

F-4 Corsair landing
on *USS Sicily*,
October 1950.



The Marine Air-Ground Team at the Chosin Reservoir

National Archives

By JOHN P. CONDON

The Marine air-ground team proved its metal in set piece battles during the Korean conflict, including both the defense of the Pusan Perimeter and support of amphibious operations at Inchon. But the maneuver phase of the war presented a new set of challenges. At the time of the Wonsan landing, the Marine Corps learned that it would take part in the dash north to the Yalu River under X Corps, led by Lieutenant General Edward Almond, USA. Eighth Army, commanded by Lieutenant General Walton Walker, would do the same in the western portion of the peninsula.

The jump-off dates were set for late November. What followed was a severe test for the ability of the Marines to integrate land and air operations in an austere theater, under rapidly changing tactical conditions. The offensive and a counterattack by regular Chinese forces stressed logistics, organizations, and tactics to the breaking point.

Into the Maelstrom

With the concentration of 1st Marine Division north of Hungnam preparing to march to the Yalu River, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, under Major General Field Harris, made plans to consolidate operations at the Yonpo airfield in the Hungnam-Hamhung area. The move was highly anticipated because it would considerably reduce

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Preparing to withdraw.

U.S. Marine Corps (Frank C. Kerr)

the response time for close air support. On November 6, Marine Aircraft Group-33 (MAG-33) was ordered to Yonpo from Japan. It became operational in time to receive Marine Fighter Squadron-212 (VMF-212) from Wonsan. On November 15, VMF-214 was ordered ashore from *USS Sicily* and set up at Wonsan with MAG-12.

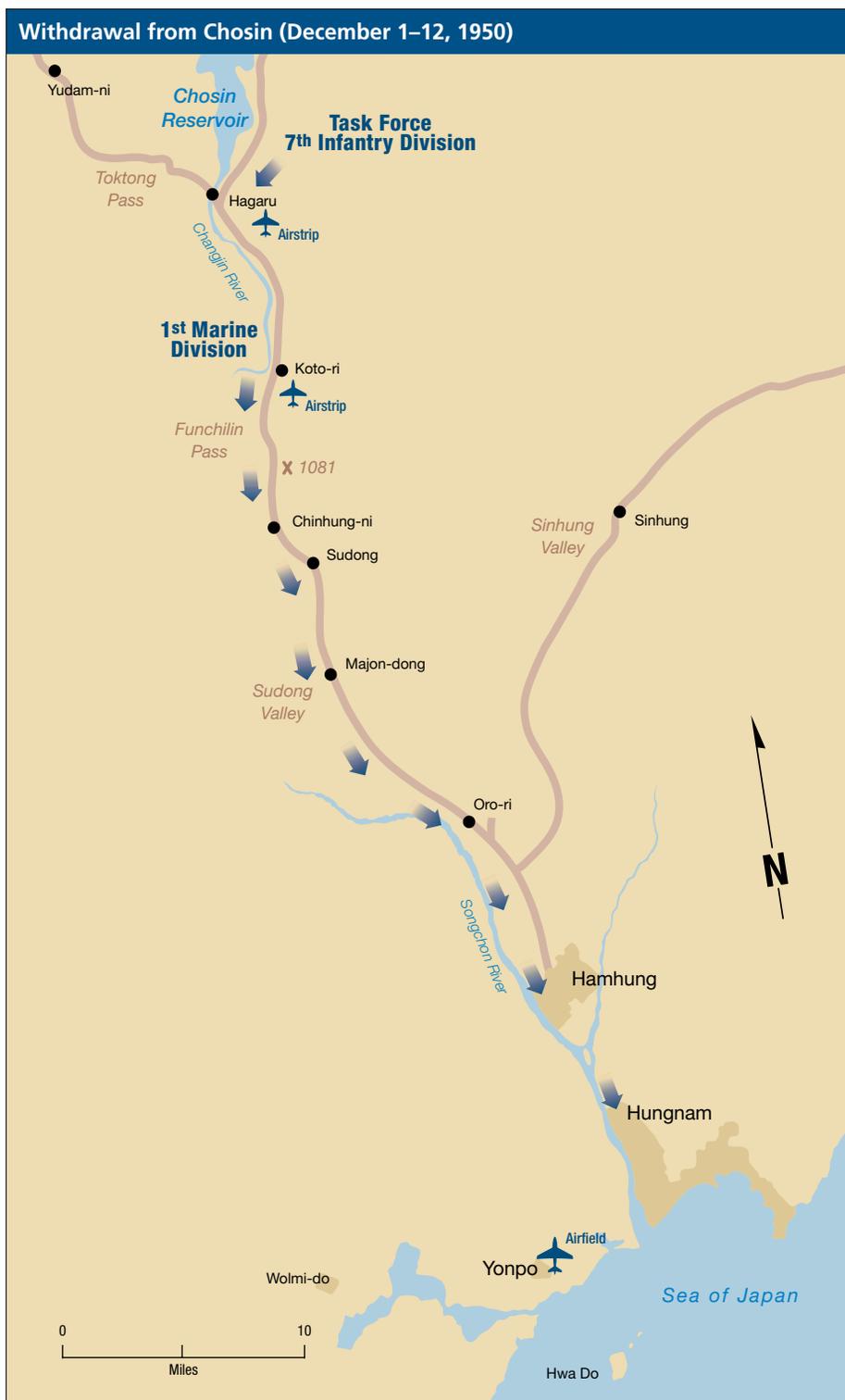
Because of shortages in shipping, it took a long time to move essential shore-based equipment from storage in Japan. Without this heavy support equipment, many operational and maintenance activities required the Marines to adopt the same improvised methods they used in island hopping campaigns during World War II. That meant that for a considerable period bombs were loaded by muscle power and aircraft were refueled by 440-pound hand pumps from 55-gallon drums. In addition to manhandling fuel, ordnance, and spare parts, maintenance activities were done without

benefit of heated workspace as the temperature fell and weather conditions worsened each day. Operating on a small, primitive airfield packed with planes and ringed with frozen mud, Marine ground crews readied sortie after sortie for combat operations.

While Harris organized Marine air support, ground troops prepared to renew the offensive. There had been repeated sightings of Chinese troops well below the Yalu River in late October and early November. Press releases issued by Far East Command, however, claimed that these forces were only volunteers. They usually were observed in small groups in remote areas, but in some instances there were thousands of footprints in the snow. Moreover, in a significant five-day battle November 4-9, 7th Marine Regiment took 62 Chinese prisoners at Chinhung-ni.

The commander of 1st Marine Division, Major General Oliver Smith, conferred with General Almond on November 25. The news from the Eighth Army sector was troubling. The South Korean corps on the Eighth Army right had been overrun. In fact, Walker's whole front was falling back. At the time, intelligence identified five divisions from interrogations of prisoners, and line-crossing agents gave firm indications of even more Chinese immediately to the north. In spite of these signs, Almond ordered Smith to attack on November 27 as planned.

By the time the division offensive was prepared, Marine air support had been put in place. Though a sixth squadron, VMF-323, was still flying off *USS Badoeng Strait*, the rest of the wing, with five squadrons, was operating from Yonpo, all in close striking distance of potential targets. In addition to fighters, the wing included VMO-6 with both OYs and HO-3S helicopters.



the same time, a division-sized assault was launched against a three battalion task force of 7th Infantry Division east of the reservoir. Intelligence reports suggested the Chinese force was massive—comprised of 9th Army Group, 3^d Field Army with four corps-sized units, and the five divisions previously identified. The communists totaled over 100,000 seasoned Chinese infantry troops. With the Marine divisional units north of Hungnam and Hamhung, plus attached units of the Army and Royal Marines with 20,500 in all, the balance favored the Chinese by better than 5 to 1.

The situation had changed so radically that on November 28, General Douglas MacArthur, Commander in Chief, Far East, brought Walker and Almond to Tokyo for a conference that led to a new strategy. U.N. forces would pull back to a more defensible line to the south. Smith began redeploying and ordered 5th and 7th Marine Regiments from Yudam-ni to Hagaru, the first leg of what would be a long fight to the sea.

The Air Situation

From the time of the decision to fight south, Fifth Air Force gave 1st Marine Aircraft Wing the sole mission of supporting 1st Marine Division and the rest of X Corps. Backup for additional close support was provided by Combined Task Force 77. Meanwhile, both the Navy and Fifth Air Force tactical squadrons attacked troop concentrations and interdicted approach routes all along the withdrawal fronts of Eighth Army and X Corps. Far East Air Forces coordinated constant requests for air drops of food and ammo, directed aerial resupply of all types from basic supplies to bridge sections, and coordinated casualty evacuation from improvised landing strips at both Hagaru and Koto-ri.

During this phase of the campaign and indeed throughout the entire war, Marine air-ground operations differed significantly from those conducted by other forces. For conventional close air support, the Air Force centralized control of fighter aircraft, then doled out sorties on the basis of replanned or immediate requests as needed. This method of operation was

On November 27, the division converged around the Chosin Reservoir, with its command post at Hagaru. Smith attacked on schedule but the lead regiment advanced a mere 2,000

yards when it was stopped by stiff resistance. That night the Chinese attacked the Marine positions in strength from Yudam-ni to Koto-ri. At



F-4 Corsair aboard
USS Badoeng Strait,
December 1950.

National Archives

based on lessons from the campaign in North Africa during World War II, where each ground command was allocated its own air support. As a result, some units in heavy contact lacked adequate support, while aircraft supporting commands not involved in the battle could find no targets.

Air support was coordinated on a centralized basis and apportioned mission-by-mission for most of the European campaign. The Marine system

the Marine Corps found that decentralized control and dedicated fighter support were essential

also stemmed from World War II, although with different results. During combat on Guadalcanal and in subsequent action, the Marine Corps found that decentralized control and dedicated fighter support were essential for responsiveness and close coordination. Thus its air arm was considered an integral and inseparable part of the force.

The Marines brought this approach to air-ground operations in Korea. Their organization would prove ideal for supporting a fighting withdrawal and covering long columns on the ground which were confined to the winding mountain roads.

From the beginning of the battle to the sea on December 1 to its completion at Hungnam on December 12, air-ground coordination was continuous and effective. During the withdrawal from the Chosin Reservoir, the most critical asset

may have been the tactical air control party (TACP) of the Marine air control system. Strikes against enemy positions along the route, whenever a column was held up, were under the control of experienced Marine pilots on the ground, known to the flyers in the air delivering the attacks. Other methods were tried repeatedly, but as one veteran put it, "there ain't no substitute for the TACP."

Underlying the air support plan for the operation was the commitment to have a sortie over the key movement at first light. This flight would be assigned to the forward air controller (FAC) of the unit most likely to require immediate close air support. In turn, as soon as that flight was called to a target by TACP, another sortie would be assigned to relieve it on station. That meant that the response time from request to delivery on target could be reduced. The weather had to cooperate, but if minimum visibility and ceiling made the positive delivery of weapons possible, planes were invariably in place and targets were hit in minimum time. When aircraft on station could not eliminate the targets, additional sorties were called from Yonpo, the carrier task force, or suitable aircraft in the area for a diversion from assigned missions. The last option was usually handled by the tactical air direction center (TADC) or tactical air coordinators airborne on the scene.

The Chinese troops could not mass in daylight because they were subject at once to devastating strikes of napalm, bombs, rockets, and 20mm guns. Not one successful enemy mass attack was delivered against the column during the daytime.

After nightfall the column would be defended by units at key positions along the perimeter. That was when Marine units were most vulnerable to the massive and fanatical attacks of superior numbers. Heckler missions conducted at night over the defensive perimeter reduced enemy fire from artillery tubes, mortars, and heavy machine guns, but fighters could not provide controlled close air support as they did during daylight. The troops on the ground were invariably relieved when dawn arrived and circling fighters appeared overhead.

The Long War Back

The first leg of the fight south followed a line from Yudam-ni to Hagaru, a movement that would reunite 5th and 7th Marine Regiments with elements of 1st Marine Regiment and the

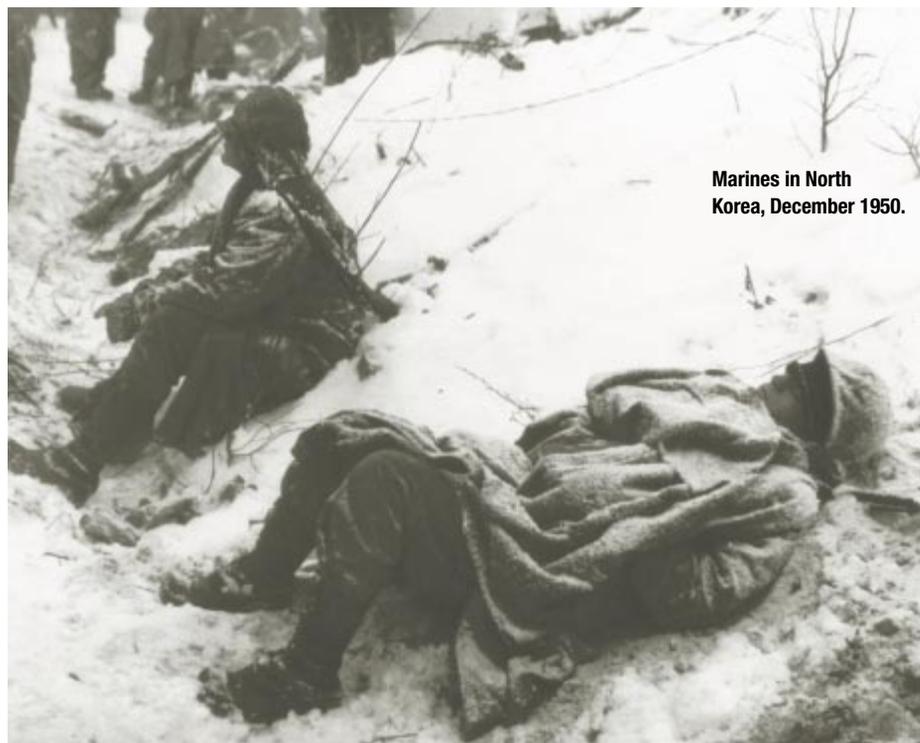
division headquarters. During this period, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing flew more than a hundred close support sorties daily, most in the service of the division. At the same time, the wing flew in support of three battalions of 7th Infantry Division east of the Chosin Reservoir, which was also trying to withdraw to Hagaru. Aided by a Marine TACP, soldiers could also call in close air support, enabling them to break contact with the enemy, at least in daylight. The detachment FAC directed critical strikes for the Army on December 1. Meanwhile, of three Army battalions, only a few hundred scattered soldiers reached Hagaru, where they joined the assembling Marine ground forces.

Holding Hagaru was essential because it gave the division an opportunity to evacuate the seriously wounded. Until a makeshift airstrip became operational on December 1, evacuation was limited. The only aircraft that could land at Yudam-ni, Hagaru, and Koto-ri were helicopters from VMO-6. For example, between November 27 and December 1, VMO-6 lifted 109 casualties from Yudam-ni, 36 from Hagaru, and 7 from Koto-ri. In the extreme cold and at the altitudes of the operation, these light aircraft had much less power and considerably reduced lift, making each flight a real

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test for pilots and their machines. The evacuations were eventually shifted to a slightly less hazardous but serviceable airstrip at Hagaru, which had been hacked out of the frozen ground. It was a feat of improvisation by Company D, 1st Engineer Battalion, working around the clock and under fire most of the time, using flood lights at night and fighter cover when possible. From December 1 to 6, C-47s evacuated 4,287 men, augmented by every Marine R4D in the area.

As the casualties left, more and more troops poured into Hagaru. The Yudam-ni to Hagaru leg was completed by the afternoon of December 4, with



Marines in North Korea, December 1950.

AP/Wide World Photos (Frank Kerr)

the first unit arriving in early evening on December 3. On December 4 and 5, the wing provided uninterrupted support, generating almost 300 combat sorties against the enemy throughout the Reservoir area. On December 6, it switched the focus of air operations to covering the second leg of the withdrawal to Koto-ri.

The air planning for the second leg drew heavily on the experience gained during the move from Yudam-ni.

FACs were again positioned along the column and with each flanking battalion, augmented with two airborne observers who flew ahead and to each side of the advancing column. The addition of a R5D transport configured to carry a complete TADC controlled support aircraft as they reported on station and assigned them to the ground or airborne observers from TACPs, who directed attacks against ground targets. The system worked smoothly and made it possible for the column to keep moving on the road most of the time. By the evening of December 7, the division rear guard

was inside the perimeter of 2^d Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment at Koto-ri. During those two days, the wing flew 240 sorties in support of the X Corps withdrawal, with almost 60 percent conducted in support of the division and most of the balance backing other units in the column. In addition, X Corps received 245 sorties from Combined Task Force 77 and 83 sorties from Fifth Air Force. Navy sorties were almost entirely close support missions and Air Force flights were mostly supply drops. Over 500 additional wounded were also flown out of the Koto-ri strip, although the airfield was even more treacherous than the makeshift strip at Hagaru.

The third leg of the withdrawal, from Koto-ri to Chinhung-ni, included a perilous passage through the precipitous Funchilin Pass, plus a blown bridge three miles from Koto-ri that had to be made passable. This situation led to engineering conferences from Tokyo to Koto-ri. A test drop of a bridge section was conducted at Yonpo. A hasty improvisation of parachutes and rigging proved successful and subsequent drops at Koto-ri provided materials to rebuild the span.



Marines at airstrip near Chosin Reservoir.

The ground and air plans for the descent to Chinhung-ni amounted to essentially using the same cover and column movement coordination as were employed successfully on the first two legs, with the addition of a spoiling attack. 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, from a position in Chinhung-ni, would attack up the gorge and, backed by air support, take the dominating terrain on Hill 1081, which overlooked a major portion of the main route. The attack was set for dawn on December 8, simultaneous with the start of the withdrawal south from Koto-ri by the main body.

A blizzard on the evening of December 7 reduced visibility almost to zero and ruled out air operations the next day. As a result, although movement began on schedule, little progress was made from Koto-ri. The installation of the bridge sections was also delayed. The one bright spot in the day was the complete surprise 1st Battalion achieved on Hill 1081. Using the blizzard as cover, A Company sent two platoons on a double envelopment maneuver, while a third launched a frontal assault to fix the enemy attention. The company seized the strong point on the crest of the hill, wiping out the enemy garrison.

December 9 brought clear skies and good visibility. Starting at daybreak under direction of the airborne

TADC, fighters from the wing maintained complete air coverage over the route. The installation of the bridge was also guarded by an air cap. With the completion of the bridge site, the column began its move down to Chinhung-ni on the plain below. Good weather continued the next day and the passage over the tortuous line of march was completed by nightfall. Truck movement from Chinhung-ni to Hungnam began early on December 11. The last unit cleared the town by afternoon. During this period, one milestone for Marine aviation was its first jet squadron to see combat when VMF-311 operated at Yonpo for the last few days of the breakout.

With the departure of the division from Hungnam, the three remaining shore-based fighter squadrons moved to Japan on December 14. Four days later, the last of the equipment belonging to 1st Marine Aircraft Wing was flown out of Yonpo. Air coverage of the evacuation of Hungnam became the responsibility of the light carriers.

Between October 26 and December 11, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing flew 3,703 sorties for a total of 1,053 missions controlled by TACPs assigned to Marine, Army, and Korean units. Close air support accounted for 599 missions, with 468 allocated to 1st Marine

Division, 67 to Korean units, 56 to 7th Infantry Division, and 8 to 3^d Infantry Division. The balance of the missions were search and attack. Logistically, VMR-152, the wing transport squadron, averaged a commitment of five R5Ds a day, serving all units across the U.N. front.

The continuous support provided by the wing came at a cost. 1st Marine Aircraft Wing had eight pilots killed, three wounded, and four missing. The division suffered 718 killed, 3,485 wounded, and 192 missing as well as 7,338 non-battle casualties, mostly from frostbite. A third of the non-battle casualties returned without being evacuated or requiring additional hospitalization. Against these figures stands an estimate of enemy losses at 37,500, with 15,000 killed and 7,500 wounded by the division, plus 10,000 killed and 5,000 wounded by the wing.

In a letter to General Harris dated December 20, General Smith wrote:

Without your support our task would have been infinitely more difficult and more costly. During the long reaches of the night and in the snow storms many a marine prayed for the coming of day or clearing weather when he knew he would again hear the welcome roar of your planes as they dealt out destruction to the enemy. Even the presence of a night heckler was reassuring. Never in its history has Marine aviation given more convincing proof of its indispensable value to the ground Marines. A bond of understanding has been established that will never be broken.

The Marines departed from Hungnam believing there was little room for compromise in the structure of the air-ground team. **JFQ**

This article is adapted from an unpublished monograph, "The Korean War, 1950-1953," held in the archives of the History and Museums Division at the Marine Corps Historical Center, which kindly granted permission for its publication.

Disaster at Inchon

In response to the communist invasion of South Korea in June 1950, the U.N. Security Council (with the Soviet representative absent from the chamber in protest) approved Resolution 84, which made the United States executive agent for military operations. Thus General Douglas MacArthur commanded both the U.S. troops in the theater under Far East Command and all allied contingents. At the request of President Syngman Rhee, American forces also assumed control of the ROK army. Meanwhile,



Seoul, September 1950.

North Korean commanders relied on Soviet advisers and matériel. After the counterattack at Inchon, street-to-street fighting raged to liberate Seoul as Stalin fired a stream of directives from the Kremlin.

The following message was sent by Stalin to the deputy chief of general staff of the Soviet army and the ambassador of the Soviet Union in Pyongyang on September 27, 1950:

The serious predicament in the area of Seoul and in the southeast in which the Korean People's Army has found itself lately has to a great extent been caused by a series of grave mistakes made by the Frontline Command, the commands of the army groups, and army groupings in matters related to command and control over troops, as well as to

the tactics of their combat use in particular. It is our military advisers who are even more to blame for these mistakes. Our military advisers failed to implement scrupulously and in a timely fashion the order of the Supreme Commander in Chief [Stalin] for the withdrawal of four divisions from the central front to the area of Seoul despite the fact that at the moment of adopting this decision such a possibility existed. . . .

One cannot help taking serious note of erroneous and absolutely inadmissible tactics for tank use in combat.

Lately you have used tanks in combat without preliminary artillery strikes aimed at clearing the field for tank maneuvers. As a consequence, the enemy easily destroys your tanks. Our military advisers who have personal experience from the Great Patriotic War must be aware that such ignorant use of tanks leads to their loss.

One cannot help noticing the strategic illiteracy of our advisers and their incompetence in intelligence matters. They failed to grasp the strategic importance of the enemy's assault landing in Inchon, denied the gravity of its implications. . . .

The assistance provided by our military advisers to the Korean Command in such paramount matters as communications, command, and control over troops, organization of intelligence, and combat is exceptionally weak. As a result of this, the [North Korean] troops, in essence, are beyond control: they are engaged in combat blindly and cannot arrange the coordination between the various armed services in battle. . . .

Stalin hoped that supporting North Korea would demonstrate solidarity with the world communist movement while humiliating the United States. Instead he faced the prospects of a crushing defeat in Asia as well as escalating confrontation with the United States in Europe. **JFQ**

Source: Cold War International History Project Bulletin, no. 6-7 (Winter 1995/1996), p. 109.