

THE BATTLE OF CHOSIN RESERVOIR AT YUDAM-NI

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The 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division, successfully used the characteristics of the offense during the breakout operation from Yudam-ni to relieve Fox Company, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, at Toktong Pass, Chosin Reservoir (also known as Changjin Reservoir), Korea, December 1–3, 1950.

A whirlwind of events occurred during the opening months of the Korean War. Among these events was the invasion of South Korea on June 25, 1950 by the North Korean People's Army (NKPA), which crossed the 38th Parallel and pushed the Republic of Korea (ROK) forces into a small perimeter surrounding the southern port town of Pusan. The Marines were ordered to Pusan to help defend the perimeter. After four weeks of combat, when the situation was under control, the Marines were embarked on naval ships for the brilliant turning movement, the amphibious landing at Inchon.

With the successes gained from Pusan and Inchon, General Douglas MacArthur ordered the U.S. 8th Army and ROK forces to pursue the fleeing NKPA. The U.S. 8th Army would operate in western Korea, and X Corps in eastern Korea — both with orders to cut off the NKPA's effort to flee to the north. The 1st Marine Division, attached to the X Corps, landed at the northeastern port of Wonsan on October 25, 1950 for operations that would take UN forces north toward the Yalu River, which was the border of Manchuria and Communist China (see Map 1).

The plan was to move the X Corps north of the Chosin Reservoir to cut off the retreating NKPA and any Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) already in the country or moving south from Manchuria. The 1st Marine Division, attached to X Corps, was composed of the 1st, 5th, and 7th Marine Regiments.

The 1st RCT (Regimental Combat Team) had engaged the NKPA south and west of Wonsan and had alerted all the elements of the X Corps that hostile forces were in the area. The Chinese forces used guerrilla warfare tactics. With little artillery and no air support, the Chinese used heavy mortars and machine guns but relied mostly on the infantryman. With the respect for U.S. air power and the devastating effects of artillery, the Chinese generally fought at night and sought tactical penetrations into command, logistical and supporting arms systems of UN forces. The Chinese actions and tactics against the Marines were initially successful because the Marines were using scattered company defensive positions instead of tight battalion perimeters.

As the X Corps moved north, the scheme of maneuver was to have the 1st Marine Division move west of the Chosin Reservoir and U.S. Army units move east of the reservoir. The division also had the responsibility of securing the main supply route (MSR)



Ebb and Flow November 1950-July 1951¹

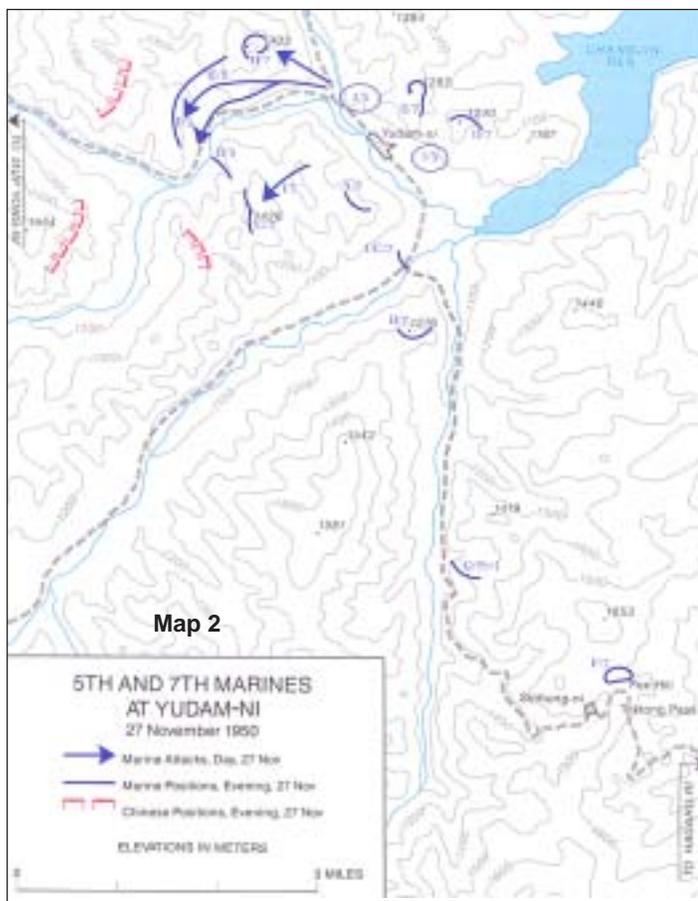
along the route north. Unknown to the X Corps, the CCF had encircled UN forces and were waiting for orders to begin an attack that was to destroy X Corps.

The 1st Marine Division's 5th and 7th RCTs were in Yudam-ni, defending a large perimeter of approximately four miles in circumference and cautiously moving closer to the Yalu when the CCF attacked. Although the Marines knew that CCFs were in the area and had made previous contact with them, intelligence reports did not report or estimate accurately the size of the force, or relate that overwhelming CCFs had attacked the 8th Army in western Korea.

When CCFs launched the first attack on November 27, 1950, the Marines fought as individual companies and battalions against human-wave assault tactics. The Marine situation was tenuous at best. Two CCF divisions attacked from the northwest of the Marines' perimeter, and a third division had encircled the southeast, blocking the MSR and trapping two rifle companies and associated attachments in non-mutual supportive positions (see Map 2).

Company C of 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, short one platoon, was approximately four miles south of Yudam-ni. Four miles farther south on the MSR, Company F (2d Battalion) in Toktong Pass was at full strength in a more isolated position, reinforced by heavy machine guns and an 81mm mortar section from the

¹ Graphics used in this article are from *Ebb and Flow*, November 1950 - July 1951, The United States Army in the Korean War, Center of Military History, United States Army, Washington, D.C., 1990.



Battalion was still about one mile from Company C. In a rapid envelopment to the west, the battalion's Company B moved with the aid of close air support and 81mm mortars fires and succeeded in pushing to the perimeter and enabling the withdrawal of Company C. Company F was supposed to fight north along the MSR and link up with 1st Battalion. This was not possible, however, with the number of casualties that Company F had suffered and the number of Chinese forces in the area. The RCT commander — not wanting to have an entire battalion

When the composite battalion did not function as expected, General Smith ordered that 5th Regiment take charge of protecting the Yudam-ni perimeter and that 7th Regiment conduct operations to clear the MSR to Hagaru-ri. The "March to the Sea" had begun. The manner in which the withdrawal was conducted is an important element of the Marine Corps' legacy.

As the two RCT commanders planned the reorganization and redeployment of forces, the regiments formed a second composite battalion to cover the weak portions of the perimeter. Additionally, as the battalions maneuvered — reforming the perimeter and breakout force — there was little contact from the CCF. It is likely that this was a tactical failure of the CCF on a grand scale, especially since the Marines were vulnerable and made all the movements during daylight hours.

The decision was made that 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, would attack over land instead of down the MSR and relieve Company F from the east. The remainder of the 7th RCT would pave a way for all other forces, including the wounded, vehicles, and equipment to move south from the Yudam-ni perimeter.

weapons company. Prior to the attacks the night of November 27–28, Company F's commander — knowing that he was on his own without hope of making it to the regimental perimeter until the following day — formed a tight perimeter. At 0230, the CCF attacked on a 270-degree arc (three fourths of the company perimeter). With one platoon initially overrun, the reserve elements fought and tenuously held the perimeter. By 0630, November 28, the Chinese had received so many casualties that the attack could no longer be considered organized.

As the RCT commanders at Yudam-ni consolidated their lines and realigned forces into one main perimeter, 1st Marine Division Commander General Oliver Smith ordered them to attack south toward Hagaru-ri to reopen the MSR as well as rescue Company C, 1st Battalion, and Company F, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines.

At 1015 on November 28, the rescue attempt for the two companies stranded on the MSR to Hagaru-ri commenced. Lieutenant Colonel Raymond G. Davis's 1st Battalion attempted first to reach Company C from Yudam-ni. After five hours of fighting, marching, and climbing, 1st

surrounded by enemy forces — ordered that 1st Battalion return to the main perimeter. The relief force returned at 2110.

The RCT commanders believed that all forces were required for the defense of the perimeter, but they were also required to mount another relief effort for Company F. In a second attempt to accomplish this relief, the commanders formed a composite battalion of the units in reserve within the perimeter at Yudam-ni. At 0800 on November 29, the composite battalion moved south on the MSR but was hit with heavy machine-gun fire 300 yards outside the perimeter. The Marines could plainly see the CCF on the ridgelines but continued to fight south. After attacking 4,500 yards south along the MSR, Marine planes dropped messages to the composite battalion and the regimental headquarters, informing them that the enemy was entrenched in a formidable force on both sides of the MSR. After consideration at the regimental headquarters, the relief force was ordered to return to the main perimeter before it could be surrounded.

Company F survived a third night on Toktong Pass. One Marine was wounded; three CCF companies perished.

Early on December 1, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines relieved 1st Battalion, 7th Marines in place, to allow it to carry out the assigned mission of relieving Company F. The initial breakout took an enormous amount of effort to create the gap in the CCF lines, which was not secured until 1930 on December 1, 1950. Lieutenant Colonel Davis evacuated his dead and wounded to the main perimeter. One additional company was attached to his battalion at the last moment because of the day's combat losses. This battalion cut the last physical ties with Marine units at Yudam-ni and attacked east and south.

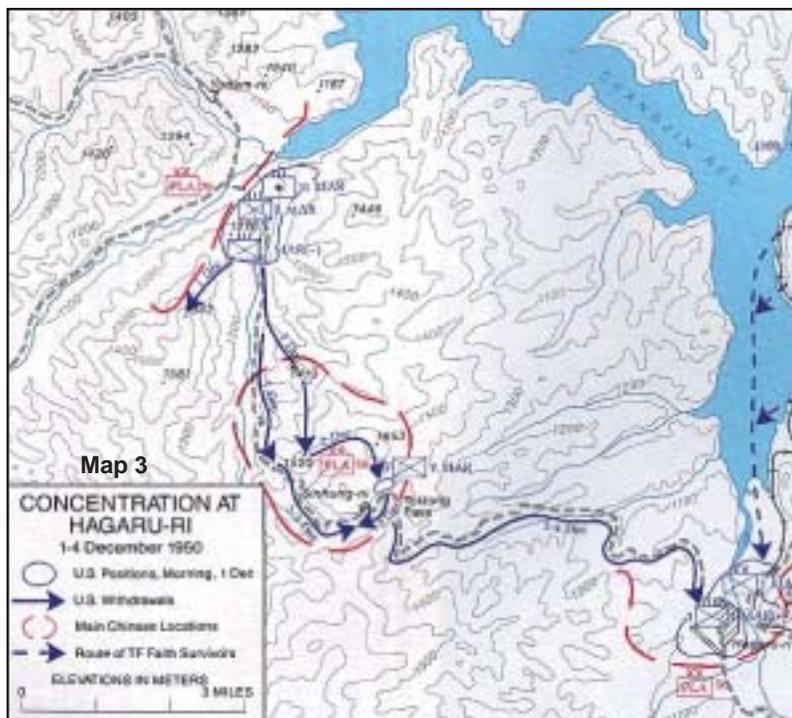
The planning process for 1st Battalion's march to Toktong Pass was swift. The concept of operations and scheme of maneuver was developed and approved in approximately 20 minutes. The plan was to take two 81mm mortars and six heavy machine guns, each manned with double crews so they could carry enough ammunition. It was also decided that all Marines would carry their sleeping bags, an extra bandolier of small arms ammunition, and extra stretchers — initially to carry ammunition and then casualties. The Marines in the battalion

reserve and headquarters company carried an extra 81mm mortar round. Extra radios were carried with the unit, ensuring duplication of assets and positive communications with the Yudam-ni perimeter. Other mission considerations were that all wounded and sick would remain with the main breakout force. These Marines would drive the vehicles and provide convoy security.

At 2100 on December 1, catching the enemy off guard, 1st Battalion broke out of the perimeter and headed east and south in the effort to relieve Company F at Toktong Pass (see Map 3). After a day of fighting, reorganizing, absorbing replacements, issuing orders, evacuating wounded, and neither sleeping nor eating a hot meal, the mission continued. The effects of the combat were pushing the Marines to the end of their mental and physical endurance.

The night of December 1, 1950 was dark, and the temperature was 16 degrees below zero. Land navigation was difficult, particularly in the deep draws and valleys that 1st Battalion, 7th Marines crossed. The lead elements were losing sight of the guiding star when they descended from the ridges. Also, during this phase of the movement, the column was drifting toward the enemy lines, which 1st Battalion was trying to avoid. The leaders noticed the problem, and passed the word to the front to change course, but it was not effective. Many, if not all the Marines, had the hoods of their parkas over their heads and were fighting the internal battles of fear and exhaustion as well as the dangerous environment around them. Lieutenant Colonel Davis attempted to use artillery fire and white phosphorus rounds on designated hills to help guide the movement. This technique did not produce the desired results. Davis then personally ran to the head of the column to orient movement on the correct azimuth of attack.

All the Marines were exhausted, including the leaders. When issuing orders or directions, Davis insisted that the company commanders repeat all orders to make sure they were what he desired and that he had, in fact, issued the orders accurately.



Small arms fire increased as the battalion drifted toward the enemy. The order to prepare for an attack of the enemy position was issued and promptly executed. The 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, had caught the enemy off guard again and destroyed a platoon-sized outpost with only a few Marines wounded. As the battalion was reorganizing for continued movement toward Company F, men began collapsing from fatigue. The effort to get them moving again required the direct action and leadership of the officers and NCOs. The battalion continued to move unchecked until Colonel Davis rested his battalion after 20 hours of combat and movement.

During the time 1st Battalion, 7th Marines was moving overland, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, was attacking south on the MSR (see Map 4). The pressure that 3d Battalion maintained on the CCF, and the fact that it probably appeared to be a much more lucrative objective to the CCF, enabled 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, to move as effectively as it did. Also, since the perimeter at Yudam-ni was shrinking, the CCF probably thought they could take decisive action and destroy the Marines in the perimeter as well as the units moving on the MSR.

After the brief respite, 1st Battalion continued the attack toward Company F. Correcting for the drift toward enemy lines, the relief force had closed to one and one half miles from the beleaguered company's position. The radios that 1st Battalion, 7th Marines carried and used were not functioning properly or were out of range of Company F and the main force at Yudam-ni. The 1st Battalion, was unable to contact Company F to ensure that the 81mm mortars or heavy machine guns did not fire on the relief force. The 1st Battalion, continued to march toward Company F's perimeter, and radio contact was finally established.

A final attack was mounted — again with the aid of close air support and 81mm mortar fires — and Company B reached the Company F perimeter at 1125 on December 2, 1950. Company B ate an air-dropped meal and immediately continued the attack west to the high ground that would lead to securing Toktong Pass.

Company A pushed out and secured a perimeter to the east of Company F's perimeter (see Map 3).

In an attempt to entice the enemy to move and reveal their positions in and around Toktong Pass, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, started warming fires. The Chinese were not expecting an attack from troops who were warming themselves; 1st Battalion changed tactics again and launched three simultaneous attacks on three different CCF strong points. The surprise attained by this action caught the CCF off guard. They fell back, running in the direction of 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, which was within a mile of Toktong Pass along the MSR. The 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, then called an air strike, which was the leading factor in a CCF regiment's complete elimination.

The 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, reached Hagaru-ri at 1900 on December 3, 1950. Behind the battalion leading the way were vehicles loaded with wounded and dead, artillery howitzers, a tank and the remainder of two Marine regimental combat teams. The last elements of the rear guard from Yudam-ni entered the Hagaru-ri perimeter at 1400 on December 4, 1950. Thus, the 1st Marine Division was united, with the exception of the two infantry battalions that were to the south at Koto-ri and Chinhung-ni.

Overcoming numerous obstacles — including continuous attacks, the relentless cold, a blown bridge in a narrow mountain pass and a 78-mile march to the sea — the 1st Marine Division and all included forces, the majority of the equipment, wounded and dead were evacuated on naval shipping at the port of Hungnam. The campaign ended when UN forces destroyed the entire port facility in a great explosion.

As commander of 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, Lieutenant Colonel Davis used the characteristics of the offense during the breakout operation from Yudam-ni to relieve Company F, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division, at Toktong Pass. Field Manual 100-5, Operations, describes the characteristics of the offense as the combination of surprise, concentration, tempo, and audacity.

Davis achieved surprise on numerous occasions during December 1-3, 1950 by “striking the enemy at a time or place or in a manner for which it is not physically or mentally ready.” (FM 100-5, p. 7-1). A prime example is when 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, continued the breakout attack force from Yudam-ni in a direction other than south on the MSR. The battalion gained freedom of action when it encountered CCFs and attacked from a direction the CCF was not anticipating. The most decisive surprise during the entire action was when the battalion conducted three simultaneous attacks from Company F’s position on Toktong Pass. This was most decisive because it enabled 1st Battalion to secure the entire pass and drive the preponderance of the enemy force into the direction of 3d Battalion, 5th Marines.

Three significant reasons that helped achieve surprise for 1st Battalion: First, if detected during the breakout, CCF may have assumed that the battalion was actually other CCF forces, because the Marines were in the CCF rear areas. Second, CCF commanders may have thought that one battalion would contribute little against their CCF actions. Third, when the battalion did attack, it was in a direction opposite of the CCF defenses—that is, in the rear or flank of the enemy. The CCF focus was the destruction of the main Marine force at Yudam-ni and the denial of the use of the MSR to the UN forces.

Colonel Davis achieved concentration of his forces during the breakout by massing



Marines begin withdrawing from Yudam-Ni after the Battle of Chosin Reservoir.

the effects of his battalion formation and weapon systems as well as exploiting the success from his actions (FM 100-5, p. 7-2). Concentrating his force, he attacked CCF units during the overland march by using combined arms, close air support, mortars, and machineguns. The effective combination of these weapon systems reduced the number of individual infantrymen required and saved the force countless casualties. “Speed, security, and deception are essential to successful concentration ...” which Colonel Davis constantly ensured by keeping the battalion moving after the breakout and after attacking the enemy outposts (FM 100-5, p. 7-2). Ensuring that the battalion moved on the correct azimuth of advance also attained speed. The best example of deception is the warming fires in the perimeter that were started before the simultaneous attack of the enemy outposts. Additionally, Davis made a conscious decision to leave the sick and wounded men at Yudam-ni, doubled up on the crew-served weapons crews, and instructed his battalion that the movement was to be conducted in silence. All of these issues added to the security of the force.

Tempo is “the rate of speed of military action; controlling or altering that rate is essential for maintaining the initiative” (FM 100-5, p. 7-2). Davis maintained the tempo during the breakout of the Yudam-ni perimeter by keeping his lead company up front, even though the Marines were exhausted from the fight to pass through the CCF lines. Stopping to move another company forward would have permitted the

CCF to maneuver, delay, or block the operation. After the attack on the CCF outpost, Lieutenant Colonel Davis kept the battalion moving. In addition to being a force protection issue, the Marines probably would have frozen from the sweat that formed during the attack, but Davis kept moving and maintained the initiative and tempo over CCF forces. This action also aided in the security of the force by not remaining in a position that the CCF knew of. Resting the Marines and permitting the battalion to sleep maintained the tempo because the rested Marines were able to regain their momentum in a few hours. Colonel Davis rested and fed his Marines before launching another attack on the CCF defensive outposts in Toktong Pass. Davis constantly adjusted the tempo and succeeded in keeping the CCF off balance.

“Audacity is a key component of any successful offensive action.” (FM 100-5, p. 7-3) The entire plan of allowing an infantry battalion to move overland in the mountains of North Korea, operating independently of its parent unit, is bold — particularly if the maneuver unit becomes decisively engaged. Company F’s building of warming fires in its positions, along with the unexpected launching of three simultaneous attacks, demonstrates the effective application of the characteristics of the offense.

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