupy the area left by the 5th Marines —an area too large for one battalion. The remainder of the 31st RCT set up a second perimeter to the south. Again, forces were divided with an enemy threat present. The perimeters were loose, but MacLean planned to attack first thing in the morning. Few seemed worried about the dangerous situation for one night; men of the 31st RCT later said they didn't believe the warnings about the Chinese.

Meanwhile, Smith continued north from Koto-ri and established his command post at Hagaru-ri. He ordered airstrips scratched from the frozen earth there and at Koto-ri. His solid protection of the MSR and the airstrips would prove crucial to the breakout of the Marines and soldiers.

Over in the west, unknown to X Corps, a massive force of 18 Chinese divisions had attacked the Eighth U.S. Army on Nov. 25 and nearly destroyed it. Within two days it was in full retreat, but for the moment, MacArthur kept his commanders in the east in the dark.

Surprised by the Chinese

On Nov. 27, the reunited 5th and 7th Marine Regiments began their attack north from Yudam-ni. They quickly ran into enemy resistance. The 7th Marines commander, Colonel Homer L. Litzburg Jr., sent Fox 2/7 to hold the high ground at Toktong Pass. The subsequent success of the fighting withdrawal depended on the tenacity of the young company commander, Marine Captain William Barber, and his men holding this crucial piece of ground.

That night, as temperatures plunged well below zero in the rugged mountains of North Korea, three Chinese divisions sounded horns, whistles, and bugles and attacked the 5th and 7th Marine regiments at the reservoir. Smith's worst fears became reality. That same night, MacLean's men were jarred awake by more noisemakers as two Chinese divisions breached their perimeter. With all other officers in the area dead or wounded, Marine Captain Ed Stamford, a World War II veteran and pilot attached to Faith with a team of four Marines as his tactical air control party, took command of A Company. Though not an infantryman, he rallied the company to repel the attack.

When MacArthur got reports of the ferocious Chinese assault, he decided on Nov. 29 that X Corps would withdraw to Hungnam while the weakened Eighth U.S. Army would try to hold P'yongyang. His late call proved fatal, and during the

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next two weeks, Marines and soldiers fought day and night to break out of the trap the Chinese had set.

The CCF surrounded everybody — the 11th Marines, the division's artillery, and the 5th and 7th Marines at Yudam-ni; Fox Company at Toktong Pass; Smith and his men at Hagaru-ri; Puller at Koto-ri; and the 31st RCT east of Chosin. They attacked late at night and retreated to the mountains during the day when deadly American close-air support was on the scene. Forward air controllers like Stamford would direct these attacks with barely functioning radios. X Corps might have been lost but for Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force pilots performing bombing runs, close-air support, supply and ammunition drops, and the evacuation of thousands of wounded.

The 31st RCT continued to take heavy fire, and casualties mounted. The unbearable cold and frost-bite took its toll. MacLean was injured, captured and later reported dead; Faith was in charge. Though he was a World War II veteran with no combat experience, his men describe him today as a charismatic leader who worked hard to get everyone out alive.

Faith's Breakout

After four nights and five days of mounting casualties with no relief or rescue in sight, Faith decided the 31st RCT would fight its way out. He radioed Smith at Hagaru-ri and asked for support. MacArthur and Barr also had talked to Smith about sending a team to rescue the 31st RCT (which had become known as Task Force Faith). But Smith's situation was not much better. Under constant enemy attack, he had everyone — including cooks and engineers — on the line holding the perimeter. Diverting support to the east would probably spell the loss of Hagaru-ri, which in turn would mean the end of the 5th and 7th Marines. Faith was on his own.

Faith's plan was to move out as soon as air support was available Dec. 1. Clouds kept the unit in place until around 1 p.m., leaving less than four hours of daylight. The breakout moved quickly at first, then came under heavy fire and hit enemy roadblocks. Young officers pulled even younger soldiers together to continue the fight. NCOs like Corporal George Pryor (the units were so jumbled up, the men thought he was a captain) rallied soldiers looking for leaders. It was the only way they would get out alive. Command and control were lost, and Task Force Faith was fighting its way out in small pieces.

Lending to the confusion, communication was by



Marine units assemble along a road in the vicinity of Yudam-ni, just west of the Changjin Reservoir, to begin evacuating the area.

voice only — Stamford had the only working radio, and his was feverishly calling for air strikes and support. Ammo was low. Pilots tried to resupply the column, but some air drops drifted over to the enemy. Bullets rained down on the column. Soldiers took cover and returned fire as best they could, but they were surrounded. Stamford continued to call in air strikes, with the enemy so close that some Americans were hit by napalm.

After about 4 miles, the column halted. The lead drivers were dead. Faith lay in a jeep dying, and his task force died with him. Organization broke down, and it was every man for himself. The enemy continued to close and kept firing. Officers and soldiers grabbed what wounded they could and fought their way out of what had become a death trap. Some played dead and escaped later. Those who did not get out were killed or captured.

Many who made it out headed across the frozen, unprotected Chosin Reservoir. Over the next several days, hundreds walked, crawled, or were dragged across the ice to the Marines' perimeter 4 1/2 miles away at Hagaru-ri. A group of Marine volunteers and a Navy hospital corpsman led by Marine 1st Motor Transport Battalion Commander Lieutenant Colonel Olin Beall spent several days out on the ice; they brought in about 320 soldiers in two days.

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Some members of Task Force Faith made it to Hagaru-ri on their own. One survivor, First Lieutenant John Gray, remembers a vigilant and suspicious Marine at the perimeter asking him for the password. After days of combat on the other side of the reservoir, who knew? The sergeant then asked Gray the location of several cities such as Dubuque, Des Moines and Sioux City. Luckily, Gray knew his geography, and he and his men were welcomed into the perimeter.

A total of about 1,050 of 31st RCT's 2,500 had survived. About 385 were considered able-bodied and fought at Hagaru-ri and all the way to the sea. Barr, devastated by the loss of his men, was relieved of command shortly after Chosin. Many Army veterans believe that if the 31st RCT had not held and engaged two Chinese divisions for nearly five days, those fresh enemy units could have been deployed against the Marines at Hagaru-ri — potentially disastrous for the 1st Marine Division. This is disputed by Marines.

Attack in Another Direction

Meanwhile, Smith had heard about MacArthur's order to withdraw on Nov. 30 and reportedly huffed, "It took them two days to decide this." He ordered his 5th and 7th Marines to pull back to Hagaru-ri. This would not be easy: They were still surrounded at Yudam-ni, and the MSR was interrupted and full of enemy soldiers.

A reporter with Smith in Hagaru-ri labeled the Marine

operation a retreat. Smith patiently explained that because they were surrounded and there was no rear, “retreat” was inaccurate: They would have to fight their way out. People back home read, “Retreat, hell, we’re just attacking in another direction.” Though not in Smith’s style, this was the perfect description of the Marines’ problem and their solution, and he never denied the quote.

The reporters also wanted time with the legendary Puller, who obliged with a highly quotable assessment of the situation: “We’ve been looking for the enemy for several days now. We finally found them. We’re surrounded. That simplifies our problem of finding these people and killing them.”

Back at Yudam-ni, Murray and Litzenberg decided to move by road during the day. Daylight gave them the advantage of air and artillery support. During the days and nights of battle, Barber and his company were alone (except for the enemy) at Toktong Pass. For the movement south, the pass had to be held, and Marine Lieutenant Colonel Raymond G. Davis’ 1st Battalion, 7th Marines was going to relieve Barber and secure it.

Davis and his men were the first unit out of Yudam-ni. They traveled over the rough, steep terrain in dark, bitter cold — something the Chinese would not expect — and made it undetected by the enemy. Davis found that Barber and his men had held for five days despite relentless attacks. Casualties were high: Of 200 men, 26 had been killed, 89 wounded and three were missing. Air drops of ammo proved invaluable.

Once Davis’ men secured Toktong Pass, the 5th and 7th fought their way to Hagaru-ri. It took them 79 hours to travel 14 miles carrying the wounded and most of their equipment, but on Dec. 3, they entered the Hagaru-ri perimeter. Prisoner-of-war (POW) interrogations — extremely reliable at this point in the war — indicated at least seven CCF divisions near Hagaru-ri. The Chinese knew its strategic location was key to Marine Corps success breaking out.

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Once in Hagaru-ri, the 5th, 7th, and other units rested, regrouped, and prepared for their next move, south to Koto-ri. Air Force C-46s and C-47s and other U.N. aircraft began evacuation of about 4,300 wounded and frostbite victims. Smith gave the dead priority, which again outraged Almond, though Smith was adamant that fallen Marines held a special place and would be flown out first. About 140 were flown to Japan, while more than 500 replacement combat Marines were flown in.

Koto-ri, Funchilin, Hungnam

On Dec. 6, the men at Hagaru-ri began their 9-mile, 38-hour fight to Koto-ri. Despite CCF control of the road and many roadblocks, the lead units moved through and kept the road open for Hagaru-ri’s rear guard. About 10,000 men and 1,000 vehicles reached the relative safety of Koto-ri. Once within the Koto-ri perimeter, most of the 1st Marine Division again was reunited. More wounded were evacuated from the Koto-ri airstrip, and X Corps prepared for the 43-mile fight to the sea.

Chinese POWs revealed that Funchilin Pass would be the site of a major enemy attack. A CCF division lay in wait, three other CCF divisions were in the area, and another two were held in reserve. Lieutenant Colonel Donald M. Schmuck’s 1st Battalion, 1st Marines holding Chinhung-ni was rested and ready to go. On the snowy night of Dec. 8,



Marines line both sides of a road during the withdrawal from the Koto-ri area on their way to Hungnam, December 1950.

they surprised the Chinese.

Funchilin Pass was the enemy's last major offensive during the Chosin campaign. The CCF had overextended its supply lines, and its soldiers were suffering from the cold and lack of food. The enemy would continue to launch minor assaults, but they were minimal compared to the force with which the CCF struck at the reservoir.

Smith and his men reached Hungnam on Dec. 11, and by Dec. 15, Navy ships transported them south.

6 Smith's insight and careful, deliberate style made him the ideal commanding general for Chosin. He was fortunate to have talented, experienced leadership from Puller, Murray, Litzenberg, Davis and others. While his men fought together like a machine, it was his uncommon understanding of the situation — and a certain amount of luck — that ensured the story of Chosin Reservoir would become part of American military lore.

—Gina DiNicolo

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