

H056.1 Korean War - Communist Chinese Offensive – November-December 1950

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Korean War Review

To quickly re-cap the Korean War, on 25 June 1950 (H-gram 050) Communist North Korea launched a massive surprise offensive into the Republic of Korea (South Korea) rapidly driving U.S. and South Korean troops in a series of stinging defeats to a perimeter around the port of Pusan in the southeast corner of South Korea. Strikes by U.S. and British carriers were a significant factor in slowing the North Korean advance to buy time for the United Nations forces to bring in reinforcements and supplies by sea to Pusan. U.S. Marines, brought in by sea, played a pivotal role in holding the Pusan Perimeter. In September 1950 (H-gram 054,) the United Nations forces under the command of General of the Army Douglas MacArthur launched a bold amphibious landing, led by the 1st Marine Division, on the west coast of South Korea at Inchon that outflanked the North Korean forces in South Korea, already severely weakened by continuing air strikes on their supply lines by carrier aircraft. North Korean forces in South Korea were quickly routed, while UN forces recaptured Seoul and continued driving into North Korea. In October 1950 (H-gram 055,) the U.S. the Army advanced into North Korea, capturing the capital of Pyongyang on 19 October while the South Korean I Corps advanced up the east coast of North Korea. In the meantime, the 1st Marine Division and the 7th Infantry Division (together forming X Corps) were withdrawn from the Seoul/Inchon area by sea to conduct an amphibious assault on the east coast of North Korea at Wonsan, which was delayed due to the presence of over 4,000 Soviet-supplied sea mines which had to be swept before X Corps could be put ashore, even though the South Korean I Corps was already in possession of Wonsan. Carrier strikes by Task Force 77 (by late October including four Essex-class carriers) continued to play a key role in the United Nations' advances. To this point in the war, the sea mines had proved to be the most serious threat to U.S. and allied naval forces.

By mid October 1950, the North Korean People's Army had been decisively defeated and the small North Korean air force and navy swept from the skies and the seas. United Nations forces were advancing rapidly in North Korea toward the Yalu River (separating North Korea from the Communist Chinese area of Manchuria) with little opposition. It looked like the war would be over by Christmas. It was all about to go horribly wrong.

Indications of Communist Chinese Intentions to Intervene with Soviet Assistance

In one of the first signs of impending danger, on 30 September 1950, an F-4U-4B Corsair pilot of Fighter Squadron VF-113 off PHILIPPINE SEA (CV-47) sighted a MiG-15 swept wing jet fighter northwest of Seoul. At the time, little was known about the performance characteristics of the Soviet-built jet fighter. The plane had actually made its combat debut earlier in the summer when MiG-15's of a Soviet aviation division, flying in support of Communist Chinese offensive operations in the Chinese Civil War, shot down several Nationalist Chinese bombers, which were flying from the island of Formosa (Taiwan,) the last refuge of the Nationalist Chinese government under Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. This intervention by Soviet jet fighters in the Chinese Civil War went undetected by U.S. Intelligence, as did the movement of a detachment of these Soviet jet fighters from the Formosa Strait area to Manchuria in August 1950, where they were joined initially by about 120 other Soviet MiG-15's, also undetected.

On 15 October, General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, Commander of U.S. and United Nations (UN) forces in Korea, met with President Harry S. Truman at Wake Island, famously (or infamously) keeping the President waiting for his arrival. MacArthur assured Truman that organized North Korean resistance would be over by Thanksgiving with most troops returning home by Christmas. Although the Chinese had publically warned in late September that if United Nations forces crossed the 38th Parallel into North Korea (which occurred on 3 October) that the Chinese would intervene, MacArthur dismissed this threat, believing that if the Chinese entered the war it would be in small numbers that would be “slaughtered.”

On 19 October 1950, the same day that the U.S. 8th Army took the North Korean capital of Pyongyang, twelve Chinese divisions (about 10,000 men per division) began crossing the Yalu River bridges at night into North Korea, initially undetected. On 26 October, South Korean troops reached the Yalu River and were surprised to be shoved back by Chinese forces that they didn’t expect to be there. It should also be noted the many of the initial Chinese forces that entered North Korea were actually ethnic Koreans, drafted from the large Korean population in Chinese Manchuria.

In late October, Commander Naval Forces Far East staff, under Vice Admiral C. Turner Joy, were busy working on redeployment plans as the advance of the ground forces toward the Yalu left very few targets to be hit outside of the restricted zone along the Manchurian border, where U.S. aircraft were not supposed to fly in order not to cause inadvertent conflict with Chinese forces along the border (or Soviet forces at the eastern end.) The first carrier to withdraw was the HMS THESEUS from the Yellow Sea side of Korea. On 22 October, carriers PHILIPPINE SEA and BOXER (CV-21) departed the operating area off the east coast of North Korea near Wonsan and transited to Sasebo. BOXER continued on to the United States for her overdue overhaul. On 30 October, carrier VALLEY FORGE (CV-45) departed station and LEYTE (CV-32) followed two days later, leaving no fleet carriers in the Sea of Japan. VALLEY FORGE, which had been in the fight from the very beginning, was scheduled to return to the U.S. West Coast by late November.

Although the fleet carriers departed, Marine F4U Corsairs flying from escort carriers SICILY (CVE-118 – VMF-214) and BADOENG STRAIT (CVE-116 – VMF-323) continued to provide close air support to the 1st Marine Division which was advancing up the road through the mountains toward Chosin Reservoir (a name that would become famous in the annals of the U.S. Marine Corps.) Marine Corsairs of VMF-212 and VMF-312 were also flying from airfields in North Korea, along with VMF(N)-513 F4U-5N Corsair night-fighters and VMF(AW)-452 F7F-3B Tigercat twin-engine all-weather night fighters. By 29 October, all of Task Force 77 was returning to Sasebo and on 31 October, Joint Task Force 7 (which had commanded both the Inchon and Wonsan landings) was dissolved and VADM Arthur Struble returned with his SEVENTH Fleet flagship to Sasebo.

As the Navy drawdown was underway (as well as U.S. Air Force units,) there were more indications of unusual Chinese activity. On 24 October, U.S. Marine pilots observed anti-aircraft fire coming from the Manchurian (Chinese) side of the border. Shortly afterwards, a USAF reconnaissance aircraft detected a large number of unidentified type aircraft at Antung airfield on the Manchurian side of the lower Yalu River. USAF and Navy (before the carriers departed) aircraft reported coming under fire from the Manchurian side of the border.

On 31 October 1950, a USAF F-80 straight-wing jet fighter reported sighting “silver, arrow-shaped jets” over Antung airfield. Unknown at the time, the Soviets had agreed to provide 16 operational fighter regiments to support the Chinese, and the first division had actually arrived at Antung in August. The aircraft were drawn from the Soviet Air Defense Force (PVO,) which was transitioning to an

independent service (separate from “Frontal Aviation” that supported ground forces.) Each PVO division included three regiments of about 35-40 aircraft each, all the new swept-wing MiG-15 (later given the NATO code name (after NATO was formed) “Fagot.”) The pilots were all drawn from elite units and many were World War II aces. The Commander of the first large Soviet PVO Division to arrive was Colonel Ivan Kozhedub, who had 62 kills during WWII, making him the leading Soviet and Allied ace of the war. The 64th Fighter Aviation Corps was the over-arching command for all Soviet PVO Divisions that fought in the Korean War.

The Soviets went to great lengths to hide their involvement – their aircraft carried Chinese or North Korean markings; the pilots wore Chinese uniforms or civilian flight suits, and they used code-words to avoid speaking in Russian on the radios. The Soviet aircraft were forbidden to operate over UN-controlled territory so as to avoid being captured (which initially meant they stayed very close to their Manchurian bases) nor were they permitted to fly over water (and Col Kozhedub, Hero of the Soviet Union, was grounded.) That Russian pilots were flying “North Korean” MiGs, quickly became an open secret due to Russian operational security (OPSEC) busts on the radio, but the full extent of the major Soviet involvement was not fully known until the end of the Cold War. In fact in the initial year of the war, all the MiG-15’s encountered were flown by Russian pilots; Chinese and North Korean pilots weren’t trained and ready until late 1951.

On 1 November 1950, Soviet MiG-15s finally crossed the border to engage USAF aircraft. In the first jet versus jet engagement in history three MiG 15s of the Soviet 72nd Guards Fighter Aviation Regiment (flown by WWII aces) attacked F-80’s of 51st Fighter Wing and the Soviets claimed to shoot down one F-80C, while another MiG-15 claimed to shoot down an F-51D Mustang piston fighter. Both U.S. aircraft were in fact lost and their pilots killed, but records at the time attributed the losses to anti-aircraft fire.

Chinese “First Phase” Offensive – Early November 1950

The Chinese infantry divisions of the “People’s Volunteer Army” that entered North Korea were under orders to engage only South Korean units and avoid contact with U.S. units. On 25 October, the South Korean 1st Infantry Division was advancing toward the Yalu River when it encountered an overwhelming number of Chinese infantry. The South Koreans assumed defensive positions, but the Chinese maneuvered between gaps in South Korean and U.S. forces. The Chinese had Intelligence collection problems of their own and on 1 November accidentally engaged elements of the U.S. 8th Cavalry Regiment at Unsan. Caught by surprise by the size of the Chinese force, which attacked from multiple directions simultaneously, the battle went very badly for the U.S. force with over 1,149 casualties including 449 killed, one of the worst U.S. defeats of the war. Those U.S. troops that made it out after several days of bitter fighting, did so only in small groups after abandoning vehicles and heavy weapons. In the debacle, the only thing that kept the Chinese from driving the U.S. force back to Pyongyang was that they ran short of food and ammunition (and the Chinese had suffered 10,000 casualties themselves.)

On 4 November, a Chinese force briefly engaged the U.S. Marine 7th Regiment (part of the 1st Marine Division) on the eastern side of the mountains in North Korea as the Marines were advancing toward Chosin Reservoir. The Chinese disengaged in both the eastern and western areas on 5 November, and essentially disappeared into the heavily mountainous and forested terrain, which caused much confusion within the UN High Command regarding Chinese intentions.

The massive scale of the Chinese intervention was unknown. During the subsequent “lull” the Chinese infiltrated 250,000 troops to oppose the U.S. 8th Army on the western side of the mountains while 150,000 entered on the eastern side to oppose the X Corps (with the 1st Marine Division.) With the Chinese in hiding, the 8th Army was ordered to plan a “Home by Christmas” offensive (enabled by the opening of the west coast port of Chinnampo after the mines were cleared (H-gram 055,)) while the 1st Marine Division continued its careful advance in the east toward Chosin Reservoir. However, the Commanding General of the 1st Marine Division, Major General Oliver Smith, sensed that the Chinese were setting a trap and made much more extensive preparations for a potential Chinese surprise attack than did the 8th Army, including establishing supply points along his route as well as a crude airstrip.

Although the outward tune from MacArthur’s headquarters was still “home by Christmas,” the surprise U.S. defeat at Unsan provoked a flurry of activity and movement by U.S. Navy forces. On 5 November, a Patrol Squadron VP-42 PBM Mariner flying boat with a crew of 12 disappeared over the Formosa Strait. Although the cause remains unknown, it added to the rapidly growing tension in the region.

U.S. Carrier Strikes on the Yalu River Bridges and First U.S. Navy Jet Kill

By 6 November, the fast carrier task force (TF 77) was back on station in the Sea of Japan, and on 8 November received orders to destroy international bridges over the Yalu River in order to prevent any further Chinese reinforcement or resupply of the unknown number of forces already in North Korea. However, the aircraft were ordered to drop only the first overwater span of the target bridges on the Korean side and were not to violate Chinese Manchurian airspace. These restrictions made for ineffective attacks with dangerously predictable run-ins so as to avoid having bombs land on the Chinese side of the bridges. Pursuit of enemy aircraft into Manchuria was also forbidden. The aircraft were also forbidden to hit the hydro-electric power plants on the Yalu (across which Chinese troops could cross.) What made the whole operation even more absurd was that the Yalu River was frozen so hard in spots that heavy vehicles could cross without a bridge (although the Chinese travelled almost exclusively on foot, at night, in the mountains.) But, the carrier aviators carried out their orders.

On 9 November 1950, Task Force 77 commenced strike operations against the Yalu River bridges. The typical strike package consisted of 8 or more AD Skyraiders with either one 2,000-lb bomb or two 1,000-lb bombs, supported by F4U Corsairs with rockets and VT (proximity) fuzed bombs to suppress enemy anti-aircraft guns, while F9F Panther strait-wing jet fighters provided high cover against any enemy aircraft threat. Lieutenant Commander William T. Amen, the commanding officer of Fighter Squadron VF-111 off the PHILIPPINE SEA, was leading a group of F9F-2B Panthers when at least five MiG-15’s from Antung Airfield (which could be seen across the Yalu River) engaged. As a dogfight amongst the jet fighters ensued, the AD Skyraiders scored three direct hits and five near misses on the Sinuiju road bridge and four hits with 2,000-pound bombs on the Manpojin railroad bridge. (It was no surprise that destroying a bridge was extremely difficult; the planking was easily replaced and hitting key structural points required pin-point accuracy.) Despite heavy and accurate anti-aircraft fire, all Skyraiders and Corsairs came back to the carrier safely.

As the attacks on the bridges commenced, LCDR Amen engaged and shot down a MiG-15 flown by Captain Mikhail Grachev of the 139th Guards Fighter Regiment, who was killed. This was the first U.S. Navy jet-versus-jet kill, and the first Navy kill of a MiG-15. Some accounts state that it was the first kill by anyone of a MiG-15. The previous day a USAF F-80 claimed to shoot down a MiG-15, but Soviet records

do not confirm that (although the USAF pilot's account seemed pretty convincing to me.) U.S. and Soviet records definitely agree on Amen's kill. In many ways the MiG-15 was superior to the Panther, particularly in speed, rate of climb and maneuverability. The Panther's main advantage was a much more accurate gunfire aiming system.

On 10 November, LCDR Amen's flight of F9F Panthers again engaged four MiG-15's in a ten minute inconclusive dogfight. Beginning on 11 November MiG-15's engaged every USN strike along the Yalu, but without effect. LCDR Amen would be awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross for 30 combat missions during PHILIPPINE SEA's first Korean War deployment.

On 13 November, LEYTE had to refuel and then flew 130 strike sorties during the next two days (which was about average for the TF-77 carriers.) The Navy carrier strikes expended so much ordnance on the Yalu River bridges that the carriers had to come off station on 16 November to re-arm. It turned out the AD Skyraiders could empty an Essex-class carrier's magazines in a little over three days. The weather also turned exceptionally foul with heavy snow blanketing the carrier decks. The weather was better on the west side of the mountains and aerial reconnaissance showed the Chinese had already repaired the bridges and were moving all the anti-aircraft guns to the Manchurian side of the border, where they would be immune to U.S. flak suppression but still quite lethal.

Shocked by the appearance of the superior MiG-15's, the USAF scrambled to send F-84 Thunderjet and the even newer F-86 Sabre to the Korean theater (like the U.S. Navy with the newer Midway-class carriers, the most capable USAF jets were being held back in case of a Soviet attack in Western Europe. This had to change as the F-86 was the only aircraft with performance characteristics in league with the MiG-15, which was the best the Soviets had.) The escort carrier BAIROKO (CVE-115,) recommissioned on 12 September, was pressed into service as an aircraft ferry for USAF jets, as was the recently recommissioned light carrier BATAAN (CVL-29,) both of which departed San Diego on 16 November en route Japan, which would get the F-86's into battle by 6 December. Recognizing the threat from enemy jet aircraft, the Marines promptly (on 7 November) ordered their only jet fighter squadron (VMF-311) to deploy to Korea and the squadron's F9F Panthers were loaded in BAIROKO along with the USAF jets.

Carrier strike operations resumed on 17 November 1950, despite continuing abysmal weather conditions at sea, with gale force winds and heaving seas making recovery probably the most dangerous part of the mission. On 18 November, a strike from VALLEY FORGE was approaching the Yalu River when the F4U Corsairs of VF-54 were engaged by between eight and twelve MiG-15's, just as the Panther jet fighters were making the rendezvous with the Skyraiders and Corsairs (the slower propeller aircraft would head toward the target first and the faster jet fighters would depart later and catch up.) In the ensuing dogfight, the skipper of fighter squadron VF-52, LCDR William E. Lamb, shared a kill of a MiG-15 with Lieutenant Robert E. Parker. Ensign Frederick C. Weber of VF-31 from LEYTE also downed a MiG-15. Thus, in the space of a week, Navy pilots downed three Soviet-piloted MiG-15's and damaged a number of others, for no losses. The strikes on the bridges at Sinuiju were less successful, causing only some damage while two Skyraiders were severely mauled by heavy anti-aircraft fire but made it back to the carrier.

Over the next days, Navy aircraft dropped the road bridge at Sinuiju and spans at Hyesanjin, while USAF B-29 Superfortress strategic bombers knocked down a couple more. However, by this time the Yalu was pretty much frozen solid.

The lack of Chinese observed Chinese activity in North Korea gave a false impression that the strikes on the supply lines across the Yalu River had been effective, and once again naval forces began to return to port. On 18 November the two escort carriers returned to Sasebo. On 19 November, carrier VALLEY FORGE departed to proceed all the way to the West Coast for a much needed overhaul. (She would be home for all of five days before being ordered to return to Korean waters, commencing her second deployment on 6 December, but with a different air group (CVG 2 replaced CVG 5.))

Chinese “Second Phase” Offensive – Late November/ December 1950

Beginning on 24 November 1950, the massive Chinese force (over 300,000 men) in North Korea, that had largely remained well-camouflaged during the previous weeks, began movement with the intent to lure 8th Army in the west and X Corps in the east into a trap, where the steep mountains in between would prevent any kind of UN mutual support. As if on cue, the 8th Army commenced its “Home by Christmas” offensive. The result would be a catastrophic meeting engagement on the western side of North Korea.

On the east side of the mountains, the 1st Marine Division had reached the Chosin Reservoir by 15 November and on 25 November reached Yudam-ni at the northwestern side of the reservoir, which would prove to be the Marine’s farthest advance. All operations came to a halt on 25 November as the worst Siberian blizzard in a century raged through the Korean peninsula and at sea. The weather was extremely hard on U.S. forces, while the Chinese soldiers suffered grievously, many dying of exposure. During the day on 27 November, with the blizzard still blowing, the 5th Marine regiment commenced an advance from Yudam-ni to the northwest, which didn’t get very far because of the presence of many Chinese troops. At 2200 on 27 November, with the bugles and gongs that the Chinese used for battlefield communications, 120,000 hardened soldiers of the 9th Volunteer Army, commanded by Long March veteran General Song Shi-lun, commenced massed attacks and closed their trap on the Marines near Yudam-ni and along the only route on the west side of Chosin Reservoir while simultaneously attacking U.S. Army positions (“Task Force Faith”) on the east side. Both roads funneled into a single road at the south end of the reservoir, which was the only route back to the coast.

In the west, the Chinese “Second Phase Offensive” hit the 8th Army hard, concentrating on the two South Korean divisions at the eastern end of the line (on the west side of the mountains) which had been badly mauled during the First Phase Offensive in early November, with many losses replaced by raw recruits. The Chinese traveled on foot and fought at night to negate U.S. reconnaissance and air power, while remaining extremely well-camouflaged during the day. They frequently got in the rear of U.S. units, prompting them to withdraw, rather than risk being cut off which quickly turned into a backwards race toward Pyongyang and then the 38th Parallel. The Battle of the Ch’ongch’on River would also become known as “The Big Bugout” as the Chinese chased the 8th Army all the way back across the 38th Parallel by Christmas. Casualties were extremely heavy on both sides. The retreat was not the U.S. Army’s finest hour, as discipline in some units broke down, and much equipment was abandoned and many troops captured. The U.S. Second Infantry Division lost about 40% of its personnel and most of its equipment and artillery. It would have been even worse without air support from both the 5th Air Force and the TF-77 carrier aircraft (however, due to the chaotic situation in the 8th Army area, about two thirds of the Navy sorties in support of 8th Army were “wasted,” reminiscent of the situation around Pusan early in the war.)

The Marines at Chosin were a completely different story. Despite being surrounded and heavily outnumbered and suffering heavy casualties from the enemy and the weather, the Marines retained discipline and unit cohesion as they had to fight their way back to the coast along the only road through mountains and gorges. As the commander of the 1st Marine Division, Major General Oliver P. Smith stated during the battle, "Retreat, hell!! We're not retreating, we're just advancing in a different direction." And unlike in the 8th Army area, virtually every sortie by TF-77 aircraft in support of the Marines was put to good use despite the extreme difficulties faced by air controllers on the ground.

One critical advantage that the Marines had was effective close air support from their own aircraft based ashore and on the two escort carriers, and from Navy aircraft from the two fleet carriers LEYTE, and PHILIPPINE SEA, augmented by the arrival of carrier PRINCETON (CV-37,) which had been hastily brought out of mothballs and had a largely reservist crew. The British carrier HMS THESEUS was recalled from HONG KONG. The escort carrier SICILY had just arrived back in Japan after embarking her Anti-Submarine Warfare Air Group (which she had put ashore at Guam very early in the war) and she was ordered once again to re-embark Marine aircraft. For the next week, the carriers conducted strike operations in some of the worst weather conditions ever encountered in combat operations, and accidents outnumbered losses to the enemy, but still the pilots did their duty to the utmost to protect the Marines on the ground. Making matters worse, the weather forecasts were often unreliable (since the weather originated in Soviet Siberia, where the U.S. obviously had no weather stations) so planes often had difficulty in finding the carriers in white-out conditions or dense fog. Pilots who ditched at sea, even with immersion suits, had only a few minutes to live in the frigid waters.

On 29 November, as the scope of the Chinese offensive was becoming apparent, the 5th Air Force sent a message shifting attack priority for USAF and USN aircraft from the Yalu River bridges to direct support of 8th Army and X Corps (a classic, "no kidding Sherlock" message.) This message was actually at the instigation of TF-77 Commander, RADM Edward Ewen, who had quickly recognized the changed tactical situation. Stopping the supplies over the Yalu was pointless when the whole ground force was in imminent danger of being cut off, surrounded and overrun. On 30 November, General MacArthur's headquarters deemed the situation on the ground to be "critical" and ordered the immediate reconstitution and deployment of all Task Force 90 (the amphibious force for the Wonsan landings in October) to prepare for evacuation of X Corps from Hungnam and Wonsan on the east coast of North Korea, and evacuation of elements of the 8th Army from Chinnampo on the west coast of North Korea.

In reaction to the rapidly deteriorating situation on the ground, the Commander of Task Force 90, RADM James H. Doyle began to deploy his ships to Korea, originally divided 50/50 between east coast and west coast, with four attack transports and two attack cargo ships sent to each of Inchon on the west coast and Wonsan on the east coast. During the "lull" between the Chinese First Phase and Second Phase Offensive, Navy planners at Commander Naval Forces Far East headquarters had the foresight to develop an emergency evacuation plan (Operation Plan 116-50, issued on 13 November) which was put to good use.

The Task Group (90.1) ordered to Inchon, after a series of confusing orders, actually went in to the port of Chinnampo in North Korea despite the imminent danger of it falling to the rapid Chinese advance. It turned out there were relatively few friendly personnel left in Chinnampo and much of the transport capacity was not needed. The bulk of the 8th Army had already pulled out to the south. The transport group took out 1,700 port logistics personnel and 6,000 Korean military, police and government personnel in addition to 3,000 Korean refugees. Protected by several British and Australian

destroyers, the transports made the difficult transit down the channel just in time. The destroyers then bombarded the harbor cranes, oil storage and railway gear to keep them from falling into Chinese hands.

The Battle of Chosin Reservoir – December 1950

Chosin Reservoir is about 50 miles inland from the port city of Hungnam at an elevation of 3,400 feet. The reservoir is oriented north-south about 16 miles long with a western spur about eight miles long. The reservoir is narrow with steep banks up to the hills. Near the end of the western spur is Yudam-ni, connected by a narrow, winding often single lane gravel road to Haguru-ri, where the Marines had established an advanced base, division command post and crude airstrip at the southern end of the reservoir, making Yudam-ni about 75 miles from the coast, almost all of the route surrounded by commanding heights, which the Chinese controlled. The extreme cold (night temperatures often reached 25-degrees below zero) was as much an enemy as the Chinese.

The 5th and 7th Marine regiments were surrounded by two Chinese divisions at Yadam-ni. Additional Marine elements were surrounded at Haguru-ri and at Koto-ri (further south on the road to the coast), while the U.S. Army 31st Regimental Combat Team (Task Force Faith) was trapped on the east side of the reservoir north of Haguru-ri. All units north of Haguru-ri were directed to disengage and consolidate at Haguru-ri, and the entire force would then fight its way south along the road to Hungnam on the coast.

On 1 December, the 5th and 7th Marines commenced to fight their way out of Yudam-ni toward Haguru-ri. The Chinese would attack at night in force, with a combination of mass attack, infiltration and hand-to-hand combat. At night, the Marines would draw into a compact hard-point formation and inflict heavy casualties on the attacking Chinese. Marine casualties were heavy (about 100 per mile) but Chinese casualties were even worse. During daylight, the Marines would advance southward down the road, relying on close-air support and artillery to neutralize Chinese on the heights along the road.

Task Force Faith, which had been brought under 1st Marine Division command, almost made it to Haguru-ri before it was cut to ribbons four miles short by massive Chinese attacks; almost all the officers and NCO's were killed, including the Commanding Officer, and 75% of the unit was lost as it disintegrated into individual stragglers, almost all of the survivors wounded.

A Navy patrol squadron plan to use flying boats to bring in supplies and evacuate wounded by landing on the reservoir was abandoned because the lake was frozen solid. However, air drops by USAF and Marine transports were more successful and made a significant difference. The half-completed airstrip at Haguru-ri was declared "operational" on 1 December and four USAF C-47 transports flew in with supplies. Three Marine fighter squadrons moved from Wonsan to Yonpo, near Hungnam, reducing flight time to the battle zone, while the Marine air group on escort carrier BADOENG STRAIT continued close support.

Beginning on 2 December, all of CTF-77's combat sorties were committed to supporting the Marines at the reservoir and protecting the transport flights, aided by the arrival of carrier PRINCETON with Rear Admiral Ralph Ostie embarked (which commenced strikes on 5 December, which also coincided with the return of escort carrier SICILY with Marine Corsairs embarked.)

On 4 December, the 5th and 7th Marines reached the Haguru-ri perimeter, still as a coherent force. Nevertheless, the Marines still faced a long difficult route to the coast. General Almond, the commander of X Corps, authorized General Smith to abandon equipment, and get as many troops as possible out by

air. The Marines refused to do so, and in fact were flying in reinforcements; only the wounded went out by air.

On 4 December, a flight from carrier LEYTE attacked a Chinese force estimated at a thousand troops at the northern end of the reservoir, with indications that many more were closing in. LEYTE had been in the Mediterranean when the war broke out, but was recalled to the U.S. in August and then sent through the Panama and thence to the Korean combat zone, commencing strikes on 9 October by Carrier Air Group THREE (CVG-3.)

Ensign Jesse Brown and Lieutenant (junior grade) Thomas Hudner

At 1338 on 4 December 1950, carrier LEYTE launched a strike in support of Marines near Chosin Reservoir. The Executive Officer of Fighter Squadron VF-32, Richard "Dick" Cevoli led a flight of six F4U-4 Corsairs. Cevoli had been awarded a Navy Cross during World War II as an F6F Hellcat pilot in VF-18 on INTREPID (CV-11) during the Battle of Leyte Gulf, for strafing the Japanese super-battleship YAMATO in the Sibuyan Sea one day, hitting a carrier with a 500-pound bomb off Cape Engano the next day, and near-missing the battleship KONGO with a bomb and strafing a destroyer the day after that. (Cevoli would earn a Distinguished Flying Cross in Korea but would be killed in a training flight accident in 1955 while in command of VF-73.)

Leading the third section of Cevoli's flight was Ensign Jesse Brown with his wingman, Lieutenant (junior grade) Thomas Hudner. Although Hudner was senior in rank, Brown had been a pilot longer and was more experienced. Brown was the first African-American to complete Navy basic flight training and be officially designated as a Naval Aviator. (Another African-American had entered Navy flight training during World War – as a rare Black college graduate, the paperwork didn't specify race, and it wasn't until he was in the flight training program that the Navy bureaucracy figured out he was Black and sidelined him.)

Jesse Brown (who also had Native American Chickasaw and Choctaw ancestry) had grown up in extreme poverty in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, but had overcome extreme prejudice to gain entry to Ohio State University. Despite resistance from recruiters, there he entered the Navy's V-5 aviation cadet program, which was not offered at any historically Black Colleges, which at the time effectively eliminated Blacks from naval aviation as only a handful of Blacks were able to attend white colleges like Ohio State at the time. Of 5,600 NROTC students in 1947, only 14 were Black. Brown enlisted in the U.S. Naval Reserve in July 1946 and earned his wings on 21 October 1948. Although he encountered some racism in the late stages of his flight training, it was less than he expected (President Truman's desegregation order signed in July 1948 helped.)

In January 1949, Brown was assigned to VF-32 on board LEYTE, and commissioned an ensign in April 1949. He was popular with his squadron mates due to his intelligence, personality and especially his demonstrated superior flying skill. He was hero to the African-American community in the United States with a degree of celebrity status and was the subject of a Life Magazine photo shoot aboard LEYTE only days before the 4 December mission. In fact, when he launched for the mission, "Vulture's Row" and other spots were lined with shipmates flashing the "V" for Victory hand signal.

Brown's wingman, LTJG Hudner had little in common with Brown, but the two had become friends during the Mediterranean deployment. Hudner was from a politically-connected patrician Boston family, who entered the U.S. Naval Academy in 1943, graduating in 1946 with the wartime-accelerated class of 1947. He served as a surface line officer until somewhat belatedly becoming interested in flying, qualifying as a Naval Aviator in August 1949 and subsequently being assigned to VF-32. The mission on 4 December would be the 20th combat mission for both Brown and Hudner.

When Cevoli's flight approached Chosin Reservoir and checked in with the Marine air controller, there were no Chinese that could be seen and the air was stacked with blue airplanes awaiting targets. The controller suggested Cevoli conduct a road reconnaissance north of Chosin Reservoir. The flight then proceeded along the road past Yudam-ni at relatively low altitude trying to spot Chinese troops known to be there but very well concealed.

At 1440, one of the pilots in the second section noted that Brown appeared to be trailing fuel or oil and radioed a warning. No Chinese troops or ground fire had been observed but Brown's Corsair had apparently been hit in an oil line by a lucky shot by Chinese small arms fire. Brown began to rapidly lose oil pressure and was having increasing difficulty controlling the aircraft. It also quickly became apparent that he wouldn't be able to make it back to the ship. With the aid of squadron mates, Brown sighted a potential flat area for an emergency wheels up landing amidst the otherwise forbidding mountainous terrain, over 15 miles behind Chinese lines.

Brown jettisoned his external fuel tank, napalm tanks and fired off his rockets. As he approached, the seemingly smooth snow field was actually full of boulders. Brown almost made a good landing, but with the engine seizing up dropped the last 25 feet into a crash landing that bent the nose sidewise, and probably broke Brown's back. At first there was no sign of life, and the plane started to smoke from a fire in the engine area. Finally Brown slid his canopy back open and waved, and in his haste to exit the aircraft from the fire discarded his helmet and lost his gloves, only then realizing that his leg was pinned by the crunched instrument panel and he could not get out.

As Cevoli climbed to altitude to call for a helicopter rescue and the other planes circled to mark the position and ward off any Chinese, Hudner could see that the fire was getting worse. Hudner made a quick decision, without asking permission (Cevoli was on a different frequency by that point anyway,) to deliberately crash land near Brown's plane. Hudner's wheels-up landing was only slightly better than Brown's, wrenching Hudner's back. In great pain, it took Hudner almost 30 minutes to wade through the 50 yards of waist-deep snow. When Hudner reached Brown's plane, Brown was still alive, but already suffering from exposure to the intense cold and drifting in an out of consciousness, and in obvious great pain, although Brown refused to complain. Hudner tried multiple times without success to pull Brown from the cockpit. He then used his gloved hands to pack snow in the engine in an attempt to smother the flames, with only partial success. He then waded back to his plane to radio that he needed an ax and a fire extinguisher. The Marine rescue helo was already on the way, but had to turn back to get an ax.

By this time other Navy and Marine flights had arrived and began flying an outer ring of circles. Although neither Hudner nor his squadron mates saw any Chinese, the outer rings did engage approaching Chinese troops.

As the winter darkness was fast approaching, the H03S-1 rescue helicopter arrived, flown by Marine First Lieutenant Charles Ward, who had volunteered for the dangerous mission. The previous day, the pilot of another Marine helo had been shot between the eyes by a sniper while attempting a similar

rescue mission. Ward brought the fire extinguisher and ax. By sheer chance, Ward (a veteran WWII Corsair pilot from Alabama) had met Brown earlier on LEYTE's transit and "Alabama" struck up a good-natured friendship with "Mississippi." When Ward asked if that was Brown in the plane, and Hudner responded yes, Ward's response was "aww, shit." Ward tried to put out the fire with the extinguisher, but the fire persisted. Hudner took the ax to the plane, but the ax just bounced off, and Brown didn't flinch. Brown uttered his last words, "Tell Daisy (his wife) how much I love her." Both men took turns trying to break through with the ax, which did nothing but cause dents.

With the sun setting, temperature rapidly falling, and Brown almost certainly already dead, Ward gave Hudner the choice to stay or go, but that if he stayed he would freeze to death overnight, as the helos could not fly at night and there would be no rescue. Reluctantly, Hudner went with the helo to Haguru-ri and eventually back to his ship, where he begged to be allowed to return to the wreck by helo to retrieve Brown's body. His request was denied due to the extreme danger to the helicopter. Instead, Brown's squadron flew a "Warrior Funeral" strike to destroy the two aircraft. Before dropping the napalm, Brown was observed to still be in the cockpit, but his flight gear and clothes had been taken. One of the pilots recited the Lord's Prayer as the bombs were dropped. Brown was the first African-American naval officer to die in combat.

Due to his back injury, Hudner was grounded for about a month, before flying seven more combat missions. He expected to be court-martialed for what he had done, as his skipper had previously warned pilots not to attempt anything like that, and in fact force-wide orders were subsequently issued explicitly forbidding anyone from doing that again. Instead, Hudner became the first Medal of Honor recipient since World War II, receiving the Medal of Honor from President Truman at a White House ceremony in April 1951. (Several others were awarded a Medal of Honor for action prior to Hudner's but were received afterwards.) Hudner was the first of seven Medals of Honor awarded to Navy personnel during the Korean War, and the only carrier aviator during the Korean War (and only one of five carrier aviators, Butch O'Hare, John Powers, David McCampbell, during World War II and Michael Estocin during Vietnam. James Stockdale's award was for action as a Prisoner of War in Vietnam.) Hudner was one of 17 Medals of Honor awarded for action during the Battle of Chosin Reservoir – 14 Marines and 2 Army.) At the White House ceremony, Hudner met Daisy Brown and the two remained in contact throughout their lives until she died in 2014.

Thomas Hudner's Medal of Honor citation reads as follows:

"The President of the United States, in the name of Congress, takes pleasure in presenting the Medal of Honor to Lieutenant (junior grade) Thomas Jerome, Hudner, Jr. United States Navy, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty as a pilot in Fighter Squadron THIRTY TWO (VF-32,) attached to the USS LEYTE (CV-32,) while attempting to rescue a squadron mate whose plane struck by anti-aircraft fire and trailing smoke, was forced down behind enemy lines near the Chosin Reservoir, North Korea, on 4 December 1950. Quickly maneuvering to circle the downed pilot and protect him from enemy troops infesting the area, Lieutenant (junior grade) Hudner risked his life to save the injured flier who was trapped alive in the burning wreckage. Fully aware of the extreme danger in landing on the rough mountainous terrain and the scant hope of escape or survival in subzero temperatures, he put his plane down skillfully in a deliberate wheels-up landing in the presence of enemy troops. With his bare hands, he packed the fuselage with snow to keep the flames away from the pilot and struggled to pull him free. Unsuccessful in this, he returned to his crashed aircraft and radioed other airborne planes, requesting that a helicopter be dispatched with an ax

and fire extinguisher. He then remained on the spot despite the continuing danger from enemy action and, with the assistance of the rescue pilot, renewed a desperate but unavailing battle against time, cold and flames. Lieutenant (junior grade) Hudner's exceptionally valiant action and selfless devotion to a shipmate sustain and enhance the highest traditions of the U.S. Naval Service."

Ensign Jesse Brown was awarded a Posthumous Distinguished Flying Cross for his 20 combat missions;

"The President of the United States of America takes pride in presenting the Distinguished Flying Cross (Posthumously) to Ensign Jesse Leroy Brown, United States Navy, for heroism in aerial flight as Pilot of a fighter plane in Fighter Squadron THIRTY-TWO (VF-32,) attached to the USS LEYTE (CV-32,) in hostile attacks on hostile North Korean forces. Participating in 20 strikes on enemy troop concentrations in the face of grave hazard, at the Chosin Reservoir, Takshon, Manp Jin, Linchong, Sinuiju, Kasan, Wonsan, Chonjin, Kilchu and Sinanju during the period 12 October to 4 December 1950. With courageous efficiency and utter disregard for his own personal safety, Ensign Brown, while in support of friendly troops in the Chosin Reservoir area, pressed home numerous attacks destroying an enemy troop concentration moving to attack our troops. So aggressive were these attacks, in the face of enemy anti-aircraft fire, that they finally resulted in the destruction of Ensign Brown's plane by anti-aircraft fire. His gallant devotion to duty was in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service."

The Knox-class frigate USS JESSE L. BROWN (DE/FF/FFT-1089) was named in his honor and commissioned 17 February 1973, serving until 27 July 1994 before subsequently being sold to the Egyptian Navy, where she remains in service. Contrary to many accounts, this was not the first U.S. Navy warship named for an African-American. USS LEONARD ROY HARMON (DE-678,) the second African-American awarded a Navy Cross (posthumously) in WW II was the first, and USS GEORGE WASHINGTON CARVER (SSBN-656) was the second.

First Lieutenant Charles C. Ward, U.S. Marine Corps, of Marine Observation Squadron SIX (VMO-6) was awarded a Silver Star for volunteering to fly the dangerous mission to attempt the rescue of Jesse Brown in the unarmed Sikorski HO3S-1 helicopter. He was subsequently also awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross. After he retired, he was killed in a jeep accident.

Thomas Hudner continued to serve in the U.S. Navy until his retirement as a captain in 1973. Among his assignments, he served as XO/CO of Fighter Squadron VF-53, an F-8E Crusader squadron on TICONDEROGA (CVA-14.) He also served as Executive Officer of KITTY HAWK (CVA-63,) during her 1966 Vietnam deployment, although he flew no combat missions. After a long life of distinguished public service Hudner died on 13 November 2017 at age 93. His funeral at Arlington National Cemetery in April 2018 was attended by my count eleven Medal of Honor recipients, which I had the privilege to witness. The Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer USS THOMAS HUDNER (DDG-116) was named in his honor and commissioned 1 December 2018.

The Battle of Chosin Reservoir (Continued)

On 6 December the Marines commenced their "advance in the opposite direction" south along the road from Haguru-ri toward Koto-ri and Hungnam on the coast. By this time two more Chinese divisions had arrived, so the Marines had a tough fight getting out of Haguru. Air support was hampered in the morning by ground fog, but PRINCETON, LEYTE and Marine squadrons still flew over 100 sorties in support. The Chinese pressed attacks even in daylight hours at road blocks. Eighteen Marine VMF-214

F4U-4B Corsairs struck a particularly persistent Chinese block with rockets and proximity-fused bombs causing heavy Chinese casualties, but the Chinese regrouped and rallied. Commander Horace H. Epes, the Commanding Officer of VF-33 off LEYTE led eight F4U-4 Corsairs in repeated strafing and napalm runs, sometimes as close as 50 yards ahead of the Marines. This wounded some Marines but was considered necessary to break through. Epes would be awarded his second Distinguished Flying Cross for this and subsequent actions. To aid the advance, the Marines also jury-rigged a four-engine R5D (Navy version of C-54 Skymaster) with extra radios, chart board, situation map, extra oxygen and cabin fuel tanks to give the plane the endurance to remain overhead all day as an airborne air-control platform.

On 7 December, strikes by aircraft from PHILIPPINE SEA, PRINCETON, LEYTE and escort carriers BADOENG STRAIT and SICILY continued with most in direct support and others searching the nearby hills for Chinese troop concentrations, which were elusive. However, by this time Marine Intelligence learned that the Chinese were remaining hidden during the day by evicting villagers from their dwellings and jamming troops into the buildings. As a result, the villagers in effect requested air strikes on their own villages to drive out the invading Chinese, and villages along the Marines' route thus became primary targets for airstrikes. U.S. pilots were astonished at how many Chinese soldiers could come pouring out of even the smallest huts, and as a by-product, Chinese casualties due to exposure and frostbite skyrocketed.

The road south from Koto-ri was the most dangerous of all, passing through a gorge with numerous hairpin turns, cliffs and drop offs of 100 feet or more at the edge of the road. Half-way through the gorge was a bridge that had been blown and repaired multiple times, and once again the Chinese had destroyed it. Without the bridge, the Marines would be unable to get their vehicles through to the other side. On 6 December the Marines requested an air drop of an M-2 steel treadway bridge, and on 7 December, the USAF Combat Cargo Command delivered, with eight C-119 Flying Boxcars dropping the bridge by parachute in eight sections, something never done before. The same day, Marine fighter squadron VMF-214 re-embarked on SICILY.

On 8 December, the Marines commenced their advance into the gorge in a swirling snow storm with the 7th Marine Regiment leading the way. Other Marines that had been cut-off south of the gorge attacked northward to assist. Zero-visibility conditions prevented much in the way of air support, but when the weather cleared on 9 December, the carriers flew a record 475 combat sorties inflicting numerous casualties on the Chinese. Luckily the Chinese had blown only the bridge and not the road, and the river was successfully crossed with the "portable" treadway bridge.

On 10 December 1950, after two weeks of some of the most bitter fighting in history, the Marines came through the gorge, extricating themselves from a seemingly impossible situation, inflicting far more casualties on the Chinese than they suffered themselves. Including the Army Task Force Faith, U.S. losses included which just over 1,000 killed in battle and almost 5,000 missing, 4,500 wounded and 7,000 non-battle casualties. By the end of the battle, the two Chinese divisions trying to block the road through the gorge were down to only 200 men. The Chinese admitted to 19,000 battle casualties and 29,000 non-battle casualties. Exact numbers may never be known, but Chinese casualties were probably closer to 50,000 – given the lack of medical facilities and supplies in general, a great preponderance of Chinese casualties were deaths.

X Corps Consolidation at Hamhung/Hungnam – December 1950

Elsewhere in the eastern sector, on 30 November, the commander of X Corps, Major General Almond, directed that all forces withdraw and consolidate at Hamhung (a large city just inland of the port of Hungnam.) The South Korean I Corps had been advancing up the east coast road as far as Chongjin, approaching the Soviet border. The advance was supported by heavy cruiser SAINT PAUL (CA-73) and destroyer ZELLARS (DD-777) and the two ships continued to provide fire support as the South Koreans carried out their orders to withdraw. Although the South Koreans were not significantly engaged by Chinese forces, they were at grave risk of being cut-off.

The bulk of the U.S. Army 7th Infantry Division was strung out north of the Marine 1st Division fighting at Chosin. Although also not attacked in force by the Chinese, the 7th Division was also at risk of being cut off and withdrew as ordered. The newly arrived U.S. Army 3rd Division was attacking westward from Wonsan for a planned link-up with the 8th Army on the west-side of the mountains. However, in the west, the Chinese advanced so far so fast against the 8th Army that the plan became moot, and 3rd Division pulled back to the coast as ordered. Fearing a Chinese attack in Wonsan, after the coast road to Hungnam was temporarily cut, SAINT PAUL was ordered to disengage from the north and proceed south to Wonsan to provide gunfire support on call.

Evacuations commenced from the east coast of North Korea about 6 December, with some degree of confusion. Four attack transports, two attack cargo ships and a fast transport of Task Force 90 arrived at Wonsan to begin out-loading the 3rd Infantry Division, only to find that most of the division had already moved north along the coast road toward Hungnam. SAINT PAUL and three destroyers executed a short fire-support mission to protect U.S. Army and Korean troops defending the perimeter of Wonsan, but that did not develop into a significant Chinese attack. Only 4,000 men and 12,000 tons of gear were loaded aboard. As there was unused capacity, the attack transport NOBLE (APA-218) was ordered to proceed to Songjin, north of Hungnam, with a couple merchant ships, a Japanese-manned LST and a South Korean LST to take aboard most of the South Korean I Corps, sparing them a long march south. The evacuation ships left Songjin on 9 December, with the South Koreans on board, and were escorted safely by destroyers MOORE (DD-747) and MADDOX (DD-731.)

Under covering fire from heavy cruiser SAINT PAUL, the evacuation of Wonsan was completed after nightfall on 9 December. Nothing had to be left behind or destroyed. The Wonsan evacuation ships took out 3,800 troops, 7,000 Korean refugees, 1,146 vehicles and 10,000 tons of cargo, all in good order. The only thing left was a small salvage group attempting to recover classified material from the sunken minesweepers PIRATE (AM-275) and PLEDGE (AM-277) but the work had been delayed by heavy seas. Instead, demolition charges were used to destroy the wrecks, which was complete by 13 December.

Initially, General MacArthur believed that with X Corps consolidated at Hamhung/Hungnam the force could hold out through the winter. Major General Almond (X Corps), Major General Smith (1st Marine Division,) and other senior commanders in the region agreed. However, the debacle in the west made it doubtful that the rest of Korea could be held at all, and it was likely that Seoul would fall to the Communists again. However, on 1 December, the U.S. Joint Chiefs had directed MacArthur to withdraw X Corps. On 7 December, there was a major meeting in Tokyo between senior commanders from Washington and in the Korean theater, to discuss a revised plan by General MacArthur to attempt to hold Seoul, by re-embarking X Corps and bringing it back around to the west coast of South Korea by sea to bolster 8th Army's defense of Seoul. As discussions among senior Navy and Marine commanders

ensued over the possibility of holding and resupplying a defensive perimeter at Hamhung/Hungnam, the JCS approved MacArthur's revised plan. This decision would be debated for years. Unlike in the west where the Chinese were still driving toward Seoul, the Chinese Army in the east was essentially a spent force having suffered debilitating mass casualties courtesy of the U.S. Marine Corps, Naval Aviation, and Siberian temperatures. Hamhung/Hungnam probably could have been held, and Seoul fell to the Chinese in January anyway.

The Evacuation of Hungnam – December 1950

The evacuation of X Corps from Hungnam was actually a massive logistics operation executed on short notice by the U.S. Navy, essentially an amphibious operation in reverse, something the Navy and Marine Corps had little experience in doing, at least in that direction. Troops that had arrived in Korea in three different ports and others that arrived overland from other parts of Korea all had to be funneled back out through a single harbor. The operation required embarking 110-120,000 men, 15,000 vehicles, and over 400,000 tons of supplies, including large stocks of ammunition and aviation fuel that had been built up to support the winter offensive. The operation would require multiple round trips by cargo ships from Hungnam to Pusan, as there was nowhere near enough shipping (or port capacity) to do it all at once.

There was considerable concern among Navy leaders that the evacuation would be vulnerable to enemy attack, with particular worry that Soviet submarines might intervene. Commander Naval Forces Far East, VADM Turner Joy reinstated a submarine patrol of La Perouse Strait to guard against Soviet submarines getting into open water east of Japan. On 12 December an ASW hunter-killer group (TG 96.7) commenced exercises off the east coast of Honshu, formed around escort carrier BAIROKO, using U.S. submarines as a target. There wasn't much that could be done about Soviet submarines at Vladivostok getting into the Sea of Japan. Admiral Joy also directed that the SEVENTH Fleet be free to move about on short notice and not be tied down near the evacuation area. As a result, the Commander of Task Force 90, RADM Doyle was given responsibility and assets to provide air cover and surface gunfire support in the evacuation area. Fortunately a Soviet submarine threat never materialized although there were multiple false alarms. (In the next H-gram I'll discuss the USS MCKEAN (DD-784) 18 December 1950 incident, which some accounts claim sank a Soviet submarine.)

Also of concern was the large number of high-performance jets operating from bases in Manchuria, which might rightly view the evacuation as a lucrative target. There was uncertainty as to whether the Soviets might have provided advanced attack aircraft. (The MiG-15 was designed as an interceptor to bring down B-29 strategic bombers and was ill-suited for a ground attack role.) Marine fighters based at Yonpo near Hungnam would provide the best defense. On 10 December, the Marine's first jet squadron, VMF-311 (a F9F Panther squadron that departed the U.S. with the Air Force fighters on escort carrier BAIROKO) arrived at Yonpo, only to be withdrawn to Pusan three days later, along with the other Marine squadrons, as the perimeter was drawn down, leaving the airfield unprotected. As a result, the jet fighters embarked on the TF-77 carriers remained the best defense against an air attack, which like the submarine threat never materialized. On 16 December, the light carrier BATAAN arrived with Marine fighter squadron VMF-212 embarked, after offloading her cargo of USAF fighters at Yokosuka, Japan.

The Task Organization and force structure of the Hungnam evacuation rivaled those of the Inchon and Wonsan landings. Still designated Task Force 90, under the overall command of RADM Doyle, the core of the force was Task Group 90.2, the Transport Group which included three attack transports, three attack

cargo ships, two fast transports, one patrol craft (control,) three landing ship docks (LSD) with nine landing ship utility (LSU) embarked, 11 landing ship tanks (LST,) 27 Scajap (Japanese-manned) LST's, and dozens of civilian-manned Military Sea Transportation Service (MSTS) ships.

The Gunfire Support Group (TG 90.8), commanded by RADM Roscoe Hillenkoetter (who had just concluded a tour as the first Director of the newly-formed Central Intelligence Agency,) embarked in heavy cruiser SAINT PAUL and four destroyers (which could be augmented by heavy cruiser ROCHESTER (CA-124) and another destroyer) and three LSMR "Rocket Ships." The Blockade, Escort and Minesweeping Group (TG 95.2,) commanded by RADM J. M. Higgins, embarked in ROCHESTER (CA-124,) also included four destroyers, six patrol frigates, plus various minesweepers. TF-90 also included a Repair and Salvage Element, a Control Element and a Tactical Air Control Element. The destroyer DUNCAN (DD-874) was stationed as a radar picket ship 50 miles north of Hungnam as mountains blocked radar coverage to the north of ships in port; fortunately DUNCAN faced no kamikazes. The fire support plan called for leaving as much artillery ashore as long as possible, with extensive preparations for surface ships to respond with naval gunfire as well.

In support of the evacuation was the SEVENTH Fleet, commanded by VADM Arthur Struble, which included the Fast Carrier Task Force (TF 77.) Task Group 77.1, the Support Group, included the battleship MISSOURI (BB-63,) and two light cruisers. TG 77.2, the Screening Group included between 17 and 22 destroyers. TG 77.3, commanded by RADM E. C. Ewen, included the three fleet carriers PHILIPPINE SEA, LEYTE, and PRINCETON, later joined by light carrier BATAAN. TG 96.8, the Escort Carrier Group, commanded by RADM R. W. Ruble, included escort carriers BADOENG STRAIT and SICILY, a light cruiser and several destroyers.

The survivors of the 1st Marine Division, which had fought its way out of Chosin Reservoir, were the first to embark. By 14 December, the Marines were loaded on one APA, one AKA, three transports (AP) 13 LST's, 3 LSD's, and seven time-chartered merchant ships, which sailed for Pusan on 15 December. The Marines then almost immediately engaged in combat with North Korean guerilla forces operating behind the UN lines in South Korea, and drove them back into North Korea. As soon as the Marine evacuation was complete, the 7th Infantry Division began loading over the next week. As that was going on, 25,000 South Korean troops with 700 vehicles were loaded and on 17 December were transported to the port of Mukho on the east coast of South Korea south of the 38th Parallel, to set up blocking positions along the east coast road.

Loading at Hungnam continued day and night, even as the weather deteriorated. On 16 December, strong winds blew four landing craft medium (LCM) adrift and into unswept minefields. The onloading was so thorough that three liberty ships were filled with broken down vehicles to prevent the Chinese from salvaging them. In addition, 29,500 drums of fuel were loaded (only 200 left behind) and 9,000 tons of ammunition loaded, with only 1,000 tons of frozen dynamite left behind which was too dangerous to move. The fuel and dynamite would be put to use in the final demolition of the port. The most significant incidents during the evacuation were a chartered MSTS vessel that ran aground on the way out (tugs managed to get her off) and an in-bound Japanese time-charter SENZAN MARU missed the entrance channel and hit a mine, fortunately without casualties and the ship was repaired enough to make it back to Japan. A Korean LST with 7,400 refugees on board fouled a shaft and couldn't get off the beach and then developed additional complications, including a shortage of water and food for the refugees. Assisted by repair parties and divers from USS ASKARI (ARL-30) and USS CONSERVER (ARS-39,)

the LST was finally able to get underway on 19 December, accompanied by two escorts rigged for towing.

Despite repeated air attacks during the day, Chinese forces moving at night had reached the outskirts of Hungnam, but held back without making any significant attacks on the perimeter. On 15 December, SAINT PAUL commenced nighttime harassing fire of Chinese troop movements, a duty that ROCHESTER also took up 17 December. The cruisers alternated harassing fire each night thereafter. In order to get rounds on the reverse slopes that the Chinese used to shield themselves from cruiser gunfire, the three LSMR "Rocket Ships" got in on the action on 21 December, launching a heavy barrage against a reported Chinese troop concentration. The volume of fire from the cruisers as well as destroyers was impressive; during the evacuation of Hungnam, 2,932 rounds of 8-inch and 18,637 rounds of 5-inch were fired at the Chinese, which kept them at bay.

By 18 December 1950, the Hungnam perimeter had been reduced to about a 5,000 yard radius. That day Major General Almond and staff moved aboard RADM Doyle's flagship MOUNT MCKINLEY (AGC-7) and responsibility for the defense of Hungnam passed to RADM Doyle. By 19 December, the embarkation of the 7th Infantry Division was complete, which sailed for Pusan on 21 December. About three Army regiments and several artillery and anti-aircraft battalions remained ashore. The frequency of naval gunfire increased over the next days as the shore artillery drew down. D-Day (in reverse) was set for 24 December.

However, a significant complication arose due to the sheer number of Korean civilian refugees flooding into Hungnam. During the earlier evacuation from Wonsan, the U.S. Navy had screened refugees for those deemed most at risk by a return of the Communists and still packed the ships with 7,000 refugees, as much as they could carry, which still left over 20,000 desperate civilians trying to break through barbed wire barriers to get aboard. About twice the population of Wonsan had gathered there in an attempt to get out. Hungnam was even worse.

With their villages occupied by the Chinese and then subsequently bombed, thousands of Korean refugees had followed the Marines down from the Chosin Reservoir area. An initial planning estimate of 25,000 refugees proved to be far short. 50,000 refugees had tried to catch the last train out of Hamhung to Hungnam. The LSTs provided by the Korean Navy were insufficient to meet the demand. LST's were packed with at least 5,000 people (in once case over 10,000) and the chartered MERIDITH VICTORY got underway with 14,000 refugees crammed aboard. On the last day of the evacuation, three Victory ships and two LSTs that were excess to U.S. evacuation needs were filled to capacity with 50,000 refugees. All told, 91,000 Korean refugees were evacuated by ship from Hungnam, which still left at last 90,000 more behind.

On 23 December, carrier VALLEY FORGE arrived on her second deployment to Korea, after having made a five-day "portcall" on the West Coast of the U.S. before being ordered to turn around and return to Korea. TF-77 thus reached peak strength of four fleet carriers, a battleship and 22 destroyers. The same day destroyer CHARLES S. SPERRY (DD-697) was conducting interdiction harassing fire at Songjin, to slow any Chinese advance down the coast road north of Hungnam. SPERRY was hit three times by shore battery fire, which fortunately caused only minor damage and no casualties. The last of the 3rd Infantry Division was loading on 23 December. Battleship MISSOURI arrived to provide gunfire support in the event the Chinese attempted to overrun the last 10,000 infantry ashore.

Early morning on 24 December, seven LSTs were drawn up on the beach at Hungnam with numerous LVT amphibious vehicles on the flanking beaches. From 0800 to 1100, the surface ships laid down a barrage of gunfire outside the perimeter. At 1100 embarkation of the last troops ashore began, with all beaches secure by 1405. There was no observed Chinese activity, although one ammunition stockpile accidentally blew up, destroying some landing craft and causing a number of casualties. At 1410, RADM Doyle gave the order to destroy the port facility. Underwater Demolition Teams had rigged the port infrastructure with explosives. The result was a massive series of explosions that destroyed cranes, piers and the walls of the inner harbor, and a towering pillar of smoke. It made for some spectacular photos. By 1436, all forces had cleared the harbor area. Chinese troops were first observed at a range of three miles inland, which was answered with some parting naval gunfire.

During the evacuation of Hungnam, 105,000 U.S. and Korean personnel, 91,000 Korean refugees, 17,500 vehicles and 350,000 tons of cargo were lifted out of the port and off the beach. Among the refugees brought out by sea were the future parents of the current President of the Republic of Korea, Moon Jae-in. Most of the ships involved made two round trips and a number made more. Wars are not won by evacuation but many have been lost by the inability to do so – Athens at Syracuse, the British at Yorktown, the Germans in North Africa. At Dunkirk, 338,000 military personnel were saved from the Germans, although almost all equipment was left behind, and the ships suffered greatly from German air attack. The key, however, is that without control of the sea and the air over the sea, such a massive and nearly bloodless operation is not possible.

The contribution of Navy and Marine Corps aviation, in some of the worst flying weather imaginable, was pivotal in keeping the Chinese offensive from being an even bigger disaster than it was. In November, Navy and Marine aircraft flew a total of 6,725 sorties including 2,728 from the carriers, 583 from the escort carriers, 473 non-carrier sorties, and 2,941 USMC sorties from shore. The cost was 6 aircraft lost to enemy action and 27 due to accident. In December, Navy and Marine aircraft flew a total of 6,781 combat sorties, including 3,630 from the carriers, 1,470 from the escort carriers, 535 non-carrier sorties, and 1,146 USMC sorties from shore. The cost was 16 aircraft lost enemy action, almost all to ground fire and 32 by accident.

The Battle of Chosin Reservoir is rightly regarded as one of the U.S. Marine Corps finest hours. In the face of overwhelming odds and a nearly impossible tactical situation, the Marines retained their discipline and fighting spirit, effectively defeating the Chinese army even as they withdrew to the sea as ordered. Marines were awarded 14 Medals of Honor (seven posthumously) during the advance to and withdrawal from Chosin Reservoir (of 42 Medals of Honor awarded to Marines during the entire war.) Two members of U.S. Army's Task Force Faith, including Lieutenant Colonel Don Faith himself were awarded posthumous Medals of Honor while serving under 1st Marine Division operational control. The commander of the 1st Marine Division, Major General Oliver Smith should be regarded as one of the great combat leaders of all time. The 1st Marine Division was awarded a Presidential Unit Citation for Chosin Reservoir and the Ticonderoga-class guided missile cruiser USS CHOSIN (CG-65,) commissioned in 1991 was named in honor of those who fought there. Task Force Faith (Regimental Combat Team 31,) which suffered over 90% killed, wounded or captured, was not originally included in the Presidential Unit Citation, however additional Chinese documentation became available in which Chinese commanders attributed TF Faith with breaking the back of their attacks at Chosin, and in 2001 the U.S. Navy approved TF Faith for the Presidential Unit Citation.

The next H-gram will cover Naval Operations during the “Third Phase” Chinese Offensive, which resulted in the loss of Seoul again.

Sources include; “Devotion: An Epic Story of Heroism, Friendship, and Sacrifice” by Adam Makos: Ballantine Books, 2015, a great book on Jesse Brown and Thomas Hudner that is being made into a movie. “Such Men as These: The Story of the Navy Pilots Who Flew the Deadly Skies Over Korea” by David Sears: Da Capo Press, 2010. “Rescuing the Frozen Chosen,” by Thomas McKelvey Cleaver, Aviation History Magazine, March 2017. “Attack from the Sky: Naval Air Operations in the Korean War,” by Richard C. Knott: Naval Historical Center, 2002. “United States Naval Aviation, 1910-2010,” Vol. I, Chronology by Mark L. Evans and Roy A. Grossnick: Naval History and Heritage Command, 2015. “Korean War, U.S. Pacific Fleet Interim Evaluation Report No. 1, 25 June to 15 Nov 1950” at history.navy.mil. “Naval Battles of the Korean War,” by Edward J. Marolda, at history.navy.mil. “History of United States Naval Operations: Korea,” by James A. Field: U.S. Navy History Division, 1962.”