

Chosin Reservoir Campaign

Battle Perspectives from Marines Who Were There



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Infantry Marines move along the flank of the column between Hagaru-ri and Koto-ri.

By Irv Sternberg

On a bitterly cold afternoon on Dec. 23, 1950, about 8,000 men of the 1st Marine Division were strung out along a narrow, twisting road that ran near the west side of a man-made lake in North Korea called the Chosin Reservoir. Despite being halfway around the world from home, they enjoyed a traditional Thanksgiving Day meal, eating quickly before their food turned cold in the freezing temperature. Under the command of Army General Douglas MacArthur, the supreme commander of the United Nations forces, the Marines had fought their way almost to the Manchurian border. MacArthur had assured them they would be home by Christmas.

Four nights later, companies of the 1st, 5th and 7th Marine Regiments fixed bayonets and engaged in hand-to-hand combat with hordes of Chinese soldiers near remote villages with names like Koto-ri,

Hagaru-ri and Yudam-ni. It was the beginning of the 17-day battle and fighting withdrawal from the Chosin Reservoir that defined the Korean War.

Called “The Forgotten War” by many, the Marines of 1stMarDiv, some of whom arrived there as boys as young as 17 and left as battle-hardened men, vividly remember their time in Korea. Among the survivors were Martin Letellier, Don Johnson and Manert Kennedy. Letellier and Johnson were teenagers when they arrived in Korea, Kennedy a 20-year-old. Now in their nineties, they recalled those fateful days 70 years ago with remarkable clarity.

Kennedy

Manert Kennedy grew up in Wyandot, Wis., the son of a self-educated engineer. Bored with school, he quit and said he “bummed around Detroit where the truant officers knew me by my first name.” Actually, he spent most of his time in

Detroit’s libraries, where he read lots of books and followed the war in Europe and the Pacific. Returning home, he told his parents he wanted to enlist in the Marines. “I needed a sense of direction,” he said. He had followed the Marines’ exploits during World War II at Guadalcanal, Okinawa and Iwo Jima. “They were my heroes.” With his parents’ permission, he enlisted at the age of 17.

Little more than three years later, as a 20-year-old sergeant in 1stMarDiv, he found himself leading a patrol that was searching for North Korean soldiers west of Wonsan, North Korea. His patrol found a North Korean hiding under a house. When the soldier reached for Manert’s .45-caliber sidearm, Manert shot him. He killed more Chinese in many firefights that followed.

Letellier

Martin “Marty” Letellier grew up in Sioux City, Iowa, and was the son of a

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—Manert Kennedy

livestock inspector. He recalled a happy childhood, spending long hours swimming in a neighborhood pool and lifting weights from the time he was 7 with the encouragement and supervision of his father.

His grandfather had been a trapper and fur trader in Canada in the late 1800s, and Marty always felt he, too, would someday be an adventurer. He played football in high school where, at 5’10” and 180 pounds, he was a punishing fullback who dreamed about playing for Notre Dame, his favorite college team. He got his chance to be an adventurer when he left high school to enlist in the Marines at his dad’s suggestion.

“They’re the best,” his father had said.

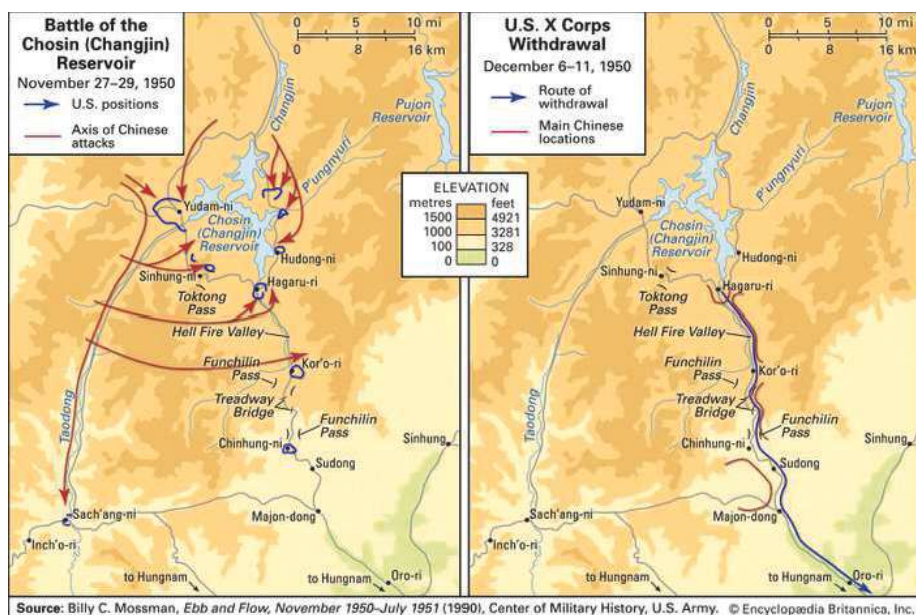
So Letellier quit school in his senior year and enlisted in 1948. He completed boot camp at San Diego Recruit Depot in November and was assigned to a 60 mm mortar unit at Camp Pendleton, Calif., where he trained before sailing to Pusan, Korea, on Aug. 2, 1950. He was 19 years old and excited to fulfill his destiny as an adventurer.

Johnson

Don Johnson and his siblings assumed responsibilities beyond their years when their father left the family during the Great Depression. To assist their mother, the boys all became newspaper carriers and delivered papers “all over south Denver” to earn money for their needy family. “We had no time to play. We did what we had to do.” At South High School, he finally found time to enjoy himself by joining the wrestling team, a sport he took with him when he joined the Marines.

About two months after graduation in 1946, he enlisted in the Marine Corps at the age of 18 because “they were a great outfit, the best.” One of his brothers was in the Navy and encouraged him to also join the Navy. “I couldn’t swim,” Don recalled, “so why join the Navy?” Then, at boot camp in San Diego, he found

The men of the 5th and 7th Marines, 1stMarDiv receiving an order to withdraw from their positions near the Chosin Reservoir, Nov. 29, 1950.



himself flailing in a pool and being eyed by an unsympathetic drill instructor. Don started to leave the pool. “Get back in there!” the drill instructor barked. “He’s trying to drown me!” Don thought. But his DI conducted late-night sessions in the pool and helped him learn how to swim. Later, Don joined the Marines’ wrestling team and earned a spot on the All-Navy wrestling team.

Discharged in 1948, he chose to remain in the Marine Reserve to earn extra money to help support his mother. During that time, he met his future wife, Joan. When the U.S. entered the Korean War in September 1950, he was recalled to active duty which was not in his plans. He wanted to get married and settle down.

“I’m not a fighter,” he protested. “I’m a lover.”

The Marine Corps, with its numbers greatly diminished after World War II, was rebuilding to fight a new war in Korea. Johnson was ordered to report to San Diego and soon boarded a troop transport headed for Inchon, Korea.

Kennedy

By October 1950, Kennedy’s company was ordered to march west to Funchilin Pass in North Korea where the altitude was about 3,500 feet, the snow deep, and the night temperatures below zero. Their C-rations were frozen, and their hands and feet colder than they had ever been before. Shortly after they arrived, they



SGT FRANK C. KERR, USMC

confronted untold numbers of Chinese.

"The enemy attack started with a flare that lit up the whole area," Kennedy recalled. "They started sounding horns and clashing cymbals. It was eerie, like a New Year's Eve celebration. Then the enemy soldiers came, waves of them. When one fell, it seemed like two more took his place. They broke through the perimeter and soon we were fixing bayonets, fighting hand-to-hand before they finally withdrew. It was nasty. Nobody slept that night. We wondered if we would survive." He paused in his thoughts. "One of the hardest things we had to do was picking up dead Marines in the morning. Their bodies were frozen, their limbs twisted and faces contorted. We were freezing, too. Not only physically, but also emotionally."

He got orders to fall back to Koto-ri, a base established by their Division commander, Major General Oliver P. Smith. There, Kennedy and his men finally found some rest inside a secure perimeter set up by their regimental commander, Colonel Lewis "Chesty" Puller of the 1st Marines, the most decorated Marine in the history of the Corps. Kennedy and his men were glad to be serving under him.

Letellier

To the northwest, Marty Letellier and his mortar outfit had marched or were trucked about 20 miles from Hagaru-ri to join Baker Company, 1st Provisional Marine Brigade.

Letellier and his buddies in "King" Battery had set up a position northwest of Yudam-ni near the Yalu River, the border between North Korea and China. MacArthur wanted to push the enemy all the way up to the border, but he didn't expect huge numbers of Chinese to pour across the border and confront his



MajGen Oliver P. Smith, CG of 1stMarDiv, attends memorial services for his fallen men at the Division's cemetery at Hungnam, Korea, following the break-out from the Chosin Reservoir in December 1950.

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troops—1stMarDiv, the Eighth Army and various United Nations forces. Soon they would be in serious trouble.

On Nov. 27, Letellier recalled, "the night we arrived, Chinese troops wearing white, padded coats attacked with burp guns, machine guns and grenades. They filled the sky with green tracers—every fifth round—and sounded bugles and other horns and slammed cymbals. As they got close, they screamed curses at us in English. 'Sonofabitch! You die, Marines!' We were mowing them down with machine-gun and rifle fire, but it seemed they just kept coming—shooting and screaming. I thought it was over. I thought I'm 19 and I'm going to croak in this damn place!"

By morning he was astonished to see how many dead Chinese were on the hillside. The white snow was red with blood. Hundreds of bodies were strewn over the ground, frozen into bizarre positions. Short of sandbags, he and his buddies stacked the bodies of dead Chinese around them to provide protection against the next attack because the ground was too frozen to dig foxholes.

Johnson

Don Johnson sailed to Wonsan in November 1950. He and his artillery outfit moved a 150 mm howitzer up a narrow, winding road for 78 miles, followed by a truck carrying howitzer shells. The farther north they went, the colder it got, falling to 35 degrees below zero at night. "We'd never been that cold. Finally, we got some parkas to replace our field jackets. That



A Direct Air Control Center in Hagaru-ri, North Korea, during the battle for the Chosin Reservoir in December 1950.

made a big difference.” But the M1s were freezing up. “You could hear a constant clicking noise all day long. The guys were moving the operating rod handles to keep the mechanism from freezing.”

The howitzer was aimed toward the Yalu River. “But we were told not to fire any shells across the river. That was China. We followed orders, but thousands of Chinese were attacking us anyway.” Johnson was given a jeep and ordered to pick up new maps from wherever the headquarters was located.

“Our greatest fear was running out of ammunition, but “Flying Boxcars” [C-119s] would come in the nick of time, flying low and dropping ammo and supplies.” Meanwhile, gull-winged Corsairs flew just above the treetops, strafed the Chinese soldiers and dropped canisters of napalm. The Chinese soldiers would run screaming, their bodies aflame. “When we found them later, they were cooked like hot dogs, their arms and legs split like franks on a grill,” Johnson said.

Under Gen Smith, 1stMarDiv captured Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea, and pushed the Chinese almost to the China border. There, the drive halted when it became apparent that the Marines and Eighth Army troops were outnumbered by more than seven to one. MacArthur,

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who had ignored or dismissed intelligence reports of Chinese intervention, finally called for a withdrawal. While the Chinese had targeted the 1stMarDiv for elimination, it was the Chinese heralded Ninth Army Group that was decimated, never to fight again in Korea.

What followed next has been called one of the most outstanding fighting withdrawals in military history. Asked if he was retreating, Smith reportedly said, “Retreat, hell! We’re just attacking in another direction.” Columns of exhausted and chilled Marines in tattered clothing stained with blood, mucus, urine and feces, marched and fought for 78 miles to the port city of Hungnam. The arrivals



Col Lewis B. Puller, CO, 1st Marines, and BGen Edward A. Craig, Assistant Division Commander, 1stMarDiv, September 25, 1950. (Photo courtesy of Oliver P. Smith Collection, Marine Corps Archives & Special Collections)



SGT FRANK C. KERR, USMC

Riflemen and machine gunners engage the enemy during the Korean War.



Marines move forward after effective close air support flushes out the enemy from their hillside entrenchments near Hagaru-ri in December 1950.

included walking wounded, hard-eyed infantrymen, and tons of artillery, vehicles and supplies.

After hot showers, hot meals and long sleep, they boarded troop transports. First to board were Smith's 22,215 Marines, including the 8,000 "Chosin Few" as they later called themselves. "They earned it," said Army Major General Edward Almond, second in command to MacArthur. Added Army General Frank Lowe, President Harry Truman's liaison in Korea, "They are the most efficient and courageous combat unit I have ever seen or heard of."

Numerous historians have called the fighting withdrawal from the Chosin one of the most astonishing maneuvers in American military history, often compared to Dunkirk or to General George Washington's stealthy night departure from Long Island in the Revolutionary War of Independence. The Chosin battle and withdrawal have joined Montezuma, Tripoli and Iwo Jima in Marine Corps lore. For his leadership, Smith was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and the Silver Star. Forty-two Marines were awarded

the Medal of Honor, 27 posthumously.

President Truman relieved and replaced MacArthur with Army General Matt Ridgway. Under his command, United Nations forces reorganized and launched a counter-attack, recapturing Seoul. But, fighting for position, the Chinese continued to attack at places like Heartbreak Ridge and The Punchbowl. The war dragged on to a stalemate, an exchange of prisoners, and an armistice on July 27, 1953. An area around the 38th Parallel was reestablished as a demilitarized zone (DMZ). Thus, the war ended where it began.

The Marine Corps lost 4,200 men in combat and suffered a total of 28,000 casualties, including 7,331 due to frostbite at the Chosin Reservoir and 193 missing in action.

Like the wars that followed, the Korean War (often called a "conflict" or "police action" because no declaration of war had ever been declared) was not popular with the American public. It was only five years after the end of World War II, and Americans had had enough of war. Nevertheless, American intervention saved South Korea

from being wiped out. Today, it is a thriving democracy technically still at war with North Korea, but a contributing nation to the world's economy. North Korea remains an isolated nation with a struggling economy and a severely oppressed population.

Kennedy, Letellier and Johnson returned home to continue their education. All became teachers; Kennedy taught at college and became an authority on genetics.

During the war, the Marine Corps had begun to rebuild its strength. Today, it can claim that 182,000 now on active duty are the few, the proud, and the ready to fight the nation's battles on the land or sea.

Author's bio: Irv Sternberg is a former journalist, public relations practitioner and the award-winning author of 10 novels. His most recent book, "In the Land of the Morning Calm, When Boys Became Men at Chosin Reservoir—the Epic Battle of the Korean War," was published in September. He served in the 1stMarDiv at Camp Pendleton in 1951 and 1952 and lives in Denver, Colo.