

KOREA
60 YEARS AGO

Chosin 1950: When Hell Froze Over

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

"You cannot conduct a retreat or a withdrawal when you are surrounded. The sole course of action open to you is a breakout, and that is by definition an attack."

—MajGen Oliver P. Smith, USMC
CG, First Marine Division
November 1950

Several years ago the annual Memorial Day celebration on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., was televised nationally. In touching upon the First Marine Division's engagement with Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) at the Chosin Reservoir in the winter of 1950, the narrator, a noted motion-picture personality, described it as "the worst defeat in Marine Corps history."

It wouldn't be fair to take that noted personality to task for his choice of words. After all, he was reading from a prepared script about events of which he had no knowledge. Nevertheless, the scriptwriter might have benefited from an elementary education in exactly who did what to whom.

The facts are these: During the Chosin Reservoir campaign, the 1stMarDiv engaged and decisively defeated seven CCF divisions with elements of three others. Five of those divisions—the 124th, 79th, 58th, 59th and 60th—were destroyed completely. They never again appeared in the Korean War. Official CCF casualty figures for the period, remarkably candid, listed 37,500 killed, wounded and missing. "Casualties had reached a high of 40,000. The Central Committee expresses its deepest sorrow," reported Mao Tse-tung.

The Marine Corps has fought few battles like the Chosin Reservoir campaign, a series of battles in which the weather and terrain were every bit as hostile as the armed enemy. Yet, in one of those oddities out of war, the reservoir that gave the campaign its name wasn't the Chosin Reservoir at all. Its proper Korean name was the Changjin Reservoir.

In 1950, the only maps available to American forces were Army Map Service translations of Japanese tactical maps from Japan's 50-year occupation of Ko-

rea. On those maps the reservoir carried the name the Japanese gave it: Chosin. So it was, and so it remains, although no Korean then or now would call it that. For the Marines who fought there, it was and always would be simply "The Reservoir," as though there had never been any other.

Although far better maps are available today, they still show the Chosin Reservoir surrounded by the towering peaks of the Taebek Mountain Range, one of the most inhospitable regions in North Korea. In November 1950, that was where Major General Oliver P. Smith was taking his division in response to orders from his senior commander, MG Edward M. Almond, USA, Commanding, X Corps.

MajGen Smith had serious reservations about the wisdom of those orders. In the light of available intelligence, orders essentially to conduct a hell-for-leather, devil-take-the-hindmost charge to the Yalu River that separated Korea from Manchuria failed to take the enemy into consideration. Any course of action that practically ignored the enemy could be filled with fatal consequences.

In a confidential 15 Nov. letter to General Clifton B. Cates, Commandant of the Marine Corps, MajGen Smith expressed his concerns. "I do not like the prospect of stringing out a Marine division along a single mountain road for 120 miles from Hamhung to the Manchurian border." Going on to spell out his reservations in detail, MajGen Smith ended his letter: "I have little confidence in the tactical judgment of X Corps or the realism of their planning."

The experienced Marine general had every reason to be wary. The enemy had changed. The ragtag fugitive remnants of the North Korean People's Army (NKPA) fleeing north after being routed in South Korea in September had vanished. Since going ashore unopposed at the port of Wonsan on North Korea's East Coast in mid-October and moving northward, there were increasing reports of a new enemy. More and more intelligence pointed to the presence of large CCF units in the area.

More than 60,000 CCF troops infil-





Leathernecks of the 7th Marines take a quick break during the heroic fight from the Chosin Reservoir down to the sea and safety by the First Marine Division in December 1950. (Photo by Sgt Frank C. Kerr)



Chinese Communist soldiers, wearing tennis shoes and tattered rags for warmth, surrender to Co C, 1st Bn, 7th Marines south of Koto-ri in December 1950. (Photo by Sgt Frank C. Kerr)

trated undetected from Manchuria, directly in the path of the 1stMarDiv. A collision already had taken place at the nowhere hamlet of Sudong on 2 Nov., when Colonel Homer L. Litzenberg's 7th Marines tangled with CCF elements positively identified as belonging to all three regiments of the 124th Div.

After four days of intense fighting, the 124th Div disappeared back into the surrounding mountains with a casualty list that rendered it combat ineffective, never to appear again. The CCF command reckoned this no great loss. The mission of the 124th Div had been to test and report on the tactics and fighting qualities of the American Marines. If it cost a division to do that, there still were more than enough other divisions.

Those other divisions, at least 12 of them in all, were Gen Sung Shin-lun's 9th Army Group, one of the CCF's elite formations, all veterans of China's Civil War. Moving by night, hiding by day, they had marched on foot across the Yalu River from their staging areas in Manchuria, carrying everything on their backs until they reached their goal. They waited in the even higher mountains near the Chosin Reservoir. Their mission: Destroy the 1stMarDiv.

A total realist and no fool walking blindly into a trap, MajGen Smith knew his or-

ders were taking him directly toward a sizeable enemy force. He knew as well that his left flank was wide open. Eighty miles of towering, trackless mountains separated him from the 8th Army, which was pushing north along Korea's west coast. Knowing the situation on the ground better than anyone else, he did not for one minute believe the insistence of General of the Army Douglas MacArthur's headquarters back in Tokyo that the only Chinese in Korea were no more than a handful of "volunteers."

Orders, but a commander faced with a significant enemy presence could use his discretion in how he carried them out. Despite continued prodding from above to "push on," MajGen Smith would continue to move northward, but it would not be a foot race. Fully aware that the advance would inevitably bring him into contact with a large, determined enemy force, he would advance deliberately, prepared to fight every step of the way.

A major element of that preparation would be the establishment of intermediate bases and laying in adequate stocks of ammunition, food, fuel and all the supplies needed to keep a Marine division ready for immediate and protracted combat. Establishing and protecting those bases would be the responsibility of Col

Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller's 1st Marines. Everything needed for two weeks of heavy fighting was the guidance.

While Lieutenant Colonel Raymond L. "Ray" Murray's 5th Marines and Col Litzenberg's 7th Marines took the point of the advance higher into the mountains and deeper into winter, Puller's 1st Marines began setting up defended bases at Chinhung-ni, Koto-ri and Hagaru-ri.

Each of these bases was within supporting distance of its nearest neighbor. No time was wasted in stocking all of them with the wherewithal to make them self-sustaining. On the relatively level ground just south of the reservoir, at Hagaru-ri, the combat engineers of LtCol John H. Partridge's 1st Engineer Battalion began around-the-clock work on a 5,000-foot runway capable of handling multi-engine aircraft.

By the third week in November, MajGen Smith's insistence on a methodical advance that stressed constant preparedness was being validated. While the 1stMarDiv's zone of action was relatively quiet, over on the west coast the advance of 8th Army had staggered to a halt under massive attacks by CCF divisions. The comparative lull on his own front did not lead the Marine to believe it would continue.

One of the Marine Corps' sharpest minds and a complete gentleman with



nothing colorful or flamboyant about him. Oliver P. Smith was at the same time a two-fisted fighter with few peers. When a fight came, he would be ready for it.

As dusk fell on 25 Nov., and the thermometer slipped below the zero mark, the division had reached what would be its farthest point of advance. Litzenberg's 7th Marines was settling into defensive positions on the snow-clad peaks towering above the flyspeck village of Yudam-ni on the reservoir's west shore. On the east side of the reservoir, at the equally insignificant hamlet of Sinhung-ni, the 5th Marines was plotting in final protective fires. That was about where Sung Shin-

lun wanted them. In a little more than 48 hours he would be able to attack two isolated regiments of American Marines with overwhelming numbers. Then, sheer, blind chance took a hand in events.

Chance took the form of elements of the 7th Infantry Div, which began relieving the 5th Marines at Sinhung-ni, on the east side of Chosin, on 16 Nov. Ordered to join the 7th Marines at Yudam-ni, as soon as Ray Murray's Marines turned over their positions to the Army arrivals, the Marines formed up on the road and set out on the march to the west side of the reservoir. As dusk fell the following day, the last elements of the 5th Marines, LICol

John W. Stevens' 1/5, entered the perimeter at Yudam-ni. The 5th and 7th Marines were no longer isolated and unable to support one another as Gen Sung Shin-lun had planned. It was none too soon.

Marines who were there will always remember the night of 27 Nov. as the night everything "hit the fan." Around 2200 on 27 Nov., as the temperature dropped to a bone-chilling 20 degrees below zero, the assault battalions of the CCF 79th and 89th divisions launched mass attacks against the Yudam-ni defenses. The fighting was intense as the Chinese attacked in waves, as though determined to bury the defending Marines of 2/7, 3/7 and 2/5

under the sheer weight of their bodies. "You couldn't kill them fast enough," one Marine commented.

It was a slaughter, but one purchased at a great price in Marine blood. Fearful casualties were suffered in the ranks of the defenders as well. Especially hard hit were Captain Walter D. Phillips' "Easy" Company, 2/7 and Capt Milton A. Hull's "Dog"/2/7, which were cut down to little more than the equivalent of one platoon between them. But they held, and they shattered attack after attack all through the bitterly cold, pitch-black night. In the end, it was the attackers who were shredded, crippled and withdrawn, no longer combat effective.

When a frigid dawn broke over the Taebaek Mountains on 28 Nov., Sung Shin-lun knew that he faced a far larger force than his intelligence had led him to believe. There was not one regiment of American Marines on the high ground ringing Yudam-ni; there were two. The intelligence that was 100 percent accurate 48 hours earlier was 100 percent useless now.

Sung Shin-lun was a dedicated communist, but he was not inflexible. If the American situation was altered, he would alter his tactics. He would maintain the pressure on Yudam-ni and encircle the garrisons at Koto-ri and Chinhung-ni, preventing any reinforcements from being sent north. Then he would redirect his main attack against Hagaru-ri. After he had overrun Hagaru-ri, leaving Yudam-ni isolated, he would tighten the noose about the American Marines there.

Left: A Chinese Communist roadblock only slowed the leathernecks as Marine air rolled in to burn out the enemy force with napalm.

Below: Marines begin to fan out from the main supply route, near the Changjin River, between Hagaru-ri and Koto-ri, to guard the flanks of the 1stMarDiv's main column.

Overwhelming the Hagaru-ri garrison seemed to be an obtainable goal. Beyond two rifle companies and the weapons company of LtCol Thomas L. "Tom" Ridge's 3/1 were only makeshift units of engineers, drivers, mechanics, cooks and clerks to defend a four-mile perimeter. Even the 105 mm howitzers of Dog/2/11 and How/3/11 had been pressed into front-line service, assigned sectors to defend. Could a defense stretched so thin, with only a handful of reserves, stand under the avalanche like attacks of the CCF 58th Div?

Vicious hand-to-hand fighting raged around the Hagaru-ri perimeter for the next three days. Penetrations were made in places, but somehow were sealed off and forced out. The line stretched and buckled, but never completely gave way as tidal waves of Chinese threw themselves at it. "Direct support" took on a new meaning, as the guns of Dog/2/11 and How/3/11 fired point-blank into the oncoming attackers, perhaps the first time since the American Civil War that artillery manned positions on the front lines, Hagaru-ri, with its absolutely vital airfield, had to be held.

So, too, did Toktong Pass, the critical terrain feature on the road connecting Yudam-ni and Hagaru-ri. Holding that vital ground was the mission of Capt William E. "Bill" Barber and his Marines of Fox/2/7. That otherwise insignificant hill would go into Marine Corps annals as Fox Hill, and Barber would earn the Medal of Honor defending it. Shot and so



CPA PETER W. WOODWARD

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On 13 Dec. 1950, Cpl Charles E. Price sounds "Taps" over the graves of the fallen during memorial services officiated by Protestant, Catholic and Jewish chaplains at the 1stMarDiv cemetery in Hungnam.

badly wounded that he couldn't stand, Barber directed the battle propped up against a tree.

The CCF 59th Div threw everything it had at Fox Co. Half of the company was wounded, but half of those casualties still could fight, and the company refused to yield its hold on the hill.

If Fox Hill were lost, Toktong Pass would be lost. If the pass were lost, the road would be lost.

The importance of that road assumed monumental proportions on 30 Nov. Acting on orders to all units from X Corps, the 5th and 7th Marines began preparations to break out of encirclement and blast a path to Hagaru-ri. The bulk of the two regiments would strike directly down the road, forcing a path through any Chinese that attempted to bar progress. One battalion, LtCol Raymond G. Davis' 1/7, drew the backbreaking assignment of marching overland through knee-deep snow to relieve the hard-pressed defenders of Fox Hill.

The weather continued to be as much of an enemy as the Chinese. Daytime temperatures struggled to reach zero, and plunged to 35 degrees below zero at night. Rations froze solid. A can could be placed in a fire until the food at the bottom blackened, but the top would still be a block of ice. Water in canteens froze. Machine guns and Browning Automatic Rifles fired sluggishly. Artillery pieces in full recoil would be painfully slow to return to battery. A vehicle with its engine shut down would never start again. Cases of frostbite mounted as snow reduced visibility to a few yards.

Despite ferocious resistance from the weather and the Chinese, the advance to the south would not be denied. On 2 Dec., bone weary from two days of plowing through snow without sleep, the advance elements of 1/7 fell on the completely surprised Chinese assailants of Fox Hill and shredded them. Toktong Pass was open; the road was clear.

At dusk on 3 Dec., having shattered everything that tried to stop them, the advance party of the Yudam-ni garrison approached the Hagaru-ri perimeter. They were exhausted from days and nights of constant combat; red-rimmed and blood-shot eyes sunk in grimy faces. But with no command, shoulders suddenly straightened, weapons were slung and feet marched in cadence on the frozen roadway. Navy Lieutenant Junior Grade Robert Harvey, who had been a battalion surgeon with



3/5 during the summer, watched them come in. "Look at those bastards, those magnificent bastards," he murmured.

It wasn't the end; rather, it was the prelude to another act. Still determined to overwhelm the embattled post, Sung Shin-lun threw more of his men at it. Already incredibly intense, the fighting around the Hagaru-ri perimeter exploded. At one point, the slopes of East Hill were covered with the corpses of more than 1,000 Chinese attackers. The advance to Koto-ri began soon thereafter.

The advance was contested every step of the way, a weeklong running gunfight of road block and hillside defensive positions that were overcome one by one by Marines on the ground and Marine, Navy and South African airmen overhead. Position after position was swept aside by leathernecks who were staggering with fatigue, malnourishment and the brutal effects of debilitating, mind-numbing cold and strength-sapping wind. They operated on sheer determination and willpower. They would not be stopped. The Chinese died by the hundreds finding that out.

Koto-ri and then Chihung-ni were reached. The CCF command threw more divisions into the battle, only to see them decimated by the mincing machine the 1stMarDiv had become. Shortly after 2400, as the new day of 12 Dec. was beginning, the first serials of the division entered the staging area in the port of Hungnam to begin backloading aboard ship.

They were filthy—scrounging beyond belief. Most had not had their clothes off for the better part of two months. They smelled like a herd of wet water buffalo. But they had done exactly what their commanding general had said: "We're coming out with our wounded, with our dead, with our equipment and with our prisoners. We're coming out as Marines."

In doing so, they had left a landscape littered with enemy dead, and they had composed their own bawdy song to celebrate it. It was an off-color and unprintable Marine version of the old British favorite "Bless 'Em All" that ended with "Those poor dumb b----- hit Hagaru-ri, and now know the meaning of USMC."

It all happened 60 years ago. Fewer and fewer of the Marines of Chosin are left now. Soon the last will be gone. But in the snow-covered mountains of North Korea they wrote a chapter in Marine Corps history never to be forgotten.

Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua, a Leatherneck contributing editor, is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean War and the Vietnam War. Later in his career, he was an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va. His book, "The Way It Was, A Seabag Full of Humor," is available from the Marine Corps Association book service: www.marineshop.net, or toll free at: (866) 622-1775.

