

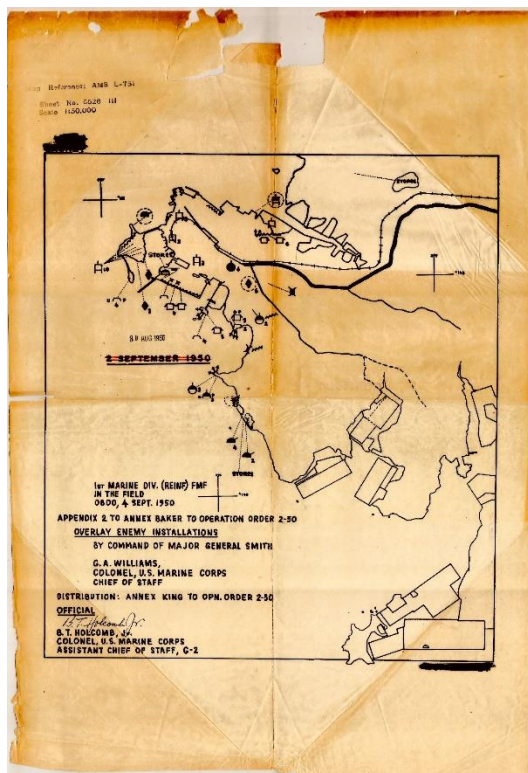


MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION

The Korean War, 1950–1953

Following World War II, Cold War tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States first escalated into open conflict on the Korean Peninsula. The two powers had divided Korea at the 38th parallel in August 1945 with the intention of eventually establishing a unified, independent government. This plan collapsed as Cold War rivalries deepened, however. The northern half of the country emerged as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, a Soviet-aligned Communist regime under the leadership of Kim Il-Sung. The south became the Republic of Korea, a U.S.-backed capitalist state led by President Syngman Rhee.

Determined to unify the Korean Peninsula under communism, Kim launched a surprise invasion of South Korea on 25 June 1950. The North Korean People's Army's (NKPA's) sudden attack caught both South Korea and the United States off guard. In response, the United Nations swiftly passed a resolution condemning the invasion and authorizing military intervention to halt the Communist advance. UN forces were placed under the command of U.S. Army General Douglas MacArthur to lead the defense of South Korea. Before Allied units could intervene effectively, the NKPA captured the South Korean capital, Seoul, and continued its rapid advance southward. The first American ground force to engage North Korean troops was Task Force Smith, a small U.S. Army unit that deployed from Japan. The better-equipped and more experienced North Korean forces routed Task Force Smith at the Battle of Osan, which exposed the unpreparedness of U.S. forces in the region and underscored the need for rapid mobilization and reinforcement. Following Task Force Smith's



Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division

Collect

Preserve

Promote

Support





failure, the United States mobilized General Walton H. Walker's Eighth U.S. Army, also stationed in Japan. Undermanned and underprepared, the Eighth Army was quickly pushed back to a narrow defensive position around the southeastern port city of Pusan. With the enemy closing in, the situation for South Korea appeared increasingly dire.

- For more information, see:
 - [*Our First Year in Korea*](#)
 - [*Mobilization of the Marine Corps Reserve in the Korean Conflict*](#)
 - [*Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*](#)
 - [*An Annotated Bibliography of the U.S. Marine Corps in the Korean War*](#)

1st Provisional Marine Brigade

As the Eighth Army fought desperately for survival along the Pusan Perimeter, General MacArthur requested additional forces, including Marine units, to bolster the defense. Under the leadership of the Commandant, General Clifton B. Cates, the Marine Corps rapidly mobilized the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade, commanded by Brigadier General Edward A. Craig. After swift preparation at Camp Pendleton, which included Marines from across the country answering the call to arms, the brigade embarked and arrived at Pusan on 2 August 1950. Upon landing, Eighth Army assigned the brigade to Task Force Kean and deployed them to the southwestern sector of the perimeter. There, U.S. forces launched an offensive to seize the initiative. The Marines' first major engagement occurred at Chindong-ni. While some Marines experienced combat for the first time, a significant portion of the brigade consisted of seasoned World War II veterans with extensive battlefield experience. Throughout multiple engagements, the brigade consistently pushed back the enemy, advancing close to the North Korean headquarters at Chinju.

Despite this initial success in the southwestern sector, NKPA forces broke through the perimeter along the Naktong River. The Eighth Army pulled the Marine brigade from its position and redeployed it to halt the NKPA offensive. On August 17, the brigade launched a decisive attack on enemy forces entrenched at "No Name Ridge." Fighting with exceptional bravery and skill, the Marines dislodged and drove back North Korean troops. Follow-up artillery and air strikes devastated much of the NKPA *4th Division*, significantly weakening the enemy's offensive capabilities.



- For more information, see:
 - [*U.S. Marines in the Pusan Perimeter: Fire Brigade*](#)
 - [*Our First Year in Korea*](#)
 - [*Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*](#)



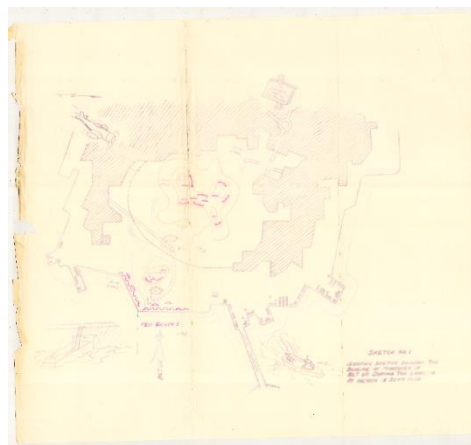
Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division

The 1st Provisional Marine Brigade quickly earned the respect of the Eighth Army, which came to rely on the Marines for rapid response to emerging crises along the defensive line. Due to their mobility and effectiveness in stabilizing threatened sectors, Brigadier General Craig's Marines became known as the "fire brigade" for their role in putting out metaphorical fires across the front. After the first Battle of the Naktong, the Eighth Army again called upon the brigade just

weeks later when the enemy breached the line along the river. The Marines responded swiftly, repelling the North Korean assault and helping restore the integrity of the Pusan Perimeter. Following the second Naktong engagement, the Eighth Army pulled the brigade from the front lines to rest, refit, and prepare for a bold and daring amphibious assault.

Inchon Landing and the Battle of Seoul

Commander of UN forces General MacArthur proposed an amphibious landing at Inchon to outflank North Korean forces, break the stalemate at the Pusan Perimeter, and recapture Seoul, believing that a bold strike deep behind enemy lines would turn the tide of the war. In preparation for the assault, Major General Oliver P. "O. P." Smith's 1st Marine Division—rapidly mobilized with a mix of active-duty Marines, reservists, and World War II veterans—arrived in theater in early September



Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division



and formed the backbone of the amphibious landing force. The division fell under the command of X Corps, led by U.S. Army Major General Edward M. Almond. Facing extreme tidal conditions and heavily fortified defenses, planners had only the narrow window of 15 September to execute the landing, making timing and coordination critical to its success.

On 10 September, the Allied Naval Force assembled off the coast of Inchon and launched a coordinated air and naval pre-bombardment to weaken enemy defenses. On 15 September, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, landed on the critical Wolmi-do Island, located in Inchon harbor and posing a threat to the main landing's flanks. The battalion assaulted the island in the early morning and secured it before the



Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division

evening tide. With Wolmi-do secured, the main landing force assaulted Red and Blue Beaches. Notably, First Lieutenant Baldomero López led his company with exceptional courage, sacrificing his life in front of an enemy bunker on Red Beach and earning the Medal of Honor posthumously. The 1st and 5th Marines quickly established a secure beachhead, allowing them to begin their drive for Seoul and initiate a maneuver aimed at encircling and cutting off the retreat of North Korean forces.

On 18 September, Marines seized Kimpo Airfield outside of Seoul, allowing allied forces to bring in aircraft, supplies, and reinforcements close to the front lines. The battle for Seoul began on 22 September, with U.S. Marines, Republic of Korea (ROK) Marines, and U.S. Army soldiers operating together as they pushed into the capital and through well-fortified North Korean positions. Fighting was intense and often at close quarters, as Allied troops cleared buildings, alleys, and barricaded streets under constant enemy fire. By 28 September, Seoul was liberated.

MacArthur's strategy had succeeded. The surprise allied victories at Inchon and Seoul caught the NKPA off guard and threatened their overextended lines of communication. This



disruption significantly weakened North Korean resistance along the Pusan Perimeter, enabling the Eighth Army to launch a breakout offensive to the north. As the NKPA retreated in disarray across the 38th parallel, U.S. and UN leaders faced a critical decision to halt at the border or pursue the enemy into North Korea in an effort to unify the peninsula under non-Communist rule. At General MacArthur's urging, President Truman authorized the advance. Unbeknownst to allied planners at the time, this decision would alarm Communist China, which was prepared to intervene to protect its border and strategic interests.

- For more information, see:
 - [*U.S. Marines at Inchon: Over the Seawall*](#)
 - [*U.S. Marines in the Recapture of Seoul: Battle of the Barricades*](#)
 - [*U.S. Marine Aviation in Korea: Corsairs to Panthers*](#)

Battle of Chosin Reservoir

In the western sector of Korea, MacArthur tasked the Eighth Army with attacking Pyongyang, the North Korean capital, which it took on 19 October. In the east, he ordered X Corps to embark on amphibious ships and swing around to the other side of the Korean peninsula to conduct a landing on the east coast at Wonsan before attacking north to the Yalu River, the border between North Korea and China. For the advance to the Yalu, X Corps assigned the ROK I Corps to the right flank, the Army's 7th Infantry Division to the center, the 1st Marine Division to the left flank, and the 3d Infantry Division in reserve. The 1st Marine Division landed at Wonsan, south of the Chosin Reservoir, on 26 October and began preparing to march north. Colonel Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller's 1st Marines, organized as Regimental Combat Team 1 (RCT-1), secured the Kojo area and engaged in significant combat with North Korean forces. While the 1st Marines were in Kojo, the 5th and 7th Marines, organized as Regimental Combat Teams 5 and 7 (RCT-5 and RCT-7) moved north from Hamhung on 1 November. The prospect of fighting Chinese forces concerned the RCT-7 commander, Colonel Homer L. Litzenberg, who told his staff, "We can expect to meet Chinese communist troops, and it is important that we win the first battle." Shortly thereafter, RCT-7 made contact with Chinese units. After four days of fierce fighting, the enemy withdrew north and the 1st Marine Division gave chase, unknowingly being drawn into a trap at the Chosin Reservoir.

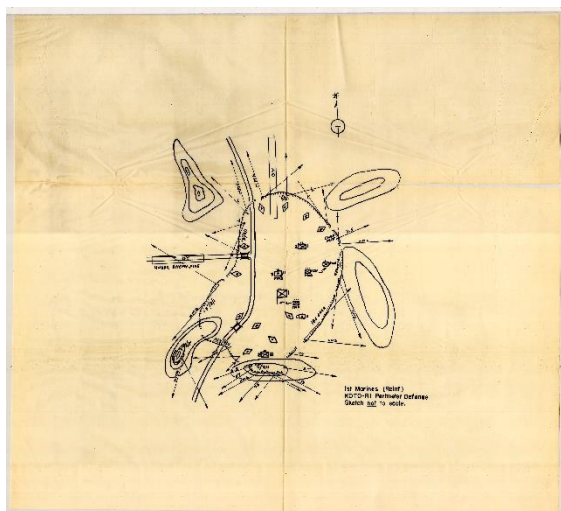


By Thanksgiving 1950, Marine forces were positioned from Yudam-ni in the north down to Koto-ri in the south. RCT-5 and RCT-7 at Yudam-ni were preparing to advance toward the Yalu River when a massive Chinese offensive struck on the evening of 27 November. Multiple enemy divisions slammed into RCT-5 and RCT-7, while simultaneous attacks targeted Captain William E. Barber's Fox Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines, defending the vital supply route through Toktong Pass. Chinese forces also assaulted the 1st Marine Division headquarters at Hagaru-ri, RCT-1 at Koto-ri, and the northernmost elements of the 7th Infantry Division along the reservoir's eastern flank. The fighting was savage and relentless, made even more brutal by freezing temperatures that plunged well below zero. Chinese commanders repeatedly launched waves of infantry against the Marines and soldiers alike. The assault extended beyond Chosin, with Chinese forces pressing the Eighth Army to the west, driving them back south.



Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division

The situation appeared dire as the 1st Marine Division and elements of the 7th Infantry Division found themselves surrounded by Chinese forces at Chosin. After deliberation, X Corps authorized a breakout, even permitting unit disbandment if necessary. General Smith firmly



Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division

disagreed, declaring that the 1st Marine Division would withdraw as a unified force—bringing out its equipment, its wounded, and its dead. Undertaking such a massive withdrawal under extreme conditions was a daunting task. Many in the world press had already written off the 1st Marine Division, expecting the Chinese to annihilate it. Instead, through the determined leadership of Marine officers and the courage and resilience of every Marine, the division executed a



disciplined fighting withdrawal—battling southward through freezing temperatures and hostile terrain to reach Hungnam on 11 December, where they were evacuated to South Korea.

- For more information, see:
 - [*U.S. Marines at the Changjin Reservoir: Frozen Chosin*](#)
 - [*U.S. Marine Helicopters in Korea: Whirlybirds*](#)
 - [*Our First Year in Korea*](#)

Stalemate

Upon return to South Korea, the 1st Marine Division established a camp at Masan, where it rested, received replacements, and refitted equipment for continued operations. In early January 1951, the Marines received orders to fight NKPA guerrillas in the Pohang area of South Korea along the east coast. After successfully completing that mission, the division joined the main battle line in the eastern sector and participated in several offensive operations to push enemy forces north of the 38th parallel. The Marines next fought Chinese and North Korean troops in rugged terrain around the operationally significant basin called the Punchbowl. Throughout early 1951, the 1st Marine Division held firm against several large-scale enemy offensives, fighting more as a traditional land army than an amphibious assault force. As momentum shifted, Allied forces once again had crossed over the 38th parallel by April, compelling both the Chinese and North Koreans to consider negotiations.

Negotiations proved long and drawn out, as the enemy initially used the talks as an opportunity to rest, resupply, and prepare for renewed offensive operations. In early 1952, the 1st Marine Division shifted from the east-central front to the western sector of the line. From mid-1952 until the signing of the armistice in July 1953, Marines held fortified defensive positions and manned forward outposts along a static front. Intense fighting erupted at key positions such as Outposts Reno,



Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division



Vegas, Carson, Bunker Hill, Dagmar, Berlin, and the Hook—battles marked by heavy casualties and determined enemy assaults.

- For more information, see:
 - [*U.S. Marines at the Punch Bowl: Drive North*](#)
 - [*Counteroffensive: U.S. Marines from Pohang to No Name Line*](#)
 - [*U.S. Marines from Bunker Hill to the Hook: Stalemate*](#)
 - [*U.S. Marines from the Nevada Battles to the Armistice: Outpost War*](#)

Armistice



Courtesy of the National Archives, photo no. 127-GR-208-A131996

UN, North Korean, and Chinese representatives signed an armistice on 27 July 1953, officially marking a cessation of combat operations. During the Korean War, the Marine Corps sustained 30,544 casualties, including 4,262 killed in action. For extraordinary bravery and valor, 42 Marines were awarded the Medal of Honor, 26 of them posthumously. The Marine Corps' performance in Korea underscored several key themes. First, the success at Inchon reaffirmed the enduring relevance of amphibious operations in modern warfare. Second, the Korean War spotlighted the Corps' unique capability as the nation's "force in readiness," able to respond rapidly to crises. Finally, the conflict demonstrated the effectiveness of the Marine air-ground task force (MAGTF) concept, while also enabling innovation in warfighting methods such as air mobility and the field-testing of life-saving equipment, including the flak jacket and thermal boots.

- For more information, see:
 - [*U.S. Marines from the Nevada Battles to the Armistice: Outpost War*](#)
 - [*The Problems of U.S. Marine Corps Prisoners of War in Korea*](#)

To see all of History Division's Korean War publications, [click here](#).