

Commandership at the Chosin Reservoir: A Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve

1st Marine Division at the Chosin Reservoir (A): June–November 1950

Every single Marine -- officer and enlisted -- learns in their entry level training the heroic story of the Marines at the Chosin Reservoir in the bleak winter of 1950. Theirs is the story of which legends are made: surrounded, outnumbered, outgunned, and in the freezing cold mountains of North Korea, where temperatures routinely dropped to -40 degrees wind chill, the Marines of the 1st Marine Division not only avoided being captured by the Chinese Communist Forces while other units disintegrated to their left and right, but actually re-attacked in a different direction. In the process, these Marines destroyed 7 Chinese Divisions! This, all young Marines learn, is what earning the title Marine is all about! Somewhere, every month, and in every corner of our Corps, Marines will be raising their glasses to toast “The Marines of the Frozen Chosin!” Few ever ask about the quality of officer and Staff NCO leadership in those frozen mountain passes because they don’t need to: It’s simply “Who We Are” as U.S. Marines, right? Former Army officer, T. R. Fehrenbach, would describe it this way after the Korean War:

“In 1950 a Marine Corps officer was still an officer, and a sergeant behaved the way good sergeants had behaved since the time of Caesar, expecting no nonsense, allowing none. And Marine leaders had never lost sight of their primary – their only – mission, which was to fight... Marine human material was not one whit better than that of the human society from which it came. But it had been hammered into form in a different forge, hardened in a different fire. The Marines were the closest thing to legions the nation had. They would follow their colors from the shores of home to the seacoasts of Bohemia, and fight well in either place.”

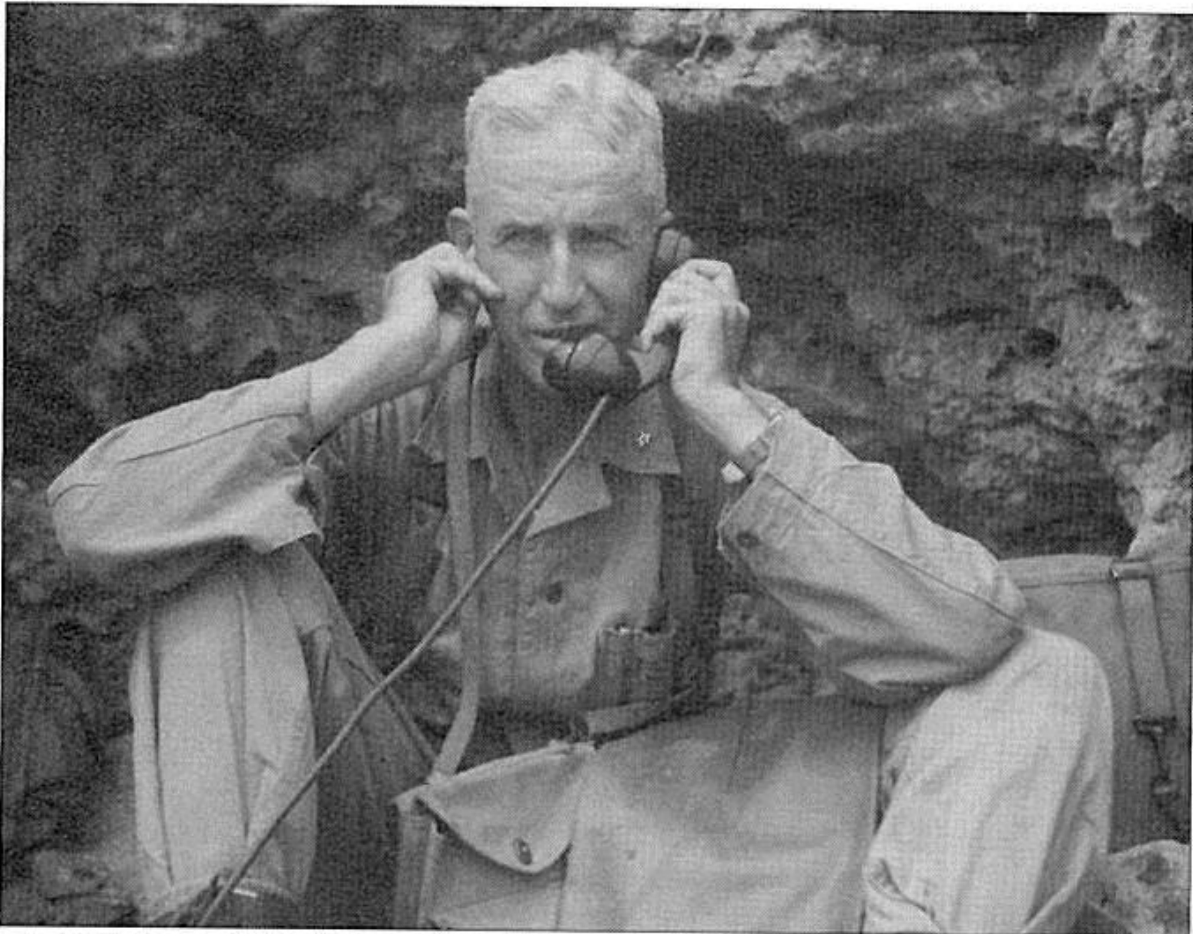
Did Marines perform heroically at the Frozen Chosin because of our ethos, our core values, and “Who We Are” as an organization, or could there be more to it? Is the “Frozen Chosin” just another chapter in the long narrative of “Marine Exceptionalism,” or is it all this *and* a valuable lesson on the importance of “Commandership”?

Probe a level deeper into the quality of officer leadership in the 1st Marine Division at that time and you’ll find many of the names who have achieved legendary status in our Corps: Chesty Puller, Raymond Murray, Homer Litzenberg, and Ray Davis, all of them to become generals, to name but a few. Yet this, too, seems overly simplified. Did the 1st Marine Division really perform so well against overwhelming odds because it was stacked with talented commanders? We must go deeper still. Probe another layer down and you’ll find at the center of the action at Chosin a humble, highly intelligent, even-keeled division commander who had been preparing his whole life for just

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such a moment as he saw at the Chosin Reservoir – Major General Oliver P. Smith. His leadership is a lesson in “*Commandership*.”

Smith was about as different from Lewis B. “Chesty” Puller as one could possibly be, at least on the surface. Yet at Chosin, Smith’s intellect, moral courage, character, wisdom, and quiet but forceful leadership created what would amount to an impenetrable force-field around his Marines and his Division: *his intellectual power and moral courage truly engendered combat power and physical courage* on the battlefield, shaping not only the actions of his Marines but also the context in which those actions occurred. Just how was he able to do this? Why did the 1st Marine Division not only maintain its combat effectiveness in the face of overwhelming odds and near-certain disaster, but actually achieve a triumph that we still celebrate to this day? And why is it that the “Frozen Chosin” has always been much, much more about the Marines, the 1st Marine Division, and the institution of the United States Marine Corps than it has been about the leader who was at the center of the storm – General O. P. Smith? What can we learn from this for current and future challenges facing our Corps?



Smith on shore party phone on Orange Beach 1, just after landing on Peleliu at H+3 hours.

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Biographical Information

General Douglas MacArthur – Commander, United Nations Command, Korea. According to Smith, MacArthur “was the youngest superintendent of West Point, and the youngest Chief of Staff of the Army. You can’t wash that out. He must have had something.” Although Smith thought MacArthur’s imagination and determination in conceiving Inchon were brilliant, he thought that MacArthur’s main drawback was that he was a “supreme egotist. That was probably because of his background. He never knew much about anything but being a general. His father was the senior general in the Army, and he lived in that atmosphere. He became a general in 1918 and was a general over 32 years...It seemed like he had always been a general and had been in that atmosphere. Maybe that accounted for some of his egotism.” MacArthur had a poor relationship with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, whom he did not view as seniors or even peers, and was openly contemptuous of President Truman. This would shape the context in which the Chosin campaign occurred.

Lieutenant General Lemuel C. Shepherd, Commander, FMF Pacific. Shepherd was a distinguished Marine officer with one of the best combat records in the Marine Corps. He was an Assistant Division Commander with the 1st Marine Division and Commander of the 6th Marine Division during World War II, and had performed heroically during several campaigns, particularly Okinawa. Although Shepherd was an old friend of O. P. Smith’s, he had also attended VMI at the same time as General Ned Almond, the X Corps Commander who became Smith’s boss during the Inchon and Chosin campaigns. Shepherd had good relations with Almond. Shepherd had a brilliant combat record from both World Wars I and II and considered his “combat club” to be those who had served with him in World War I. Although Smith was a close friend of Shepherd’s, he was not in this “club.” Shepherd had also been accepted into MacArthur’s inner council during the planning for the Inchon landing at a time of great uncertainty for the Marine Corps, and probably felt some sense of loyalty to MacArthur and Almond even though he had wanted to command the Inchon landing himself. Shepherd’s role in the events leading up, during, and after the Chosin Reservoir campaign would be complex, as he was close to both Smith and Almond, and their positions would become irreconcilable.

Major General Edward (Ned) Almond, Commander, X Corps. Almond was a VMI graduate like Shepherd who had risen up to command the 92nd Infantry Division in World War II, an African American Division that had fought in the Italian theater. The Army Chief of Staff, General George Marshall, had selected Almond for this assignment because of the unique challenges it posed before the armed forces had been integrated and due to Marshall’s supreme confidence in Almond. But the Division had not performed well and Almond had thereafter blamed his troops. His career was therefore going nowhere

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when he volunteered for an assignment in MacArthur's Headquarters in occupied Japan, initially as the G-1. Almond stood out among MacArthur's old group of "Bataan Gang" staff officers (who were not competitive) and eventually became MacArthur's Chief of Staff. MacArthur saw that Almond hungered for one last shot at glory and that, with him, he had a willing, capable, and dedicated general officer who would execute his plans without pushback. Almond's G-3 once said of him, "He could precipitate a crisis on a desert island with nobody else around," with another officer noting, "When it paid to be aggressive, Ned was aggressive. When it paid to be cautious, Ned was aggressive."

Major General Oliver P. Smith, Commander, 1st Marine Division. Smith was 57 years old and stood 6 feet tall, with his weight fluctuating between 150 and 165 pounds. A graduate from the University of California at Berkeley, Smith was about as different from Almond as an officer could be. President Truman's Liaison officer in Korea, Army Brigadier General Frank Lowe, described him thus: "He is tall and slender with prematurely white hair. He is a very *kindly* man, always calm and cheerful, even under the greatest strain. He is almost professorial in type and this characteristic is apt to fool you because he is an offensive tiger. He cares nothing for the accumulation of real estate in war; his concept is to find the enemy and kill him – with a minimum of casualties. He has had a great amount of successful battle experience. His officers and men idolize him, albeit he is a *strict* disciplinarian – *Marine* discipline." He did not drink and was rarely, if ever, heard to swear. Although Smith had held command at every level from lieutenant to general, he was often viewed by his peers as more of a staff officer than a colorful combat commander, like Colonel Puller, for example. He had a strong academic background and had even attended the *Ecole Supérieure de Guerre* in Paris, France. He served as Assistant Division Commander for the 1st Marine Division in World War II and afterwards as the Commander of the Marine Corps Schools. His most searing experience in World War II was as the ADC for General William Rupertus during the amphibious assault of Pelelieu – which will be covered in some detail below. As the Commander of the Marine Corps Schools after World War II, Smith was in charge of an aggressive group of young colonels comprising the "Little Man's Marching and Chowder Society," later abbreviated to "the Chowder Society." These young colonels drafted papers for the Commandant articulating the future value of the Marine Corps to the Nation in a time of some skepticism among our Nation's political and military leadership. While Smith contributed intellectually to their activities, he thought some of them were too self-important and generally avoided the backroom intrigue that many of these officers routinely participated in, causing some to conclude that Smith was naïve about the brass-knuckled nature of DC inter-service politics in a time of constrained resources. But Smith had served Marine Corps Commandant, General Clifton Cates, well as the Assistant Commandant, and had earned his assignment as Commander of the 1st Marine Division in summer 1950.

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Colonel Lewis B. “Chesty” Puller, Commander, 1st Marine Regiment.

Smith and Puller were old friends, and had served together many times before their paths would cross again in Korea. Smith thought Puller had been at his best as a Battalion Commander and would probably not have made general were it not for his service in Korea. According to Smith, “Colonel Puller is picturesque. He is what might be termed a ‘character.’ He was always good copy. His men loved him for it. No one who associated with him could help loving him. With all his rough, tough exterior he had a very warm heart. What may surprise many is the fact that he is very well read. He is an avid reader of biography and history. Tactically he believes in direct action. He would have no truck with clever maneuvers, but he did not sacrifice his men uselessly. His command post was always well forward. Often his command post was in fact his observation post. He had a tendency to get all his battalions in the fight. Often it was necessary to discourage this tendency by putting strings on one of his battalions. He was wont to sound off about orders and instruction from higher headquarters, but he carried out his orders with determination and singleness of purpose. He was never unreasonable. Colonel Puller could always be depended upon to give you his best and his best was always in combat. He detested administrative chores.”

Colonel Homer Litzenberg, Commander, 7th Marine Regiment. Litzenberg was Smith’s most difficult subordinate, and had to be watched more closely than the other two regimental commanders, but did the most outstanding work in the Chosin campaign. Smith noted, “Colonel Litzenberg had considerable staff background. This is reflected in the handling of his regiment. He planned methodically and executed methodically. He was consistently abreast of his situation. The division received a flow of messages from him setting forth his requirements and giving information of the enemy, but he was prone to keep the division somewhat in the dark as to his own tactical situation. It was therefore difficult at times to measure his requirements against his tactical situation. His manner was quiet but convincing. He did not have the flair of Colonel Puller, but his regiment always did a workmanlike job. He was always very loyal to his regiment to the extent that he sometimes lost his perspective with regard to the division as a whole. Some of these remarks may appear to be critical. They are made in an attempt to fully describe Colonel Litzenberg’s temperament and capabilities. His performance as a whole was magnificent.”

Lieutenant Colonel Raymond Murray, Commander, 5th Marine Regiment.

Murray was 37 years old and was the most junior of the three regimental commanders. General Graves Erskine had given Murray command of the regiment before Smith arrived and Smith could have assigned a more senior Colonel to take the regiment to Korea, but decided to give Murray a fair shot. Smith thought “Colonel Murray was a fine figure of a man, tall, robust, and iron-jawed. His looks alone stamped him as a leader. He did not have the staff background of Colonel Litzenberg or the flair of Colonel Puller, but he was an

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inspiring leader. He never spared himself. He used imagination in the handling of his regiment, but was not reckless. Administration was not Colonel Murray's strong suit, but fortunately he was blessed with able executive officers. Colonel Murray was not a fair weather Marine; it was reassuring to have him in there when the going was tough."

Lieutenant Colonel Ray Davis, Commander, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines.

Davis was 35 years old when he was a Battalion Commander in Korea, but by that time he had already amassed an impressive combat record. He was a man of few words who relied on neither tough talk nor gruffness to inspire his Marines, but rather on his uncanny ability to retain his composure while at the center of any fray – no matter how tough. His reputation as a "ferocious battalion commander" had been well-earned by the time of Chosin. Davis grew up in Atlanta, Georgia and graduated from Georgia Tech University in 1938. He had been enrolled in the Reserve U.S. Army ROTC Program, but resigned from this program and accepted a commission as an active duty officer in the Marine Corps upon graduation. He studied under Chesty Puller at The Basic School in Philadelphia and, having impressed Puller, later served with him in the 1st Marine Division during World War II on Guadalcanal, New Guinea, and New Britain. As a major, he commanded 1st Battalion, 1st Marines under Chesty Puller's 1st Marines during the assault on Pelelieu in 1944, ultimately earning a Navy Cross when he refused evacuation after being wounded in the leg and personally leading a counter-attack against a Japanese banzai charge. Davis was serving as a Battalion Inspector-Instructor in Chicago when Puller tapped his unit to join the forming 1st Marine Division for upcoming operations in Korea. When Davis got to Camp Pendleton, his unit was quickly disbanded to flush out other units, but Davis took the initiative and stood up the 7th Marines' 1st Battalion by recruiting disparate and unassigned Marines from Camp Pendleton and Barstow who wanted to fight in Korea. Davis simply asked them to join him while driving around in an old jeep, and they did in large numbers to form the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines – Puller's former battalion on Guadalcanal. Davis's superior combat leadership and ability to stay calm in any crisis were well known to Smith and all of the regimental commanders as the division went north up to Chosin.

Captain William Barber, Commander, Fox Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th

Marines. Barber was a 30 year-old captain in November 1950 who had grown up in Dehart, Kentucky. He was the eighth of ten children. Barber was a gifted young child who read everything he could get his hands on, ultimately graduating from his high school as valedictorian when he just 15. He attended Morehead State Teachers College and, as a student there, enjoyed helping his siblings with their schoolwork and supporting his family financially when he could. Then in 1940, sensing there was a war coming, Barber suddenly dropped out of college and enlisted in the Marine Corps. Barber was such a good shot in boot camp that he was retained at Parris Island as a marksmanship instructor. After Pearl Harbor, Barber was transferred to the

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1st Parachute Battalion in San Diego where he met his future wife at a USO club. After getting promoted to sergeant and marrying his USO sweetheart, Barber earned his commission due to his outstanding leadership abilities. He joined the 5th Marine Regiment as a new platoon commander just in time to land with them on Iwo Jima in February 1945. Due to the severe attrition of that battle, Barber was serving as a company commander by the time it was over. On Iwo Jima, Barber had won a Silver Star for rescuing two Marines who were pinned down by Japanese machine-gunners and a Purple Heart for being shot in the hand. Barber was stationed in Altoona, Pennsylvania training reservists when he got called up for duty in Korea. He eventually caught up with the 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines after it had already landed at Wonsan and had headed north. Barber was promptly assigned to command Fox Company, which was then at Koto-ri. Barber took one look at his Marines and was not impressed. He immediately ordered them to shave, clean their weapons, and told them to stop talking about being home for Christmas. He then told them to prepare for a conditioning hike the next morning. The Marines of Fox Company were not thrilled with their new skipper. One of the saltiest Marines in the Company – Private First Class Graydon Davis – grouched, “Just what we need...some candy-ass captain who wants us to troop and stomp. What in hell is this war coming to?”

The Context: June – October 1950

In June 1950, North Korea’s “Inman Gun” invaded South Korea with a combined-arms, mechanized invasion, catching the South Koreans, their United States allies, and the world, completely by surprise. The United States rushed four Army divisions that had been on occupation duty in Japan to shore up the surprised and disintegrating South Korean Army units, but these units were understrength and not prepared for combined arms combat. The Marine Corps Commandant, General Clifton Cates, was not then a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff but had offered to the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Forrest Sherman, a Marine regiment to the embattled forces in Korea. After waiting for several days, the offer was accepted and the 1st Marine Brigade, built around the 5th Marine Regiment and under the command of Brigadier General Edward Craig, sailed for Korea from San Diego on 12 July. By early August, General Walton Walker, Commander of the 8th Army in Korea, had run out of room in his retreat south and was then stretched behind a thinly held defensive line behind the Naktong River in south eastern Korea which came to be called the “Pusan Perimeter.” The 1st Marine Brigade was key to holding this defensive line.

While MacArthur had been considering an amphibious assault deep behind enemy lines even in the early stages of the Korean conflict, large-scale amphibious assaults and Marine Corps capabilities to execute them were not well understood by the country’s political and military leadership at that time. The advent of the nuclear age had convinced some, even after all of the

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amphibious assaults of World War II, that amphibious assaults were a thing of the past, most notably among them the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff – General Omar Bradley. President Truman had even written a Republican Congressman in late August 1950, who was then seeking to add the Commandant to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that “the Marine Corps is the Navy’s police force and as long as I am President that is what it will remain. They have a propaganda machine that is almost equal to Stalin’s.” With Marines then fighting against communist forces in South Korea, this statement did not go over well when publicized by the media. At any rate, General Cates saw an opportunity to get his Marines a larger role in the Korean conflict and in a back-door maneuver sent the Commander of FMF Pacific – General Lem Shepherd – out to visit MacArthur in July with a message for him to request a Marine Division for duty in Korea. MacArthur promptly did so, even though a full Marine Division did not then exist. Thus while Major General O. P. Smith prepared to leave his post as Assistant Commandant in Washington D.C. to take command of the 1st Marine Division, planners throughout the Marine Corps were scrambling to get the skeleton 1st Marine Division up to full strength to fill MacArthur’s request for combat in Korea.

The 1st Marine Division was brought up to full strength just in time as the 1st Marine Regiment embarked out of San Diego in early August with an arrival date in Korea of between 28 August and 3 September. The 7th Marines were not planned to make it to Korea until 15 September, the planned day of the Inchon landing, and thus could not take part in Inchon. Meanwhile, the 5th Marines had to be removed from the line at Pusan on the evening of 5-6 September which required securing the approval of both Almond and Walker – not an easy task. But with these risky moves all completed, MacArthur now had his amphibious assault force afloat of 1st and 5th Marines and told Smith aboard the USS *Mt. McKinley* “that the operation will forever assure the Marines of their place in the sun.” MacArthur further told Smith that, “when Mr. Truman discovers tomorrow that he, General MacArthur, and the Marines are at Inchon, the President will want to know who let us out of the doghouse.” MacArthur was well-aware of the controversy surrounding President Truman’s impolitic statement about the Marines.

As is well-known, the 1st Marine Division’s landing at Inchon was a brilliant success and had a profound effect on the North Korean army. With its supply lines threatened, the North Korean attackers around Pusan quickly became the retreaters as they raced northwards under pressure from General Walker’s 8th Army, which had launched a breakout attack from Pusan. The 1st Marine Division’s methodical capture of Seoul caused MacArthur to begin contemplating plans to successfully conclude the war by venturing into North Korea to crush the remaining opposition. Inchon thus achieved two things for MacArthur: it enabled the liberation of Seoul and eventually South Korea from an aggressive invasion from the north, and strengthened his hand against the joint chiefs of staff – who had opposed Inchon – and civilians in Washington,

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who felt less empowered to exercise oversight of his increasingly risky plans. When Almond was asked by a *Time* reporter about MacArthur's success at Inchon, Almond compared his Commander to the great captains of history: "Napoleon, Caesar, and Hannibal," Almond had said. The names Almond had conjured up from history, ironically, did not bode well for the future of the American Theater Commander: Napoleon had lost his Army in winter in Russia; Caesar had led his Army against the democratically elected Roman Republic and engulfed Rome in Civil War; and Hannibal had lost a war after marching his Army across the Alps.

Still, MacArthur desired to complete his brilliant triumph at Inchon by finishing off North Korea. As a product of World Wars I and II, MacArthur did not fully understand the complexities of conflict in the nuclear age. To him, there could be no substitute for victory, and he probably thought that the strategic umbrella of nuclear weapons in his back pocket would keep China out of North Korea while he took increasingly risky actions at the tactical and operational levels. Smith, on the other hand, had studied this issue closely in the inter-war years as part of a Board for the Commandant on the future of the Marine Corps in the nuclear age, and had actually developed a much more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the role that nuclear weapons would play in future conflicts. Smith saw that nuclear weapons would increase the likelihood of lower-level, limited war conflicts, at which the Marine Corps excelled. MacArthur thus began planning another amphibious assault into North Korea by X Corps – this one on the east side of the peninsula at Wonsan. Therefore, rather than pouring supplies and troops into Inchon Harbor to build up forces that could then drive east to link up with Walker's 8th Army then moving up from Pusan, X Corps began *back-loading* supplies out of Inchon harbor for another amphibious landing at Wonsan.

By 19 October, the 1st Marine Division's assault ships were off the east coast of Korea while the ROK Divisions and even Bob Hope on a USO Tour had beaten them ashore at Wonsan. The 1st Marine Division's Marines finally began coming across the beach at Wonsan on 25 October. Thus, as MacArthur pushed his forces farther and farther into North Korea to complete his triumph at Inchon, he dangerously split his two primary subordinate commands by placing them in positions where they could not mutually support each other: the 8th Army would be going up the west side of the peninsula under General Walker, while X Corps would push up the east side of the peninsula from Wonsan under General Almond. The possibility of Chinese intervention had always been a concern of the civilians in Washington and many of the troops in the field, especially as MacArthur's forces pressed farther and farther north in the winter months. But MacArthur and his staff, misreading the strategic situation, dismissed these concerns.

On the other hand, as early as 1 October, Mao Zedong – China's Communist Dictator – had declared, "the Chinese people will not tolerate

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foreign aggression and will not stand aside if the imperialists wantonly invade the territory of their neighbor.” And starting on 25 October, the same day that Marines began landing at Wonsan, Chinese prisoners had been getting taken elsewhere in the Korean theater, with many of them even identifying their units. Smith grew increasingly concerned. On 1 November during a helicopter trip made by Smith to visit Litzenberg’s 7th Marine Regiment at Hamhung, Smith learned that South Korean troops had identified two Chinese regiments in the area and that they (the ROKs) were glad to be leaving the area as they did not want to fight the Chinese. Farther west on that same day, in the 8th Army’s sector at Unsan, a major engagement occurred between two Chinese Communist Divisions and the ROK 7th Division and the 8th Cavalry Regiment. When the fight was finally over on 4 November, the 8th Cavalry had been overrun and suffered *800 casualties*. Truman and the Joint Chiefs were very nervous about this open Chinese intervention, and asked MacArthur what was going on. General Walker meanwhile cabled MacArthur that, “AN AMBUSH AND SURPRISE ATTACK BY FRESH WELL ORGANIZED AND WELL TRAINED UNITS, SOME OF WHICH WERE CHINESE COMMUNISTS” had occurred on 3 November (he could not have been more blunt). MacArthur chose to ignore this very clear Chinese warning and, as the Chinese had temporarily disappeared, pushed his forces ever farther north.

Up the Mountain: 1 -15 November

The Chinese Communist Forces had also sent a warning in the X Corps sector to the 1st Marine Division. On the evening of 2 November, two battalions of the 7th Marines were attacked in force by the 124th Chinese Communist Division. The fighting had gone on for about five days, during which time the Chinese 124th Division had ceased to exist as an effective fighting force while the 7th Marines suffered 44 dead and 162 wounded. And then on 7 November, the Chinese forces simply disappeared, like they did in the 8th Army’s sector. After this engagement with the Chinese, and with Almond still pressing him to push his Division ever-farther north, Smith confronted Almond with what he saw as the facts on the battlefield. Smith thought the Chinese attack was a blocking action to delay his division so that more Chinese forces could enter the area. Smith also saw that his Division was strung out across 170 miles from Wonsan in the south to Chinhung-Ni in the north, and with winter weather fast approaching and few supplies built up to sustain it, Smith badly wanted to consolidate his positions. He received no support from Almond however. More concerning to Smith, he did not think he was getting support from the Marine Corps senior leadership either.

On 1 November, on the same day that Smith had received reports of Chinese forces operating in the area from Litzenberg, General Shepherd paid a visit to Smith at Hungnam. Shepherd had been staying with Almond and had been getting an earful of Almond’s and MacArthur’s version of events regarding the 1st Marine Division. Almond most likely complained to Shepherd that

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Smith was moving too slow and that he was too deliberate and methodical for the fast-paced aggressiveness he wanted to see in pursuit of the North Koreans. Smith discussed his problems with Shepherd until 2330 that evening. Shepherd later recalled, "I talked to him and said, 'O. P., play the game, don't get so mad with Almond, he's trying to do the right thing.' And I knew he was....I kept urging Smith to push forward more rapidly as he had the North Koreans on the run and when an enemy is retreating is the time to pursue vigorously....Smith as you know wanted everything done right by the book. And in battle you can't always do things by the book. You've got to take initiative in combat – take chances when the opportunity to gain a victory appears probable....My idea was to pursue, pursue, clean up those pockets later." Smith's discussions with Almond and Shepherd in early November caused him to conclude that they had become detached from realities on the ground. Smith's conversations with both generals reminded him of a searing experience he had had as the ADC for the 1st Marine Division during the assault on Pelelieu in 1944. In many ways Smith had been here before, but this time, at Chosin, it would be different.

To understand Smith's commandership at Chosin, we first have to understand his searing experience in the assault on Pelelieu as the ADC for the 1st Marine Division. In the spring of 1944, Smith was serving as the Commander of the 5th Marines under Major General William Rupertus. Shepherd was Rupertus' ADC at the time. Smith learned after his regiment had performed exceptionally well during the assault on New Britain that he had been selected for promotion to Brigadier General and would soon take Shepherd's spot as Rupertus' ADC. Smith knew that Rupertus could be a difficult Boss to work for because the Division Commander preferred to operate with a very centralized command style. He did not empower his ADC. The Division had been transported to Guadalcanal following the New Britain operation, and from there it had embarked for Pavuvu – an island about 65 miles northwest of Guadalcanal from where it would refit, rest, rearm, and prepare for its next operation. The next planned operation for the 1st Marine Division would be an assault upon Pelelieu in the Paluas island group. But before the Marines could rest and train for this mission, they first had to make Pavuvu livable, and the living conditions on Pavuvu were deplorable. The 1st Marine Division was not then in good shape.

Shortly after Rupertus had landed on Pavuvu, however, he was recalled to Washington D.C. to debrief the Commandant, General Alexander Vandegrift, on the New Britain operation. Smith, meanwhile, worked closely with the staff and the regimental commanders to improve the quality of life for the Marines on Pavuvu and to start the planning for Pelelieu. At about this time, the commanders of the 1st Marine Division learned that Rupertus would not be coming right back to Pavuvu as they thought but instead had been selected to sit as the president of a promotion board, requiring his extended presence in Washington D.C. for another six weeks. The net result of this was that

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Rupertus was away from his command for more than a third of the time it was based on Pavuvu (and the most difficult third at that) and missed nearly all of the pre-assault planning for a major assault on a fortified island. This would not be good for any commander, but for Rupertus, who preferred a centralized command style in which subordinates were not empowered, it caused him to become even more detached from his division. To make matters worse, shortly after Rupertus returned to Pavuvu, he broke his ankle while dismounting from an Amtrac, immobilizing him during a very critical period. Smith urged Rupertus to tell his Corps Commander, Major General Geiger, about his injury, but Rupertus refused to do so.

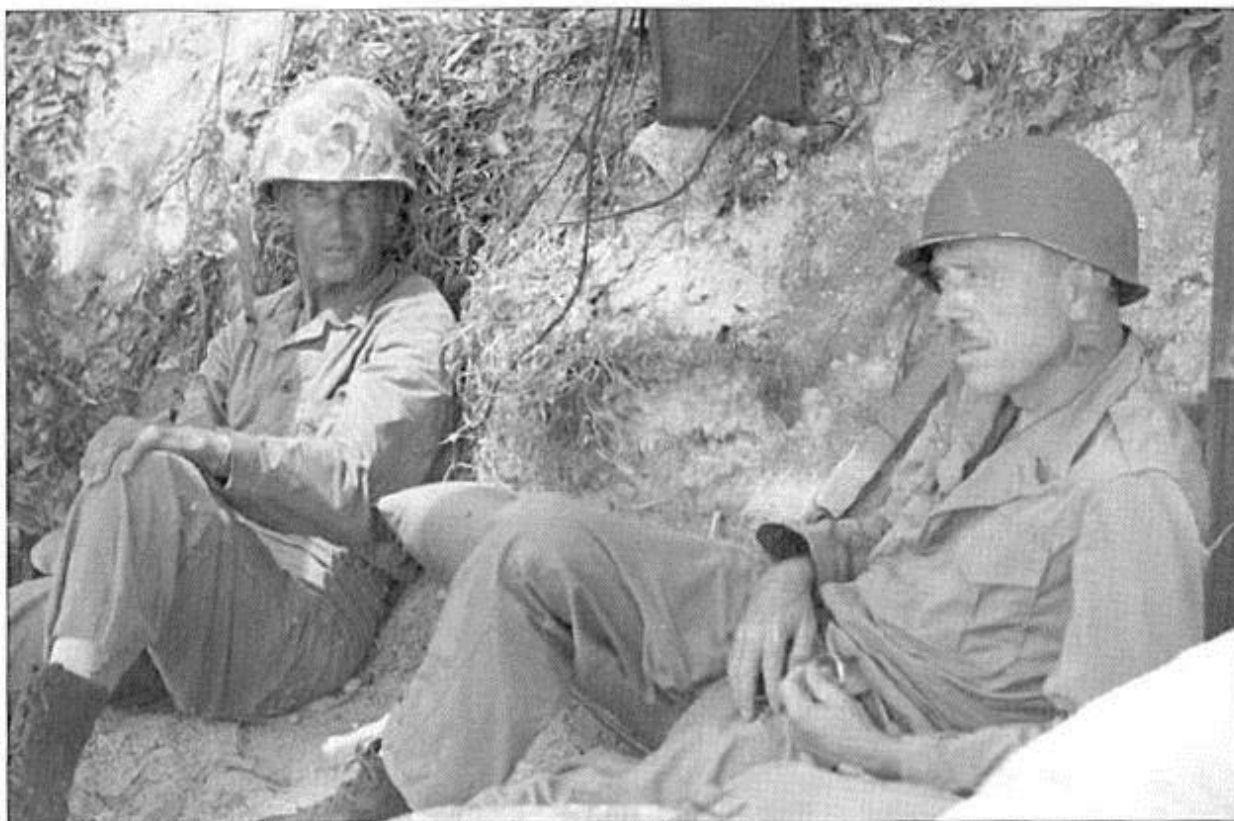
The Pelelieu operation had been planned for 15 September and as August wore on, Rupertus had still not recovered his mobility. The Commandant conducted an inspection trip to Pavuvu in late August and saw firsthand Rupertus' hobbled condition, but probably was told that he would be better by the landings. During the division's rehearsal landings on Guadalcanal from 27-29 August, Geiger observed the practice landings and saw that Rupertus was not ashore as he expected due to his broken ankle. Even worse, it quickly became apparent that Geiger was unaware of his own division commander's injury. Geiger remarked to Smith later, "If I had known, I would have relieved him."

The 1st Marine Division thus had conditions set for a deteriorating command situation. First, the Division Commander had grown detached from his Marines during a long absence and had not played a significant role in any of the planning for the operation it was about to undertake. Second, Rupertus became injured shortly after returning to Pavuvu and could not get about to inspect his Marines' preparations and get a pulse of the division. Third, while under these circumstances even a commander who preferred centralized decision-making (like Rupertus) would have been expected to empower and rely heavily on his ADC, Rupertus told his regimental commanders before the assault, "I want you to understand now that there will be no change in the orders, regardless. Even if General Smith attempts to change my plans or orders, you regimental commanders will refuse to obey." Finally, in an even more bizarre twist, prior to the landing Rupertus handed letters to his regimental commanders and to the media explaining that, "this is going to be a short one, a quickie. Rough but fast. We'll be through in three days. It might take only two."

Contrary to Rupertus' optimistic predictions, the bloody battle of Pelelieu lasted for six weeks. Pelelieu was four miles long on a north/south axis and two miles wide on an east/west one, consisting almost entirely of coral and rock where it was nearly impossible to dig a good foxhole. The 10,000 Japanese troops defending the island had hunkered down in their well-fortified bunkers during the preliminary air, naval, and artillery bombardment, and afterwards emerged from their strongholds to fight with great ferocity. Some

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officers involved in this battle called it the worst of the Pacific War. While Smith had landed on D-Day, Rupertus landed the next day and took command. Colonel Puller's 1st Marine Regiment was confronted with the Umurbrogol – a natural and man-made labyrinth teeming with thousands of dug-in Japanese – that would prove to be the most difficult nut to crack for the division. The combination of Rupertus and Puller was not a good one: Rupertus was hampered with his broken ankle and urged Puller from his command post to “Attack, Attack, Attack!” while Puller's natural inclinations were to do just that anyway, regardless of the circumstances. The recent death of Puller's younger brother in the Pacific War might have contributed to his grim determination to push the attack. Rupertus grew more and more depressed as the battle wore on, at one point holding his head in his hands saying, “This thing has about got me beat.” Puller's 1st Marines were essentially destroyed on Peleliu, suffering 60% casualties as the regiment was relieved by an Army regiment to complete the task. Smith had seen how Rupertus lost touch with reality and how the command situation -- not healthy going into Peleliu -- deteriorated steadily under the stress of combat. He would never forget.



D-day +1, Peleliu, 16 September 1944. Brig. Gen. O. P. Smith, ADC 1st Marine Division (*left*), as he turns over operations ashore to Maj. Gen. William Rupertus. (Photograph courtesy of the Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections.)

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So as Smith took stock of the situation of the 1st Marine Division perched out on a limb deep in North Korea with winter fast approaching, and MacArthur and Almond continuing to make statements that all would be over by Christmas, all of this and Pelelieu were on the mind of the 1st Marine Division's Commander. By 15 November, although several Army Commanders throughout Korea had had their concerns about a massive Chinese intervention, Smith alone had acted upon them by doing something. *In fact, he did everything he could think of, and then some.* By 15 November, Smith had taken the following actions to ensure the health of his command.

- First, he made clear to every officer in the command what they and their Marines were to do when the Chinese attacked (not if, but when!): they would fight from the high ground; they would not stay anchored to the roads; they would move during the day and button-up at night; they would use their artillery and their fire support as their equalizer for what Smith knew would be superior numbers;
- Second, they would slow their advance (against the desires of X Corps), close up the division, and create stockpiles of needed supplies at fortified base camps from the harbor at Hungnam to Hagaru-ri. Each base camp was to have strong perimeter defenses, supporting artillery that could fire in any direction, and a usable airstrip.
- Third, as Smith had observed that the one winding road into the mountains had several bridges – the destruction of any one of which could have isolated the division deep in the cold mountains – he ordered the engineers to set up a sawmill to begin producing timbers for bridge repair.
- Fourth, and showing a keen appreciation for the value of air power, he ordered his engineers to plan for construction of an expeditionary airfield at Hagau-ri, basically to build an airfield on the side of the mountain. Smith foresaw that this airfield could become the linchpin of the entire operation if he were forced to conduct a breakout.

With these actions, Smith had prepared the *emotional and physical infrastructure* of the Marines in his Division for what they would soon encounter. Officers throughout the Division acted on Smith's intent. For example, Barber -- commanding Fox Company 2/7 – devoured a captured and translated copy of *Military Lessons*, a Chinese military propaganda tract describing how the Chinese should fight the Americans. Barber also, having watched in amazement as one of his squads failed to take out two fleeing North Koreans in what would have a simple job for one Marine on Iwo, started conducting daily marksmanship training for all of his Marines. Noncommissioned officers got into the act too when those who had served in China during World War II followed the lead of their officers and began preparing their new Marines for what they would face when the Chinese attacked. It was not a question of “if” but “when.”

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With the entire Division thus preparing for what its Marines and Sailors knew would come, Smith's final action on 15 November was to write the below letter to the Commandant of the Marine Corps explaining his actions:

“Although the Chinese have withdrawn to the north, I have not pressed Litzenberg to make any rapid advance. Our orders still require us to advance to the Manchurian border. However, we are the left flank division of the Corps and our left flank is wide open. There is no unit of the 8th Army nearer than 80 miles to the southwest of Litzenberg. When it is convenient, the Corps can say there is nothing on our left flank. If this were true, then there should be nothing to prevent the 8th Army from coming abreast of us. This they are not doing. 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.....

As I indicated when you were here [in October], I have little confidence in the tactical judgment of the Corps or in the realism of their planning. My confidence has not been restored....

Someone in higher authority will have to make up his mind as to what is our goal. My mission is still to advance to the border. The 8th Army, 80 miles to the southwest, will not attack until the 20th. I suppose their goal is the border. Manifestly, we should not push on without regard to the 8th Army. We would simply get further out on a limb....I believe a winter campaign in the mountains of North Korea is too much to ask of the American soldier or Marine.”

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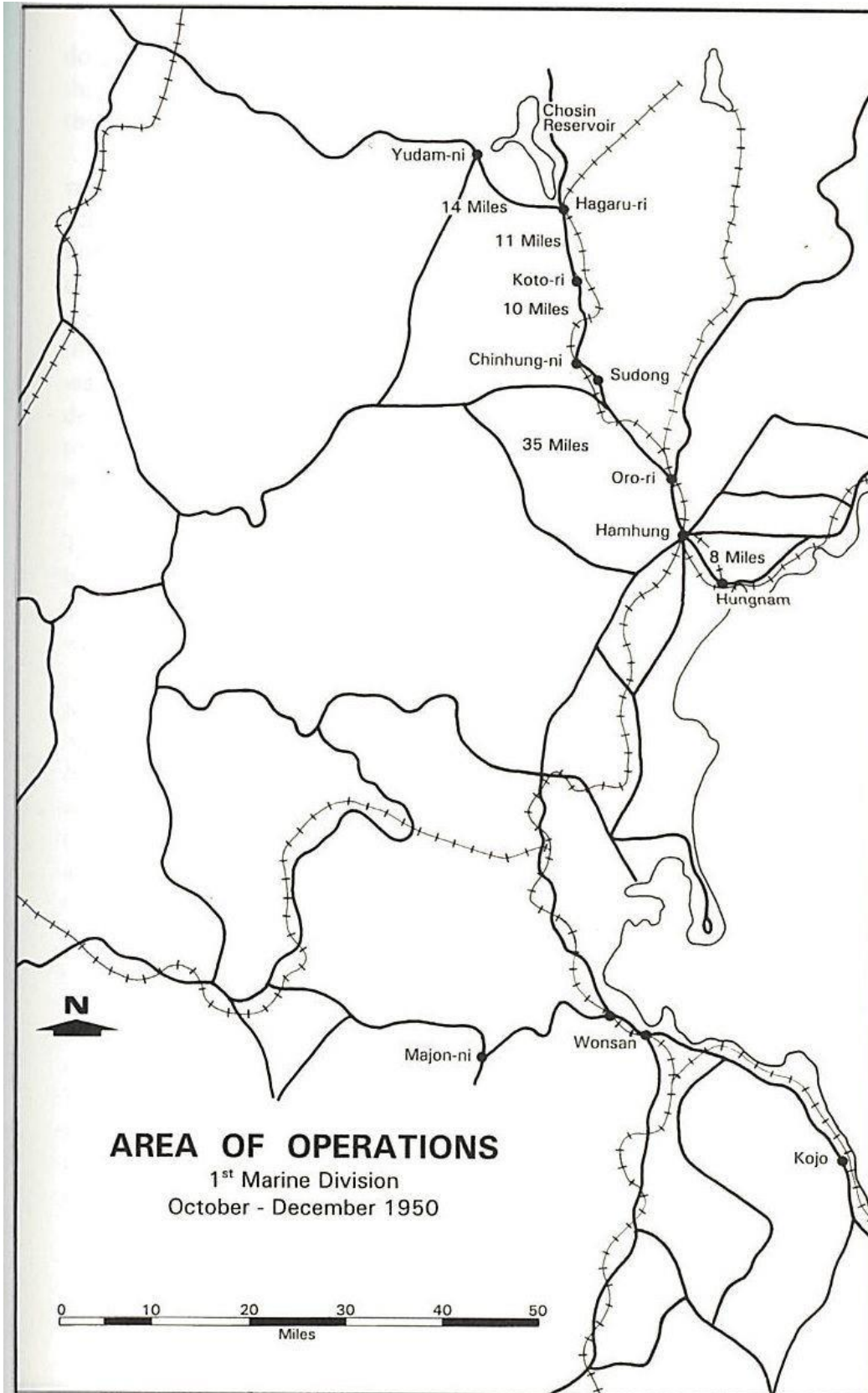


Figure 1. Map of 1st Marine Division's AO October – December 1950

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Questions For Discussion (30 min)

1. Describe the context in which the 1st Marine Division approached its campaign in the Chosin Reservoir. What were the internal and external factors influencing its' commanders? How important is it for a commander to understand the context in which their unit will be operating? What is the context your unit will be operating in? Should you discuss this context with your subordinate leaders to have a shared understanding with them? Do you think your subordinates' understanding of the context is important?
2. Our Commandant has spoken recently about the sacred responsibilities of "Commandership." How would you define "Commandership," and is it different from leadership? What are the differences between "commandership" and leadership?
3. Discuss General Smith's actions up to 15 November 1950. What has he done to prepare the emotional and physical infrastructure and resilience of the Marines and Sailors in his division? Is it possible for a commander to "set the conditions" for the projection of combat power and physical courage on the battlefield, or is courage an intensely personal characteristic? How? Is it possible for a commander to "set the conditions" for the projection of ethical power and moral courage in the barracks, in the work place, or on liberty? How would a commander go about doing this?
4. Are professional competence and excellence shown by commanders and ethical conduct shown by Marines mutually reinforcing? How so? How important is it for Marines to have assuredness in the professional competence of their commanders? Will this affect their conduct and performance?