

Commandership at the Chosin Reservoir: A Triumph of Optimism and Resilience

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.”¹

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,

¹ T.R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War*, (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1991), 182.

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even-keeled division commander who had been preparing his whole life for just 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?

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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."² 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 Superieure 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.

² Gail B. Shisler, *For Country and Corps*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2009), 156.

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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 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 propoganda machine that is almost equal to Stalin's."³ 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.

³ Shisler, *For Country*, 124.

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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.”⁴ 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.”⁵ 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, 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.⁶ 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

⁴ Ibid., 141.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶David Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter*, (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1991), 387.

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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.

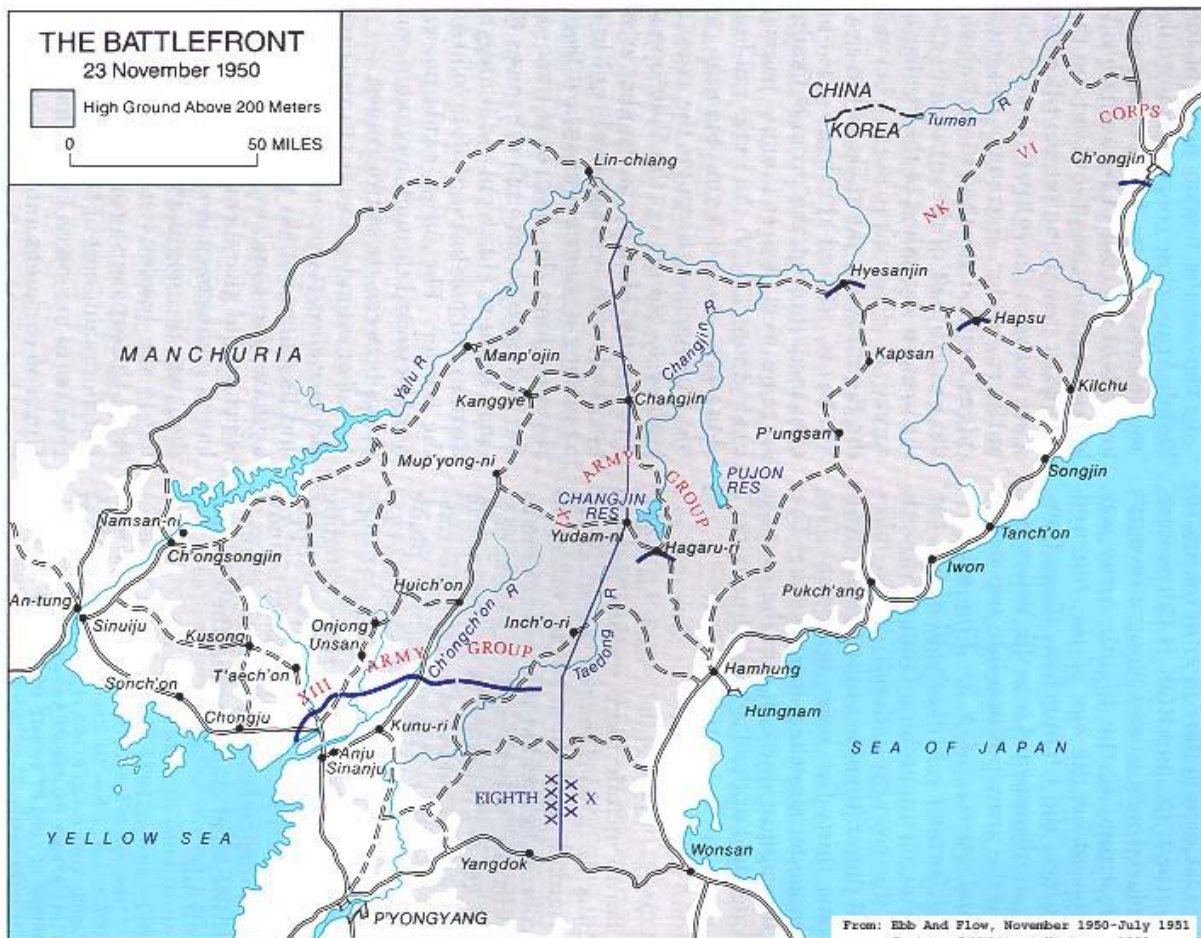
By 19 October, the 1st Marine Division’s assault ships were off the east coast of Korea while the ROK Divisions and even Bob Hope on a USO Tour had beaten them ashore at Wonsan. The 1st Marine Division’s Marines finally began coming across the beach at Wonsan on 25 October. Thus, as MacArthur pushed 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 foreign aggression and will not stand aside if the imperialists wantonly invade the territory of their neighbor.”⁷ 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.

⁷ Fehrenbach, *This Kind*, 266.

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When the fight was finally over on 4 November, the 8th Cavalry had been overrun and suffered 800 *casualties*.⁸ 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).⁹ MacArthur chose to ignore this very clear Chinese warning and, as the Chinese had temporarily disappeared, pushed his forces ever farther north.



MAP 3

⁸ Halberstam, *The Coldest*, 41.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

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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.¹⁰ 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 positions¹¹. 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 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."¹² 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

¹⁰ Shisler, *For Country*, 172

¹¹ Martin Russ, *Breakout: The Chosin Reservoir Campaign, Korea 1950*, (New York: Fromm International, 1999), 51.

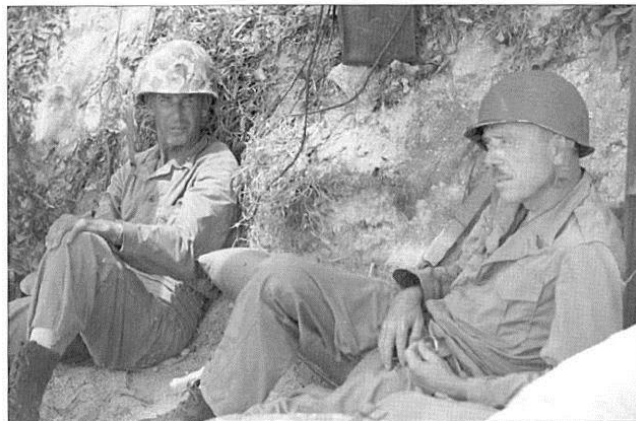
¹² Shisler, *For Country*, 180.

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assault on Pelelieu in 1944. In many ways Smith had been here before, but this time, at Chosin, it would be different.



Using a map spread out on the hood of a jeep, MajGen Edward M. Almond briefs LtGen Lemuel C. Shepherd on his arrival at Wonsan on 31 October. At the extreme left is MajGen William J. Wallace, Director of Aviation at Headquarters U. S. Marine Corps, who accompanied Shepherd. MajGen Oliver P. Smith stands behind Shepherd and Almond. MajGen Field Harris is on the extreme right.



D-day +1, Pelelieu, 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.)

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

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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 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."¹³

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."¹⁴ Finally, in an even

¹³ Ibid., 75.

¹⁴ Ibid., 76.

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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.”¹⁵

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.¹⁶ Some 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.¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸ Puller’s 1st Marines were essentially destroyed on Pelelieu, suffering 60% casualties as the regiment was relieved by an Army regiment to complete the task.¹⁹ Smith had seen how Rupertus lost touch with reality and how the command situation -- not healthy going into Pelelieu -- deteriorated steadily under the stress of combat. He would never forget.²⁰

“When in command, Oliver Smith acted on two simple principles. The first was to be prepared for the worst, the second to be optimistic when it came.”²¹ 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

¹⁵ David Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter*, (New York, NY: Hyperion, 2007), 430.

¹⁶ Shisler, *For Country*, 86.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

²¹ Robert Leckie, *The March to Glory*, (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1960), 41.

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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.

1. 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;²²
2. 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.²³
3. 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.²⁴
4. Showing a keen appreciation for the value of air power and key terrain, 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.²⁵

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, Capt William 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 been 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

²² Ibid., 176.

²³ Ibid., 182.

²⁴ Ibid., 182.

²⁵ Ibid., 184.

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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.”

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.”²⁶

²⁶ Ibid., 179.

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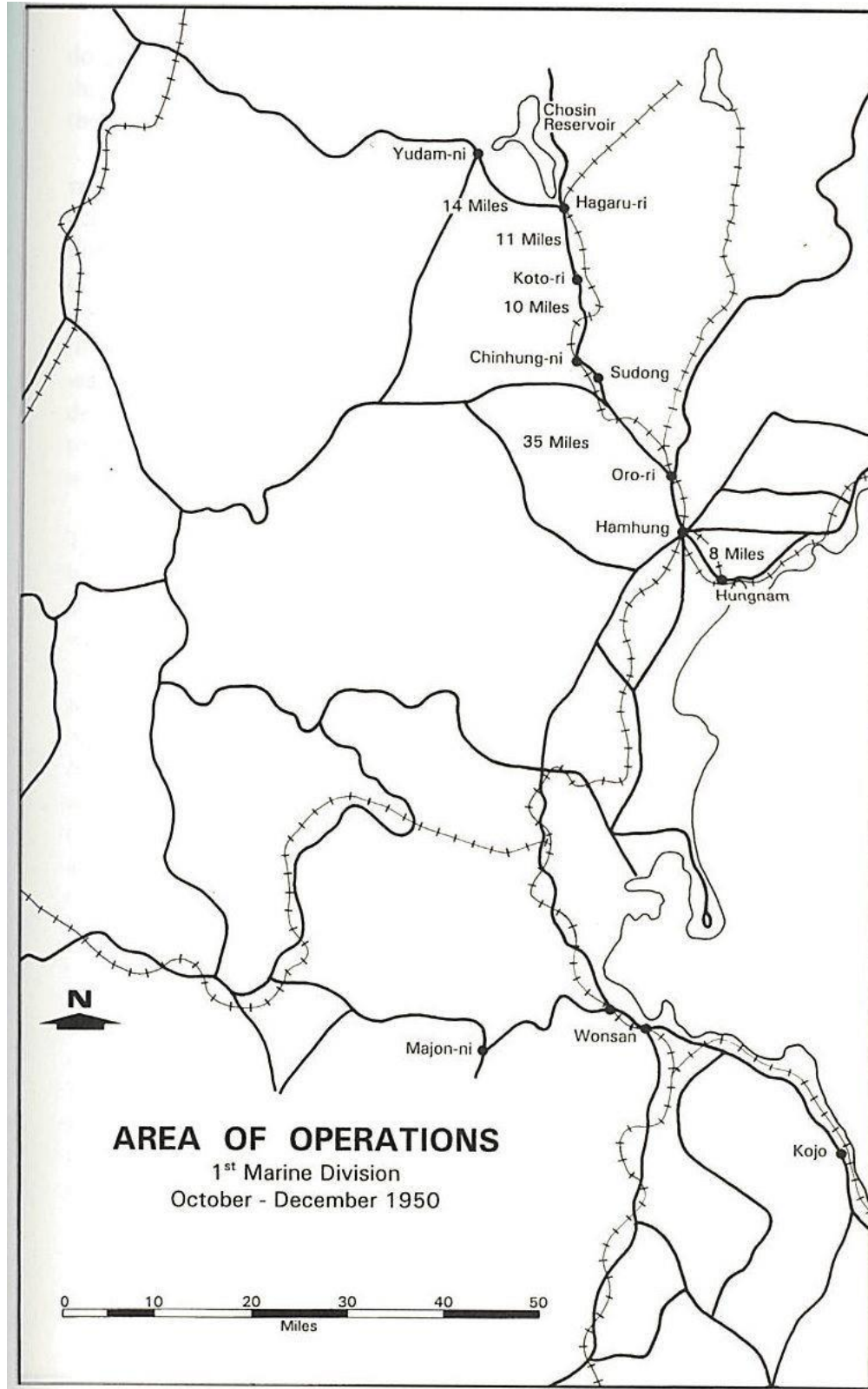


Figure 1. Map of 1st Marine Division's AO October – December 1950

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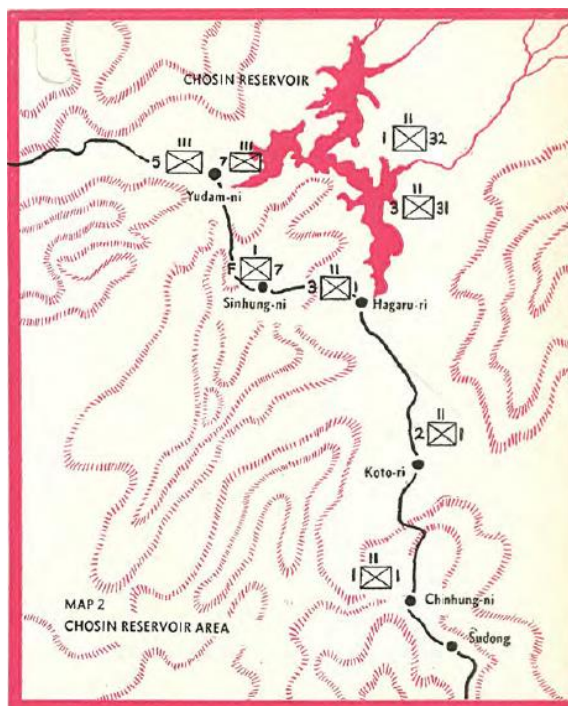
Questions For Discussion (30 min)

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?

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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.²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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, Koto-ri, and Hagaru-ri.²⁹ The 1st Marines' regimental command post (CP) was placed at Koto-ri. 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.³⁰



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

²⁷ Gail B. Shisler, *For Country and Corps*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2009), 183.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 184.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 185.

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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 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.

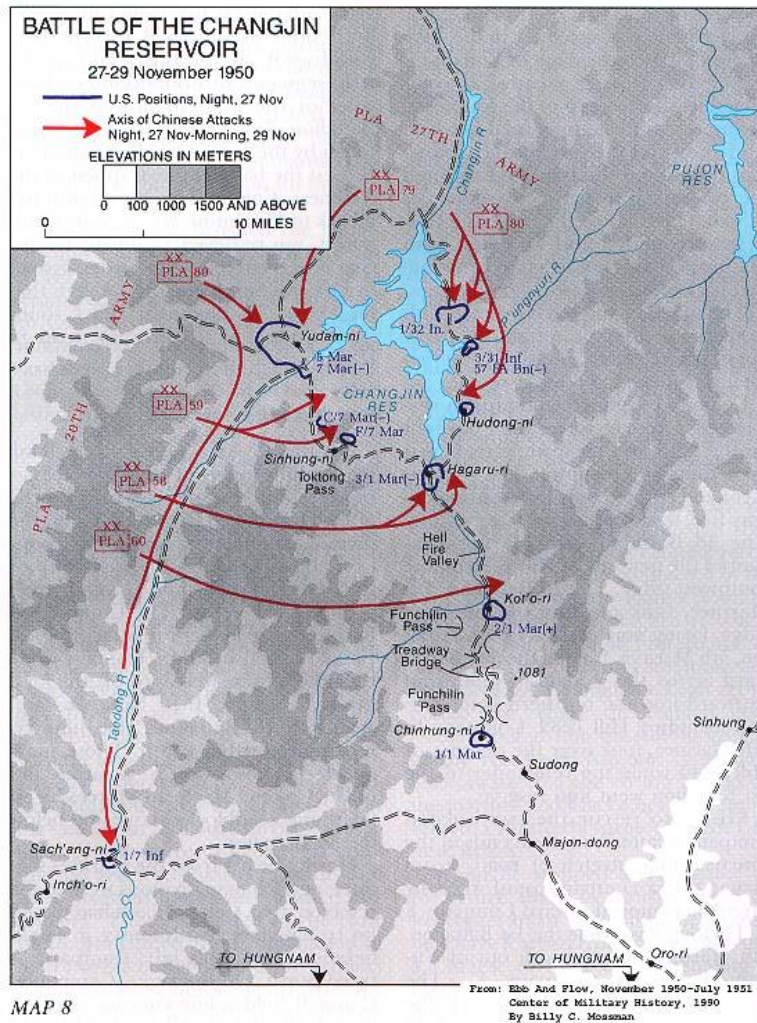
That same evening, the 5th and 7th Marines were attacked in force by massive amounts of Chinese at Yudam-ni west of the reservoir, while Task Force MacLean/Faith was attacked similarly east of the reservoir. The Chinese had dedicated a battalion to attacking and capturing the hill at Toktong Pass which 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*



LtCol Don Carlos Faith

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laundrymen stop you!"³¹ 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.³²



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

³¹ David Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter*, (New York, NY: Hyperion, 2007), 439.

³² *Ibid.*, 440.

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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 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."³³ 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."³⁴ The two Marines simply shrugged, turned and trotted back up the hill, getting back into the fight.

³³ Tom Calvin and Bob Drury, *The Last Stand of Fox Company*, (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1991), 174.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

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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 1300.³⁵ Almost immediately, a napalm drop from the MAW landed too close to the column and wounded 8-10 soldiers.³⁶ 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 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.³⁷

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."³⁸ 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:



LtCol Ray Davis

³⁵ Shisler, *For Country*, 210.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 212.

³⁸ Martin Russ, *Breakout: The Chosin Reservoir Campaign, Korea 1950*, (New York: Fromm International, 1999), 287.

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“We will hold, sir” Barber had told Litzenberg.³⁹ Davis stepped off with his “Ridgerunners” to relieve Barber’s Fox Company on the evening of 1 December.

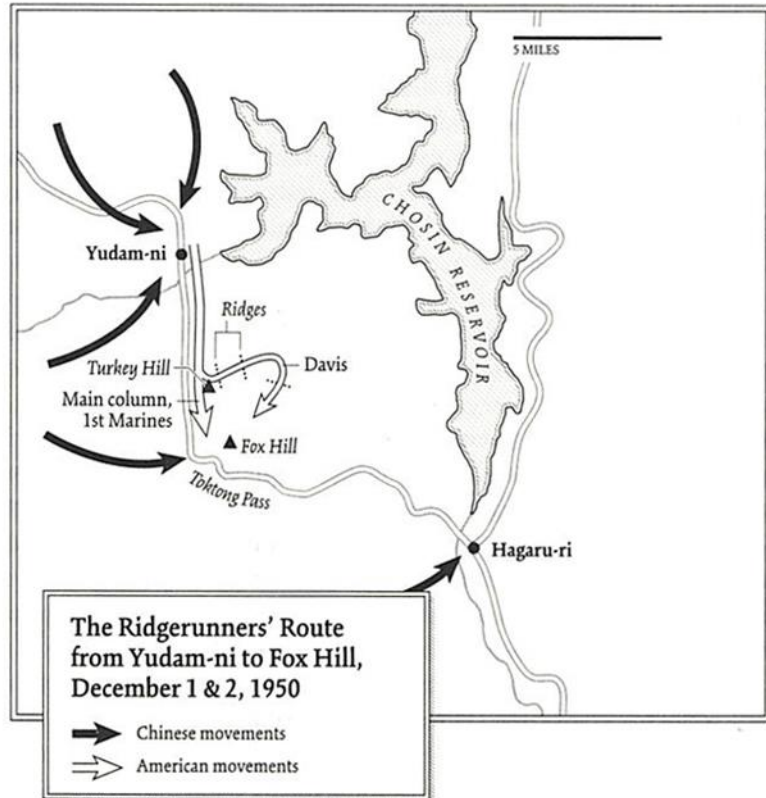


Captain Bill Barber

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 “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.”⁴⁰



³⁹ Calvin and Drury, *The Last Stand*, 189.

⁴⁰ Russ, *Breakout*, 322.

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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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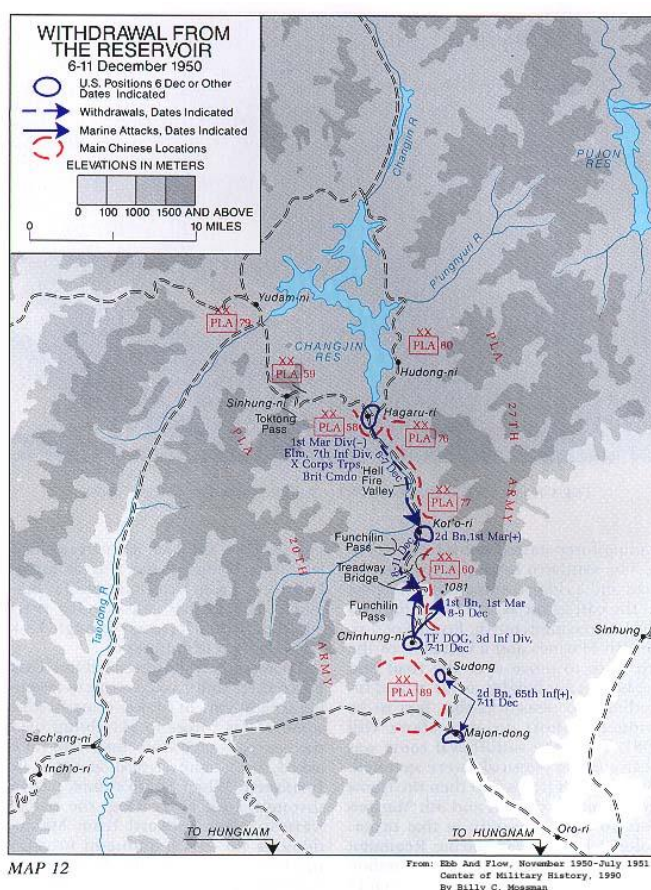
5. what factors led to the disintegration of its military structure? Compare and contrast Task Force Faith with LtCol Ray Davis' 1/7.
6. Finally, where do units like LtCol Ray Davis' 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, and Captain Bill Barber's Fox Company come from? What imbues units like these with such esprit 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?

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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.⁴¹ 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.⁴² 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.⁴³



⁴¹ Gail B. Shisler, *For Country and Corps*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2009), 216, 219.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 217.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 222.

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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.⁴⁴ 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 across the Han River. I got you an airfield and I will get you a bridge.’ I laughed and told him to go ahead.”⁴⁵



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

⁴⁴ Ibid., 223.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 224.

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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."⁴⁶ 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."⁴⁷ 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."⁴⁸ 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."⁴⁹

Final Thoughts

Although the focus of this particular case study is commandership, as exemplified by MajGen O.P. Smith, the Chosin Reservoir campaign provides opportunities to explore a myriad of topics that remain relevant to today's Marine Corps. There are numerous instances of individual bravery and courage displayed by Marines of every rank and background, from Pvt Hector Cafferata's actions to prevent Fox Hill from being overrun to Captain Edward Stamford's leadership and expertise in coordinating close air support for Task Force Faith and the Division's Motor Transport Battalion Commander (LtCol Beall) rescuing nearly 400 soldiers from TF 31 withdrawal from the eastern side Reservoir.

⁴⁶Ibid., 219-220.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 220.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ General Barrow provided this quote during a PME with the officers of the 2d Marine Division in the early 1990s.

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The success of the campaign required contributions from all elements of the MAGTF. The engineering efforts to build an airfield and repair damaged bridges, the professionalism of the medical corps in not only providing frontline care to the wounded but establishing surgical centers and casualty evacuation procedures, and contributions of both fixed and rotary wing Naval aviation. The Chosin Reservoir campaign saw a number of firsts for the Marine Corps on the social front as well. When Ensign Jesse Brown, “the first black man to win Navy’s wings of gold”,⁵⁰ was shot down and killed while providing close air support for the Marine breakout from Yudamni, a young African American sailor by the name of Frank Petersen took notice. Apprentice Seaman Second Class Frank Petersen was stationed at U.S. Naval Station Treasure Island in San Francisco training to become an electronics technician when he first learned of Ensign Brown’s death. The wide publicity that surrounded his death served as a defining moment for Petersen and provided him the motivation to strive to become a Marine fighter pilot thinking “Jesse had done it. Why not me?”⁵¹ Jesse Brown’s inspiration led to Lieutenant Petersen earning his wings, becoming the first African American Marine pilot and subsequently flying combat missions in Korea, commanding Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 314 in Vietnam, and becoming the first black Marine General Officer.



Ensign Jesse Brown aboard the USS Leyte



Lieutenant Frank Petersen

Our history remains an integral component to our heritage and the Chosin campaign provides a number of lessons to be drawn upon to continue to strengthen our leadership culture. The use of this case study and others like it can provide an effective mechanism to pass along these hard earned lessons and remain close to those that came before us.

⁵⁰ Frank E. Petersen and Joseph A. Phelps, *Into the Tiger’s Jaw: America’s First Black Marine Aviator*, (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1998), 34.

⁵¹ *Ibid* 34-35.

Commandership at the Chosin Reservoir: A Triumph of Optimism and Resilience

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?

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Annex A - 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.”⁵² 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.”⁵³ 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

⁵² Gail B. Shisler, *For Country and Corps*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2009), 134.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

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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 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."⁵⁴

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."⁵⁵

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

⁵⁴ Ibid., 156.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 167.

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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."⁵⁶

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 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."⁵⁷

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

⁵⁶ Ibid., 167-168.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 168.

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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 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?”⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Tom Calvin and Bob Drury, *The Last Stand of Fox Company*, (New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2009), 25.

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Annex B – Discussion Guide

Part A: Lead up to the Chosin Reservoir.

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?
 - *MajGen Smith faced a number of challenges in leading the Division to the Chosin Reservoir, from a refusal by HHQ to acknowledge the potential/reality of large-scale Chinese intervention and an aggressive operational plan that placed the Division at risk to a lack of support from Marine Corps leadership. In the face of these challenges, his foresight, operational experience, and conviction to do what he thought was right were critical the future preservation and success of his Marines.*
 - *As his higher commanders became increasingly detached from the realities on the ground (ominously similar to his WWII experience at Peleliu), he took deliberate measures to set the conditions for the Division to succeed and increase the resiliency of the force.*
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?
 - *Commandership is a broader view/approach to a situation while appreciating the context within which events are occurring. Commandership is the art of applying leadership within this context and creating an environment/climate/culture that sets the conditions for successful operations.*
 - *Some of the elements that contributed to MajGen Smith's commandership included foresight, operational competence/experience, relationships with higher (Almond), lateral (Harris and Joyce) and subordinate commanders, and a maneuver warfare/offensive mindset.*
3. Discuss General Smith's actions up to 15 November 1950. What has he done to prepare the emotional and physical infrastructure and resilience

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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?

- *MajGen Smith operated on 2 simple principles while in command: prepare for the worst and be optimistic when it comes. These principles manifested themselves throughout the campaign in his assessment of the operational environment and deliberate decisions to mitigate the risk to his force.*
 - *He effectively set the conditions for physical and moral success through his modeling of desired behaviors, demonstrated trust in his commanders and staff, and leveraging of Marine culture, ethos, and heritage in preparing the Division for the fight ahead.*
 - *On a more practical side, he took direct measures to enhance the resolve of the force. His focus on securing the lines of communication and ensuring the physical infrastructure was in place to ensure access to supplies and casualty evacuation provided a level of confidence in his Marines to endure the challenges ahead and added to their resiliency, both during combat operations and in their future retelling of the events.*
 - *These actions helped to build resiliency during the campaign and upon their return home (left the battlefield with dignity and protected the honor of the Marine Corps).*
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?
- *Marines expect a balance of both technical competence and moral character in their leaders. Trust is built upon this balance and any shift in the equilibrium can result in a loss of confidence or belief in their ability to accomplish the mission.*
 - *The physical and mental hardships endured by Marines during the Chosin Reservoir campaign provide a classic example of the criticality of this trust. This same level of trust and confidence did not exist within the Army units,*

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for a number of reasons, and led to instances of near total collapse (TF 31 on the eastern side of the Reservoir).

Part B: Attacks and Consolidation.

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 7 Chinese Divisions?
 - *MajGen Smith made some key decisions during the campaign that set the conditions for success. These included:*
 - *Slowed movement which preserved the opportunity to consolidate and mutually support*
 - *Secured key terrain (Hagaru-ri) and LOCs that ultimately facilitated a breakout*
 - *Built airfields which allowed resupply and more importantly the evacuation of casualties (practical and moral aspects)*
 - *Staged supplies in anticipation of a longer conflict (WWII experience of Peleliu).*
 - *These actions provided the Division a level of confidence they could not be defeated even against overwhelming odds. The issue was never in doubt in the mind of MajGen Smith and that feeling permeated throughout the Division based upon his actions.*
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?
 - *MajGen Smith’s combination of professional competence, high moral character, and vision/foresight created an environment for positive climates to develop within the Division. He undoubtedly had competent subordinate commanders but he was responsible for creating the environment to maximize their capabilities and set the conditions for their*

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- *success. He accomplished this by creating an environment of mutual trust, providing clear guidance, and demonstrating the will to persevere.*
 - *Captain Barber, and many other leaders within the Division, displayed a high level of human understanding and empathy. These qualities allowed them to relate to their Marines and provide effective leadership under extremely adverse conditions. Not only were they enduring the same hardships, but their empathy earned them the trust and respect of their subordinates that allowed them to accomplish the impossible.*
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.

- *MajGen Smith leveraged the Marine Corps’ ethos and culture to strengthen the psychological armor of the Division. Capitalizing on the shared experience from entry level training, previous combat experience, our history and traditions, and most importantly by maintaining an offensive mindset (attacking or preparing to attack), he built resolve throughout the Division. This resolve would prove critical throughout the fight at Chosin but maybe more importantly when Marines returned home. Korea was a quickly forgotten conflict that was viewed by many as a failure. Yet, the Marine Corps continues to celebrate the operational competence of the Division and the small unit/individual bravery and courage of the Marines that participated. This can be attributed directly to the commandership of MajGen Smith. His leadership provided a level of resiliency to his Marines that carried forward throughout their lives.*

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- *In contrast to MajGen Smith's commandership and foresight, Army leadership did not properly prepare their soldiers for the demands of conflict in Korea. From a lack of cold weather gear and a failure to appreciate the operational and tactical pictures to the continued belief this would be a short conflict and everyone would be home by Christmas, Army leadership did not set the conditions for success.*
 - *LTGEN Almond's character and leadership style increased the potential for his detachment and lack of clear operational vision. Careerist tendencies prevented him from acknowledging the tactical situation on the ground and accurately informing General MacArthur of the deteriorating operational picture. His ego and lack of mutual trust with his subordinates led him to discount their assessments and continue to be recklessly aggressive. The resulting overextension of the X Corps placed his units in a situation that would require the level of commandership inherent in MajGen Smith to achieve success.*
 - *The Korean Conflict caught the country by surprise and there was a general lack of preparedness across the military services. This manifested itself through the ad hoc formation of combat units in both the Army and the Marine Corps but we had a stronger and more developed culture to fall back upon. From "Every Marine a Rifleman" to "First to Fight", our ethos and heritage provided a foundation to build an effective fighting force prepared for the challenges they would face.*
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 what factors led to the disintegration of its military structure? Compare and contrast Task Force Faith with LtCol Ray Davis' 1/7.
- *TF Faith was a microcosm of the differences between the Services. Unprepared for the challenges that lay ahead, it was an ad hoc unit quickly formed from regular army units and South Korean conscripts to perform a mission that was underestimated in its complexity. Lacking the discipline, identity, and culture of the Marine Corps, when faced with extreme adversity the unit came apart. This was not a reflection of the poor leadership of any one individual but rather a non-cohesive unit lacking a strong identity or trust in one another that was ultimately given an impossible mission.*

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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?
- *In the book "Battle Ready", General Zinni describes Marine culture and ethos as follows:*
 - *Our first identity as Marines is to be a Marine. We are not primarily fighter pilots, scuba divers, tank drivers, computer operators, cooks, or whatever. The proper designation for each Marine from privates to generals is "Marine"*
 - *Every Marine has to be qualified as a rifleman. Every Marine is a fighter. We have no rear area types. All of us are warriors*
 - *We feel stronger about our traditions than any other service. We salute the past. This is not merely ritual or pageantry. It is part of the essence of the Marine Corps. One of the essential subjects every Marine has to know is his corps' history; he has to take that in and make it an essential part of himself*
 - *We carry a sense of responsibility for those who went before us, which ends up meaning a lot to Marines who are in combat. We don't want to let our predecessors down or taint our magnificent heritage*
 - *The above description is as relevant today as it was for the Marines fighting at Chosin. This culture and ethos provides the foundation for everything we do in preparation for and execution of combat operations. Through the study of the Chosin Reservoir campaign, parallels can be drawn and lessons taught to Marines about the importance of this identity and our responsibility as Marines to embrace, sustain, and improve our culture.*

Part C: Breakout.

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?
- *The Marine Corps has benefited from outstanding commandership throughout its history but it is not guaranteed for the future. We all have a responsibility to ourselves and to our Marines to continue to study and grow as leaders. Marines will only be as competent, disciplined,*

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- *professional, and of high moral character as the men and women that lead them.*
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?
 - *The Chosin Reservoir campaign provides numerous examples of Marines from all backgrounds and MOS's displaying courage and valor. Their actions were aligned with our ethos and culture and contributed to the high standards and expectations of Marines today. The individual and small unit discipline that ensured success was a result of our culture and the climate established within the Division.*
 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.
 - *MajGen Smith's principles of prepare for the worst and be optimistic when it comes can be seen throughout campaign. No matter how bad the situation appeared, Marines never lost faith that their leaders and the Marine Corps would take care of them. They trusted the Marine in the foxhole next to them, the lieutenant bleeding alongside them, the Colonel choking down the same frozen C rations, and the General that had the foresight to prepare for an impossible situation. This trust allowed them to continue to believe they were going win no matter how many Chinese battalions attacked their positions or how much the temperature dropped. They believed they were going to win, and they did.*
 4. Finally, what do you make of the fact that although several other successful American military campaigns have become synonymous with

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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?

- *The Marine identity will always be our greatest strength and can never be allowed to diminish. From our physical fitness and how we wear our uniforms to our readiness to fight tonight, warrior ethos, and trust in one another we must remain fanatical in the protection of our culture and continue to accomplish any assigned mission.*

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