

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

1st Marine Division at the Chosin Reservoir (B): 16 November – 3 December 1950

Having sent his letter to the Commandant, and resolved upon what he would do to save his Marines and his division, on 16 November Smith and the Commander of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, Major General Field Harris, drove up to Hagaru-ri to reconnoiter the site for the expeditionary airfield to be constructed on the side of the frozen mountain by the division's engineers. Both commanders mapped it out themselves. As an added bonus to the trip, Harris got to visit his son – who had just assumed command of a battalion in Litzenberg's 7th Marines. Construction of the airfield started on 19 November and would continue non-stop while the Marines were at the reservoir. On 21 November, Smith began receiving Puller's 1st Marines back from their security mission farther south, enabling him to place them at key points along the Main Supply Route (MSR) protecting the supply depots that Smith had been methodically building up with their respective battalions at Chinhung-ni, Kotori, and Hagaru-ri. The 1st Marines' regimental command post (CP) was placed at Koto-ri (see Figure 1). On Thanksgiving Day, 24 November, Almond called Smith to his luxurious field tent for dinner and described his grand plans to complete MacArthur's offensive to win the Korean War by Christmas.

Almond intended his Corps to conduct a two-pronged attack towards the Yalu from both the east and west sides of the Chosin Reservoir – notably, the two thrusts would not be attacking from mutually supporting positions. Almond hastily pulled a regimental combat team together from the 7th Division and sent it to the east of the reservoir as quick as they could get there. Unfortunately, this unit -- which would come to be known as Task Force MacLean after its commander, and later Task Force Faith when MacLean was killed -- was cobbled together quickly and coordination between and among its elements was poor. With the 5th Marines and 7th Marines now west of the reservoir and Task Force MacLean east of the reservoir, Almond now had his pieces in place to attack north, although notably did not pass control of this RCT to Smith. And then on 25 November, the sky fell in on the 8th Army attacking up the west corridor of the peninsula. The Chinese had counter-attacked and the three corps of the 8th Army quickly began to come apart, causing them to start the longest retreat in the history of American warfare. MacArthur and Almond ordered Smith to reorient the 1st Marine Division's attack west to relieve the 8th Army -- an impossible order to execute as it would involve an attack across 100 miles of mountainous terrain! The Corps and Theater Commanders were losing touch with the reality on the battlefield. On 26 November, Smith's ADC was evacuated on emergency leave due to the expected death of his father, leaving Smith without a second general officer for the onslaught he knew would come. As a precautionary measure, to protect the supply route that would sustain the 5th and 7th Marine Regiments from Hagaru-ri, Litzenberg had ordered his new company commander – Captain Bill

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Barber -- to secure the hilltop dominating Toktong Pass; this was also the only obstacle holding open the back gate in case the Chinese attacked in force and the two regiments had to get back to Hagaru-ri. Barber's Fox Company ascended the hilltop on the evening of 27 November.

That same evening, the 5th and 7th Marines were attacked in force by massive amounts of Chinese at Yudam-ni west of the reservoir, while Task Force MacLean/Faith was attacked similarly east of the reservoir. The Chinese had dedicated a battalion to attacking and capturing the hill at Toktong Pass which would isolate the two regiments. Throughout the evening of 27 November and early morning of 28 November, the Chinese battalion threw everything it had at Barber's Marines, but Fox Company repulsed attack after attack, with one of the Marines even thinking of the marksmanship practice Barber had insisted upon as he shot retreating Chinese. By the morning of 28 November, however, the scope of the disaster in the X Corps area had still not become apparent to the X Corps Commander, although it had become clear to the Marines -- who had been expecting and preparing for it. The soldiers of Task Force MacLean/Faith -- who had been rushed up there in a hasty manner, had little cold-weather gear, and had limited capabilities at combining arms -- were fighting for their lives when Almond helicoptered in on the afternoon of 28 November. The TF Commander, MacLean, was out with one of his beleaguered battalions when Almond arrived, so LtCol Don Carlos Faith received and briefed Almond. As Faith tried to explain how perilous the situation of their task force was, Almond cut him off with, *"We're still attacking and we're going all the way to the Yalu. Don't let a bunch of goddamn Chinese laundrymen stop you!"* After that, Almond said he had three silver stars that he desired to present to Faith and to two other soldiers. Almond promptly awarded the medals to Faith, a wounded lieutenant, and a mess sergeant who was walking by, and just as quickly, flew away in his helicopter. Faith ripped his medal off, threw it in the snow, and exclaimed, "What a damned travesty" in the presence of other task force soldiers.



LtCol Don Carlos Faith

On the evening of 28 November, the Chinese attacked the Marines at Hagaru-ri en masse, and it quickly became apparent that the Marines' mental and physical preparation was paying off. The most perilous and important mission in the division remained that of Captain Bill Barber's Fox Company, which had the mission of holding the high ground protecting Toktong Pass which would enable the 5th Marines and 7th Marines to make it safely back to Hagaru-ri from Yudam-ni (see Figure 1). That evening, as another Chinese battalion prepared for an all-out assault on Barber's position at Toktong Pass, Almond and Walker were called back to Tokyo to confer with MacArthur on the scope of the unfolding disaster while the Marines and Task Force Maclean/Faith were left to fight it out. As 28 November came to a close, the 5th

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Marines and 7th Marines were holding fast at Yudam-ni; Captain Barber's Fox Company was under enormous pressure at Toktong Pass but barely holding on, although Barber himself had been wounded; 3d Battalion, 1st Marines and several support units were barely holding Hagaru-ri – which Smith said had to be held at all costs because of the lifeline of the expeditionary airfield; and Task Force Faith (MacLean had been captured and died of his wounds) was isolated, surrounded, and attempting to fall back to Hagaru-ri.

On the evening of 29 November, Almond returned from his Tokyo conference with MacArthur with new orders for the 1st Marine Division. Smith was now directed to consolidate the division at Hagaru-ri and to send a regiment to extricate Task Force Faith, which was surrounded and fighting for its life east of the reservoir. It was as if Almond had created this mess by refusing to listen to any of his subordinate commanders' concerns up to the moment of crisis, and now wanted Smith to pull the units of his Corps he had mishandled out of the fire. On the morning of 30 November, General Barr, the 7th Division Commander and original owner of the Task Force Faith units, flew in to Hagaru-ri to visit Smith. Both commanders quickly saw that the available manpower to rescue Task Force Faith was not available as the 5th Marines and 7th Marines were still fighting at Yudam-ni and the battalion of 1st Marines had to hold the base at Hagaru-ri, again at all costs. Harris did make abundant sorties of Marine air available to support Task Force Faith, but the troops available to conduct a rescue mission were simply not available. The Chinese battalion re-attacked "Fox Hill" on the evening of 29 November and into the early morning of 30 November, but Barber's Marines held on again. In the early morning of 30 November after a Chinese assault had been repelled, Barber and his radio operator were touring the lines when they saw two Marines running off with their parkas flapping. When Barber asked where they were going, they said, "Getting the hell out of here." While the radio operator thought Barber would shoot them on the spot, Barber calmly held up his hand and said, "Hold on, you're not going anywhere. There's nowhere to go. We can talk about this, but now's not the time. I'll make a deal with you. Get back to your position and in the morning if you come up with a better plan than mine, I'll listen. But now's not the time." The two Marines simply shrugged, turned and trotted back up the hill, getting back into the fight.

Thus, on 1 December, with the 1st Marines holding on at Hagaru-ri and securing the road and supply depots, the 5th Marines and 7th Marines fighting hard to get back to Hagaru-ri, and Fox Company holding Toktong Pass against massive Chinese assaults, Task Force Faith began its attempted breakout to cover the 5 miles south to get back to the perimeter at Hagaru-ri. Task Force Faith loaded its hundreds of wounded onto the backs of its trucks and started its breakout southwards at 1300. Almost immediately, a napalm drop from the MAW landed too close to the column and wounded 8-10 soldiers. Faith had to pull his pistol several times to keep his soldiers from getting onto the trucks, but the faltering column continued its breakout attack southwards. The

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column next came upon two blown bridges and a roadblock, followed by a third blown bridge. The column bypassed the first blown bridge and then Faith personally led an attack against the roadblock. Faith fought and led heroically, but was killed in this attack on the roadblock and, with him gone and the column still facing two blown bridges, the unit disintegrated into a leaderless mass of small bands doing whatever they could to get to safety. The unit had broken apart. Over the next three days, many of the survivors from Task Force Faith would trickle into the perimeter at Hagaru-ri by walking directly across the ice of the reservoir. Only 385 of the 1,000 survivors from the original 2,500 of Task Force MacLean/Faith were able to be added to the defenders of the Hagaru-ri perimeter.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the reservoir and still on 1 December, the 5th Marines and 7th Marines began their breakout from Yudam-ni. LtCol Ray Davis, the battalion commander of 1/7, was selected by Litzenberg to lead an overland attack – 4.5 miles as the crow flies but 9 miles when factoring in the ridges and valleys -- across the mountains on a night attack/movement to contact to relieve the pressure on Captain Barber's Fox Company, which was still just barely holding onto the Toktong Pass, the loss of which would have isolated and cut-off the two regiments. Before stepping off, Davis simply told his assembled Marines, "Fellow Marines are in trouble, and we are going to rescue them. Nothing is going to stand in our way....Surprise will be our essential weapon. Marines don't usually attack at night, so the Chinese won't be expecting us." Litzenberg made radio contact with Barber before Davis stepped off, knowing full well that the Chinese would throw at least another battalion into the attack that night against his position: "We will hold, sir" Barber had told Litzenberg. Davis stepped off with his "Ridgerunners" to relieve Barber's Fox Company on the evening of 1 December (see figure 2).



LtCol Ray Davis

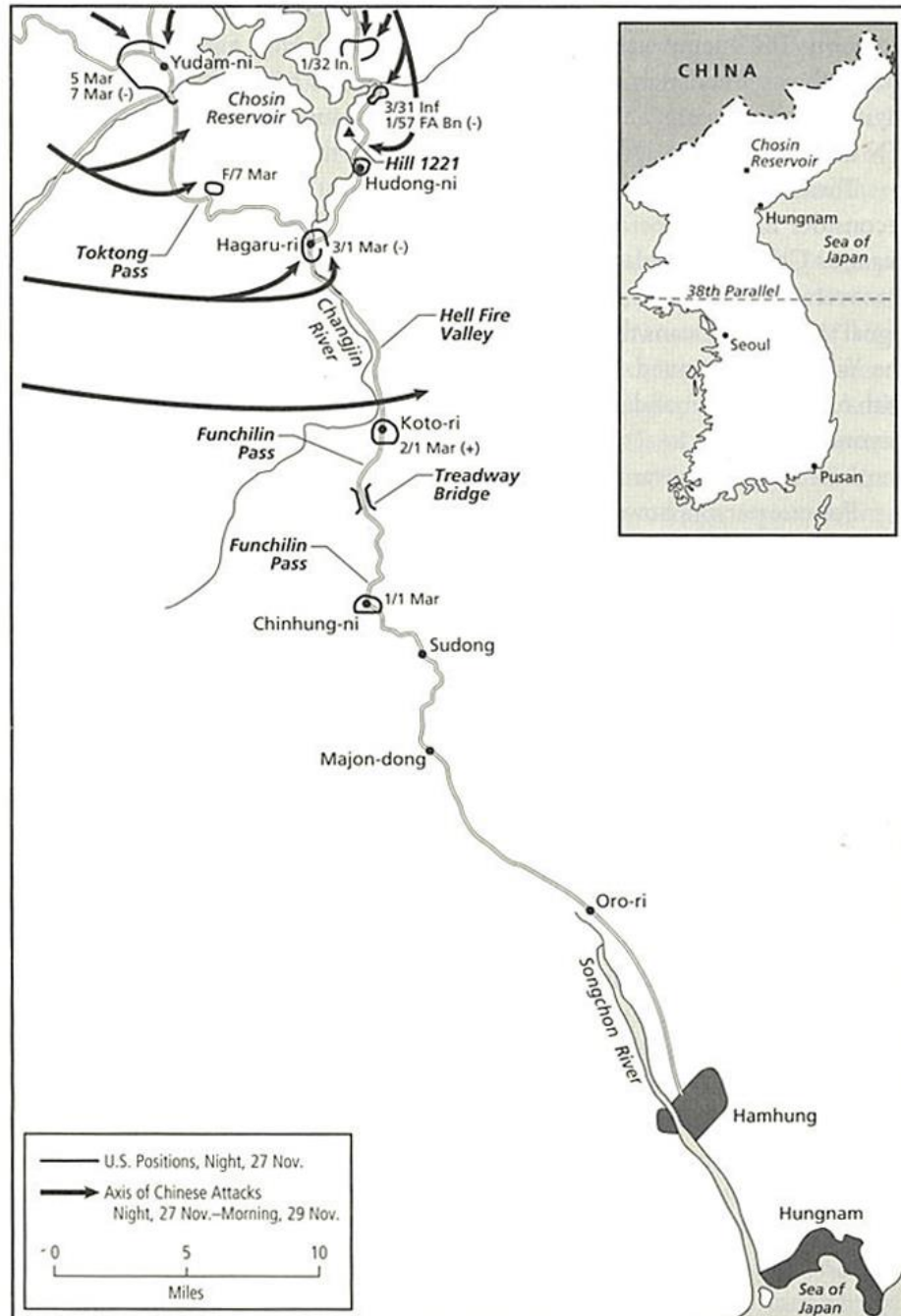


Captain Bill Barber

Davis's night movement to contact and Barber's holding of the pass for five days against at least two Chinese regiments' constant attacks are examples of the highest physical and moral courage ever mustered by Americans serving in any conflict, in any age. Both officers would deservedly earn the Congressional Medal of Honor as their courage and leadership under the most trying conditions and circumstances imaginable are legendary. With the Toktong Pass held, the 5th Marines successfully fought their way down the MSR and, by the evening of 3 December, both regiments were marching their way into the perimeter at Hagaru-ri. The Marines of LtCol Ray Davis's 1st Battalion, 7th Marines and Barber's Fox Company collected themselves, carried all of their wounded, and led the way, first humming and then proudly singing the

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“Marines’ Hymn” while stomping their shoepacs on the frozen road to make a loud and steady beat. When Davis entered the perimeter with his embattled battalion, there was a tumultuous eruption of cheers and shouts to welcome the singing Marines. Smith would later call it “quite an emotional experience.”



The Chosin Reservoir, December 1950.

Figure 1. The Chinese Attack at the Reservoir.

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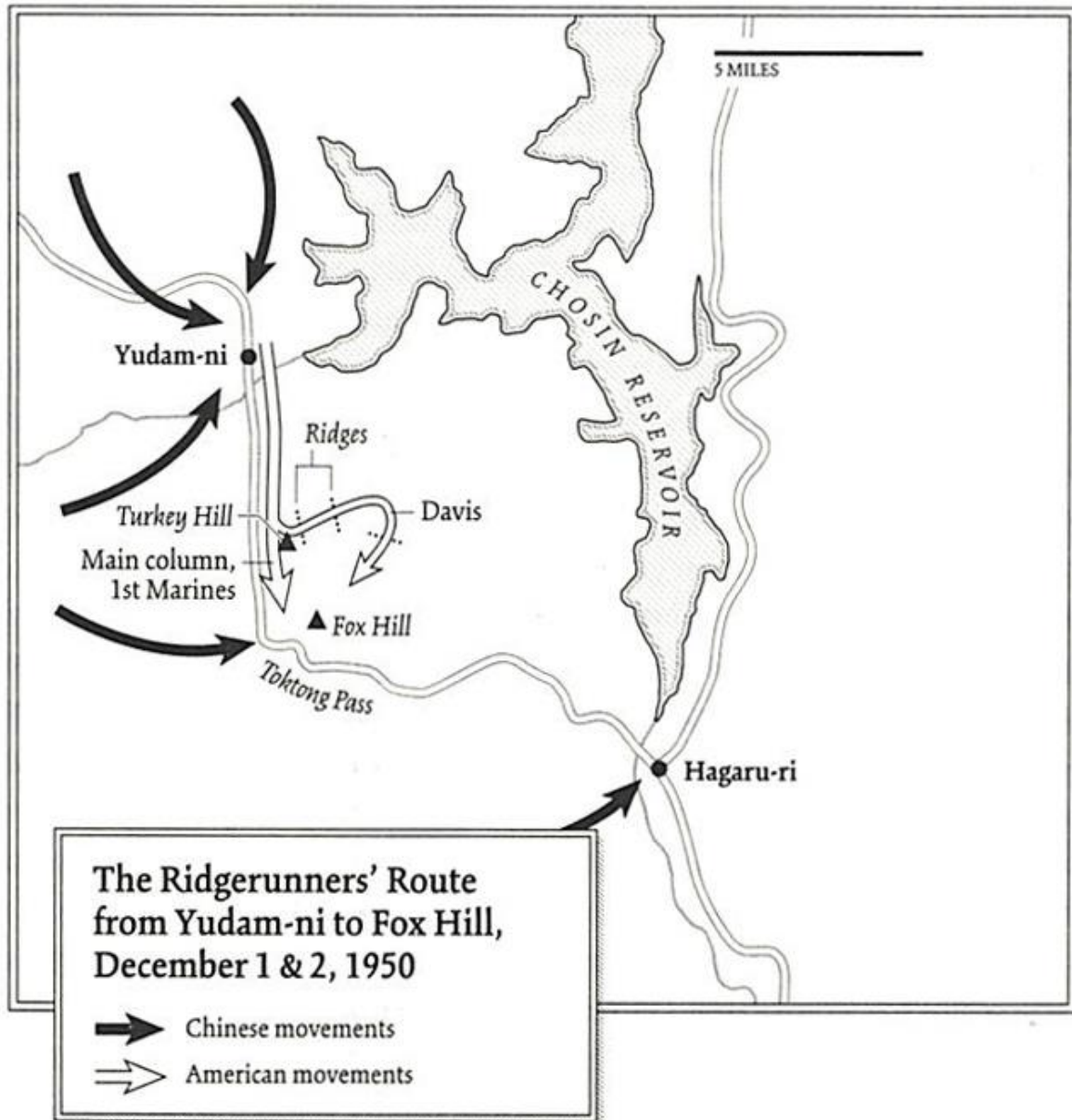


Figure 2. The Ridgerunners' Route

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Questions For Discussion (15 min)

1. In Part A, we looked at some of the differences between “Commandership” and “Leadership” as commonly understood in the Marine Corps. General Smith took several precautionary measures and actions to set the conditions for the projection of combat power and displays of physical and moral courage on the battlefield. How did General Smith’s moral courage, character, and intellect prepare his Marines for when the division was attacked by 6 Chinese Divisions?
2. Every large military command has a culture, a command climate, and several “sub-climates” existing within the larger climate set by the Commander. Do you think General Smith’s intellectual powers, moral courage, and foresight enabled positive “sub-climates” within the 1st Marine Division, or was he just very lucky to have commanders like Ray Davis and “Chesty” Puller? Discuss Captain Barber’s leadership of Fox Company, particularly his calm handling of the two Marines who were trying to run away from the fight. Was his compassion appropriate?
3. Consider the below quote from the personal notes of General Smith from when he was stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia, early in his career with “Chesty” Puller from a talk he gave entitled: “Panic.”
 - a. “Military training is not solely a question of instructing your unit in handling weapons, in solving tactical problems or military technique. It is these things, of course, but much more besides. It is also the transformation of psychological crowds into companies, battalions, and regiments. Once mutual confidence is built up, the officer or man, whatever his rank, who by word or action injures this fragile psychological armor of an army, sins against his brother. In so doing he is transforming the army back into a crowd.”

How did General Smith strengthen the *psychological armor* of the 1st Marine Division? How will you do it for your unit? Compare and contrast the “commandership” of General Almond and General Smith and the impact this had on the sub-climates existing within their respective units.

4. Discuss the unhappy fate of Task Force MacLean/Faith. Many of these soldiers fought very bravely and, in fact, protected the Hagaru-ri airfield from being over-run for the four days prior to 1 December. LtCol Faith was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Many soldiers also bravely afterwards became defenders of Hagaru-ri. But

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what factors led to the disintegration of its military structure? Compare and contrast Task Force Faith with LtCol Ray Davis' 1/7.

5. Finally, where do units like LtCol Ray Davis' 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, and Captain Bill Barber's Fox Company come from? What imbues units like these with such esprit de corps, courage, and fortitude that they can still move and inspire us? Does it take the crucible of combat to produce units like this? Why, or why not?