
The Battle Of Chosin Reservoir: One Of The Latest Major Battles During The Korean War

Battle of Chosin Reservoir: Korean War

During “The Forgotten War”, also known as the Korean War, many battles took place across North and South Korea. The Korean War began primarily due to the North Koreans, supported by the Soviet Union and China, beginning a mass military invasion of South Korea (“The US Enters the Korean Conflict”). The People’s Republic of China became involved by supporting the North Koreans’ fight against the South and in result, further renewed President Truman’s fears of the Soviet Union and China expanding their global sphere of communism influence throughout Asia. Not too long after the start of the conflict between the North and South Koreans, the conflict quickly became international and ultimately pulled in the United States to support the South Koreans’ fight against the North Koreans. From the initial push of support from the United States, the military forces Chosin Reservoir comprised of were the 1st Marine Division, led by Major General Oliver Smith of the storied U.S. X Corps, along with elements of the 7th Infantry Division that were located near the Chosin Reservoir. The commander of the U.S. X Corps was Major General Ned Almond and fell under the overarching command of General Douglas MacArthur of the United States Army. The main force behind the United States becoming involved in the Korean War, shortly after the end of World War II, was in part to then-President Truman seizing the opportunity to defend a noncommunist government from a communist country’s invasion of troops (The US Enters the Korean Conflict). In addition, President Truman felt compelled to “not lose another country to communism and to shore up the U.S.’s anticommunist credentials” to the international eye (Millett).

One of the latest major battles that took place during the Korean War was deemed the Battle of Chosin Reservoir. The entire battle of the Chosin Reservoir took place over the time span of November 26, 1950 to December 11, 1950. This U.S. backed effort was one of the largest attempted efforts of the United States and the Republic of Korea (South Korea) to destroy remaining North Korean army units and to reunite Korea under one government. Resisting these attempts by the United States and South Korea, the Chinese and North Koreans collaborated in an attempt to drive the United States out of North Korea by violent force. Early in the Chosin Reservoir campaign, China achieved one of their early objectives of pushing the entire U.S. X Corps in retreat to South Korea but did not destroy the entire 1st Marine Division as intended. Throughout this fight with the Chinese and the North Koreans, the United States faced overwhelming odds of facing an enemy ten times their force size. The United States had a force of approximately 20,000 troops led by General Douglas MacArthur versus the approximately 200,000 troops that were primarily fighting from the Chinese front, under the command of Chinese General Shong Shi-Lun (Hickman). Ultimately, these overwhelming odds facing the United States would not deter them from fighting fiercely, maintaining their high morale despite possible looming death, and their valiant attempts to turn the tide of the war in their favor. In comparison to the current day standard and recommended U.S. military “three-to-one force ratio rule”, the United States’ combat forces during the Battle of the Chosin Reservoir were facing an overwhelming ten-to-one forces ratio. As many present day commanders and historical analysts would probably agree, this ratio was wholeheartedly not in the United States’ favor and would be a tragic decision to go through with. Even as they were easily outgunned

and outmanned, General MacArthur's troops' perseverance, grit, and willingness to fight proved to be a determining factor in creating a historic mark in the Korean War. In result of this partial victory, the fatigued and injured Chinese and North Korean troops gained a significant morale boost and were ready for another battle with the United States.

Following the landing of the U.S.'s X Corps in Incheon, South Korea on September 1950, the United Nations, under the command of President Truman and the United Nations' General Assembly, pursued the remaining forces of the communist North Korean army into North Korea. General Douglas MacArthur ordered the U.S. Army's Eighth Army to cross the tumultuously fought 38th Parallel, advance up the western side and into the North Korean capital of Pyongyang (Millett). From historical perspectives, General MacArthur's strategic rationale behind having an entire division advance deep into North Korean territory was to possess a United States' show of force, and to plan a strike against any opposition with reprieve advancing closely behind them. While the Eighth Army was being steadily deployed into Pyongyang, General MacArthur also deployed the X Corps amphibiously to the east coast of North Korea to gain a strategic edge on the North Korean and Chinese forces. As these forces were quickly gaining ground and staging a future offensive operation, the Chinese began their own preparations for a fierce war with the United States and South Koreans by sending their own supplies and troops into North Korea. In addition to deploying troops, equipment, and assets into North Korea, the Chinese began quick expansions to their already standing twenty one combat brigades to further prepare to deploy against the United States and their allies (Millett). These twenty one combat brigades remained in Manchuria, China to stand ready to fight against the United States' approaching forces at any given time. Later on October 19, 1950, Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong, with General Peng Dehuai under his command, ordered his Chinese forces to move against the advancing Eighth Army, whose lead elements had quickly advanced beyond Pyongyang and created fear among the Chinese opposition. Shortly after both sides' mobilization into North Korea, Chinese and United States forces met in the battle of Onjong-Unsan from October 25th to November 6th, 1950, which was later deemed the Chinese First Offensive (Millett). On October 25, 1950 with General Douglas MacArthur at the helm of the United States' forces, strong Chinese opposition met him from across the North-South Korean border (Hickman). Resulting from this strong Chinese border push, Major General Almond's units were overwhelmed with force, retreated across the reservoir, and were deserted from each other's support. Due to the unexpected offensive charge and the inability to provide firepower support, Major General Almond requested Major General Smith to have his 1st Marine Division begin their hasty retreat south to the coast line of North Korea. In the course of this retreat, Major General Smith's forces faced brutal winter conditions, and suffered heavy casualties along the way (Seelinger). One of the major units involved in the battle of Onjong-Unsan was the U.S. Army's 31st Regimental Combat Team, also known as Task Force Maclean, and also comprised of elements of the 7th Infantry Division that unfortunately suffered heavy losses due to the severe winter weather. In retrospect, the relatively hasty Chinese military mobilization, troop build-up, and eventual mass deployment of troops in response to the United States' advance could be seen as a reactionary and ill-fated strategic move due in part of fear by Chinese Communist leader, Mao Zedong. In contrast to the United States' calculated and strategic advance into North Korea, Mao Zedong's troop mobilization could be seen as a risky strategic maneuver that proved to be wildly successful by chance.

As the battle of Onjong-Unsan came to an end, two American divisions of the X Corps landed in North Korea, along with a supporting South Korean Corps, to head up north along the North Korean coast to prepare for another engagement against the Chinese-North Korean forces. To

Mao Zedong and General Dehuai's eyes, the wide-standing distance between the two newly arrived X Corps' divisions and the badly damaged Eighth Army division was seen as an exploitable weak spot in the United States' warfighting capabilities. Later on November 2nd to 4th, 1950, a South Korean Corps along with a U.S. Marines regiment, fought their first engagement against the Chinese at the city of Sudong, North Korea. Throughout this hard fought battle at Sudong, troops from opposing sides fought valiantly in attempts to gain further land advances, destroy the enemy, and regain any lost traction from prior battles. As a result, the U.S. Marines and South Koreans after two arduous days, ultimately defeated an attacking Chinese division and killed at least 662 Chinese soldiers and wounding hundreds more (The Chinese Failure at Chosin). This small victory for the United States gave them a rekindled sense of hope, a morale boost for the remainder of the war, and a further advance for the United States.

A short time later after the United States' minor victory at Sudong, General Douglas MacArthur began his advance to the Chosin Reservoir with General Almond commanding the 1st Marine Division and 7th Infantry Division. As General MacArthur began his trek towards the Chosin Reservoir, it was noted that he severely underestimated the fighting ability and strength of the Chinese opposition waiting for his arrival. While the movement of the 1st Marine Division and 7th Infantry Division began, General MacArthur hatched a controversial plan to have General Almond lead the two divisions by foot over a 55 mile unpaved mountain road of the Taebaek Mountain in severe winter weather. With this rumor circulating among the troops, General Smith convened with General Almond to have him possibly reconsider his rash decision but ultimately, General Almond ordered his troops forward due to the pressures of directly being under the command of General MacArthur. Throughout their long foot-march towards the Chosin Reservoir, the X Corps seized two significant areas of land and established battalion sized bases at Chinghung-Ni and Koto-ri villages among a vital supply route to aid their large future operation. On November 13, 1950 the final leg of the march began to the Chosin Reservoir with the 5th and 7th Marine regiments deemed as the main advance element. Two days later, the 5th Marine regiment made their arrival to the Chosin Reservoir while the 7th Marine Regiment opted for a detour to Hagaru-ri for a quick reprieve before they began another treacherous march 14 miles away to the city of Yudam-ni, North Korea. While these two regiments were simultaneously approaching their strategic positions, the 1st Marine Division's troops were quickly gaining ground for a Chosin Reservoir arrival and causing another wave of fear to reciprocate through the Chinese army's ranks. Chinese General Song Shilun, under the command of General Peng, hastily ordered the Chinese Ninth Army Group to abandon Manchuria and destroy it during their abandonment. General Shilun's rationale in having his troops abandon a strategic location was mainly due to his troops being ill-equipped to fight the United States along with being momentarily unprepared for the harsh winter weather that laid ahead. Even as the common knowledge of knowing their troops were unable to effectively fight, the Chinese Generals believed they could exploit the United States' weaknesses through ambushes, night-time raids, and number superiority. During the last week of November 1950 and fighting morale at an all-time high despite extreme physical discomforts, the Chinese Ninth Army Group launched simultaneous night-time division level ambushes on the 1st Marine Division and Task Force MacLean at the North Korean cities of Yudam-ni, Hugaru-ri, and Koto-ri (Millett). Despite being surrounded at all sides and facing overwhelming odds, the 5th and 7th Marine Regiments of the 1st Marine Division were prepared to face the Chinese opposition by setting up a strong perimeter defense and staged troops along the surrounding terrain to use to their advantage. Soon after on the night of November 27, 1950, approximately three bloody days and nights of intense fighting began between the United States and the Chinese front, In

the aftermath of the hard fought battle, all of the major Marine-held positions still stood strong but unfortunately the United States' suffered heavy casualties with Task Force MacLean's ranks ending up decimated. As the surviving soldiers struggled via foot march across the frozen reservoir in small disorganized groups, only half of the 670 arriving U.S. troops were mission capable for the next advance. On the other hand, even though up to half of their ranks were destroyed, the two Marine regiments managed to continue their position defense against the persistent Chinese onslaughts who were determined to overrun the strategically held positions of airfields, artillery positions and command posts.

On November 29, 1950, General Almond re-convened with General MacArthur in Tokyo, Japan to begin a mutually-agreed evacuation plan of the X Corps to the nearest port to sustain their surviving troops for a planned retreat. In a decision that further amplified the Eighth Army's defeat in the western part of North Korea, a majority of Eighth Army's troops were consolidated in the city of Hungnam and had to be eventually evacuated to Wonsan. Due to this retreat, the Truman administration abandoned their policy of attempting to unify Korea by military force but simultaneously maintained their unwavering stance on undertaking the task of saving the Republic of Korea. In a valiant effort to achieve President Truman's initiative, General Almond resorted to his "last ditch effort" plan of ultimately having the standing U.S. troops at Yudam-ni and Hagaru-ri consolidate and air evacuate out of Korea altogether. Unfortunately, this plan involved the United States abandoning all of their heavy weapons, vehicles, and supplies due to their lack of available support to re-deploy them back to the United States. While the troops at Yudam-ni and Hagaru-ri were conducting their withdrawal, the remaining troops of the 1st Marine Division were to march back down their designated route to the city of Hungnam for evacuation. As this plan seemed feasible to General Almond, General Smith disagreed on abandoning his mission essential equipment in North Korea. General Smith alternatively offered another plan, due to the fear of attracting unwanted attention from the Chinese, of reuniting troops at Hagaru-ri to advance back to the coastal plain and coordinate another attack in a different direction with a resupply awaiting their arrival. On December 1, 1950 the 1st Marine Division began their movement inside the created established perimeter by the 3rd Infantry Division near the city of Hungnam. During this planned escape, the 1st Marine Division was able to destroy three more Chinese divisions that were in their retreat path and further decimated their ranks. While the 1st Marine Division conducted their retreat, the 5th and 7th Marine regiments defended their airfield which was used as a vital re-supply point and ensured it was not re-captured by the incoming Chinese opposition. At Hungnam, the 1st Marine Division prepared to fight their way back to the coast and began the 11 mile march back to the city of Koto-ri. Throughout their arduous march back, the 1st Marine Division fought their way through intricate Chinese ambushes and once again, further obliterate the fatigued and cold-ridden Chinese opposition. Later, on December 15th, the entire 1st Marine Division reached Hungnam city and began their re-deployment back to South Korea via troop transport ships. After the United States' retreat, the Chinese opposition deemed the Chosin Reservoir battle a geographic victory in terms of successfully forcing the United States out of North Korea. On the other hand, the United States deemed Chosin Reservoir a significant loss in the Korean War due to their forced return to South Korea. The Chosin Reservoir battle with the United States, nonetheless, severely destroyed the Chinese with estimated casualties in the range of 40,000 to 80,000 soldiers in comparison to the 1st Marine Division and X Corps' losses of 11,723 soldiers and 6,000 soldiers each, respectively. In this respect, the United States was able to claim a small and closely held victory with the knowledge the enemy sustained far more damage and was less mission capable for future operations.

Many military lessons can be taken away from the battles preceding the Chosin Reservoir and ultimately the battle at Chosin Reservoir. One of the many lessons learned is the ability to effectively use surrounding terrain to overwhelm the enemy. Using the terrain to a force's advantage simply gives them the element of surprise against an enemy during a conflict. In addition to that natural edge, the ability to use the natural climate to one's advantage was a hard lesson learned for the United States. The harsh winter weather that engulfed the United States' troops gave an upper hand to the Chinese and North Koreans due to their extensive weather acclimation and knowledge compared to the United States'. Moreover, the variety of decisions that were made by the top echelons from both forces had a relative extreme cause and effect order during the Chosin Reservoir battle. These cause and effects had an effect on the tide of the war shifting favorably after monumental gains were made as well as significant morale boosts to the battling troops to continue the seemingly endless fight. One of the most notable cause and effects was the decision to have a division march 55 miles across an unforgiving mountain in winter conditions to gain a strategic edge on the Chinese. This decision, contested among troops due to the likely potential of succumbing to injuries and fatigue, was seen as a vital step in attempting to defeat the Chinese further in the Korean War. While these risks were heavily considered, the payoff for conducting a heavily taxing maneuver paid large dividends in the U.S.'s favor in successfully fighting against the Chinese offensive. Generally speaking, it can be concluded that with most strategic military decisions comes alarming and malignant risks that stand out as the overarching highlight of a well-designed plan. This particularly difficult decision lies within a military commander's hands to go against natural intuition and may in fact be the winning factor in a military conflict. Nonetheless, it can be said that only few military masterminds akin to General MacArthur have mastered the ability to decipher the grand payoff in a high-stakes situation despite any attached negative connotations.æ