

KEYSTONE BATTLE BRIEF
INCHON LANDING, KOREA, 1950

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The Korean War: The Inchon Landing

[Notes for the instructor: The text below can be read, or you may just use it for background and speak informally, using the slides to cue you for your remarks. If you read every word below – not counting the parts marked “Notes for the instructor” – the whole lecture will take approximately 30 minutes, which will leave 20 minutes for the slide marked “discussion.” A list of additional readings is listed at the end of the presentation. Sections marked in italics with the label “Notes for the Instructor” are for the instructor’s use only; they should not be read out loud.]

Slide 1: Title Slide

No Text

Slide 2: Agenda

Good Morning. For today’s Marine Corps history lecture, we are going to discuss the Korean War and the Inchon landing, which was perhaps the most significant turning point in that war and a great triumph for the Marine Corps in particular. Over the next 30-40 minutes, I’ll give you the strategic context of the war and explain why we were there in the first place. Then I’ll explain the initial battles, and the decision of the United States to land forces at Inchon. I’ll then cover the battle in detail – both the amphibious landing and the battle for Seoul that followed. Then we’ll take a look at what happened after Inchon, and how the Marine Corps finds itself surrounded by the Chinese at the Chosin Reservoir. Here’s what’s we’ll cover today:

[Notes for the Instructor: read agenda slide]

Slide 3: Korea: The Division of a Nation

Why was there even a war in Korea? Before WWII, Japan took over Korea and ran it as a colony throughout the war. When Japan lost WWII, the Soviets and the Americans decided to occupy Korea temporarily until a new government could be formed according to the desires of the Korean people. Elections occurred in the South in 1948; but the North refused to recognize them. As the Cold War continued and US-Soviet relations soured, the temporary occupations turned into two countries: North and South Korea, divided at the 38th parallel. Neither side liked the separation and both the North and the South wanted to reunify the country – peacefully if possible, with violence, if necessary.

Slide 4: The Roots of War

It’s important to remember that even though the South held elections and the North did not, no part of Korea was a democracy at this point. From 1949-1950, both North and South Korea are run by autocrats – people who will not tolerate any dissent or objections to their power. North Korean is run by Kim il Sung – he is the grandfather of the current

North Korean leader – and he has military and financial assistance from Russia and China because his regime is communist.

South Korea is run by Syngman Rhee (pronounced: Sing-Man Ree) and he has military and financial assistance from the Americans. Both leaders ask permission of their superpower patrons to invade the other side and unify the peninsula, but in these early years of the Cold War, both the Americans and the Soviets tell the Koreans to avoid a large war. As a result, small skirmishes along the border are fairly common in 1948 and 1949, but the two countries are officially at peace.

Even though China shares a long border with North Korea, at this point, China does not get involved with the Korea issue, because it is in its own civil war – the Chinese Civil War – that will finally be won by the communists in 1949. This is important, because as you'll see by the end of the lecture, China gets very involved in Korea and is the major reason that the Marines find themselves in such dire straits at the Chosin Reservoir.

Slide 5: Invasion

In 1949 and 1950, the Communist powers – Stalin in the USSR and Mao Zedong in China – start getting a bit more aggressive towards the West. Even though both had initially cautioned North Korea about not invading the South, in 1950, Stalin changes his mind and gives Kim il Sung the green light to invade. The North Koreans cross the 38th Parallel on 25 June 1950 and catch the South Koreans and the Americans entirely by surprise. They sweep down the peninsula and win a string of major victories. President Truman decides to rush US forces stationed in Japan into the fight. He doesn't even have time to ask Congress for a declaration of war, and so, the Korean War is the first major war fought by the United States without Congress voting on it.

Slide 6: On the Brink of Defeat

Even though the Americans send Army troops from Japan almost immediately, it isn't enough. There are too few Americans; they lack tanks and heavy equipment; and the soldiers had been on occupation duty in Japan – they simply weren't prepared for combat. The heat in Korea was terrible – sometimes over 100 degrees and humid in the South of the country – and by mid-July, the Americans and the South Koreans are pushed all the way down to the Southwest corner of the country around the port of Pusan – an area the defending troops called the “Pusan Perimeter.” With more North Koreans pouring into the South every day, the Joint Chiefs of Staff start drawing up withdrawal plans in order to retreat back to Japan.

Slide 7: The Marines Arrive!

Meanwhile, back in the USA: As soon as the war begins, the Marine Corps started mobilizing men and sending them to the West Coast for immediate deployment. In just two weeks, they put together a provisional brigade, which sets sail for Korea and lands at Pusan in early August. And, although the Marine Corps had not yet named their units as

Marine Air-Ground Task Forces yet, that is exactly what showed up in Korea on 3 August. Infantry worked together with close air support flying off navy ships and engineers and artillerymen provided support on the ground.

The arrival of the Marines and additional army forces in August stabilizes the Pusan Perimeter and halts the North Korean advance. But the situation is still very serious. All of the South Korean forces are stuck at the bottom of the country with their backs to the ocean. The North Koreans control all the major roads leading back up to North Korea.

Slide 8: The Inchon Plan: (Animation Slide – follow notes)

Army General Douglas MacArthur -- who is the overall commander of the war -- sees that the Americans and South Koreans are stuck at the bottom of the country, but he also sees something else: the North Koreans are over-extended. They've had so much success that they are now stretched out all over South Korea, and they don't have enough forces to guard their rear areas, the logistics trains, the lines of communications and the road networks they are using to move forces and supplies down the length of the peninsula.

And so, MacArthur comes up with a daring plan: an amphibious landing at Inchon – deep behind enemy lines, right next to the South Korean Capitol of Seoul. Seoul is the convergence point for all of the major roads that run down the Korean Peninsula. If the First Marine Division can conduct an amphibious landing there, hundreds of thousands of North Koreans will be trapped below Seoul, and will be totally cut off: no logistics, no support, and no reinforcements. **[Click for next graphic]** Then, the South Koreans will be able to march north and defeat them, and South Korea will be saved. **[Click for next graphic]**

MacArthur called the plan a “strategic envelopment” – surrounding the entire North Korean army by invading from the sea. If it worked it would be a masterstroke; if it failed, the forces landing behind enemy lines would be destroyed – either at the beach or once ashore.

Slide 9: MacArthur's Plan:

MacArthur's plan was controversial. He was supremely confident about it – When he briefed the plan, he said “We shall land at Inchon and I shall crush them!” But neither the Navy nor the rest of the Army were as confident. Inchon was one of the worst possible places for an amphibious landing, for a number of reasons:

- It had huge tidal changes – there was a 30-foot tidal difference between high tide and low tide. That meant they could only land at high tide and when the tide went out, the landing craft would be stranded in the mud.
- The only way to get to the landing sites was through a narrow dredged sea channel called “Flying Fish Canal.” This reduced the Marines' options for avenues of approach to just one. If the North Koreans mined that channel, the damaged ships would bottleneck the narrow waterway and the entire operation

would collapse.

- There was also a large seawall to protect Inchon from the sea, and that means the Marines needed to carry ladders to get over it.
- Also, no one knew how the Marines would perform. The last time the Marines had done an amphibious landing was at the battle of Okinawa five years earlier. Many of the Marines moving to Korea were WWII vets that stayed in the reserves, but the training and fitness requirements were far less than they had experienced prior to an amphibious operation in World War II.
- Plus, planning an amphibious landing usually took months. This time, the Army and Marines had just two weeks and there'd be no opportunities for rehearsals. Even so MacArthur was not deterred. This is what he said just before the operation: "I know that this operation will be sort of helter-skelter. But the 1st Marine Division is going to win the war by landing at Inchon."

Slide 10: The Inter-service Politics of the Amphibious Assault

Even though the mission was a difficult one, the Marines were particularly eager to do it. This was not only because it was a chance to make a major contribution to a war that was already going very badly, but because the Marine Corps' utility to national defense had been questioned by the other services since the end of WWII. During the war, the Marine Corps grew very quickly – from 20,000 in 1939 to 485,000 by 1945. By the end of the war, there were six Marine Divisions and five Marine Aircraft Wings and the army worried that the Marines were becoming a second land army. Some senior Army officers had argued that the Marine Corps be disbanded or at least that they be reduced to battalion-sized units for guarding naval installations.

The Marines took offense – as you might expect. They responded that they weren't a second land army; they were amphibious assault experts – only they knew how to do these complex landings from ships to shore under fire, and the Marines argued this was a very important skill. The army disagreed.

Look at these quotes from senior army leaders just before the Korean War started – you can see that the Army was biased against the Marines. But it wasn't just interservice rivalry; the Army had a reasonable argument as well: Neither one of these famous leaders thought we would ever do another amphibious landing again, because (1) the soviets didn't have much of a navy, and (2) no one knew how to do an amphibious landing against an enemy armed with nuclear weapons. So, neither of these senior leaders believed the Marines arguments that having experts in amphibious assault was important to national defense anymore.

Inchon proved them wrong.

Slide 11: The Landing Plan:

The plan the Marines developed with MacArthur was a good one, but the whole plan depended on quick action in the short time windows allowed by the tides. The first step was to seize Wolmi Do Island, which the Marines called “radio Island” and to establish a beachhead on “green beach.” This would happen on the morning tide, when the Marines had just 2 hours of high water to get a reinforced Battalion ashore. They would take out the North Korean field guns and anti-ship guns that intelligence had revealed were overlooking the channel. It would be a tough fight, but securing this hill was essential to allowing the afternoon landings to proceed up the two narrow channels to Red and Blue beach without being hit from the front and from the flanks.

Then, in the afternoon, when the tide came back in and landing craft could navigate the channels, the 5th Marines would land on Red Beach and surmount the sea wall with ladders carried inside the landing craft. The 1st Marines – under the leadership of Colonel Lewis B. “Chesty” Puller -- would land on Blue beach and seize the high terrain that yielded fields of fire and observation over the city itself. Once the two regiments had consolidated on the beachheads, they would fight their way into Seoul, neutralize all North Korean defenses, and liberate the city.

The entire plan depended on surprise and a good deal of luck. If the harbors were mined, the operation would collapse. If the single battalion charged with seizing Radio Hill failed in its mission, the landing craft would be attacked from two sides and the operation would collapse. If the new and inexperienced ship drivers missed their marks, the Marines would be gunned down in the channels and if the young – (and often raw and untested Marine PFCs of the 1st Marines) -- couldn’t overwhelm the North Koreans, the operation would collapse.

Slide 12: The Inchon Landing

Luckily, none of those things happened. After 2 days of preparatory bombardments by air and naval gunfire, the Marines swung into action. The North Koreans were caught totally by surprise. They had neither mined the harbor nor bolstered their defenses and their lines of communication and supply were badly overextended throughout the peninsula.

The reinforced Battalion from the 5th Marines seized Radio Hill and defeated the North Korean defenders. The tide went out and the LSTs were stuck in the mudflats, but when the tide came back in that afternoon, the 5th Marines assaulted Blue Beach, mounted the seawall, and consolidated control. The 1st Marines were equally successful, though there were some friendly fire incidents when two damaged LSTs – that had been hit and were burning and in distress – fired indiscriminately at the beach and killed a number of friendly forces. The total number of casualties from the seizure of Inchon was just 200, which was far below anyone’s expectations.

Slide 13: Hero of Inchon

Of course, just because it was a success doesn't mean it was easy. The Marines still had to storm ashore and directly into the teeth of the enemy defenders, sometimes while still climbing ladders or trying to charge up hill. There was even a typhoon at sea, which almost prevented the forces from linking up and doing the operation in the first place.

It was still hard fighting – as amphibious assaults always are. One famous picture of the battle is of 1stLt Baldomero (Bald-o-MARE-o) Lopez, who led his platoon over the seawall at Red Beach and was hit by machine gun fire in the chest and arm. He had just pulled the pin on a hand grenade to throw at the North Koreans, and once he was hit, he pulled the grenade into his chest to save his men. For this act, he was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

Slide 14: The Mud Flats at Inchon

Once the beaches were secure, the Marines were able to build up their forces to prepare to take the city. This image gives you a picture of just how bad the tidal fluctuations were and you can imagine what would have happened if the North Koreans were still able to fire on the ships when they were beached in the mud.

Slide 15: The Fight for Seoul

Once Inchon was secure, the Marines and Army still had to seize the capital of South Korea: Seoul. This was important for two reasons: First, as the capitol of South Korea, it would be a major blow to the North Koreans to lose it so soon after the initial invasion and conquest of the South. Second, Seoul is the transportation hub for the western side of the country: controlling Seoul allowed the U.S. military the ability to move freely about the country.

The fighting Seoul was brutal. It was city fighting – street to street – and it was much more heavily defended than Inchon. The Marines and Army fought for 10 days before it was secured. Tanks fired at each other in the streets; Marines and soldiers had to take the city block-by-block. The Marines used many of the same tactics they had used on Iwo Jima – grenades and flamethrowers to clear out buildings instead of caves – but unlike Iwo Jima, Seoul still had civilians in it. And yet, on 25 September – 10 days after Inchon and 3 months after the initial invasion, the U.S. declared Seoul secure and turned it back over to the South Koreans. Mopping up still continued for several more days, and on 7 October, the campaign for Seoul officially ended.

Slide 16: After Seoul

The Inchon Landing reversed the initiative. Now the US and South Korea went on the attack. By 15 October the North Koreans had been pushed back across the 38th Parallel. MacArthur and the JCS had convinced Truman that the North Korean Army had to be destroyed to prevent a renewal of aggression. Truman changed his objective from defending South Korea to unifying the peninsula under democratic, South Korean rule.

The Americans crossed into North Korea, determined to overthrow the communist regime in North Korea.

Slide 17: The Chinese Decide to Intervene

Sadly, it did not go as planned. The Chinese government had just fought its own civil war and had a new communist government in place under the fragile leadership of Mao Zedong. He had supported the North Korean government and knew that having any American forces on the peninsula would always be a threat to his Soviet-aligned regime. Having the Americans below the 38th parallel was bad enough, but at least it kept them at the narrowest point in the peninsula, which meant that if the entire Cold War went hot, he could pour in Chinese forces at the narrow bottleneck near the border between North and South Korea and block any advance into China. But now, the Americans were moving north of the 38th. If they moved all the way to the Yalu River, they would be able to cross and threaten his entire regime – a truly strategic threat. This, he could not allow. He needed a security buffer between China and the West and the weak but aggressive North Korean regime provided just that buffer. As the Americans moved further and further North, Mao decided he had to act. On 19 October 1950, the Chinese began crossing the Yalu into South Korea to oppose the coming Americans.

Slide 18: The Chinese Trap

MacArthur was overconfident and vowed that the war would be over before Christmas. He knew the Chinese were entering the war, but thought it was only a few thousand troops that China was sending as a weak signal that it opposed the invasion into North Korea. He was wrong. What he didn't know was that China had made a strategic decision to commit fully and had already sent over 300,000 troops into the North Korea.

The 1st Marine Division advanced far north into the freezing mountains that surrounded the Chosin Reservoir. They were unaware that 6 Chinese Divisions were already positioned in the hills around the reservoir all of whom had direct fields of fire onto the single road below.

Slide 19: The “Chosin Few” of the Chosin Reservoir (Korean Name “Changjin”)

We won't cover the Chosin Reservoir today – that's a lecture for another day. But let me close the lecture today with a wrap-up of what the Marines did before Chosin so you can gain an appreciation of what the 1st Marine Division went through in those first six months. Even before Chosin, they had already:

- landed at Pusan in the South in August 1950, fought through 100 degree summer heat, reversed the war's momentum, and prevented a South Korean defeat.
- They then got back on ships in September, suffered through a typhoon at sea, and did an amphibious landing at Inchon.

- They fought through Seoul and endured the brutal urban warfare necessary to liberate the capital.
- They then had their mission expanded and their deployment extended. In November they started moving North into North Korea and by Thanksgiving they were in the mountains of North Korea without any proper winter clothing or equipment.

As they marched North, the temperature dropped. By the time they got to Chosin, it was between 10 and 30 degrees below zero. In this weather, everything froze: boots, food, water, equipment, and skin. Waiting for them in the hills were 6 fresh Chinese Divisions. There was just one road in and one road out with numerous narrow passes and bombed out bridges. The Marines held the road, but the Chinese held the high ground. There was no way to continue moving North; the only option was to turn around and get out safely without being encircled and destroyed by the Chinese forces. The result:

Slide 20: The Fighting Withdrawal

How'd they do it? I think Chesty Puller put it best: "You're the 1st Marine Division, and don't you forget it. We're the greatest military outfit that ever walked on this earth. Not all the Communists in hell can stop you."

Slide 21: Guts and Determination

This ends the lecture part of this discussion. Now, we will use the rest of the time for discussion.

Slide 22: Discussion Topics

Here are a few questions to discuss.

Why did the Army think the US would never do another amphibious landing?

[Notes for the instructor: Use this question to review the information from Slide 11. Use the Omar Bradley quote. Since both the US and the USSR now had nuclear weapons, no one could figure out how to do an amphibious assault without getting hit by nukes. Since amphibious landings require ships to converge near the shore, everyone assumed that we'd never do one against the Soviets without being nuked. But no one considered that the US might do the operation against anyone other than the Soviets, and at this point, North Korea did not have nuclear weapons.]

What were some of the risks of the Inchon Landing? Why was it a risky operation?

[Notes for the instructor: Use this question to review the information on slide 10: Major tidal fluctuations; a seawall; an untrained division that couldn't even conduct rehearsals; no time to plan the operation in detail; the risks of mining the narrow channel; the need to take Radio Hill first and then wait for the tides; the risks that the North Koreans knew about the landing and had moved heavy forces into defensive positions.]

What went right in the Inchon landing? What went wrong?

[Notes for the Instructor: Possible topics for what went right includes: the effective seizure of Radio Hill, the use of ladders over the seawall; the effective coordination of close air support with ground movements. Discussions of errors could focus on the unexpected typhoon at sea, and the LSTs that fired on the American troops. You could also note that we have no idea how many civilians were killed in the ensuing battle for Seoul, but that anytime a Marine kills a civilian, it's obviously a very difficult mistake to live with.]

Why were the Marines landing at Inchon in the first place? What was the purpose?

*[Notes for the Instructor: Use this question to review the objectives of Inchon. The **tactical objective** was to secure the beach and take Inchon in order to march into Seoul. The **operational objective** was to control Seoul and the road networks that led south into the country, which the North Koreans depended on to execute their ongoing campaign in South Korea. The **strategic objective** was to liberate the capital of South Korea and to perform a "strategic envelopment": to surround all of the North Korean forces in South Korea so that they could not continue to occupy South Korea. If successful, the North Koreans would be surrounded by US/ROK forces attacking from both Pusan and Seoul, which would lead to a lasting defeat and the end of the war.*

What made the fight for Seoul so brutal? Why was it so difficult?

[Notes to the instructor: Use this question to have a discussion on the difficulties of urban combat. Those with Iraq experience can comment on the difficulties of identifying civilians, clearing houses, maneuvering in a city, dealing with rubble, using close air support around civilians, etc.]

How did the Marines find themselves surrounded at all sides at the Chosin Reservoir?

[Notes to the Instructor: Use this question to discuss the pros/cons of pressing the initiative. How much can you depend on intelligence? What do you do when the intelligence is incomplete? Who should have been watching China's intentions more closely? Who should have understood that the Chinese had a strategic reason for keeping the Western forces below the 38th Parallel?]

Slide 23:

END

Further Reading: There are a number of good books on the Inchon landing. A short summary of it may be found in:

Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The history of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: Free Press, 1990). The sections on Inchon may be found on 481-495.

Robert Debs Heinl: *Victory at High Tide: The Inchon-Seoul Campaign* (New York: JB Lippincott, 1968).

BGen Edwin Simmons (ret'd), *Over the Seawall: U.S. Marines at Inchon: Marines in the Korean War Commemorative Series* (Washington DC: USMC History Division, 2000).

Lynn Montross and Capt Nicholas A. Canzona, USMC, *The Inchon-Seoul Operation: U.S. Marine Operations in Korea, 1950-1953, vol. 2.* (Washington DC: Historical Branch G-1, HQMC, 1955).

Paul M. Edwards: *The Inchon Landing, Korea, 1950: An Annotated Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994)