

A Master Class in Mission Command: *LTG Matthew B. Ridgway's Leadership at Chipyong-ni*

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On 25 June 1950, the North Korean communists launched an attack on the Republic of Korea (ROK), starting a war that would last 37 months, claim more than 33,629 American lives, and leave another 103,284 American Soldiers wounded.¹ The fighting was due to a battle of philosophies featuring communism, backed by the newly founded People's Republic of China, and democracy, endorsed by the United Nations (UN) and most notably supported by the United States. The impact on the United States following the war was profound as it "greatly intensified hostilities between the West and Communist-bloc nations, gave powerful impetus to a massive nuclear arms race between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and gave root to the notion that communism could be contained by military power... which led to American intervention in Vietnam."²

Having struggled early in the Korean War, the U.S. made personnel changes that led to the placement of LTG Matthew B. Ridgway as the commander of Eighth Army. Having proven himself in Washington, D.C., as the Army Deputy Chief of Staff for Administration, he had the endorsements of then Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall and GEN Dwight D. Eisenhower, who noted LTG Ridgway had "never undertaken a job that he has not performed in a soldierly and even brilliant way."³ His placement in this position was unequivocally significant as he organized his forces to participate in the Battle of Chipyong-ni. Considered the decisive point of the war, this battle proved to the UN troops that they could defeat the Chinese Communist Forces (CCF), and from the conclusion of the battle until the armistice agreement, the UN troops conducted purely offensive operations.⁴ Through the utilization of the mission command principles of shared understanding, mutual trust, risk acceptance, and competence, LTG Ridgway and his forces repelled the Chinese attack at the Battle of Chipyong-ni, effectively turning the tide of the Korean War.

The Battle of Chipyong-ni took place from 13-15 February 1951 and ended in a defeat for the CCF, which lost an estimated 5,000 Soldiers.⁵ The 23rd Regimental Combat Team (RCT), accompanied by a French battalion, withstood hundreds of Chinese attackers who tried to break through its perimeter, which was situated on a ring of eight hills

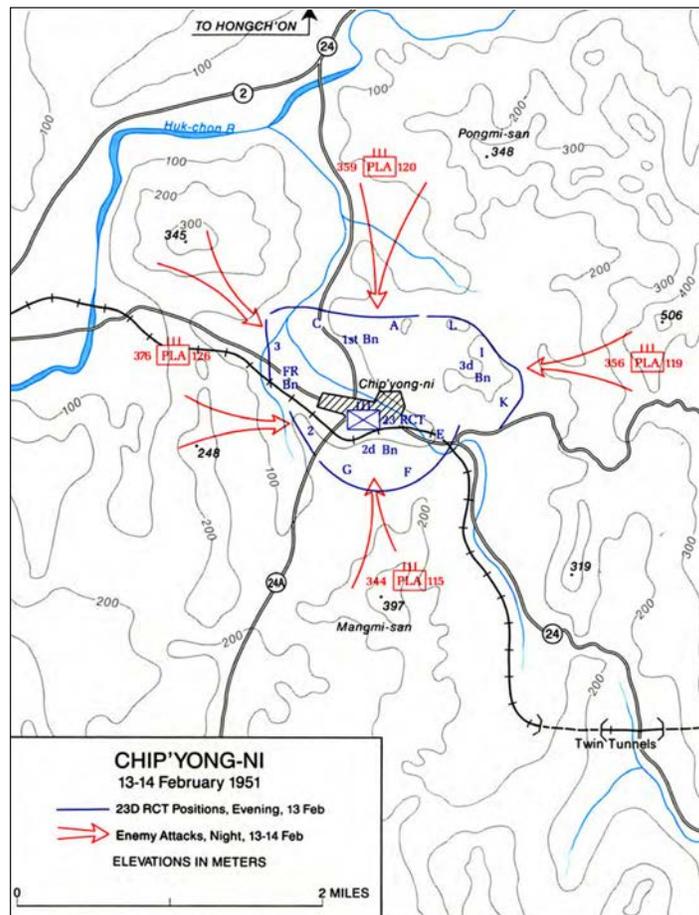


Erle Cocke, American Legion; LTG Matthew B. Ridgway, commander of Eighth Army; and LTC Gilbert J. Check, commander of 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment inspect the lines in Korea on 14 March 1951.

surrounding the city. Supported by more than 131 air sorties for aerial resupply and fires from the 37th Field Artillery Battalion, the 82nd Anti-aircraft Automatic Weapons Battalion, and the 503rd Field Artillery Battalion, Ridgway's Soldiers fought around the clock, countering continuous waves of communist invaders.⁶ Having only given up ground twice, only to regain it through vigorous rounds of close combat, the fighting ceased at 1715 as 20 tanks from the 5th U.S. Cavalry Regiment arrived in relief. The Chinese forces fled and unsuccessfully attempted to invade the city of Chechon in the east, and the 5,600 UN Soldiers who fought there were awarded the American Distinguished Unit Citation.⁷

LTG Ridgway continuously relied on concise messaging to communicate what had to be accomplished. Most notably, by answering the questions of "what are we fighting for" and "what would happen if the line did not hold," he was able to create a shared understanding across the Eighth Army, which inspired the Soldiers to maintain a successful defense at Chipyong-ni. While conducting an earlier battlefield circulation, LTG Ridgway was astonished by his Soldiers' lack of esprit de corps and unit pride in comparison to that of troops past in the European theater.⁸ Upon the completion of the trip, he realized that a major source of his units' apathy was that they did not understand their purpose in the Asian theater. He made it a point to address this question in written correspondence titled "Why Are We Here?" In the address, LTG Ridgway explained, "To me the issues are clear. It is not a question of this or that Korean town or village. Real estate is, here, incidental... The real issues are whether the power of Western civilization, as God has permitted it to flower in our own beloved lands, shall defy and defeat Communism."⁹ The message to "defeat communism" was well received and understood by the Soldiers preparing for battle at Chipyong-ni.

The second message LTG Ridgway pushed out created shared understanding and elicited buy-in from Soldiers and policymakers; this message was that his Soldiers would fight. This came from the realization of what would happen if the defense at Chipyong-ni collapsed. Senior leaders in Washington, D.C., his direct superior GEN



Map — Battle of Chipyong-ni
(*Ebb and Flow, November 1950-July 1951* by Billy S. Mossman)

Douglas MacArthur, and subordinates all felt that any hope of gaining momentum and securing the town was lost. Adamantly refusing these notions, LTG Ridgway made it clear that further withdrawal would seriously jeopardize any hope of gaining a foothold in the southern region of the country.¹⁰ His message to the President down to the newest Soldier: "We are going to stay here and fight it out."¹¹

LTG Ridgway understood that in order to hold the defensive position at Chipyeong-ni, the American forces would have to rely on their allies. As the relationship with the ROK Army was seeming to sour due to a series of withdrawal to the south, he looked towards the UN country of France.¹² This trust built between LTG Ridgway and the French Army, and in turn the French Army and the American 23rd RCT, proved critical in defeating the Chinese. In his account of the relationship leading up to the battle, LTC Sherman Pratt recalled, "They were just another battalion in the regiment, and we saw them regularly... We intermingled often with the French troops, and sometimes they would share their daily ration."¹³ The French battalion commander, Lt. Col. Ralph Monclar, also held the mutual trust with his American partners in high regard having stated, "This war marks the first time in all recorded history that armies have taken to the field... simply to preserve the peace and stop wrongful aggression, and do it under the banner of an international organization created for just that purpose."¹⁴

During the engagement, the confidence between the U.S. and French armies paid off as the French soldiers were able to hold key terrain along the southwest perimeter of the town, against various elements of three separate Chinese armies (Corps).¹⁵ The bond built between LTG Ridgway, his Soldiers, and the French, proved essential at Chipyeong-ni and became a major theme for the rest of the war. This was largely because it answered the question of whether "the UN forces could stand up to the Chinese oceans of manpower."¹⁶ From Chipyeong-ni on, China and the rest of the world understood that it could.

LTG Ridgway had a masterful understanding of his enemy, to include their capabilities, strengths, weaknesses, and history. This enabled him to make the call to dig into the high ground on the ridgetops surrounding Chipyeong-ni. Knowing the Chinese doctrine of the day and having cut off the CCF's dwindling supply route from the nearby city of Wonju days earlier, LTG Ridgway was able to accept the risk that came with holding the town. He believed in his Soldiers' ability to outlast the Chinese and that the CCF's weakened supply lines would keep them from participating in a prolonged engagement.¹⁷

Chinese forces generally carried any necessary fighting and personal supplies, to include ammunition, on their backs into battle. This allowed them to operate without being tied to logistical hubs or sustainment areas, unlike the American troops. Utilizing this tactic, the CCF was able to send out its men quickly but could not keep them in the fight for extended periods of time.¹⁸ This problem was exacerbated by the fact that factories in mainland China could not meet military demand, which amounted to a shortfall of more than 12,600 tons of ammunition and "critical shortages in anti-tank weaponry, surface-to-air communications equipment, and trucks for both transportation and supply."¹⁹

Although he did not have specifics, the knowledge of the Chinese supply overextension and standard operating procedures was key to LTG Ridgway's decision to fight at Chipyeong-ni. This meant accepting the possibility that if the CCF broke through during the battle a corridor would be open to the city of Yoju, where the enemy could resupply and isolate LTG Ridgway's remaining forces.²⁰ His line held and the 23rd RCT and French battalion soundly defended against their attackers.²¹

LTG Ridgway, a West Point graduate and former commanding general of the 82nd Airborne Division and the XVIII Airborne Corps respectively, was a highly competent leader heading into the Korean War. Applying lessons learned from the invasion of Normandy, the Battle of the Bulge, and the Western Allied invasion of Germany, he immediately recognized the importance of understanding geography and coordinating logistics in Korea.²²

An astute tactician accustomed to combat operations on tough terrain, LTG Ridgway was eager to make a stand against the offensive-minded CCF in an area that gave his Soldiers an advantage. He selected Chipyeong-ni after successfully maneuvering the U.S. X Corps and III ROK Corps to maintain a blocking position on-line to the southwest while simultaneously advancing the U.S. IX Corp on their immediate left-flank.²³ LTG Ridgway picked the village, predicting the Chinese were planning to march on the UN communications center, Wonju, 30 kilometers to the southeast.²⁴ He assessed the village had hills "that rose from 100-400 meters in height... and provided excellent defensive positions, with good fields of fire... that stretched the ridgelines."²⁵ It was from these hills that the 23rd



**U.S. Army in Action Poster — Breakthrough at Chipyeong-ni
(U.S. Army Center of Military History)**

RCT and French battalion were able to call airstrikes and artillery on the CCF hordes in the early hours of the Battle of Chipyeong-ni, which softened the enemy as the fighting advanced. LTG Ridgway's competence, showcased by his innate ability to conduct strategic planning under pressure and wargame enemy courses of action, led him to choose the optimal location in which his Soldiers staged their defense.

In the aftermath of the Battle of Chipyeong-ni, LTG Ridgway was recognized for his remarkable strategic-thinking abilities and later named the Allied Commander of the Far East, following the dismissal of GEN MacArthur.²⁶ Eighth Army used the momentum it had gained to push the CCF invaders back to the north and remained engaged in offensive operations until the armistice was signed on 27 July 1953.²⁷ LTG Ridgway's mastery and use of the mission command principles of shared understanding, mutual trust, risk acceptance, and competence during the Battle of Chipyeong-ni was the differentiator of the Korean War.

Notes

¹ Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War* (NY: Times Books, 1987), Foreword.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 563.

⁴ "The Battle of Chipyeong-ni: February 1951," *Parallel Narratives*, accessed 18 February from <https://parallelnarratives.com/the-battle-of-chipyong-ni-february-1951/>.

⁵ Bevin Alexander, *Korea: The First War We Lost* (NY: Hippocrene Books, 1986), 393.

⁶ Ministry of National Defense, *The History of the United Nations Forces in the Korean War* (Republic of Korea: War History Compilation Committee, 1975), 475.

⁷ Alexander, *Korea*, 393.

⁸ Matthew Ridgway, *The Korean War* (NY: Doubleday & Company, 1967), 86.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 264.

¹⁰ Ministry of National Defense, 469.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 470.

¹² Alexander, *Korea*, 380.

¹³ Sherman Pratt, *Decisive Battles of the Korean War* (NY: Vantage Press, 1992), 165.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁵ Alexander, *Korea*, 393.

¹⁶ Pratt, *Decisive Battles*, 161.

¹⁷ Ansil Walker, "Ansil L. Walker Recalls the Battle of Chipyeong-ni During the Korean War." Historynet, accessed 19 February from <https://www.historynet.com/ansil-lwalker-recalls-the-battle-of-chipyong-ni-during-the-korean-war.htm>.

¹⁸ Alexander, *Korea*, 301.

¹⁹ Harry Crocker, "Chinese Intervention in the Korean War" (master's thesis, Louisiana State University, 2002).

²⁰ Alexander, *Korea*, 393.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ridgway, *The Korean War*, 1.

²³ Ministry of National Defense, 467.

²⁴ Ibid, 466.

²⁵ Ibid, 467.

²⁶ Blair, 796.

²⁷ Ibid, 975.

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