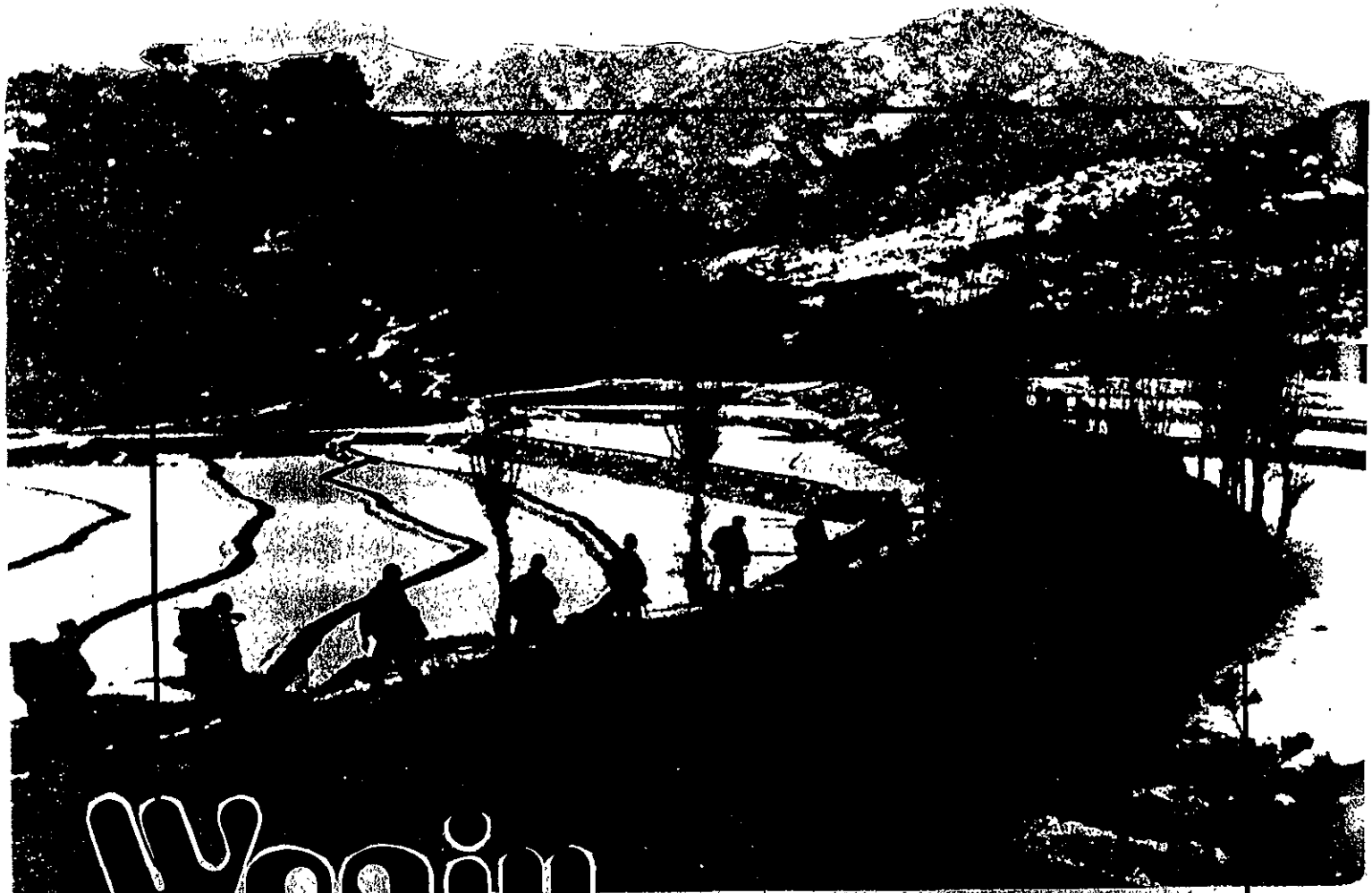


Wonju and Chipyong-ni

RAYMOND T. CASSIDY

Wonju and Chipyong-ni must be held "at all costs." This was General Matthew B. Ridgway's resolute order as five Chinese divisions bore down from the north on the two Korean towns in early February 1951.

The two towns marked the center of an unstable, erratic Eighth Army front that stretched across the Korean peninsula just below the 38th parallel. A five-road junction and a terminal on the railroad line that ran south to Pusan made Wonju a critical communications center. Twenty miles to the northwest, Chipyong-ni, nestled in a long, three-mile wide valley, controlling any access

westerly to Yangpyong, southerly to Soju, and easterly to Wonju. Both towns were key points, and whoever held them controlled central Korea (see Map 1).

But the numerical odds against the United Nations forces that held Wonju and Chipyong-ni were great — at least five to one. And Eighth Army had not been able to cope with such large numbers of Communist Chinese in North Korea three months earlier in spite of the sophisticated weaponry upon which it had become so dependent. A successful defense of the twin towns, therefore, appeared to hinge upon whether Eighth Army had finally learned to offset the enemy's manpower advantage by effectively employing that weaponry against him. Clearly, the United Nations forces now faced a crucial test of arms, the results of which would determine their continued presence in Korea and ultimately the fate of South Korea.

During the preceding weeks, Eighth Army had done some serious soul-searching. Its calamitous retreat from North Korea had shown that its units needed more training and better leadership at the company and battalion levels. Accordingly, Eighth Army had launched an extensive retraining program. Its field artillery units underwent intensive drills in the rapid deployment of their guns, and fire direction centers plotted and replotted mock fire missions.

Gun crewmen interchanged positions until each man knew every job. Mortar sections underwent the same rigorous training, while in the line companies, riflemen, cooks, and truck drivers drilled and drilled until they were proficient with every infantry weapon. Since close-quarter fighting favored the numerically superior enemy, all the infantry units also received intensive bayonet training.

And now the 2d ("Indianhead") United States Infantry Division occupied Wonju and Chipyong-ni, straddling the southward course of the enemy offensive. Thousands of Chinese troops were known to be moving south on the main road leading to Wonju, and friendly agents returning from the outlying areas reported numerous hidden, enemy pre-assault troop concentrations.

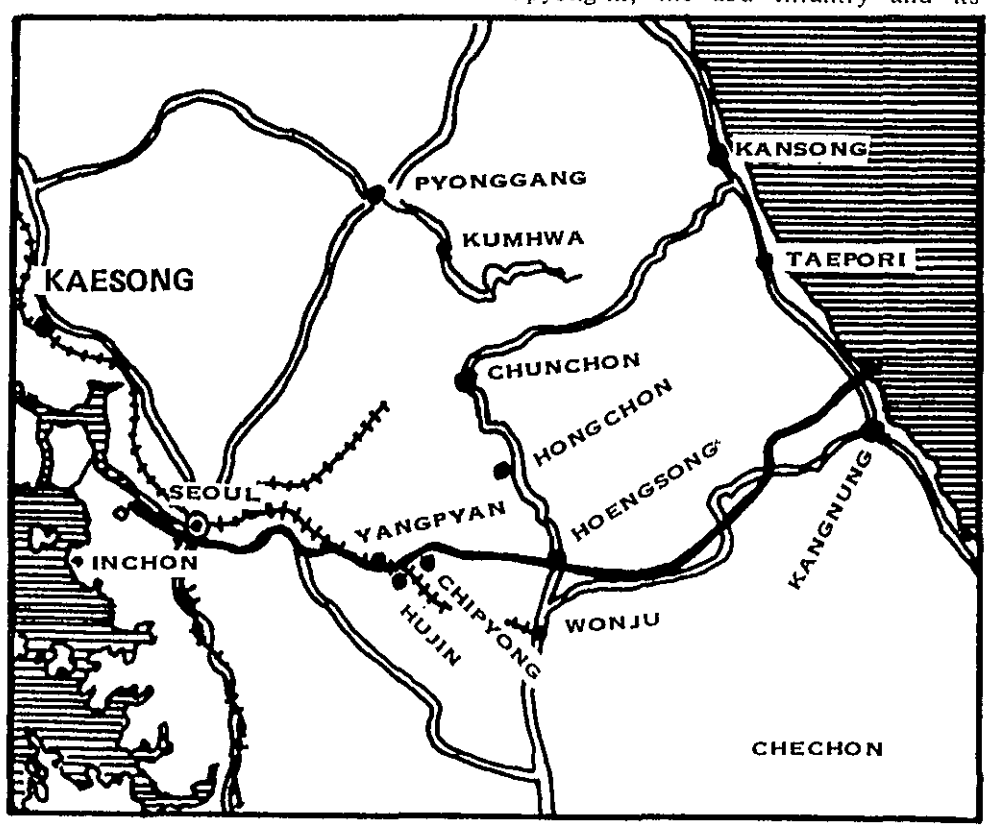
The men of the division had learned well the lessons of the past few months and now readied themselves to meet the onslaught. On 12 February Brigadier General George C. Stewart, the division's assistant commander, arrived at Wonju to take charge of the defense. He brought with him General Ridgway's order that there would be "no withdrawal, no evacuation." Everyone would stay.

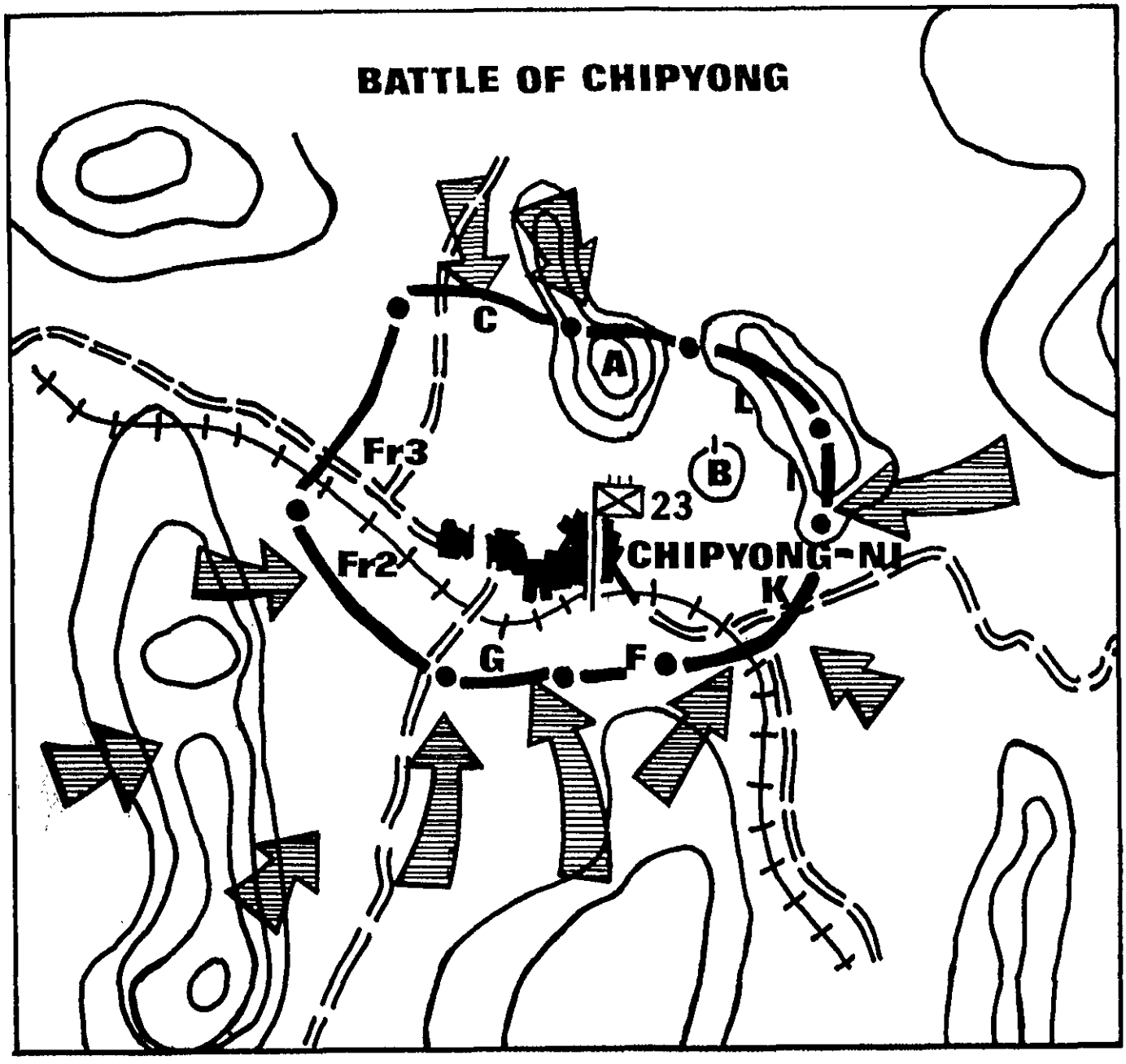
Defensive positions were established on the high ground surrounding both towns. The 37th Field Artillery Battalion shifted its eighteen 105mm howitzers from Wonju to Chipyong-ni to support the 23d Infantry Regiment and its attached French Battalion, while the long-range guns of an alerted IX Corps poured fire into the suspected enemy concentration areas. At both Wonju and Chipyong-ni, ammunition and medical supplies were feverishly stockpiled for the test that they all knew would come.

While the 2d Division prepared itself to meet the threat, Eighth Army ordered continuous surveillance flights, and air observers warned that the main enemy force had split into two columns — one aiming south along the Som River toward Wonju, the second veering west toward Chipyong-ni.

As night fell on 12 February, the temperatures dropped to minus 10 degrees Fahrenheit. In the brittle-cold darkness at Chipyong-ni, the 23d Infantry and its

Map 1





Map 2

attached French Battalion — four battalions in all — settled into their defensive positions (see Map 2). At Wonju, the 38th Infantry, its attached Netherlands Detachment, and units from the 9th Infantry — five battalions in all — dug into the frozen ground along the ridgelines.

SURROUNDED

Late in the afternoon of 13 February, the Wonju front fell strangely silent. Although poised before Wonju, the enemy suddenly — and inexplicably — shifted his attention to Chipyong-ni. Under cover of darkness, the Chinese infiltrated to the east and west of the town, cutting roads and surrounding the garrison.

They reached Chipyong-ni near midnight, and the defenders there were subjected to an intense barrage from Chinese 120mm mortars and 76mm self-propelled guns. All along the perimeter shells whined down, blasting up frozen clods of earth and sending shrapnel into the darkness. Infantrymen pressed tighter to their bunker walls or deeper into their foxholes, bracing against the concussion of each explosion. In the valley below, the 37th Field Artillery's cannoneers hugged their gun-pit walls.

Everywhere, officers and NCOs darted from bunker to foxhole to gun emplacement, risking exposure to check on their men, to admonish them where needed for not taking better cover, or to direct medical assistance for any wounded.

Then, as suddenly as it had started, the bombardment stopped. In the pall of silence that followed, officers

shouted for their men to get ready. Along the entire ridgeline, American and French infantrymen scurried to man their blasted parapets while in the valley cannoneers jumped to their howitzers.

All along the perimeter, infantrymen watched red and green signal flares arch into the arctic-like night. They listened apprehensively to the enemy's shouts and bugles in the distant darkness and waited tensely for the attacking waves of Chinese that each man knew would follow.

Suddenly, from the west, north, and east, hordes of screaming Chinese soldiers swept across the snow-patched, frozen ground toward Chipyong-ni's defenses. But the Chinese soon found that much had changed since their intervention three months earlier. Their tactic of a sudden, human-wave assault under cover of darkness — the element of terror upon which they had relied so heavily and used so successfully — failed this time. Instead of falling upon road-bound columns of leaderless, panic-stricken troops, the Chinese soldiers charged headlong into the defenders' disciplined, waiting guns.

Clusters of American star shells flashed in the darkness above the advancing Chinese, and soon the attackers were engulfed in a thunderous holocaust of artillery, mortar, and automatic weapons fire that blew ragged holes in their packed ranks and shot away the force of their attack. Only a handful managed to come within a few yards of the perimeter before they, too, fell under the fire from the infantrymen's rifles.

Although forced to retreat, the Chinese maintained heavy pressure on the garrison with continuous probing attacks around the entire perimeter.

A second, furious attack slammed against the perimeter on the southwest, hitting the 3d Battalion, 23d Infantry. Again, the attackers met a bristling wall of disciplined fire that chewed their attack to pieces. Before dawn, a third, frenzied assault from the south rushed at the French Battalion. For a third time, waves of attacking Chinese were cut down by the defenders' fire; for a third time, the line held.

The fighting at Chipyong-ni eased with the first light of 14 February. The enemy's interest shifted to Wonju. Fully prepared to meet the threat, every piece of American artillery within range raked the enemy with devastating fires. Eventually, under the merciless pounding of the guns, the enemy's once-massed ranks were shattered, and leaderless groups streamed northward, trying to escape the devastating artillery fire. Air Force ground-support aircraft took over to strike incessantly at

the fleeing survivors. The "Wonju Shoot" cost the Chinese more than ten thousand casualties.

Chipyong-ni, though, still lay under siege. Even as the Chinese were being repulsed at Wonju, the defenders quickly repaired the damage to their positions caused by the frenzied attacks of the night before. Parachute drops supplied the garrison with ammunition, medical supplies, and rations. Helicopters fitted with litters flew in and out of the tight perimeter like giant dragonflies, braving enemy ground fire along their route to evacuate the more seriously wounded. The less serious casualties had to stay, and they were made as safe and comfortable as possible.

But as a combined relief force from the 27th British Brigade and the 5th U.S. Cavalry Regiment mounted an attempt to break through from the south, another threat to Chipyong-ni materialized. Weather conditions worsened. An intermittent overcast and a patchy ground fog made supply drops inside the perimeter more difficult. When conditions became such that much-needed supplies fell outside the perimeter, further parachute resupply had to be suspended.

VENGEANCE

Their assault on Wonju smashed, the Chinese turned on Chipyong-ni with added vengeance. Near midnight, 14 February, they launched several hammering attacks against the 2d and 3d Battalions, 23d Infantry. Forward observers on the ridgelines frantically called for "walking" barrages to pace the advancing enemy, and 37th Field Artillery radios crackled with urgent calls for fire missions.

Disciplined artillery and automatic weapons fire tore great holes in the Chinese formations. Where one of the enemy fell, another took his place; where ten fell, ten more took their place; where a line was blown away, another took its place. Seemingly mindless of their heavy losses, the Chinese pressed the attack until, at 0200 on the 15th, they overran Company I, 23d Infantry, to make their first major penetration of the perimeter. Led by their surviving officers, an immediate counterattack by Company L and the survivors of Company I managed to cut out the penetration at bayonet point.

An hour later, hordes of Chinese overran Company G in a second, deeper penetration. Overwhelmed after the most savage bayonet fighting yet seen, Company G's soldiers had to withdraw. This time, efforts to regain the lost ground failed. The counterattacking force was driven to the ground by steady enemy fire from the newly-captured positions.

Doubts now arose that the battered perimeter could withstand the pressure of any more heavy attacks. The defenders were exhausted and their last reserves had been committed. Ammunition was pitifully low. Fewer than 100 rounds of 4.2-inch mortar ammunition remained and only 90 rounds of 81mm. Small arms ammunition could be counted by the number of clips that remained in the infantrymen's bandoliers. Artillery batteries were ordered not to fire on any target unless they could be seen and were in a position to be hit. And to the south, meeting fanatical enemy resistance in its drive northward, the anxiously awaited relief force was still more than five miles from the perimeter.

Early in the afternoon of 15 February, the overcast that had prevented supply drops and supporting air strikes began to clear. Circling flights of P-51 aircraft came through the parting clouds with their wing guns rattling above the cheers of the exhausted infantrymen. As more flights arrived over the perimeter, they had to be stacked by ground observers to wait their turn to strike.

The first napalm air strikes hit the enemy's penetration of the perimeter. It was too much. Burned and screaming Chinese fled the captured positions. The counterattacking force that had been pinned down leaped up and, firing from the hip, charged forward to recapture the lost ground.

As the weather continued to clear, planeload after planeload of ammunition and supplies parachuted down to the waiting defenders. Embattled garrison troops risked heavy enemy mortar fire to retrieve the bundles, and resupplied mortars and artillery once again were able to pour fire onto the faltering Chinese.

At about 1600, the southern outposts jubilantly reported spotting the relief column's lead tanks. Two hours later, 20 tanks and the point elements of the 27th British Brigade rolled into the perimeter. As if acknowledging defeat, the Chinese abandoned the siege and fled north. Artillery fires and aircraft strikes followed them.

The siege officially ended late on the night of 15 February. The Chinese had been stopped, their winter offensive shattered.

For the officers and men of the 2d Division, they had proved that they had learned their earlier lessons well. Perhaps General S.L.A. Marshall said it best when he wrote: "Americans do not like being knocked down, and they have a characteristic which these men of Korea readily displayed — of getting up wiser, tougher, and more determined."

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