

KOREAN WAR

Hagaru-ri: The Vital Link

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

As a frigid Korean dawn broke on 27 Nov. 1950, the commanding general of the First Marine Division did not like the situation one bit. The picture he saw from his command post at Hamhung was of a division scattered over a much wider area than he wished. As required by orders from his higher headquarters, X Corps, his division was strung out over miles of a tortuous, single-lane mountain road that could be blocked by bad weather or enemy action at a dozen points.

Seventy-eight miles to the north at the point of the advance, two of his regiments, Lieutenant Colonel Raymond L. "Ray" Murray's 5th Marines and Colonel Homer

L. Litzenberg Jr.'s 7th Marines, were dangerously out on a limb at the flyspeck hamlet of Yudam-ni in the mountains on the west side of the frozen-over Chosin Reservoir.

Major General Oliver P. "O.P." Smith's third regiment—Col Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller's 1st Marines—was engaged in building up intermediate bases at Chinhung-ni and Koto-ri along that inadequate road that would have to do as a main service route (MSR). Each base was to be manned and provisioned for protracted and intense combat. Protracted and intense combat was precisely what MajGen Smith expected and intended to be prepared for.

The dispersal of his main combat units was cause for serious reservations, but MajGen Smith's most troublesome concern was the base being constructed at Hagaru-ri at the southern tip of the reservoir. Located between Murray and Litzenberg to the north and Puller to the south, Hagaru-ri was vital to all three. There, engineers of LtCol John H. Partridge's 1st Engineer Battalion were working around-the-clock to scrape an airfield out of the frozen, rock-hard surface of the only reasonably level ground for miles in any direction.

It was Hagaru-ri and its vital half-completed airfield that were foremost in Oliver



Marine tanks scramble around a blown bridge south of Koto-ri as the allies push to break out from Chinese Communist encirclement en route to the beachhead at Hungnam in December 1950.

P. Smith's mind. Hagaru-ri was the key link in the chain. Were Hagaru-ri to be lost the situation of the 5th and 7th Marines at Yudam-ni would go from exposed to perilous. Hagaru-ri, in MajGen Smith's words, "had to be held."

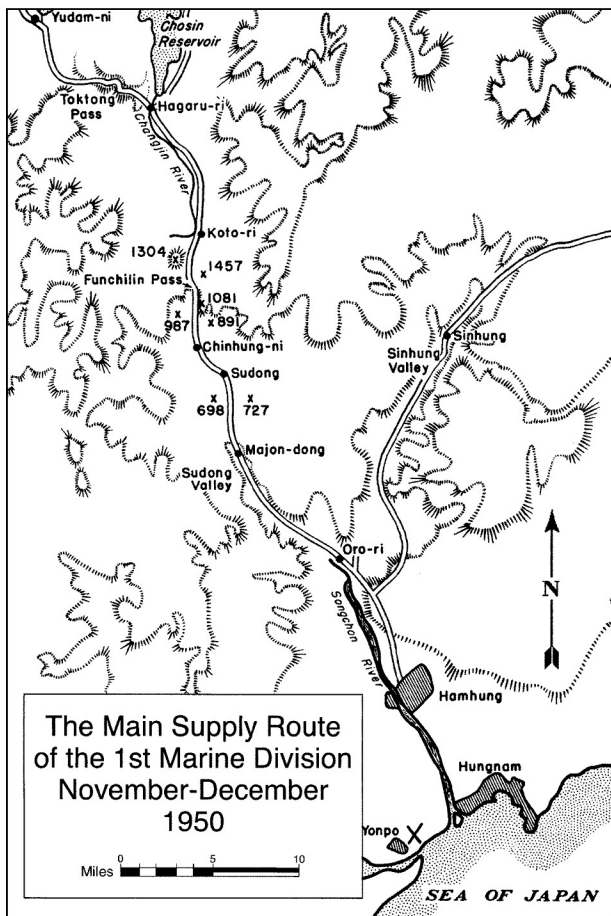
What enemy was there to overrun Hagaru-ri? The battered and beaten remnants of the North Korean People's Army (NKPA), pounded mercilessly since being driven from South Korea back in September, were little more than disorganized bands of fugitives fleeing for the Yalu River and sanctuary in Manchuria. Would the Chinese enter the war to save the NKPA from complete destruction? Higher headquarters didn't think so.

Intelligence reports from X Corps and the headquarters of the supreme commander, General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, USA, in Tokyo discounted any significant presence of the Chinese. As seen by Tokyo, any Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) units in Korea were little more than a handful of "volunteers." "There aren't two Chinese Communist divisions in the whole of North Korea," was the assessment of Lieutenant General Edward M. Almond, USA, commanding X Corps.

MajGen Smith didn't believe the reports. There had been increasing sightings of CCF units in 1stMarDiv's zone of action for weeks. At Yudam-ni, 5th Marines reported more and more daily Chinese radio traffic. Marine patrols were running into CCF units with disturbing regularity. North Korean civilians voluntarily were providing information indicating the presence of large numbers of Chinese. Aerial reconnaissance disclosed significant bodies of heavily camouflaged troops tucked away in remote canyons and valleys.

Even as MajGen Smith was considering the situation, reports were coming in from LtCol Harold S. "Hal" Roise's 2d Bn, 5th Marines. The battalion's attempt to advance to the west from Yudam-ni at first light was encountering heavy resistance by a large CCF force in well-prepared defensive positions. Were there or were there not Chinese in North Korea? As far as MajGen Smith was concerned, there were, and they were there in fairly substantial numbers.

X Corps and MacArthur's headquarters were wrong. Oliver P. Smith was right. As he was preparing to displace his command post to Hagaru-ri the following morning, 60,000 Chinese, lying low in the snow-clad mountains about the Chosin Reservoir, were waiting for him. They were Gen Sung Shin-lun's 9th Army Group, 12 divisions in all. Carrying everything on their backs, moving by night and hiding by day, they had infiltrated undetected



from staging areas in Manchuria. Their mission was to destroy the 1stMarDiv, and they were waiting.

In the pitch-black night of 27 Nov., as the thermometer skidded to minus-20 degrees, seven CCF divisions attacked all along the MSR. The roadway between Chinhung-ni and Koto-ri was cut, as was the link between Koto-ri and Hagaru-ri. CCF elements north of Hagaru-ri severed the roadway linking Hagaru-ri with Yudam-ni. Heavy fighting raged throughout the night at Koto-ri and Yudam-ni as waves of attackers threw themselves at Marine positions.

Particularly hard-pressed were the defenders of Yudam-ni, under ferocious attack by two CCF divisions, the 79th and

89th. Marine firepower cut bloody swathes in the serried ranks of the attackers, but it wasn't a one-sided affair. Marine casualties, especially in LtCol Randolph Lockwood's 2/7, were frighteningly high.

At Hagaru-ri not a shot was fired. Only the distant sounds of combat at Koto-ri and Yudam-ni broke the night silence. There wasn't a Chinese alive within rock-throwing range of Hagaru-ri, where Partridge's engineers worked under arc lights to extend the runway beginning to take shape.

Could Sung Shin-lun have failed to appreciate the fact that possession of Hagaru-ri was the key to the entire situation? Not exactly. No less than MajGen Smith's Marines, the CCF were victims of inade-



quate maps of the area. The Taebaek Mountain Range, the most remote, rugged and inhospitable region in Korea, had never been adequately mapped. Tasked with assaulting Hagaru-ri that night, the CCF 58th Div, forced to rely upon what were little more than sketch maps, became hopelessly lost among the trackless mountains west of Hagaru-ri. It was dawn on the 28th, time to go to ground to escape detection by Marine air, before the 58th Division finally reached its objective.

About the same time that the 58th Div was getting itself sorted out, MajGen Smith arrived at Hagaru-ri by helicopter to set up his command post. What he found

wasn't exactly comforting. To defend a 4-mile-long perimeter were only two rifle companies and Weapons Co of LtCol Thomas L. "Tom" Ridge's 3/1 and Weapons Co, 2/7. Manning the bulk of the line were elements of such unlikely units as Headquarters and Service Co, 3/1; 1st Motor Transport Bn; 1st Service Bn; a company of Army engineers; and hastily assembled cooks, clerks and mechanics.

A pair of artillery batteries, "How" 3/11 and "Dog" 7/211, even had been pressed into front-line service. It was probably the first time since the Civil War that artillery had manned a position on the firing line.

Help was on the way in the form of

George/3/1 and 41 Independent Commando, Royal Marines, but they wouldn't arrive until the following day and would have to fight their way north from Koto-ri.

First, though, they had to make it through the night. Fully conscious of the damage Marine air could inflict on them, the Chinese preferred to do their fighting under cover of darkness. With full confidence in his ability to swamp the defenders of Hagaru-ri, the commander of 58th Div waited for the sun to set behind the mountain peaks west of the thinly manned post. But he had not considered Second Lieutenant (later LtGen) Richard E. Carey.

Carey, until only recently a rifle platoon



Left: The Seventh Marine Regiment at Yudam-ni prepares to depart, ready to fight its way back to Hagaru-ri and on to the sea for extraction in December 1950.

Below: Soldiers, wearing the distinctive short parkas, and Marines advance south of Hagaru-ri along the main supply route on 6 Dec. 1950. (Photo by Sgt Frank C. Kerr)



cepted the extremely dangerous mission of actually mingling with the Chinese and determining the heaviest areas of concentration. The result was a gold mine of information.

"I expected little or no information," Carey remembered, "but apparently these men had a way with them. Upon reporting back they told me that they had talked freely with enemy troops, including several officers who boasted they would occupy Hagaru-ri on the night of 28 November."

With full confidence, Carey reported that the Chinese would attack that night between 2100 and 2400 in division strength. The main attack would be against the western and southern sectors of the perimeter, while a secondary attack would be directed against East Hill, the prominent terrain feature. The Chinese did exactly that at 2230. On 100 percent alert along the southern and western sectors, Capt Clarence Corley's How Co and First Lieutenant Joseph "Bull" Fisher's Item Co were waiting for them.

Both company fronts were well-sited behind concertina wire, trip flares, booby traps and 5-gallon gasoline cans rigged with thermite grenades. By packing C3 plastic explosive in C-ration cans to fashion handmade shaped charges, the Marines were able to blast loose the frozen surface layers of earth to permit relatively easy digging for fighting holes. The earth excavated from those holes was shoveled into 1,000 sandbags that had been "bor-

rowed" to make a respectable fortified position. Weighing in with additional firepower was a pair of M4A3 medium tanks from LtCol Harry T. Milne's 1st Tank Bn.

As the bottom fell out of the thermometer and a thick curtain of snow reduced visibility to mere yards, the 58th Div threw its Sunday punch at the defenders of Hagaru-ri. The main attack fell as predicted on the southern and western sectors of the perimeter where the fighting quickly reached volcanic levels as massed waves of attackers threw themselves at the defensive positions of How and Item companies.

Hand-to-hand battles raged all along the line, as the Chinese attempted to overcome the defenders by sheer numbers. Leading Item Co's 3d Platoon, 2dLt Wayne M. Hall used his .45-caliber service pistol to shoot a pair of attackers at such close range as to leave powder burns on their clothing. A third attacker pitched forward into Hall's hole before dying.

Similar scenes played themselves out all around the arc of fire that outlined the perimeter. Marine firepower ripped through the attacking waves, piling bodies in blood-soaked heaps. Still the Chinese attacked.

Under the cover of accurate mortar fire, a wedge of mustard-colored uniforms broke through an outnumbered How Co position and cut a path toward the bulldozers and graders that continued to work

leader in George/3/1, had just days before assumed duties as the battalion's S-2 (Intelligence) officer. Beyond his Intelligence chief, Staff Sergeant Saverio P. Gallo, an interpreter and four scouts, Carey had only a pair of Korean Counterintelligence Corps (CIC) agents to determine the enemy's capabilities and intentions. What young 2dLt Carey did with those meager assets was a masterpiece of intelligence work.

Utilizing selective interrogation of local civilians and constant sweeps for information by his CIC agents, Carey built a continually emerging picture of the 58th Div's dispositions. The same CIC agents ac-

Leathernecks with the First Marine Regiment, advancing up a hill outside the Koto-ri perimeter, had to repel repeated attacks by Chinese Communist Forces. Employing Marine air and artillery, they blasted, bombed and napalmed their way out of encirclement.



through the height of the battle. Second Lt Robert D. McFarland, a heavy-equipment officer, led a counterattack by a hastily assembled handful of Dog Co engineers that sealed off and then threw back the breakthrough. That done, the engineers slung their weapons and went back to work extending the airfield.

The Chinese pressed their attacks despite staggering losses, and the battle continued to reach higher heights of intensity. In the How Co CP, Sergeant Keith E. Davis saw crisscrossed paths of red and green tracer rounds from Marine and Chinese machine guns looking "so thick they lighted up the darkness like a Christmas tree." Surgeons working over the wounded in the clearing station of Charlie Co, 1st Medical Bn repeatedly were required to duck for cover as bullets burst through the rickety building's wooden walls.

The Chinese seemed to be everywhere at once. Somehow the line held, and in the

midst of it, the engineers continued to work on the airfield in a blizzard of bullets and a curtain of snow.

On East Hill the situation wasn't going well. A massive Chinese attack had forced the defenders of CPT Philip A. Kulbes, Co D, 10th Engineer Combat Bn, USA, from the crest of the hill. A two-pronged Marine counterattack regained some of the ground, but the large body of Chinese at the crest could not be dislodged. Caught squarely between the two forces, Marine radio operator Private First Class Bruno Podolak lay flat on the ground and continued to transmit constant reports on the situation.

That situation would have been much worse except for the constant drumbeat of fire kept up by the artillerymen of Capt Benjamin S. Read's How Battery, 3/11 and Capt Andrew J. Strohmenger's Dog/2/11. At one point, firing almost point-blank, Dog Btry poured 1,200 rounds into the

oncoming Chinese. The command "Fire at will," almost never heard on the gun line, passed over the battery conduct of fire channel. Sgt Vince Mosco counted more than 100 empty 105 mm shell casings around his gun alone. Somehow the line held.

Another freezing dawn revealed a scene of carnage all around the Hagaru-ri perimeter. One entire regiment of the 58th Div, the 172d, had been all but annihilated, the frozen corpses ringing the perimeter. The division's 173d Regt, while not as badly mauled, still collected a bloody nose for its efforts.

Friendly casualties, although not on the scale of those suffered by the Chinese, were not negligible. Almost 500 defenders of Hagaru-ri died or were wounded during the night of 28 Nov. Their numbers were cause for serious concern given the small size of the garrison holding the vital installation. The arrival of George/3/1 and



CP W. T. WOLFE

41 Independent Commando at Hagaru-ri late in the day of the 29th after a daylong running gunfight was a welcome sight. The 58th Div wasn't about to go away.

Neither were John Partridge's engineers. Working around-the-clock while fierce fighting raged all about them, they sometimes pitched in to lend a helping hand. Then, the Marines of 1st Engineer Bn continued to extend the runway that was becoming more and more vital with each passing hour.

By dawn of 1 Dec., after another night of massed Chinese attacks, with a pitched battle for ownership of East Hill raging and the airfield less than half-completed, it was decided to attempt landings and takeoffs. Chancy? Yes, very chancy. The runway was barely 3,800 feet long and 50 feet wide, with no taxiways and a 2 percent grade at the north end. The front lines were scarcely 300 yards from the south end. However, casualties were mounting, and replacements were needed. The situation quickly was becoming critical.

The first twin-engine R4D of MajGen Field Harris' First Marine Aircraft Wing (MAW) that touched down on Partridge's airfield on 1 Dec. was the first of hundreds of other flights by 1st MAW and the C-47s of Far East Air Force's Combat Cargo Command. Inbound flights carried supplies and replacements. Outbound flights were reserved exclusively for wounded tagged for evacuation.

A priority system was designed by Division Surgeon CAPT Eugene R. Hering, MC, USN. The first outbound medevac carried 24 stretcher cases. In time, with the 5th and 7th Marines ordered to withdraw from Yudam-ni, the Hagaru-ri airfield would load out 4,300 casualties.

Through it all the 58th Div, badly bloodied and battered, never let up in its attempt to overrun the Hagaru-ri perimeter. Having finally been ousted from their positions on East Hill, the last remaining 1,500 members of the 58th Division threw themselves in a do-or-die attempt to regain the hill in the early morning hours of 1 Dec. Almost every one of them died.

Daylight revealed the slopes of East Hill covered by a solid carpet of the dead. The 58th Div ceased to exist. Hagaru-ri, the position that had to be held, had been held.

MajGen Smith's assessment of the critical importance of Hagaru-ri was more than vindicated less than 48 hours later as the lead column of the Yudam-ni garrison entered the perimeter. They were bone weary after fighting every step of the way through two CCF divisions who attempted to bar their progress. They were badly in need of a respite to regroup before continuing the march to the south, and they had taken more than 900 casualties with them. Food and ammunition both were beginning to run low, but, thanks to MajGen Smith's foresight, Hagaru-ri was well-stocked with both.

When all was said and done, it remained for MajGen Smith to sum up everything. In a personal letter to the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen Clifton B. Cates, he wrote, "I am understandably proud of the performance of this Division. The officers and men were magnificent. They came down the mountains bearded, footsore, and physically exhausted, but their spirits were high. They were still a fighting division." They also were led by a commanding general who stands among the giants of the Marine Corps.

Now, more than 60 years later, it is tempting to speculate about what might have happened had Hagaru-ri fallen. Without Hagaru-ri as a base to rest, resupply and reorganize, could 5th and 7th Marines successfully have withdrawn from their exposed position at Yudam-ni, taking only what equipment and ammunition they could carry with them and those casualties who could not be evacuated otherwise? Many veterans, grandfathers now, of both regiments would more than likely be glad they never had to find out.

Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua, a Leatherneck contributing editor, is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars. Later in his career, he was an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va.



CP PETER W. McDONALD

After five days and nights of slugging it out with Chinese Communists to return some 15 miles to Hagaru-ri, wounded leathernecks of the 5th and 7th Marines find rescue at hand, as Marine engineers had hacked out a landing strip, and evacuation flights helped take wounded and frostbitten men to rear areas for treatment or hospitalization.