

MacArthur at Inchon: Good Decision Well Executed

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ABSTRACT

Early in the Korean War, the South Korean and U.S. forces had been pushed to a small, encircled defensive position. If that position was overrun, North Korea would have complete control over the entire peninsula. General Douglas MacArthur, Commander of the United Nations Command forces, ordered a daring amphibious assault at the city of Inchon. Despite disbelief from his peers and other military and political leaders at the time, MacArthur pursued this apparently illogical landing site as the location of the primary counterattack, a counterattack that would prove incredibly successful. The amphibious landing at Inchon destroyed the North Korean line and forced them into retreat, and only slower than expected follow-on action by American forces allowed enough North Korean forces to escape and avoid complete destruction.

Keywords: MacArthur, Korean War, Inchon, amphibious, strategy, counter-attack, intelligence, planning

MacArthur en Inchon: Buena decisión bien ejecutada

RESUMEN

A principios de la Guerra de Corea, las fuerzas surcoreanas y estadounidenses habían sido empujadas a una pequeña posición defensiva cercada. Si esa posición fuera invadida, Corea del Norte tendría el control total de toda la península. El General Douglas MacArthur, Comandante de las fuerzas del Comando de las Naciones Unidas, ordenó un audaz asalto anfibio en la ciudad de Inchon. A pesar de la incredulidad de sus compañeros y otros líderes militares y políticos en ese momento, MacArthur persiguió este lugar de aterrizaje aparentemente ilógico como la ubicación del contraataque principal, un contraataque que resultaría increíblemente exitoso. El desembarco anfibio en Inchon destruyó la línea de Corea del Norte y los obligó a retirarse, y solo una acción de seguimiento

más lenta de lo esperado por parte de las fuerzas estadounidenses permitió que suficientes fuerzas norcoreanas escaparan y evitaran la destrucción total.

Palabras clave: MacArthur, Guerra de Corea, Inchon, anfibio, estrategia, contraataque, inteligencia, planificación

仁川战役中的麦克阿瑟：出色执行良好决策

摘要

朝鲜战争初期，韩国和美国军队被推到了一个小型的、被包围的防御阵地。如果这一阵地被占领，朝鲜将完全控制整个半岛。联合国军司令部总司令道格拉斯·麦克阿瑟将军下令对仁川市进行一次大胆的两栖行动。尽管当时他的同僚和其他军事政治领导人对此表示怀疑，但麦克阿瑟还是将这个明显不合逻辑的着陆点作为主要反击地点，这一反击将被证明是非常成功的。仁川的两栖登陆摧毁了朝鲜防线并迫使其撤退，但美军采取的后续行动晚于预期，导致足够多的朝鲜军队得以逃脱并避免被完全摧毁。

关键词：麦克阿瑟，朝鲜战争，仁川，两栖作战，战略，反击，情报，规划

Following the North Korean attack into South Korea in the summer of 1950, the United Nations and American forces were immediately and repeatedly pushed back until a defensive position could be created and maintained near the city of Pusan. Although the situation at first glance appeared bleak for the United Nations Command (UNC), with friendly forces retreating, and advancing North Korean Army (KPA) divisions pressing deep into South Korea on several fronts, the actual status was more manageable than

it appeared. To get to this point, KPA military leaders had committed virtually all of their reserve forces to the effort and the losses suffered in the field were proving to be costly.¹ Furthermore, the U.S. Eighth Army was deployed in a solid defensive position, and American air superiority under the Fifth Air Force had inflicted devastating casualties to KPA tanks and armor, reducing their ability to continue their offensive thrust or move rapidly to defend contested areas.² The situation as it was proved ripe for a UNC counterattack against a

weakened and critically overextended KPA, and a coordinated counterattack was exactly what the Commander of the United Nations Command, General Douglas MacArthur ordered via a controversial amphibious assault at the South Korean city of Inchon (code-named Operation CHROMITE) in September 1950.

It is clear in hindsight that the amphibious assault at Inchon was a masterstroke for the UNC effort in Korea—a textbook example of how such an action should be completed. However, in September 1950, the amphibious assault at Inchon was not necessarily considered a *fait accompli* by all military and political leadership. Nevertheless, General MacArthur pushed for and eventually received clearance for this effort, and although naysayers could argue that the idea to land forces at Inchon was a bad one that succeeded in spite of its shortcomings, in reality the selection of Inchon as a landing site was both operationally and strategically sound. Although the landing at Inchon could have proved to have had debilitating effects on the UN mission in Korea if it had failed, in general it was a good idea that was very well-executed that could have won the war in a short timeframe if not for mistakes that occurred after the landing.

The amphibious landing at Inchon was a solid decision by General MacArthur primarily because he understood that the KPA was overextended, and further that an amphibious assault well-behind the rear of their forces could effectively sever their supply and

communication lines. MacArthur was not the only high-ranking officer with this belief, however, but what separated him from his peers was his firm belief that the landing should be at Inchon, a city much further to the north than what conventional logic recommended at the time. Primarily going against the combined wisdom of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, MacArthur pushed for Inchon as the landing site due to his unshakable certainty that due to it being so far north of the KPA location, that once UNC forces were ashore they would be able to more easily envelop the enemy who would not be able to reinforce themselves with any sort of expediency.³ Believing that an amphibious assault closer to the KPA lines would not achieve this (which is what the JCS were recommending), MacArthur chose Inchon and stubbornly stuck with it. More importantly, MacArthur accurately assessed the situation and understood that strategically, a successful attack at Inchon would strike at the North Korean center of gravity, the KPA. With this attack, MacArthur was hoping not to just make a beachhead or forward operating base, he was aiming for a much higher and strategically important goal of severing the KPA from their lines of supply and communications, and summarily enveloping the enemy forces to win the war.⁴

It must be briefly noted from a tactical and operational perspective, there were many tangential positives to choosing Inchon as well. The close proximity of Inchon to Kimpo Airfield, a high value asset and the largest airfield in Korea, would allow for land based

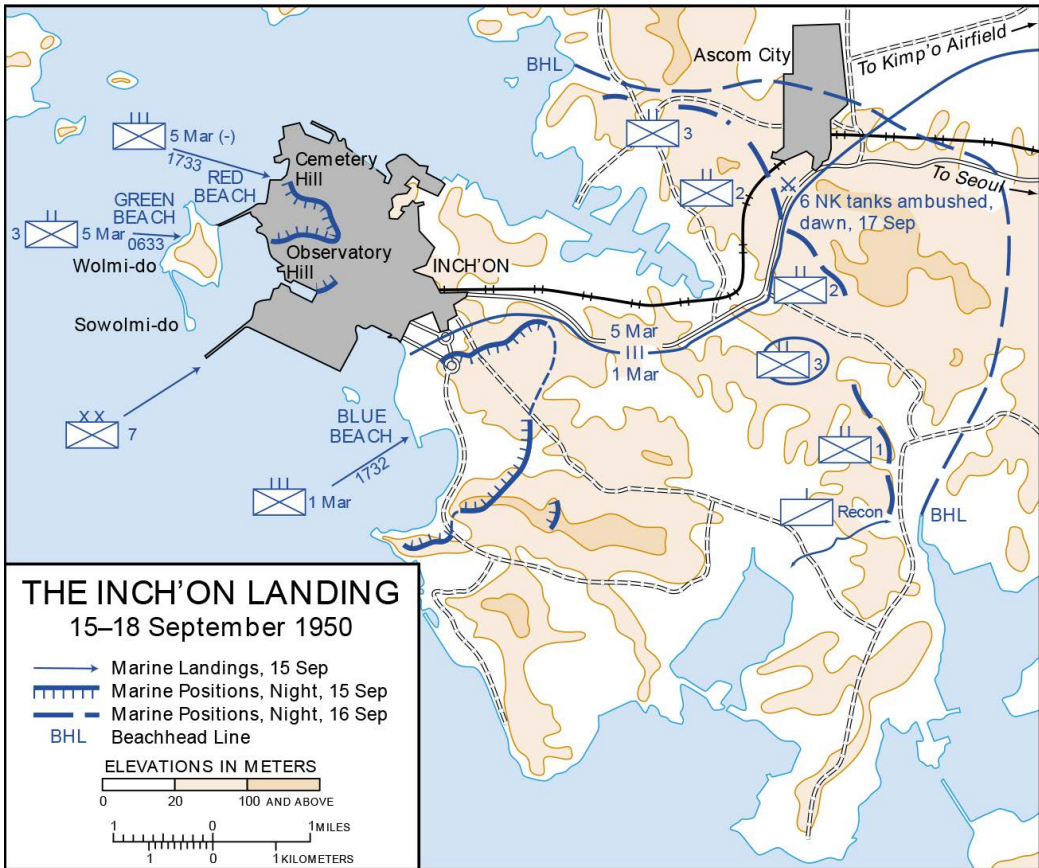


Image 1: Map of the invasion of Inchon. The three landing sites, Red, Green, and Blue Beaches, depicted here detail the United Nations forces enveloping action which led to the rapid acquisition of beachheads and the collapse of the KPA defenses. Stephen L.Y. Gammons. *The Korean War: The UN Offensive*. U.S. Army Center for Military History Pamphlet. CMH Pub 19-7. <https://history.army.mil/html/bookshelves/resmat/korea/intro/commemorative-products.html>

aerial action once captured.⁵ Seizing Kimpo Airfield was also significant because it allowed the air assets under the Far East Air Forces (FEAF) to, after the success at Inchon, flex from providing ground support and aerial interdiction to strategic bombing in North Korea, a shift that weakened the enemy for forthcoming attacks.⁶ Furthermore, MacArthur was also keen on the strategic (while largely symbolic) signifi-

cance of recapturing the South Korean capital of Seoul, which was less than 30 kilometers from Inchon. This was important, as MacArthur hoped that seating South Korean leader Syngman Rhee back in power in Seoul would give more legitimacy to the young country and inspire further effort among Republic of Korea (ROK) forces in the field.⁷

Also of note is that Inchon was not suspected as a possible landing site

by the North Korean leadership, something that MacArthur was extremely focused on as an aspect of the operation. The principle of surprise weighed heavily upon MacArthur's decision-making, and it was front and center in any brief or proposal that he had to make to senior leadership. Historical analysis quickly reveals that the most successful amphibious landings throughout history have hinged on surprise and deception, both of which MacArthur understood were key to the landing at Inchon working as intended. A prime example of this was the British success at the Battle of Quebec during the Seven Years' War, where British forces conducted an amphibious assault with devastating success due in part to the British commitment to secrecy and the French inability to believe that an amphibious assault at the Plains of Abraham was even possible. These parallels to Inchon were remarkable in that the North Korean forces were completely surprised and their leadership also refused to believe that Inchon would be where MacArthur attacked. MacArthur staunchly believed that surprise would offset the potential negatives associated with Inchon that greatly disturbed his fellow military leaders, such as close the proximity to Soviet forces on the nearby Liaoning Peninsula.⁸

Finally, MacArthur concluded that if the landing at Inchon did not produce a quick victory as he surmised would occur, his forces would still be in a strategically sound position. Once ashore at Inchon, should the UN forces somehow get bogged down, they would still be relieving pressure for the belea-

guered Pusan perimeter and also be extremely close to the 38th parallel. Having troops so close to the former armistice line could give U.S. and UNC leadership the opportunity to take an operational pause and allow the communist North Korean leadership a chance to choose to conduct peace talks. This situation, however, was unlikely, and the much more plausible scenario of a rapid envelopment of the KPA allowed MacArthur and fellow leaders to dream bigger and thereby shift war aims to moving north of the 38th parallel with the goal of reuniting the peninsula into one Korea.⁹

There are numerous counterarguments against choosing Inchon as the base of an amphibious assault, although nearly all are at the tactical level. Those will be discussed because they are important but it must be noted that strategically, the vast majority of military leadership at the time approved of an amphibious assault of some order, just not the location. It is worth acknowledging that MacArthur largely ignored the numerous aspects about Inchon that made it such a dangerous location to attempt a large scale amphibious assault. Nature itself made Inchon a formidable obstacle for an amphibious landing in many ways, most notably the tides which were in a word, enormous. It was known to military planners that the tides in the Inchon harbor had a range of 32 feet, a fact that limited daylight landings to three or four days each month.¹⁰ Furthermore, the approaches to the harbor at Inchon were extremely narrow, and the anchorage was in general small with high seawalls. This narrow entryway



Image 2: General MacArthur’s vision and determination led to Inchon being chosen as the invasion site for the crucial United Nations counterattack, personally observed the operation while aboard the USS *Mount McKinley*. In this image, Gen. Douglas MacArthur (seated center), Commander-in-Chief of the Far East Command, watches the bombardment of Inchon, Korea from the bridge of the USS *Mount McKinley* on September 15, 1950. Brigadier General Courtney Whitney (on MacArthur’s right) and Maj. Gen. Edward M. Almond (on MacArthur’s left) observe alongside Gen. MacArthur. Photograph courtesy of the National Archives. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/531373>

was further complicated by the belief that the entry had been mined.¹¹ Also, despite attempts at subversion and distraction, the enemy was still made aware of intentions for the landing at Inchon. This was exemplified by the fact that media dubbed the upcoming mission as “Operation Common Knowledge,” and the harrowing capture of a North

Korean spy who was found with a copy of Operation CHROMITE’s operation plan.¹² Luckily for UN forces, this advance notification of the impending invasion was largely ignored by North Korean leadership, which expected an assault to occur at another location (in part due to the widely held belief that Inchon in fact, was a terrible location to

attempt such an attack for the geographical reasons just listed).

It cannot be ignored that the decision by MacArthur to launch the major counterattack of the Korean War at Inchon was a personal one. Military planning is a difficult task, but made even more so when personal feelings impact the decision making process. MacArthur let his personal feelings dictate his approach to the decision to use Inchon as the landing site for Operation CHROMITE, which could have had a huge impact on the outcome of the war if the combined prevailing wisdom had indeed been correct. MacArthur went out on a limb alone on this decision, facing firm pushback from his fellow military leaders. In a pivotal briefing, Admiral Doyle, the commander of Amphibious Group 1, on presenting the naval aspect of the operation went so far as to say "The operation is not impossible, but I do not recommend it."¹³ Such strong condemnations as these from high ranking officers are often enough to make leaders re-consider their suggested platform, yet in this instance MacArthur was not swayed in the least and continued to fully lobby for Inchon to be the location of the upcoming amphibious landing. Instances like these, where personal preference wins in spite of the presence of concrete and significant tactical/operational drawbacks often lead to disaster.

However, MacArthur did not blindly send in forces to Inchon, where in reality it was quite the opposite as a good amount of reconnaissance was conducted that provided key intelli-

gence prior to the launch of Operation CHROMITE. American planners relied greatly on the brave efforts of U.S. Navy Lieutenant Eugene Clark, who led a small team which encamped on the island of Yonghung Do only a few miles from Inchon. Lieutenant Clark and his team captured unsuspecting North Koreans who provided useful information, while also probing undercover into Inchon and even Seoul. These dangerous efforts yielded critical information such as the location of defensive forces, height of seawalls and the accuracy of available charts.¹⁴ Far from being a spur of the moment idea, these well thought out intelligence gathering missions allowed for military planners to incorporate these critical items into their products and thereby provide accurate plans to the operational commanders.

Comprehensive misinformation efforts to distract North Korean leadership from believing that Inchon would be the location of the upcoming amphibious operation were conducted with great results. In particular, prior to the beginning of the amphibious assault at Inchon, the *USS Missouri* shelled cities on the east coast of Korea, while a small number of troops commenced a feint at Kunsan, a city 100 miles south of Inchon thought by many in KPA leadership to be the logical location for the actual attack.¹⁵ These diversionary attacks had the desired effect, which was to complete the element of surprise MacArthur knew was key to a successful assault at Inchon. By utilizing effective intelligence gathering methods and employing coordinated diversionary attacks, UNC leadership was able to min-

imize and offset many of the inherent difficulties associated with Inchon as a location for a major amphibious assault.

Overall, the plan that MacArthur set in motion with Operation CHROMITE was an operational and strategic success from the very beginning, as it caught the KPA in an untenable defensive position in a city they never expected to have to defend. MacArthur was correct in that the KPA would not be able to quickly reinforce Inchon, and the few KPA reinforcements that did arrive were destroyed by U.S. Army X Corps forces. However, for as fast as UNC forces took Inchon, they were not as expeditious in capturing Seoul, an aspect that turned into a critical failure. MacArthur's stated goal for the operation, of having his landing force at Inchon be the anvil upon which the Eighth Army in Pusan would hammer the KPA against to deliver the end of the war did not materialize, as the X Corps' delay in taking Seoul allowed enough KPA forces to squeeze out of the oncoming encirclement. These numbers were substantial enough that North Korea did not have to surrender,

instead they were able to retreat north and, eventually, were reinforced by the People's Republic of China army.

However, through a comprehensive analysis of the landing at Inchon, there is no debate that it was a masterpiece of military operational success. Many have lauded it as MacArthur's greatest achievement in a storied military career. Because MacArthur was right in naming Inchon as the landing site for Operation CHROMITE, the war was very nearly won. Stanley Weintraub describes it well by writing "Tens of thousands of NKPA troops cut off in the south surrendered. With pressure relieved, Walton Walker's divisions holed up near Pusan broke out easily from the "perimeter" ... the war seemed won."¹⁶ Although there was enough military leadership to make the case that choosing Inchon as a landing site for such an important operation was not logical, solid planning and exceptional execution ensured it was a success that provided universal acclaim and demonstrated that it was indeed a good plan well executed.

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