

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

1st Marine Division at the Chosin Reservoir (C): 4 – 11 December 1950

By 4 December, although Smith had now consolidated his division at Hagaru-ri, its challenges were still enormous. The JCS Chairman, General Omar Bradley, was almost certain that the 1st Marine Division would be lost. Other divisions on the peninsula, such as the 2nd Division, *were* lost. But again, Smith's moral courage and character had prepared his command for every contingency. Smith now had 10,020 men in the perimeter at Hagaru-ri to include 1,500 wounded. His first order of business was to evacuate the wounded using the airstrip while also bringing in resupplies for the planned breakout to the south. The Division still had to fight 11 miles south to reach Koto-ri, and Smith was determined to bring all of his equipment and vehicles out with them. Smith's G-3 later noted that this decision (and its execution) was of incalculable value in the Marines' belief that they had actually achieved a triumph. Smith gave his Marines two days of rest and started the breakout from Hagaru-ri on 6 December. 5th Marines would hold the airfield at Hagaru-ri while 7th Marines would attack south and clear the MSR. The 1st MAW would provide close air support. The fight south would take the Division 39 hours, and by the evening of 8 December there were 14,000 Marines and soldiers (about 2,300 soldiers accompanied the Marine Division, and fought very bravely throughout) safely within the perimeter at Koto-ri with another 11 miles to cover to get to Chinhung-ni, to include repairing a blown bridge at Funchilin Pass that could prevent the division from bringing its vehicles and equipment out.

The Division had suffered 616 casualties during the breakout from Hagaru-ri to Koto-ri, and yet again Smith's moral courage and foresight in planning his fortified supply depots with usable airstrips had buttressed the Division's morale as the wounded were promptly cared for. But Smith did not yet have a solution for repairing the blown bridge at Funchilin Pass. Smith's engineer officer, LtCol John Partridge, had requested an air drop of treadway bridge sections into the perimeter at Koto-ri to see if these could be assembled within the perimeter, brought to the site using large Army trucks, and emplaced by his engineers. Smith recalled:

“On December 5th, Partridge came to see me and report on his plans. I cross-examined [him] as I was not familiar with all the details. I asked him if the bridge section dropped as a test was damaged, which it was not. Then I asked him if he planned on dropping more bridge sections than required to allow for damaged sections. He told me he planned to drop double the required number. I then asked him if the drops failed was he prepared to install a timber bridge. He said he had bridging timbers assembled at Koto-ri. I could see that Partridge, who had convinced himself of the feasibility of the operation, was becoming annoyed by the cross-examination. Finally, he burst out: ‘I got you

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across the Han River. I got you an airfield and I will get you a bridge.' I laughed and told him to go ahead."

This final phase on the breakout from Koto-ri to Chinhung-ni, set to begin on 8 December, was the most complicated military maneuver of the campaign. The 5th Marines and 7th Marines would have to attack south from Koto-ri to secure the high ground on both sides of Funchilin Pass, while 1st Marines would have a battalion attack from the south at Chinhung-ni to secure a hill overlooking the bridge site. The attack kicked off in a blinding snowstorm with the temperature at -14 degrees. On the morning of 9 December, with its objectives finally secured after tough fighting, the bridge convoy left Koto-ri, arriving at the site that afternoon. Smith's moral courage and foresight, again, had paid off as both treadway and timbers were needed to repair the bridge, which was accomplished by nightfall. With Marines carefully guiding vehicles across the fragile bridge with their flashlights, the division completed an orderly and methodical crossing, with nearly all of the Division reaching the coast at Hungnam by the evening of 11 December.

Smith would later cite three critical aspects to the success of the 1st Marine Division's breakout at the Chosin Reservoir. They are very telling in his overall approach to "Commandership." First, Smith said, "we took considerable time to make certain of the security of the column by deploying our people out to the ridgelines on either side. It was a tedious and exhausting operation to get tactical elements disposed on the commanding ground flankward along both sides of the MSR, but it paid off; the more slowly you moved because of these precautions, the fewer became our losses in men and vehicles." Second, Smith credited the order with which his Marines came out of Hagaru-ri, "in good order with heads up, but they [the American people] need to understand it if they are ever to appreciate the moral values in this particular operation." Finally, Smith noted that all went according to plan, that it depended on team-work, and specifically noted that the Marines struck their tents properly "and this was done in as orderly a fashion as if the camp had been raised somewhere back in the U.S. All tentage was loaded on vehicles. There was no rush and nothing was done in a slipshod way." Forty years later, General Barrow – who had served as a company commander in the 1st Marines during the Chosin campaign -- was delivering a PME to the officers of the 2nd Marine Division when he was asked by a young officer, who noted the cold, the conditions, and the number of Chinese attacking the 1st Marine Division, "How did you do it?" Barrow simply responded, "I made them shave every day."

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Questions For Discussion (15 min)

1. What does this case study teach us about the nature of “commandership,” moral courage, and the linkage between professional excellence and discipline among the troops?
2. The Chosin campaign was conspicuous for the number of Marines receiving Congressional Medals of Honor, Navy Crosses, and several other awards for valor and heroism. Yet Smith, and years later Barrow, would both attribute the 1st Marine Division’s remarkable success to such actions as Marines properly putting their tents away, moral values in maintaining order and discipline, and shaving. What do you make of this? Compare Smith’s and Barrow’s comments above to the description Fehrenbach gave of the Marines in Part A, noting the importance of Marine Staff NCO’s and NCO’s to accomplishing the mission. Does the professional excellence of commanders set conditions for NCO’s properly enforcing discipline?
3. In his book *Achilles in Vietnam*, (currently on the Commandant’s Reading List), Jonathan Shay notes that studies have shown an increase in pessimism, cynicism, and the “undoing of character” among troops in units commanded by those who do not demonstrate sustained professional competence and excellence. What does the “commandership” of the commanders in the 1st Marine Division at the Chosin Reservoir teach us about this.
4. Finally, what do you make of the fact that although several other successful American military campaigns have become synonymous with the names of the generals or admirals who commanded them, yet the Chosin Reservoir Campaign remains to this day all about the 1st Marine Division, and more broadly, the *institution of the United States Marine Corps* and the ethos of our individual Marines. In fact, Marines today even take *ownership* of the accomplishments of the Marines of the “Frozen Chosin.” Why is this? Why do you think General O. P. Smith would want it that way? How do you want your Marines to remember your command years into the future?