

## **Chosin Reservoir: The Battle That Stalled a War**

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### ABSTRACT

The onset of the Korean War was indicative of the superpowers' quest for ideological supremacy, with multiple factors setting the stage for massive confrontation. North Korean forces were able to quickly overwhelm those of South Korea. The United States entered the conflict and was able to reverse the North Korean gains and drive them to their border with China. Unknown to NATO forces, the Chinese Army was mobilized to intercept the allied forces at the Chosin Reservoir. Despite having superior numbers, US forces were able to retreat and save the majority of their personnel in North Korean territory. The combined North Korean and Chinese armies won a pyrrhic victory that shocked both sides into a stalemate.

**Keywords:** Chosin Reservoir, Chosin Few, Korean War, Cold War, 1950, General Douglas MacArthur, Major General Edward "Ned" Almond, Major General Oliver Smith, People's Volunteer Army

## **Embalse de Chosin: la batalla que detuvo una guerra**

### RESUMEN

El inicio de la Guerra de Corea fue indicativo de la búsqueda de las superpotencias por la supremacía ideológica, con múltiples factores preparando el escenario para una confrontación masiva. Las fuerzas de Corea del Norte pudieron abrumar rápidamente a las de Corea del Sur. Estados Unidos entró en el conflicto y pudo revertir las ganancias de Corea del Norte y llevarlos a su frontera con China. Desconocido para las fuerzas de la OTAN, el ejército chino se movilizó para interceptar a las fuerzas aliadas en el embalse de Chosin. A pesar de tener un número superior, las fuerzas estadounidenses pudieron retirarse y salvar a la mayoría de su personal en territorio norcoreano. Los ejércitos combinados de Corea del Norte y China obtuvieron una victoria pírrica que dejó a ambos lados en un punto muerto.

**Palabras clave:** Embalse de Chosin, Chosin Few, Guerra de Corea, Guerra Fría, 1950, General Douglas MacArthur, General de Divi-

sión Edward “Ned” Almond, General de División Oliver Smith,  
Ejército de Voluntarios del Pueblo

## 长津湖战役：让战争停止的一次战役

### 摘要

朝鲜战争的开端表明了超级大国对意识形态主导的追求，伴随着多个因素（为大范围冲突奠定基础）。朝鲜军力迅速战胜了韩国。美国进入这场战争，逆转了朝鲜优势并将其驱逐到与中国交界处。北约军并不知道中国军队的加入，后者被动员在长津湖拦截联盟军。除了在数量上占优，美军还成功撤离战场并挽救了在朝鲜境内的大多数人员。朝鲜和中国军队的合作赢得了一场让交战双方都陷入僵局的惨胜。

关键词：长津湖，长津精英，朝鲜战争，冷战，1950，上将道格拉斯·麦克阿瑟，少将爱德华·“奈德”·阿尔蒙德（Edward “Ned” Almond），少将奥利弗·史密斯（Oliver Smith），中国人民志愿军

The Korean War was the initial culmination of the geopolitical and ideological struggle for dominance at the onset of the Cold War. The two superpowers sought to support their ideological platforms, but the concept of Nuclear War, or World War Three, prevented a direct confrontation. The Korean Peninsula provided multiple nations with an opportunity to prevent the spread of an opposing political system on a neutral stage. All major powers rose to bring their influence to bear, culminating in the Battle of the Chosin Reservoir. That confrontation became inevitable and the results of the battle left both sides in a stalemate

that neither could recover from without risking all-out global war. In the end, the Chosin Reservoir was the climax of a war that stalled efforts on both sides to secure a total victory.

The Korean Peninsula became a political stage for the world powers to flex their respective ideologies. Like all stages, this one has a number of actors that had their own motivations behind their support that played a factor in the decisions leading up to the Battle of the Chosin Reservoir. These motivations show how the confrontation between US and Chinese forces became inevitable. It all begins with the end of the Second World War.

At the end of the Second World War, there was an ideological divide between the two major superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, and their respective political ideologies, capitalism and communism. Former Nazi Germany-held territories were divided into spheres of influence dominated by occupying countries. A split into East and West was created by both superpowers in a bid for dominance. This gave rise to a military alliance in the form of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) between all nations allied with the United States. Some nations became battlegrounds for the spread of communism, such as Turkey and Greece.<sup>1</sup> In response to this, President Truman developed the Truman Doctrine, which stated that the United States would provide necessary support to prevent, or contain, the spread of communism. In Turkey and Greece, this was in the form of economic and military aid. Korea was a different matter.

The Soviet Union had committed itself to supporting growing communist governments all over the world. In Europe, this meant that it supported puppet regimes in the Eastern European territories taken from Nazi Germany.<sup>2</sup> In other locations around the world, the Soviet Union provided economic and military aid and advisors to facilitate the overthrow of democratic governments. The most significant case was that of China. China had been embroiled in a civil war beginning in 1927, which was essentially paused during the Japanese invasion of Mainland China. Once Japan was defeated, the forces

of the Communist Party of China, led by Mao Zedong, and the Kuomintang resumed fighting, with the Communist Party taking the country by 1950. Once firmly in power, China was able to begin to support communist parties in countries along its own borders, such as Burma, Laos, North Vietnam, and North Korea.

Europe was split into the two ideological spheres of influence based on whichever country had effective control of that area. Korea was arbitrarily divided during the Yalta Conference into two halves along the 38th Parallel, with the former Korean capital of Seoul lying within the southern, US-controlled territory.<sup>3</sup> Once World War II ended, both superpowers provided support to their controlled territory. Additionally, North Korean fighters supported the Communist Party of China during the Chinese Civil War. The North Koreans returned to North Korea with their arms and equipment and the valuable experience they gained fighting the Kuomintang. The bonds between Josef Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Kim-Il Sung bolstered North Korean interests for a forcible reunification. As evidence of this, Kim-Il Sung sought approval for all war plans against South Korea before acting on them.<sup>4</sup>

With that approval, the North Korean forces moved south of the 38th Parallel on June 25, 1950, meeting minimal resistance from South Korean emplacements.<sup>5</sup> Two months into the conflict, the South Korean forces and those US Army units that had arrived from Japan had been pushed back into

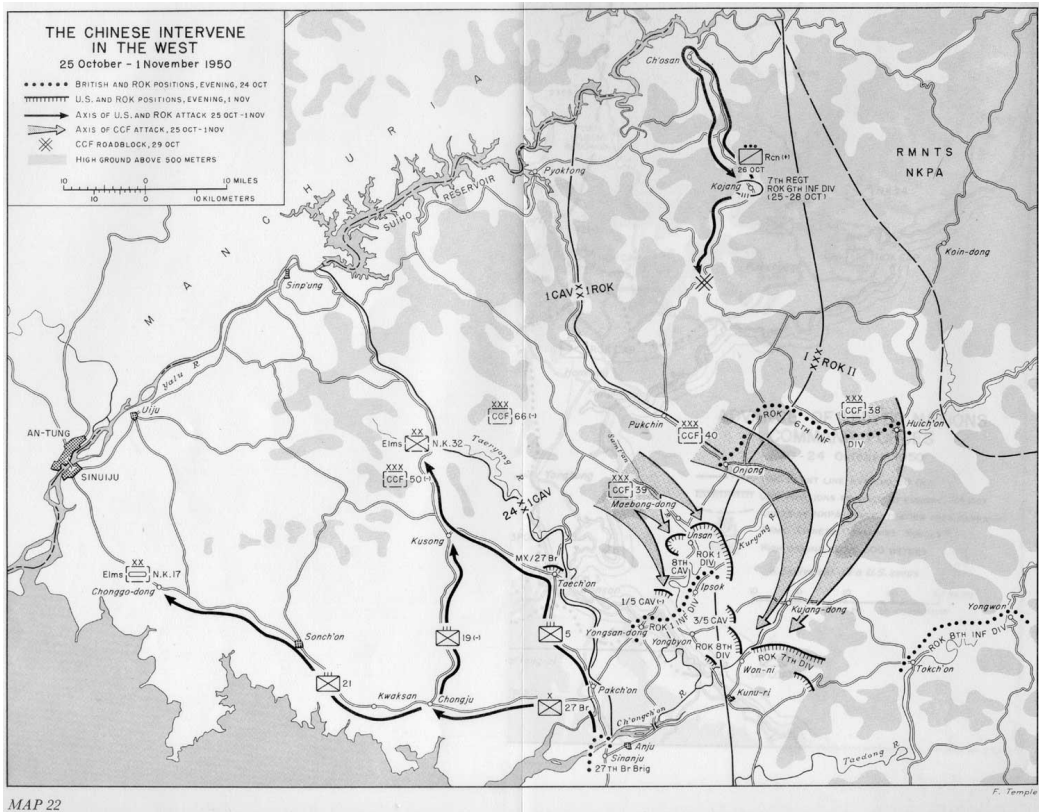
a perimeter around the port city of Pusan. The attacks were repelled due to the combination of well-entrenched defenders and constant attacks on the North Korean supply lines by the newly minted US Air Force.

The United Nations officially condemned the attack. However, this was primarily due to the absence of the Soviet Union and China's veto authority, which was still in possession of Taiwan's government in exile. The Truman administration was initially hesitant to get involved, due to its focus on preventing the spread of communism in Europe. However, the United States decided to intervene to protect Japan after the interception of a Soviet communiqué stating that the Soviet Union would not deploy forces in support of North Korea. President Truman entrusted the plan to General Douglas MacArthur. MacArthur had developed a living legend persona and was viewed as "a man with a solemn regard for his own divinity."<sup>6</sup> MacArthur put together a brilliant plan to turn the tide of war. He planned to use the US Marine Corps' amphibious landing capabilities to insert at the port city of Inchon, located in close proximity to Seoul. The landing was thought impossible due to low tide waters and treacherous inlet sandbars. To accomplish this, MacArthur brought in two individuals. The first was one of his most trusted, or at least most agreeable, generals: Major General Edward "Ned" Almond. Almond was a devoted believer in MacArthur's cult of personality and was guaranteed to follow any order presented to impress MacArthur.<sup>7</sup> Almond would be given command of

X Corps, which comprised forty thousand men from the 1st Marine Division and the 7th Infantry Division. MacArthur also brought in Major General Oliver Smith to help devise the landing. Despite some counterintuitive guidance from MacArthur, the invasion of Inchon was a success, and the troops attacking Pusan were forced to withdraw to North Korea.<sup>8</sup> However, Almond and Smith clashed frequently with MacArthur supporting Almond's positions.

The North Korean forces withdrew past the 38th Parallel by the beginning of October 1950. Initially MacArthur was instructed not to pursue them, as the United States did not want to bring the Soviets or Chinese into the war.<sup>9</sup> South Korean forces continued to push past the 38th Parallel and the United Nations task force followed. MacArthur himself felt that the only possible outcome was to push all the way into China to fully crush the North Korean forces. However, China was expecting a confrontation with the United States and had been preparing since June of that year. As United Nations forces approached the North Korean/Chinese border along the Yalu River, Chinese forces secretly entered North Korea and engaged the South Korean and United Nations forces. They first engaged in battle on October 25 at Onjong, surprising the Republic of Korea (South Korean military – ROK) forces. The battle was a disaster for ROK forces, which were forced to retreat south and were separated by impassable terrain in the form of the Taebaek Mountains along the eastern peninsula. As part of the First Phase Campaign, China was able to win

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The Chinese Intervene in the West - October 25 - November 1, 1950. The US Army in the Korean War, Center of Military History, US Army, Washington, DC.

a victory over the Eighth Army, turning the tide of the United Nations' campaign. This was followed by an attack on the X Corps' Marines at Sudong, which was repulsed.

A number of factors had come together to bring these events to fruition. MacArthur believed in a guaranteed victory despite the input he was receiving from his field commanders. In fact, MacArthur was noted as not spending a single night in Korea, preferring to return to his headquarters in Japan. The overwhelmingly successful landing in Inchon had bolstered his view of the X Corps and his dangerous underestimation of China. China was con-

cerned that the Americans would not stop at the Chinese/Korean border as part of the Truman Doctrine's approach to communism. China's response was to form the People's Volunteer Army (PVA) of expatriated North Koreans in the same manner US forces were officially dubbed the United Nations Police Force. Both of the administrative moves indicated that both nations were committed to fight for dominance but did not want to risk an all-out war between the two countries.

MacArthur's response to Chinese forces joining the conflict was to organize a Home-By-Christmas campaign due to his belief that the PVA had



Marines talking cover at the Battle of Chosin Reservoir, Korean War. Photo by Sergeant Frank C. Kerr, US Marines.

withdrawn to Chinese territory.<sup>10</sup> To this end, Almond formulated a plan for the X Corps to move west into Yudami-ni, while the Army's 7th Infantry Division moved east to Sinhung-ni. The 3rd Infantry Division providing security along the western flank of the advancing task force became spread over 400 miles of front lines. The Americans, along with the ROK forces, had begun to envelope Lake Jangjin, which maps referred to by their Japanese pronunciation as the Chosin Reservoir. The PVA had also staged around the Chosin Reservoir with fifteen divisions of approximately 120,000 infantry. The stage was now set, with both sides seeking the complete destruction of the other, and

both sides having to endure harsh cold weather conditions.

Almond and Smith continued to clash over strategy, as the former only wanted to meet MacArthur's arbitrary deadline for victory. Smith cautioned Almond about the overextended Marine Division but was overruled. X Corps' Marines moved into Hagaru-ri, which they simply called Hagaru, and began to fortify it.<sup>11</sup> There were also battalion-sized Forward Operating Bases (FOB) at Koto-ri and Chinhung-ri along the supply route from the south. The 7th Marines continued to push forward from Hagaru and into Yudam-ni while the 5th Marines enveloped right of the reservoir. Smith opposed this



A column of the US First Marine Division move through Chinese lines, Battle of Chosin Reservoir. Photo by Corporal Peter McDonald, USMC

form of deployment and convinced Almond to make some concessions. First, Colonel Allan MacLean split from the 7th Infantry Division and replace the 7th Marines in the east. The second concession was to allow the Marines to construct an airfield at Hagaru, which Almond only allowed because only Marines would perform the labor. The date was November 27, 1950 and the PVA forces were about to attack in force.

The PVA 9th Army crossed the border of China mainly on foot due to fears of being targeted by the US Air Force. Five divisions moved down from the north on both sides of the Chosin

Reservoir. Simultaneously three divisions moved around the reservoir to the south of Hagaru in order to attack Koto-ri and thereby cut US supply lines. In the evening of November 27, the PVA launched attacks at Hagaru, Koto-ri, and Yudam-ni. Thanks in large parts to Smith's preparations, the 5th and 7th Marines recognized the need to dig in for the evening and were prepared to do so. The PVA 59th Division attempted to block the road between Hagaru and Yudam-ni, but Company F, referred to as Fox Company, 7th Marines were defending the Toktong Pass. US forces were able to hold out against

the Chinese onslaught, with the exception of Task Force MacLean, which was spread out across the eastern shore of the Chosin Reservoir. Task Force MacLean withdrew to Hagaru with approximately 75 percent killed in action and 50 percent of the remaining forces able to continue fighting.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, Smith and Colonel Lewis “Chesty” Puller had ordered a convoy to move from Koto-ri to Hagaru in order to reinforce Hagaru. The PVA was able to ambush the convoy and separate it into three. One-third was able to press on to Hagaru, while another third was forced to return to Koto-ri. The remaining third did not survive the battle.

The PVA did not fare much better and received heavy casualties from their attacks on Yudam-ni and Hagaru compared to casualties for the Americans, which ranged from 30-50 percent. The PVA 58th Division was nearly completely destroyed, as was much of the 20th Corps. To the east, the PVA successfully turned back the US Eighth Army at the Battle of the Ch'ongch'on River inflicting heavy losses. In response, MacArthur ordered the X Corps to withdraw from the Chosin Reservoir. The issue became how to move the entirety of the X Corps out of the battlespace under threat of Chinese attack, which had become more precarious once the PVA 26th Corps, comprised of the 76th and 77th Divisions, arrived at Hagaru on December 6. Almond initially wished to fly out all troops from Yudam-ri and Hagaru, but Smith refused to abandon the Marines' heavy equipment and artillery. Smith famously declared that those garrisons

would “attack in a different direction” and head to Hagaru.<sup>13</sup>

The withdrawal involved the movement of all United Nations forces south to the port of Hungnam with the 7th Marines in the lead and the 5th Marines covering the rear flank. The 26th Corps attacked Hagaru on the night of the 6th but were repulsed as the 7th Marines continued to clear the route between Koto-ri and Hagaru. The breakout continued well for the Americans, but the PVA began to destroy roadways and bridges in order to trap the X Corps north of Hungnam. This included the pivotal Funchilin Pass south of Koto-ri. With the bridge destroyed, the Chinese were successful in stopping the retreat of US forces and had a solid defensive point. The Marines contested the defenders and were able to airdrop several bridges to allow for the Marines' withdrawal to Hungnam, although the Chinese continued attacks on Hungnam.<sup>14</sup>

Evacuations at Hungnam had begun as early as December 8, while the Eighth Army continued south. Supporting aircraft and naval gunfire were able to aid in the defense, while the remaining X Corps personnel and equipment was evacuated, along with approximately one-third of the Korean refugees. The last ship departed Hungnam on December 24, and the port was destroyed to prevent its use by Chinese forces, which took what remained of the port the following day.<sup>15</sup> The original intent of the withdrawal was to Wonsan north of the 38th Parallel, but X Corps returned to South Korea in early 1951 instead.

At the end of the Battle of the Chosin Reservoir, both sides were devastated. US and ROK losses totaled 17,833 casualties as a result of combat and non-combat related injuries.<sup>16</sup> The 1st Marine Division reported over seven thousand of these non-combat casualties, a direct result of the intense cold weather.<sup>17</sup> Smith's successful withdrawal of troops and equipment allowed for those troops to reinforce the Eighth Army almost immediately. The PVA forcing US troops to retreat resulted in a huge blow to the concept of US military superiority. Chinese intervention and the withdrawal of troops from North Korean territory ended all hopes of a quick United Nations victory and MacArthur's Home-by-Christmas campaign. MacArthur's opinion of US forces remained unchanged and shortly after, he challenged China by declaring to them that they had been defeated. His initial belief that China would not enter the war, his refusal to acknowledge the full scope of the situation, and his conflicts with President Truman led to his relief as Commander-in-Chief of the United Nations Command.

North Korean territory lost to the United Nations Command was returned to North Korea by January 1951. The combined Chinese and North Korean army would have been able to occupy the whole peninsula. However, the

PLA was forced into a pyrrhic victory at a cost of an estimated forty thousand casualties with some estimates ranging from sixty to eighty thousand troops lost. A total of twelve PVA divisions were no longer combat effective and the entirety of the PVA Ninth Army was unable to return to the war effort until March of 1951. Two PVA divisions were disbanded as a result of the battle. Despite these losses, China pushed forward and was able to retake Seoul, bolstered by the victory at the Chosin Reservoir. As the Eighth Army was able to survive and rejoin the war effort quickly, US forces were able to retake Seoul again in March 1951. This caused the Chinese Fourth Phase Offensive to fail and the Fifth Phase Offensive was a catastrophic failure for China. The resulting United Nations counteroffensive stabilized the front lines just north of the 38th Parallel. The combination of all of these losses forced China to change their focus from driving the United States from the Korean Peninsula to defending Chinese assets. Both sides bore terrible losses that made the concept of a quick total victory impossible, resulting in two more years of relative stalemate due to stalled peace talks regarding prisoners of war. As such, the outcome of the Battle of the Chosin Reservoir produced conditions that stalled the Korean War and prevented either side from gaining a decisive advantage.

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3 T.R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War* (Dulles, VA: Brassey's, 2000), 18.

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12 Lynn Montross and Captain Nicholas Canzona, *US Marine Operations in Korea, 1950-1953, Volume III: The Chosin Reservoir Campaign* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1957), 243–44.

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13 Sides, *Ground*, 261.

14 Cleaver, *Frozen*, 322–24.

15 Fehrenbach, *War*, 250.

16 Cleaver, *Frozen*, 343–79.

17 Montross, *Marine Operations*, 382–83.