

# Chosin Reservoir

## Korea

### November - December 1950

#### The Road to Chosin

The Korean War sprung from seeds sown well before the North Korean Peoples' Army surged across the 38th Parallel on 25 June 1950. The roots of the conflict penetrate at least as deep as 1905, when the Japanese Army occupied Korea. Annexed in 1910, the Korean peninsula was considered enemy territory by then allies, China and the United States. In 1943 and 1945, President Roosevelt set the course for Korea to become free and independent following the end of World War II and until it was able to function on its own, China, the Soviet Union, and the United States would serve as joint trustees. Between the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Soviet Union opportunistically declared war on Japan joining the Allied Powers in the Pacific. The surrender of Japan on 14 August 1943 made immediate delineation of zones necessary where each ally would receive the Japanese surrender. Two American Army Colonels, Dean Rusk and Charles Bonesteel, used a *National Geographic* map to propose a suitable line of demarcation. With no agreeable geographic boundaries, the line agreed upon between the Soviets and Americans was the 38th Parallel. The Americans occupied south of the line as the Soviets descended from the north and sealed the border. Unfortunately, President Roosevelt's vision of a free and independent Korea was not to be.

Korea's halves diverged ideologically along the lines of their trustee state. The South desired the free and independent vision of Roosevelt and was not willing to wait; neither were the Americans. The growing menace of the Soviet Union loomed over both Asia and Western Europe; the Americans chose to consolidate their efforts in Europe. Handover of the Korean peninsula to the United Nations (UN), accompanied by US troop withdrawal, occurred in 1948. The UN Temporary Commission on Korea attempted, and failed, to arrange and conduct free and democratic elections. The result was one people, split by a line on a map, with two separate governments vying for control of the entire peninsula. Ideologically polarized, conflict was inevitable.

As Korea was split, so was the world. In the view of most Americans and Western Europeans, the monolithic face of communism was that of Stalin. The "reactionaries", those fearful of an impending people's revolution on a global scale, were firmly in camp behind the lead of the United States. On 1 October 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) announced the establishment of the People's Republic of China and carried the largest country, in terms of population, into the pool of resources controlled by communism. Though the CCP's 28-year

effort to seize power was at a successful end, the retreat of Chinese Nationalist forces under the lead of Chiang Kai-shek to the island of Taiwan drew the battle lines for the final campaign of the Chinese Civil War. Events between the fall of 1949 and summer of 1950 put the final campaign on hold; conflict in Korea would postpone any plans to conquer the final Nationalist redoubt.

North and South Korea, "the former under the Soviet-installed Kim Il Sung, the latter under the Western-oriented but authoritarian Syngman Rhee", had been heading down the road to conflict since the end of World War II. Most parties, especially the Koreans, viewed the partition of the country as a temporary condition. The actions of the international community, notably the United States, led many to believe that foreign powers would not interfere in the coming civil war.

In a *New York Times* article dated 2 March 1949, Supreme Commander Allied Powers (SCAP), General Douglas MacArthur, stated,

*Now the Pacific has become an Anglo-Saxon lake and our line of defense runs through the chain of islands fringing the coast of Asia. It starts from the Philippines and continues through the Ryukyu archipelago which includes its broad main bastion, Okinawa. Then it bends back through Japan and the Aleutian Island chain to Alaska.*

Effectively, the highest-ranking United States military officer in the Pacific had told the entire world that South Korea and Taiwan were not of defensive concern to the United States. Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, took MacArthur's statement a bit further.

*So far as the military security of other areas in the Pacific is concerned, it must be clear that no person can guarantee these areas against military attack...Should such an attack occur... the initial reliance must be on the people attacked to resist it and then upon the commitments of the entire world under the Charter of the United Nations.*

The withdrawal of troop formations from South Korea and the words of the most senior military commander and state department official combined to paint a picture of United States non-interference in an internal Korean conflict.

The isolation of South Korea, coupled with the victory of the CCP, encouraged North Korean Premier, Kim Il Sung. In late 1949, Kim approached Stalin, not for the first time, to discuss Soviet "sanction and support [of] an invasion of South Korea by the North Korean People's Army" (NKPA). After consultation with CCP Chairman, Mao Tse-tung, and the signing of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship on 15 February 1950, Stalin informed Kim that the Soviet Union was willing to provide support. This support was subject to the approval of North Korea's plans by Chairman Mao. Effectively, Stalin removed himself and the Soviet Union from the blame line and placed the responsibility for failure in China's hands.] In Stalin's cable to Kim, he stated, "If you should get kicked in the teeth, I shall not lift a finger. You have to ask Mao for all the help." Mao inherited liability, but he was also ceded approval authority. The North Korean invasion could only proceed with the blessing of Chairman Mao.

Giving his approval would have been difficult for Mao. Allowing the plans of Kim to go forward

would require a shift of China's focus away from liberation of Taiwan, but the complex relationship between North Korea and the CCP weighed heavy on Mao's mind. During the Chinese Civil War, North Korea was the strategic rear area for communist forces. In July 1946, in the midst of severe losses to Chinese Nationalist forces, thousands of CCP troops and their families crossed the Yalu River and found refuge in North Korea. Without the assistance of North Korea, the CCP in Manchuria would have been wiped out. In early 1947, tens of thousands of Koreans left North Korea, under the orders of Kim, to aid the CCP in the liberation of China. Feelings of appreciation and respect for the sacrifices of North Korea mingled with distrust for Kim. However, Mao overcame his personal feelings; his ideological desires, to spread communism throughout Asia and the world, prevailed over his distrust. In May 1950, Mao reluctantly offered the fraternal support of the CCP. Kim accepted the approval, but assured Mao that no support was necessary. According to Kim, the NKPA, in conjunction with guerrilla elements in the South, would sweep the Korean Peninsula within a month; the Americans would not be able to react in time, if they reacted at all.

In the predawn hours of 25 June 1950, North Korean forces, "trained and equipped by the Soviet Union, swept over the Parallel, slashing through the nominal defenses erected by the South Koreans." Marked by initial success, the NKPA invasion quickly took Seoul. The CCP, watching from the sidelines, breathed a sigh of relief and adopted the party line that by "actively preparing for the liberation of Taiwan, we shall be giving effective aid to the support of Korea." Their relief was short-lived. Kim's invasion plan and estimate of a one-month war rested on the foundation of two critical assumptions. The first was that guerrilla forces in the South would rise against their oppressors and aid the cause of the NKPA. The second, based on American rhetoric, was that the United States would stay out of a Korean civil war. Neither assumption held true. The guerrillas never rose in strength. The United States, caught off guard by the invasion, reversed course on its previous statements. Two days after the invasion, the United States ordered troops to Korea from their post-World War II occupation bases in Japan, and General Douglas MacArthur was named Supreme UN Commander over the sixteen nations contributing forces to the joint defense of South Korea. At the same time, President Truman ordered the United States 7th Fleet to move from the Philippines to the Taiwan Strait. With these actions, the United States reversed its position on both locations, in reference to the U.S. Pacific Defense Perimeter, and essentially intervened in Chinese and Korean civil wars. The sudden reversal of policy increased the already robust distrust harbored by the CCP for the United States. China began making preparations for military action on the Korean peninsula thereby making the Korean Civil War an international conflict.

The NKPA offensive stalled before the shores of the Naktong River and the city of Pusan. It was there that UN reinforcements were finally able to stem the flow of the NKPA offensive, draining their momentum while preparations were made to counterattack. On 15 July, MacArthur sent his second request for a United States Marine Division to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The first request, five days earlier, had met refusal. His subsequent request stated,

*I strongly request reconsideration of my need for a Marine division. Its availability is absolutely essential to achieve a decisive stroke. If not made available, a much longer and more expensive effort, both in blood and money, will result. I must have the Marine Division by September 10. I cannot too strongly emphasize the complete urgency of my request.*

The Joint Chiefs approved the request; the 1st Marine Division entered the Korean War.

Beijing watched the situation in Korea with great interest. The intervention of the United States in the Taiwan Strait angered Mao, but it was the involvement of United States land forces in Korea where Mao saw both risk and reward. Initial responses to the U.S. policy changes were rhetorical, but they were quickly followed by the redeployment of People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces, from locations throughout China to Manchuria, across the border of North Korea. On 7 July, the CCP created the Northeast Border Defense Army (NEBDA) so that "in case [they] needed to enter the war [they] would be prepared."

MacArthur's decisive stroke fell at Inchon on 15 September. "The U.S. X Corps, with the 1st Marine Division leading, executed a risky but successful landing. The Marines, together with the 7th Infantry Division, drove inland to recapture Seoul and cut the North Korean lines of communication." The back of the NKPA was broken. The initial aims of UN intervention, as declared by the U.S. State Department, were "solely for the purpose of restoring the Republic of Korea to its status prior to the invasion of the north." After the success of the Inchon landing, the Americans again reversed positions. Instead of stopping at the pre-war border, the 38th Parallel, MacArthur, with the consent of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the U.S State Department, decided to continue past the Parallel and occupy all of North Korea. At the time of the decision, the United States embarked upon a campaign of rhetoric aimed at soothing nervous Chinese and Soviet leaders. The U.S. hoped to "accomplish unification without triggering a strong, undesired reaction, that is Soviet or Chinese intervention."

The Chinese viewed UN forces crossing the 38th Parallel tantamount to a declaration of war and made it known to the world by issuing a number of complaints and warnings against the American intention of "expanding the war to the Chinese-Korean border and China itself." Mobilization in Manchuria increased and on 2 October, Peng Dehau was named commander of the Chinese forces dedicated to potential intervention in Korea. In an attempt to separate the CCP from the conflict, and as an ingenious deception measure, the NEBDA was renamed the Chinese People's Volunteer Army (CPV). On 16 October, the 124th Division of the 42nd Army crossed the Yalu River; China had entered the Korean War.

As the UN forces continued north, the flow of the CPV crossed the Yalu at night and flooded to meet them. The CPV forces maintained strict discipline. They moved only at night and kept under cover throughout daylight hours in an attempt to avoid being spotted by aerial reconnaissance. On 20 October, Major General Charles A. Willoughby, MacArthur's intelligence officer, "reported that the UN Command had taken precautionary measures in conducting daily air reconnaissance flights over all avenues of approach from the Yalu River. No positive movement had been sighted." The discipline of CPV soldiers and leaders directly contributed to one of the biggest intelligence failures in military history.

On 24 October 1950, the CPV had four Armies in North Korea. Also on the 24th, the U.S. Eighth Army Intelligence Officer reported, "considering the relative impotency of the remaining North Korean Force, it may be expected that friendly movement to the Manchuria border will be rapid." Incredibly, staff members at all levels failed in accurate assessment of the strength of the

CPV. From 25 October through the 5 November, the Chinese Armies bloodied the nose of the UN forces. However, on 6 November CPV forces withdrew to the north. The UN Command convinced itself that China's effort in the Korean War was over.

The first blows inspired confidence in the Chinese leadership and contempt for American forces, contempt for all but the 1st Marine Division. After taking Seoul, the U.S. X Corps had re-boarded ships and circumnavigated the peninsula for a second amphibious landing. The 1st Marine Division came ashore uncontested at Wonson, but soundly defeated a strong Chinese force in the vicinity of the Sudong Gorge, south of Chosin, during the Chinese 1st Phase Offensive. The defeat was not important, but it helped shape the Chinese vision of the 1st Marine Division as the best-trained and equipped military force in the U.S. arsenal. Special steps were taken to ensure the defeat would not be repeated during the impending 2nd Phase Offensive. On 5 November, the IX Army Group crossed the Yalu. Three Armies, each made up of four divisions, moved to the Chosin Reservoir area with their collective sights on the Marines. The forces that China had dedicated to the 1st Phase Offensive swelled from 12 divisions to 30 in preparation for the second phase. "On 14 November a cold front descended over all of North Korea, with temperatures reaching 35 degrees below zero" in the 1st Marine Division area; the stage was set for Chosin.

### **Strategic Objectives at Chosin**

The overall strategy for the conduct of the Korean War up to Chosin was created by Chairman Mao Tse-tung, on behalf of the Chinese, and General Douglas MacArthur, for the United Nations. During analysis of the two competing strategies, it can be seen that the Chinese cared little for control of actual terrain, whereas the UN Command could not separate victory from the land. The Chinese focused on formations. The UN focused on occupation.

The Chosin Reservoir itself was not important to either leader, but total victory was. Chasing total victory led both sides through the most broken terrain during the harshest conditions imaginable. MacArthur's UN Communiqué Number 12, issued 24 November 1950, outlines his view of the "run for the border" campaign and gives insight into why the 1st Marine Division would cross through the Chosin area.

*The United Nations massive compression envelopment in North Korea against the new Red Armies cooperating there is now approaching its decisive effort...the eastern sector of the pincer [X Corps with the 1st Marine Division in lead] ...has now reached a commanding enveloping position, cutting in two the northern reaches of the enemy's geographical potential. This morning the western sector of the pincer moves forward in general assault in an effort to... close the vise.*

The route MacArthur wanted the 1st Marine Division to follow crossed the Nangnim Mountain Range through the Chosin Reservoir area. Unfortunately for MacArthur and the men of his command, his estimate of the situation was based on a much smaller number of communist forces in Korea. His "massive compression envelopment" played right into the hands of the communist strategy.

Mao's dispatch of forces to Korea was motivated by the goal of "eliminating the enemy troops

and forcing the Americans out of the Korean Peninsula." Once committed, Mao would not be happy while there was an American presence in Korea and did little to hide his contempt for the UN forces. He declared all South Korean forces "puppet" units and thought little of American discipline in battle. These sentiments were reinforced during the 1st Phase Offensive, except in the case of the Marines. Mao sought in the 2nd Phase Offensive to make an example of the Marines, to break the back of the UN force by annihilating their premier unit. In guidance to his field commander, Peng Dehau, Mao states,

*It is said that the American Marine First Division has the highest combat effectiveness in the American armed forces. It seems not enough for our four divisions to surround and annihilate its two regiments. [You] should have one or two more divisions as a reserve force. The 26th Army of the Ninth Army Group should be stationed close to the front.*

Strategically, Mao desired total destruction of the Marines and ejection of UN forces from the peninsula. MacArthur sought to end the war through the complete occupation of North Korea. In the end, neither could be pleased with the results of the Chosin Reservoir campaign because neither accomplished their strategic objective.

### **Operational Objectives at Chosin**

Away from the political centers of Beijing and Tokyo, operational commanders translated the guidance of MacArthur and Mao into executable orders. Major General Edward M. Almond, commander of X Corps, and General Song Shilun, commander of IX Army Group, were the men in northeastern Korea who would set the operational objectives for their subordinate commanders.

General Shilun's mission was "to find opportunities to eliminate all four divisions of X Corps, luring the enemy in deep and destroying them one after another." Shilun had under his command three Armies; the 20th, the 26th, and the 27th. In accordance with Mao's guidance, Shilun focused all efforts on the 1st Marine Division before moving on to the rest of the corps; "the 9th CCF Army Group plan was to take its main force and destroy two regiments of the 1st Marine Division. After that, they were to destroy the remaining Units."

General Almond's objective is less clearly defined. Almond was commander of an independent corps that was directly under the operational control of Far Eastern Command or, in other words, General MacArthur. Almond was also still serving as MacArthur's Chief of Staff. The X Corps had been created solely for the Inchon invasion, but after the liberation of Seoul, it was shipped to the other side of the peninsula unattached and unable to support Eighth Army.

The 80-mile gap between Eighth Army and X Corps was not as large as the expanse that separated the two unit commanders; Lieutenant General Walton Walker and Major General Edward Almond did not get along. Walker, though senior in rank, had been treated poorly by MacArthur's Chief of Staff. The assignment of Almond to command X Corps, and MacArthur's continuance of the command after the liberation of Seoul, further cooled an icy relationship. MacArthur's pride in Almond is clear; however, his orders were not. If Almond complied with them, it would put all of his divisions in locations where mutual support was impossible.

Perhaps because of the success bestowed upon him through the picture-perfect Inchon invasion and feelings of gratitude towards MacArthur, Almond accepted the orders and the dispersion of his forces. He did not question the orders or analyze their impact in any substantial manner; it seems that he merely restated MacArthur's directive to move X Corps forces to the border as soon as possible regardless of apparent risk. When questioned about Edward Almond, Major General Smith, Commander of 1st Marine Division, had the following to say, "Almond was a very energetic man and egotistical. He was a MacArthur man, and anything MacArthur said, nothing could change it. MacArthur was God." Although one may hope that Almond's motivations were professional in nature, it appears that the real motivations were personal. Edward Almond desired to please MacArthur and further show up his rival, Walton Walker.

Whatever Almond's motivation, X Corps was rushing to the border. On 20 November, the 17th Regiment of the 7th Infantry Division reached Hyesanjin on the Yalu River followed eight days later by Task Force Kingston, which reached the border with a platoon of K Company, 32nd Infantry. X Corps never made it to the Yalu in force; it did not meet its operational objectives.

The Chinese seeking to destroy two regiments of Marines before moving on to the rest of X Corps, also failed. On 10 December 1950, the last element of the 1st Marine Division departed the Chosin area. Although they had suffered a high number of casualties, the Marines maintained the strength to bring their wounded and equipment with them. The Marine Division was still a functioning unit, a unit that would fight again in Korea.

### **Tactical Objectives at Chosin**

The Chinese IX Army Group consisted of three Armies; each Army had four divisions. At full strength, these formations totaled 120,000 soldiers; information obtained from Chinese prisoners of war during the Chosin campaign reduced that number to approximately 84,000. Of the 12 divisions in the IX Army Group, three were never identified in contact with UN forces during the Chosin campaign. Seven of the remaining nine divisions actively engaged UN forces at the Chosin Reservoir with the intent of annihilating the 1st Marine Division; the analysis of Chinese tactical objectives will focus on those seven formations.

The Chinese divisions will be addressed by location, starting in the north and moving south, while also moving from west to east. Under this framework, the first of the seven divisions encountered was the 89th Division. The 89th Division's sole objective was the destruction of one Marine regiment at Yudam-ni. On the night of 27 November, the division closed to within a few hundred yards of Marine positions on Hill 1403 northwest of Yudam-ni. In a night of intense fighting, the 89th Division took Hill 1403, using 7000 Chinese to drive less than 500 Marines to lower ground. The Marines lost seven killed and 25 to wounds. "In front of E and F companies [2nd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment] lay roughly 500 CCF dead." The 89th held the hill, but posed no further threat to the Marines throughout the remainder of the action, neglecting to exploit their success. Not only had the 89th failed to meet its objective, its subsequent posture revealed the Division to be combat ineffective.

Directly to the east of the 89th Division, the 79th Division was also attacking in force. The 79th

shared the same mission: destroy one Marine regiment. The 79th attacked from the northeast and focused on three critical hills along North Ridge. Each hill was assigned to one regiment. The night approach caused confused leaders to veer off track and launch assaults on the wrong hills. The confusion of the Chinese was transparent to the Marines; fighting all along the ridgeline was intense. The 79th never captured North Ridge, but they maintained pressure "until the withdrawal of the Marines southward... [The 79th Division] showed a tenacity not matched by any of the divisions of the 20th Army. It was the only unit that continued its attacks in the daylight, despite the presence of air support." Even though the 79th Division's tenacity spoke well of its members' valor, the mission assigned was not accomplished.

Running south from Yudam-ni, the Marine main supply route (MSR) twisted through the jagged terrain towards the southern end of the Chosin Reservoir and a town known as Hagaru-ri. The critical point along the route was the Toktong Pass, "a potential bottleneck reached from Yudam-ni by way of a steep, narrow section of the one-lane MSR." To support the destruction of the Marines at the hands of the 89th and 79th Divisions, the 59th Division was assigned the task of cutting the MSR in an effort to block both withdrawal and reinforcement. In coordination with the attacks on Yudam-ni, the 59th cut the MSR, but when they approached the critical point at Toktong Pass, they ran squarely into F Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment. Two regiments of the 59th were positioned in the hills on both side of the MSR north of the pass. A third regiment was assigned the task of securing the pass, but F Company maintained control of Toktong Pass until relieved on 2 December. Amazingly, this one company of Marines held the most critical point along the MSR for five nights of fierce combat. While the 59th Division inflicted much damage on the Marines, their failure to seize the Toktong Pass meant the objective was never met and since the 59th could not prevent withdrawal, as ordered, the main body of the Marine forces at Yudam-ni fought their way south and east to Hagaru-ri.

Hagaru-ri did not mean safety for the Marines. Recognized as another critical point; Hagaru-ri was also a weak point for the Marines. The perimeter at Hagaru-ri was manned by a collection of Marine service units who had built supply dumps in the area to support the "attack" to the border. Only two batteries of artillery supported a small infantry force. The Chinese assigned the mission to attack and seize Hagaru-ri to the 58th Division. The 58th Division's attack was planned as a coordinated effort with the attack on the Marine elements at Yudam-ni. For reasons unknown, the attack on Hagaru-ri was delayed one night. The delay of the 58th, and the reports coming from Yudam-ni, handed the initiative back to the Marines. Using South Korean Counterintelligence Corps agents and police that had joined the 1st Marine Division during the Inchon-Seoul Campaign, the Marines at Hagaru-ri gained detailed intelligence of Chinese troop formations in the surrounding hills and their current dispositions. This extremely accurate intelligence allowed the Marines to position their meager forces where the enemy would hit hardest. The 24-hour difference also meant that every Marine in the perimeter was alert and ready. Incidentally, the 58th Division suffered huge losses and little gains. It did manage to take East Hill, the dominant terrain feature overlooking Hagaru-ri, but never succeeded in taking the town. The Marine perimeter held; the lifeline to the Marines in Yudam-ni remained intact.

While actions on the western side of the reservoir clearly showed the superiority of the 1st Marine Division, the events that unfolded along the eastern shore spelled unit and individual disaster for UN forces. The 80th Division, with one regiment of the 81st Division attached,



assumed the mission to destroy one Marine regiment east of the reservoir. That Marine Regiment was the 5th Marines, but it was not located east of Chosin. On the 25th of November, the lead elements of an ad-hoc U.S. Army Regimental Combat Team (RCT) relieved 5th Marine elements. The Marines then moved to Yudam-ni on the other side of the reservoir. The 80th Division expected to fight the best formations the United States had to offer, instead they encountered a collection of varied units located in three different areas, operating independently without communications or leadership. RCT 31, also referred to as Task Force Faith, put up an unorganized, but fierce, fight. Vastly outnumbered at all positions, RCT elements fought their way south, combining forces as they went. However, the 80th Division, and a large number of reinforcements from the 81st Division, sealed the escape route. The effort left the Chinese divisions east of Chosin with huge numbers of casualties, largely due to air strikes, rendering the 80th and the 81st combat ineffective. Although the 80th was successful in the destruction of enemy units in its assigned area of operations, it did not meet the goal of destroying a Marine regiment.

The final unit to engage UN forces during the Chosin Reservoir campaign was the 60th Division. The 60th was tasked with cutting the MSR between Hagaru-ri and Koto-ri. Koto-ri was a well-defended town, eleven miles to the south of Hagaru-ri, under the control of the 1st Marine Regiment. An aerial route reconnaissance of the MSR performed on the morning of 28 November counted nine unmanned roadblocks and several abandoned American vehicles. The 60th had successfully cut the route, encountering little resistance. However, while in control of the MSR, they only achieved limited, tactical success, as they allowed reinforcements through to Hagaru-ri in the form of TF Drysdale. Additionally, the reality was that the 60th held the MSR only while 1st Marine Division allowed it. The 60th sat in foxholes along the stretch of frozen road for days and lost many soldiers to the freezing temperatures well before the 1st Marine Division ruined their illusion of control over the MSR. Attacks south from Hagaru-ri and north from Koto-ri cleared the 60th Division from the path of the Marines. With the road to the coast open, the 1st Marine Division had successfully broken out of the Chinese entrapment at the Chosin Reservoir. Seven Chinese divisions engaged UN forces during the Chosin Reservoir campaign, all sustained losses that rendered them combat ineffective.

Major General Oliver Prince Smith commanded the 1st Marine Division at Chosin. His orders, from X Corps, were to attack north to the Yalu and to do so with all haste. He did not follow these orders. Smith was the only leader in X Corps to appreciate the threat posed by Chinese forces hiding in the mountains. On 15 November, he wrote the Commandant of the United States Marine Corps,

*...we are the left flank division of the corps and our left flank is wide open. No 8th Army units are closer than eighty miles southwest...If this were true [no Chinese on his flank], there could be nothing to prevent the Eighth Army from coming abreast of us. This they are not doing. Although the Chinese have withdrawn to the north, I have not pressed Litzenburg [Commander of 7th Marine Regiment] to make any rapid advance. I do not like the prospect of stringing out a Marine Division along a single mountain road for 120 miles from Hamhung to the border.*

In effect, Smith was telling the Commandant, "I'm not following the orders given to me. When you hear about my transgressions, here is my side of the story." Smith saw as early as 15

November, if not earlier, that trouble was brewing. Smith's personal objective became to maintain the integrity of his force and defeat the enemy wherever he presented himself. The 1st Marine Division passively refused the seemingly unwise objective of higher command and established its own.

By reducing the dispersion of his forces, Smith set the conditions that prevented the destruction of the Marine Division. Chinese operations followed the guidelines outlined by Mao,

*To achieve a quick decision we should generally attack, not an enemy force holding a position, but one on the move. We should have concentrated, beforehand [and] under cover, a big force along the route through which the enemy is sure to pass, suddenly descend on him while he is moving, encircle and attack him before he knows what is happening, and conclude the fighting with all speed. If the battle is well fought, we may annihilate the entire enemy force or the greater part of it. Even if the battle is not well fought, we may still inflict heavy casualties.*

Smith's foresight and borderline insubordination made all the difference. Not only did the Chinese encounter more consolidated formations than they expected to find from a strung out attacking force, they also ran into units who were essentially conducting a cautious movement-to-contact. While the rest of X Corps was charging forward, the 1st Marine Division was holding back. Actions like the F Company seizure of the Toktong Pass and construction of airstrips at Hagaru-ri and Koto-ri showed that the Marines fully expected to head south on the MSR at some point in the near future. In effect, Smith's policies used the Chinese tactics against them. The Chinese intended to draw a dispersed unit into their kill zone, but instead, they inadvertently allowed the Marines to gain and maintain contact. The superior firepower of the Marine division, coupled with the finest examples of leadership during the Korean War, allowed the successful completion of Smith's true objective, preventing the destruction of his Marines.

### **Military Perceptions of Victory**

From a strategic perspective, Mao's objective of ejecting UN forces and destroying the Marines at Chosin was left unaccomplished. Tens of thousands of Chinese were thrown into the wall of pride and firepower that was the 1st Marine Division; their divisions did not survive to fight another day. The loss of seven divisions ended the 2nd Phase Offensive in the East. The backbreaking blow Mao sought never came. X Corps, thanks to the sacrifices of the Marines, repositioned in South Korea and continued to fight. Strategically, the Chinese gained nothing at Chosin.

The legion of loyal servants that MacArthur assembled, failed him. The inability of his staff to take the hard line and convince the UN Supreme Commander of the danger in his plan resulted in disaster. The immense risk taken in his "run for the border" meant that many servicemen would not survive the winter and others would spend years in captivity, all for no gain. MacArthur's political motivations, a dream to square off with communism and come away with a win, kept him from seeing the military reality before his eyes. The UN Command certainly could not claim victory on a strategic level.

Operationally, both sides found failure also. IX Army Group's primary target, the 1st Marine

Division, proved sufficiently able to break the waves of Chinese thrust upon it. Combined with freezing temperatures and improper clothing for the conditions, the IX Army Group was ruined. IX Army Group's actions caused X Corps to "bug out" out of North Korea, but X Corps did not suffer the magnitude of losses that were inflicted upon the Chinese. Unlike IX Army Group, X Corps maintained strength to fight again, but it is difficult to claim victory in retreat. The Chinese sought to take the strongest down first. Who knows what would have occurred if they had focused on another division. Given the dispersion of X Corps forces in northeast Korea, the collapse of Army units in the west, and the destruction of RCT 31, it can be surmised that the other divisions may not have fared as well as the 1st Marine Division. It is clear that the X Corps was fortunate that the Chinese focus was on the Marines.

Throughout the conduct of the Chosin Reservoir campaign, the 1st Marine Division was the only unit that achieved tactical victory. Except for limited circumstances at the small unit level, the Chinese achieved few instances of tactical superiority. The Chinese divisions fought valiantly, but their efforts were rarely combined. Failure of communication and tactical flexibility, coupled with an inability to truly mass their overwhelming numbers at the critical point, allowed the IX Army Group to be defeated unit by unit. The Marines, however, fought as one, each unit doing its part to hold lines, maintain perimeters, and take hills. Even geographical isolation could not break the faith required to hold critical points against overwhelming odds. The Marines did so because they never lost pride in their organization or in themselves; they did so because they refused to leave any man behind.

### **Cultural Perceptions of Victory**

Americans are obsessed with celebrity. General Douglas MacArthur was just that, a celebrity. In 1950, the United States was trying to come to grips with its status as a world power and with an imminent confrontation with perceived evil. The lines in Europe were clearly marked; the members of the fledgling North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO) fully expected conflict with the shadowy figures behind the Iron Curtain, but the clear lines allowed some semblance of stability. Asia, however, was falling to pieces. The historical authority of former colonial powers was being replaced in China, Vietnam, and potentially Korea, by communist influence.

MacArthur was America's man in the East. His celebrity had grown in the Pacific during World War II, and he had become a legend with the defeat of the Empire of Japan. MacArthur made no attempt to hide from fame; he welcomed it. The Inchon landing and the subsequent successes of UN forces further cemented his stature, a status that proved detrimental to the Nation's objective view of the Korean situation. The Secretary of State, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Far East Command Staff, and subordinate staffs were all blinded by the genius of MacArthur. The "run for the border" and its collision with the Chinese 2nd Phase Offensive spelled the end for MacArthur. The Eighth Army fell before the Chinese attack, as did the American legend.

The rout of Eighth Army in western North Korea lit a fire of panic in Washington's policy-makers and MacArthur's staff. In the panic, the achievements of the 1st Marine Division went unnoticed and the evacuation of X Corps from the port city of Hungnam was ordered. Fleet Marine Force Pacific Operations Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Victor H. Krulak, had the following to say concerning the evacuation,

*[The Fleet Marine Force Pacific Commander and I] opposed this evacuation, for the simple reason that we were not convinced that if there were a million Chinese that they could sustain themselves and chase everybody off the wonderful hill positions around Hungnam and that great port. But MacArthur's headquarters and MacArthur, too, had the wind up. They really did have the wind up. The reverses had apparently traumatized them to the point where they were unable to detach themselves. And, of course, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, too.... It just shocked me to see that there was the 'bug-out' philosophy throughout MacArthur's headquarters, throughout Almond's headquarters. I didn't see any of that in the Marines, I must say, and, in retrospect it makes me so proud.*

The failure of a legend and the withdrawal from North Korea scared Americans, and the brilliance of the tactical successes at Chosin was lost in the midst of a major strategic defeat.

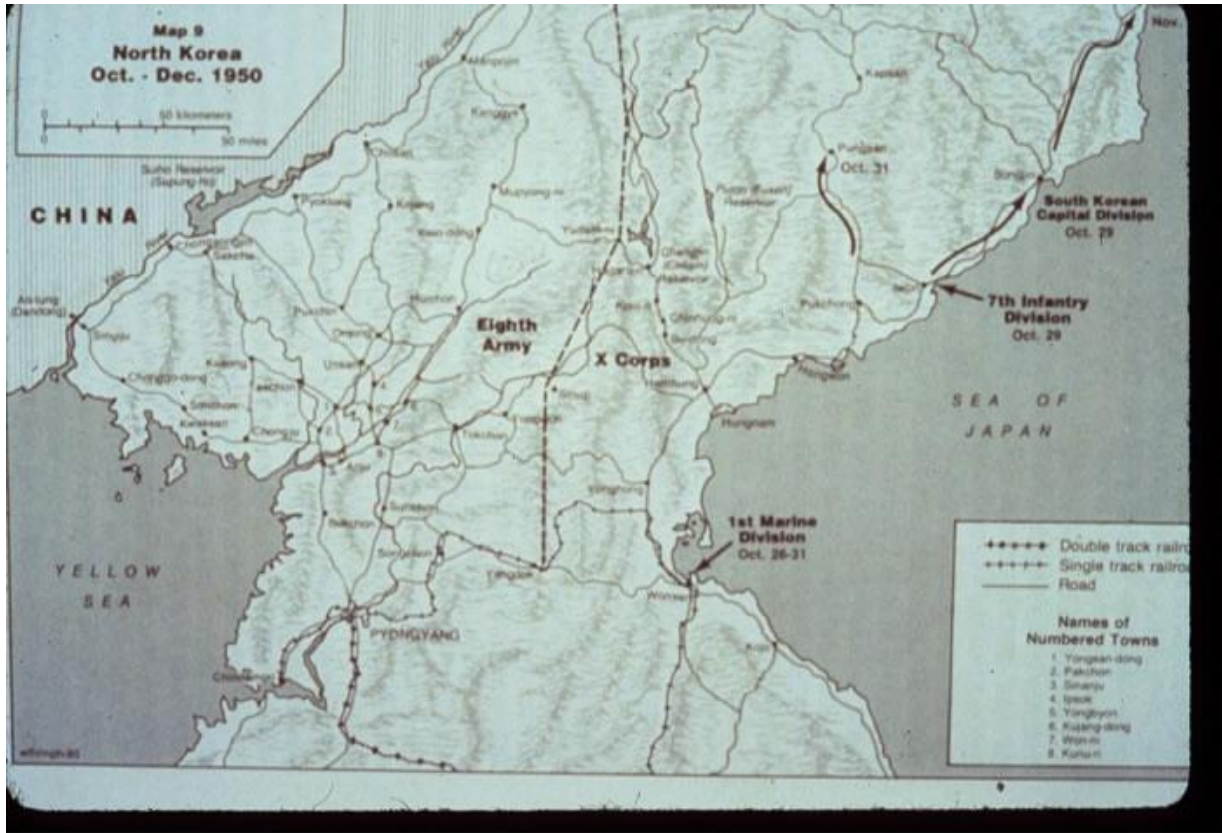
The Chinese view of the actions at Chosin is understandably different from the American perspective. The Chinese CCP had enjoyed the taste of victory twice in the previous five years. They had joined forces with Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists to fight the Japanese, emerging victorious with the rest of the allies after Nagasaki. Following the Japanese surrender, the Chinese Civil War continued until the CCP claimed control of the country in 1949. The Korean War gave the CCP a chance to test their winning strategy and tactics on Western forces.

Mao, the foremost military mind in the CCP, believed in People's War. He preached the triumph of "morale and manpower over material." In September 1950, field commanders made a detailed assessment of the advantages Chinese tactics and doctrine would have over American forces. The study references U.S. weaknesses as "small number of troops, long supply lines, tactical inflexibility, lack of appropriate political motivation, and the dismissal of nuclear weapons." The Chinese marked as their advantages "justness of cause, ability to move on foot, aptitude for hand-to-hand fighting, and light logistics." The actions at Chosin crushed these assessments. Justness of cause mattered little in a fight against a well-trained opponent. The ability to move on foot was moot if the Army's feet were frozen. The Chinese were forced to accept that morale and manpower, though successful against the poorly trained Eighth Army, could not compete against a professional force with better equipment and superior firepower. From the losses at Chosin, the Chinese learned more than they did from the major successes elsewhere. They recognized the defeat and what it meant; to achieve relevance on the world stage, they must upgrade the materiel of their armed forces.

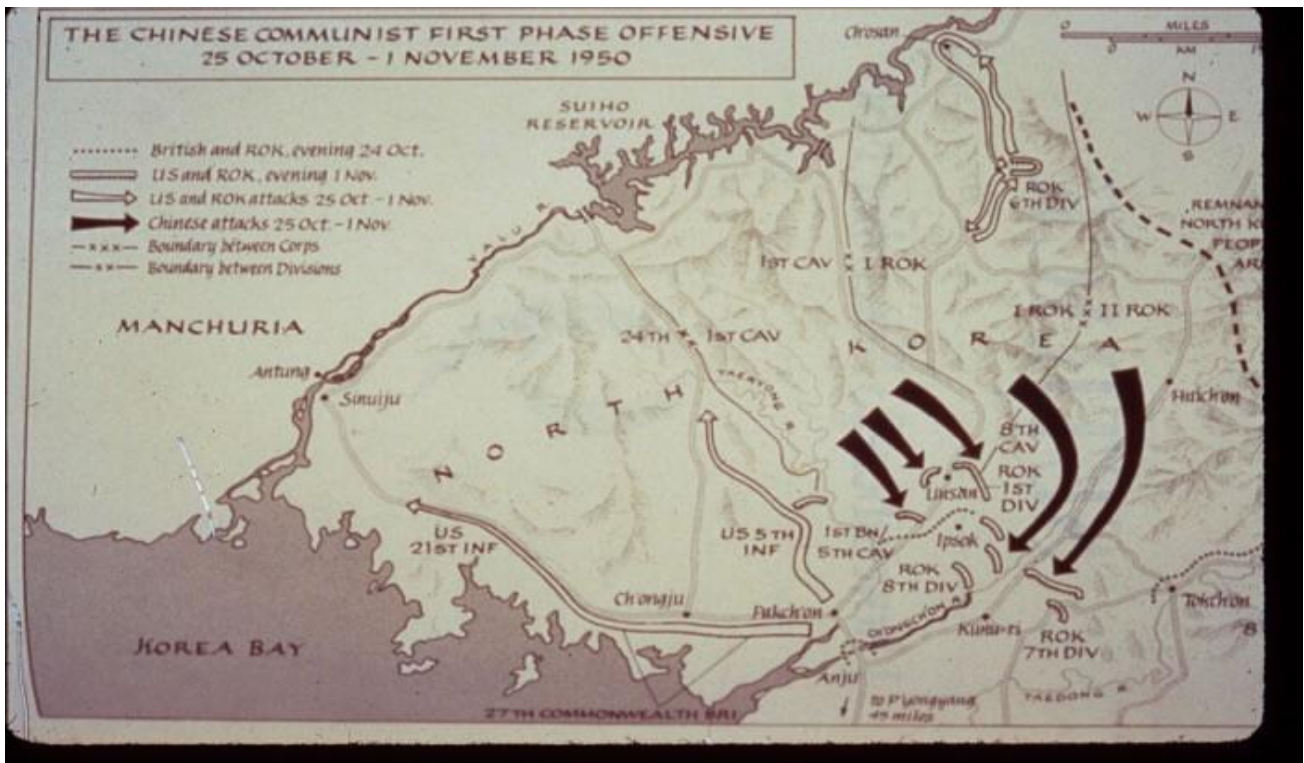
## **Conclusion**

Perception defines the difference between victory and defeat. It is an understanding shaped by our perspectives, and governed by fact. Analyzing the different echelons of command, at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels, and comparing objectives against actual endstates, it is possible to model the perception of events as they unfolded at the Chosin Reservoir. When evaluated from national and command perspectives, it is clear that victory at Chosin cannot be claimed by any party other than the United States Marines.

[Source: Military History Online | Perception of Victory Mark E. Bennett article 19 Jul 09 ++]



Map Shows North Korea October-December 1950 8th Army And 10th Corps Boundries





**Marines Move North Toward The Yalu And Into The Chosin Reservoir Area.**





**Weapons Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines. Giving Overhead Fire On The Advance Toward Hagaru-ri.**



**Standing By To Move Out To Koto-ri From Hagaru**



**A Base Of Fire And Flank Protection**



**U.S. And British Royal Commado Marines Prepared For Burial At Koto-ri.**





**Possible Dead From Hell Fire Valley. The Chinese Stripped The Bodies For Boots And Parkas.**