

TASK FORCE FAITH

At the Chosin Reservoir

A Failure of Command, Control, and Communications

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The defeat of Task Force Faith (originally Task Force MacLean) on the eastern shore of the Chosin Reservoir in late November 1950 was one of the worst disasters for the U.S. Army in Korea. Could it have been prevented? At least to some extent, the fate of the task force could certainly have been different, given that disasters seldom occur spontaneously; rather they result from a series of events whose cumulative result leads to catastrophe. This article will present the proposition that the defeat of Task Force Faith was due, in large part, to an inadequate command and control structure as well as ineffective and inadequate communications.

The Strategic Setting

Following the success of the U.S. X Corps at Inchon and the Eighth Army breakout from the Pusan perimeter, Lieutenant General Walton H. Walker and his staff developed a plan for pursuing the North Korean Army across the 38th parallel. The overriding intent was to destroy the remnants of the North Korean People's Army (NKPA) before it could gain a sanctuary in Manchuria. An integral part of this plan was the incorporation of X Corps into Eighth Army, thus establishing a unified command structure for future operations. Unfortunately, no one had consulted General Douglas MacArthur.

MacArthur's plan called for X Corps to remain an independent command under Lieutenant General Edward M. Almond, who would report directly to him. X Corps, under MacArthur's plan, was to withdraw from the battlefield, board ships at Inchon and Pusan, and conduct an amphibious landing on the east coast of North Korea at Wonsan. From Wonsan, X Corps would attack northwest across the peninsula to seize Pyongyang, while the Eighth Army would attack north across the 38th parallel toward Pyongyang to create a double envelopment.

Upon learning of MacArthur's plan, General J. Lawton Collins, the Army Chief of Staff, expressed concern over the command arrangements that left X Corps independent of Eighth Army. But having been proven wrong about the feasibility of the Inchon landing, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were reluctant to voice their objections, and, on September 29, cabled their approval of MacArthur's plan. On October 2, MacArthur issued orders for the redeployment of Eighth Army and X Corps for the invasion of North Korea.

As events unfolded, it became apparent that the Eighth Army would capture Pyongyang ahead of schedule and would not need X Corps support. Accordingly, on November 16, MacArthur changed the X Corps mission. Now, the corps would orient its attack north toward the North Korean-Chinese border. When it reached the Changjin Reservoir (best known by its Japanese name, Chosin), the corps was to turn west to intersect a main supply road that ran south from the Yalu River into the Eighth Army sector.

On November 17, the corps staff presented a plan to Almond for approval. Almond made several modifications to the plan and approved it, with one significant change—the 7th Infantry Division would provide a regimental size task force to move north on the east side of the Chosin Reservoir. This would permit the 1st Marine Division to withdraw the 5th Marine Regiment from that side of the reservoir and concentrate the division for the attack on the west side.

Organizing and Deploying the Task Force

The corps operations plan issued on November 25 called for the regimental task force to be in position on the east side of the reservoir no later than noon on November 26. In view of the current disposition of the 7th Division regiments, this was a monumental task. Beginning on October 29, the division had landed at Iwon, 150 miles north of Wonsan. The

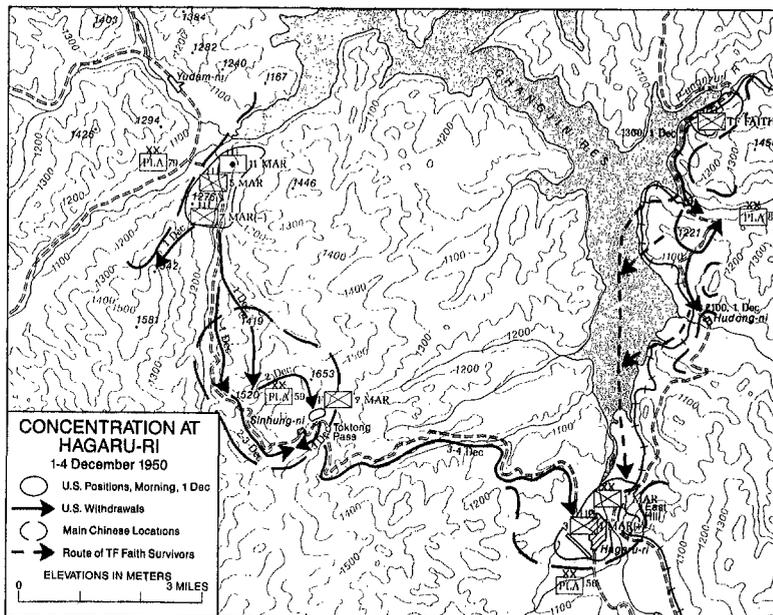
ers to provide direction, the soldiers were reluctant to counterattack the Chinese. Attempting to restore order through personal example, Faith led an attack on a roadblock at Hill 1221. In the process, he suffered a mortal wound. Virtually leaderless, the task force began to disintegrate into small groups. In the words of a member of Task Force Faith, "After Colonel Faith was killed, it was everyone for himself. The chain of command disappeared. Some men sat down and refused to move."

The other area of concern focuses on the failure of X Corps to replace key leaders lost during CCF attacks and formulate a plan for withdrawing the task force from the reservoir. General Almond had learned of Colonel MacLean's disappearance on November 30. In view of the precarious situation, the X Corps commander should have become more personally involved in restoring the chain of command. There was no Army officer senior to Faith in the area and it is doubtful whether General Almond would have appointed a Marine officer to command the task force, although there was historical precedent for such a decision (in World War I the U.S. Army 2d Infantry Division was commanded by a Marine officer).

There was, however, another option. Brigadier General Henry I. Hodes, the assistant division commander of the 7th Infantry Division, had visited Faith at the reservoir on November 26 and was familiar with the situation. Appointing Hodes to command the task force would have had a tremendous effect on the morale of the unit. More important, it would have allowed Faith to plan the breakout for his battalion while Hodes orchestrated the overall concept of operation. In addition, General Almond should have provided the task force with combat-experienced platoon leaders to replace the casualties at small-unit level. The absence of these leaders was sorely felt during the breakout attempt.

Finally, the X Corps should have developed a plan to support the withdrawal of Task Force Faith. Almond, Barr, Hodes and Major General Oliver P. Smith (the 1st Marine Division commander) met on November 30 to discuss the situation, but made no decisions concerning the resupply of ammunition, fuel, and supplies, or the replacement of key leaders. Furthermore, they failed to reach agreement on how to reestablish communications with Faith even though General Smith exercised command and control over the task force. In the absence of support and guidance, Task Force Faith attempted to extricate itself from the reservoir with the means at hand. In the end, 1,050 survivors of the original 2,500 member RCT reached the 1st Marine Division CP at Hagaru-ri. Of these, only 385 were able-bodied soldiers.

What did the survivors of Task Force Faith conclude about their performance at the Chosin Reservoir? A Major Curtis, the operations officer for the 1st Battalion, 32d Infantry, said, "The plan did not work and the mission failed because control was lost from the outset—and, in fact, the rifle elements failed to provide flank and rear security. . . . Our main problem was maintaining control of the troops under very trying circumstances."



Ironically, the fate of Task Force Faith was not a foregone conclusion. The fundamental shortcomings that contributed to the defeat were failures to plan and implement an effective command and control structure that could function even without a communications system. The disintegration of the task force underscores the importance of the commander's intent. If Faith had articulated his intent within the framework of a simple plan, subordinate leaders would have been able to execute it in the absence of further orders once he was mortally wounded.

The actions of surviving subordinate leaders also emphasize the importance of training leaders to act independently. As a staff sergeant observed, the unit became paralyzed when the commander was killed. If subordinate leaders had been trained to think and act independently within the context of the commander's intent, the outcome at the Chosin Reservoir might have been markedly different.

EDITOR'S NOTE: A few years ago, the phrase "no more Task Force Smiths" made the rounds, but this was not the only such disaster to befall U.S. forces in the Korean War. As we review the lessons of Task Force Faith, we must examine the decisions and circumstances leading to its defeat in light of today's Army and units. By a critical scrutiny of today's training and readiness, we can go a long way toward ensuring that U.S. forces on future battlefields do not suffer the same needless casualties that crippled Task Force Faith. Our men fought as well as they could under unforeseeably difficult circumstances, but factors beyond their control left them at the mercy of the winter and an implacable enemy.

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