

KOREAN WAR PROJECT

INFORMATION OF MARINE ACTION IN NORTHEASTERN KOREA HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS

HEADQUARTERS, U. S. MARINE CORPS
WASHINGTON, D. C.

UNCLASSIFIED

07H34750
[REDACTED]

AH-1551-man
13 Dec 1950

From: Commandant of the Marine Corps
To: Distribution List

Subj: Information of Marine action in northeastern Korea

Encl: (1) Narrative of subject action
(2) Confidential casualty analysis

1. Enclosure (1) is provided for information and such dissemination as recipients may deem desirable. Copies of Encl (1) have already been distributed to major posts and station newspapers.

2. Enclosure (2) is provided for assistance and guidance in advance planning and in official discussions. The figures in Encl (2) are not for public release. The casualty figures for the period after 20 November are subject to significant revision.

3. Upon detachment of Encl (2), this covering memorandum is downgraded to unclassified.

J. C. McQueen

J. C. McQUEEN
By direction

DISTRIBUTION: Special

DOWNGRADED AT 3 YEAR INTERVALS;
DECLASSIFIED AFTER 12 YEARS.
DOD DIR 5200.10

[REDACTED]
UNCLASSIFIED

HEADQUARTERS, U. S. MARINE CORPS
DIVISION OF PUBLIC INFORMATION
WASHINGTON 25, D. C.

12 December 1950

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Weary in flesh but unbroken in spirit after a twelve-day ordeal unmatched for hardships in Korea, the 1st Marine Division and elements of two U.S. infantry regiments completed a retreat of nearly 50 miles on 10 December to reach comparative safety in the plains north of Hamhung.

Overwhelming Chinese forces, seemingly vertical roads and temperatures of 25 below zero could not prevent the men in the wind-whipped parkas from fighting their way through the mountains to escape the enemy trap. So hemmed in were the Marines at times that the comment attributed to their commanding general, Major General Oliver P. Smith, might have been taken as a sober and literal statement of fact at the climax:

"We are not retreating; we are just attacking in a new direction."

This sums up a mobile fight in which the Leathernecks were facing the foe most of the way and giving back more than they received. From start to finish it was an epic of ice and fire that ranks alongside Tenaru at Guadalcanal, the Bloody Nose of Peleliu or some of the other pages in the World War II history of the 1st Marine Division.

The prelude may be dated back to 25 October, when the X Corps, commanded by Major General Edward M. Almond, landed unopposed at Wonsan with a mission to strike northward to the Manchurian border and clear out pockets of enemy resistance. This task began in the Wonsan area itself, where the guerrillas were so bold and numerous that an X Corps spokesman said:

"There are more Koreans behind us than ahead of us."

These words describe what was to become a normal daily condition of following weeks. As early as 28 October the tempo of the fighting speeded up when two Marine companies were cut off for a few hours near Kojo by several times their numbers of Reds dressed in civilian clothing. Vigorous air attacks were a factor in the rescue, but stiffened enemy resistance added to the plausibility of reports that the Chinese were massing in formidable numbers on the other side of the Yalu.

By the end of October the X Corps was pushing ahead on the Sinuiju and the Yalu River Power plants. The 5th and 7th Marines made good progress between Wonsan and Hagaru against resistance generally described as "moderate" throughout the first half of November. On the 15th, the 7th Infantry Division reached the east side of Pujon Reservoir, and the Marines were credited with the destruction of most of a Chinese division while driving toward Hagaru.

Although resistance was generally announced as "light" for this period, the Marines had their next to the heaviest

day's casualties of the retreat on 3 November, when a battalion of the 1st Marines was cut off 35 miles west of Wonsan. Air support aided the men who fought their way out, and the casualties were evacuated by air.

The last half of the month seemed to be following the same steady, predictable pace. Seven U.N. divisions, recently joined by elements of the British Royal Marines, were taking part in General Douglas A. MacArthur's all out offensive to "end the war". And then with devastating fury the enemy struck back in force on the night of 28 November at Yudam on the western edge of Changjin Reservoir. The 5th and 7th Marines not only defended themselves against three Chinese divisions but advanced and counterattacked repeatedly before falling back during the next five days to Hagaru, at the south end of the Reservoir.

Here General Smith reorganized the forces, estimated at from 20,000 to 25,000, which were to begin the retreat-- the Marines plus elements of the 31st and 32nd Infantry regiments, the British Royal Marines and some South Korean troops.

Casualties were successfully evacuated by helicopter-- 2,351 of them from 2 to 6 December, according to one report. All equipment which could not be carried on the person or in the 1,000 available vehicles had to be destroyed as the troops began their race against encirclement at 0630 on the 6th, with the 7th Marines in the lead.

Seven Chinese divisions were identified in the Chosin Reservoir area on this date. Elements of these forces brought pressure on the rear of the retreating column in the vicinity of Koto. Worse yet, other Chinese troops were reported to have dug in on both sides of the road on the route to Majon -- the halfway point to Hamhung and escape.

At this time a Korean Red communique already claimed the destruction of "a considerable part of two surrounded American divisions."

Proximity-fused bombs dropped by Marine Corsairs and artillery preparations by the 11th Marines supported the frequent counterattacks of ground troops supplied from the air. All rear positions were stoutly held until the time of a planned withdrawal. General Smith was quoted as saying, "It was bad (the drive to Koto) but not so bad as we expected."

Only 28 air miles stretched between that dismal village and Hamhung. But the road is winding, steep and narrow, so that even jeeps cannot pass each other in spots. On the anniversary of Pearl Harbor (American Time), or 0725 on December 7th, all forces were in Koto and on their way eastward toward the coast. A blinding snowstorm came on that historic date and the following day, adding to the trials of troops who had to throw their water cans in bonfires to thaw them out.

When a bridge across a dam was dynamited by the enemy south of Koto, eight Flying Boxcars dropped a new 16-ton treadway bridge in eight spans, a span at a time. Then the

column lurched on, pausing only to fight its way out of tight spots.

From Koto, on a bleak plateau 3,500 feet above the sea, the road seemed to lead perpendicularly downward in places toward Hamhung. South of Majon, a drop of 1800 feet in three miles multiplied the troubles of half-frozen troops. Here on the 8th, with the blinding snowstorm still in progress, heavy ground fighting had been going on for 24 hours, with the Chinese making use of caves overlooking the "mountain-walled" road. But there was hope ahead, for the relief column of the 3rd Infantry Division had approached near enough on this date to give rise to premature announcements of contact.

More bridge trouble awaited on the 9th-- another day of heavy ground fighting -- when the Reds destroyed a bridge over a mountain gorge. The Leathernecks fought off the Chinese for four hours while the engineers built a span over which 100 vehicles passed before nightfall. Then the skidding of two trucks blocked the way for another four-hour period until 100 Marines applied enough muscle to move them out of the way.

Relief forces contacted 1st Division advance elements at Pohujang on the evening of the 9th. General Smith could still report morale relatively high as he prepared to fight his way southward with the 1st and 7th Marines in the lead and the 5th Marines as a rear guard. Neither the cold nor the scanty rations had sapped the aggressive spirit of men who closed

with the enemy on occasion in hand-to-hand work -- a test even for well-fed and rested troops.

Only magnificent air support enabled the 5th Marines to continue rear guard actions covering the retreat from Koto. The 10th was the day of deliverance, though the ragged survivors had felt confident the day before that nothing would stop them from fighting their way out. But for the record it was the afternoon of the 10th when the 5th Marines, as rear guard, gradually disengaged with the enemy in the defensive perimeter around Hamhung.

The way to Hamhung was now clear as one of the epics of American military history came to a less costly end than could have been anticipated a week before. Not all the Leathernecks, of course, came back. Incomplete casualties from 27 October to 5 December amounted to 1,153 killed, wounded and missing in the 1st Marine Division, and this number is expected to be increased by the results of the fights of the last five days.

Any American casualty is a loss not to be dismissed lightly, but the outcome might have been much more dreadful if the troops had not fought through. Once again the man with the rifle, under competent leadership had provided the imponderable of sheer spunk which made a fact out of the improbable.

CASUALTY FIGURES⁽¹⁾
MARINES IN KOREA

	<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>KIA</u>	<u>WIA</u>	<u>MIA</u>	<u>NBC</u> ⁽⁴⁾
Pusan ⁽²⁾	914	175	727	6	6 ⁽⁵⁾
Inchon-Seoul ⁽²⁾	2303	422	1848	8	5 ⁽⁵⁾
Wonsan-Hungnam ⁽³⁾					
I 26Oct-14Nov ⁽³⁾	1456	112	478	4	862 ⁽⁴⁾
II 15Nov-20Nov ⁽³⁾	445	15	18	0	412 ⁽⁴⁾
III 21Nov-27Nov ⁽³⁾	378	10	13	2	353 ⁽⁴⁾
IV 28Nov-4Dec ⁽³⁾	1388	138	828	18	404 ⁽⁴⁾
V 5Dec-9Dec ⁽³⁾	2742	233	1291	247	971 ⁽⁴⁾

(1) Casualties, not individuals. A number of individuals have become casualties more than once. Ratio officer/enlisted casualties, 1/14.

(2) Statistics for Pusan and Inchon-Seoul operations generally accurate. These represent an analysis of day-to-day figures maintained by personnel accounting section.

(3) Statistics for Wonsan-Hungnam phase are best present estimates, derived from situation reports and personnel accounting records as of 1100, 12Dec50. Supplementary casualty reports arriving HQMC continually revise figures, usually upward. This is result of tardily submitted reports from lower echelons, death of WIA, return of MIA, determination that an NBC also becomes a WIA, etc.

(4) Non-battle casualties represent personnel incapacitated by automobile accidents, downing, SIW, accidental discharge, over-exposure, frost-bite, etc. Of these, in the Wonsan-Hungnam phase, slightly less than one percent have thus far resulted in death.

(5) Known to be deaths.

Enclosure (2)