

Battle of the Chosin Reservoir

Luke Chavez

Abstract and/or Background

Lake Changjin, also known as “The Chosin Reservoir” is located high in the Korean peninsula and is in modern-day North Korea. The Battle of the Chosin Reservoir took place on 25 November and lasted till 11 December 1950. The battle was between the Chinese Red Army and the 1st Marine Division alongside the 31st Regimental Combat Team of the 8th Army Division. The battle was part of the secret Chinese second advance to retake the Korean peninsula. The battle is regarded as the most brutal battle in American history. What led to the Battle of the Chosin Reservoir? Why is it considered the most brutal battle in history? The research is about the 1st Marine Division, their journey to the reservoir, when they arrived, how they were trapped, and how they pushed their way out of the reservoir. Although a costly defeat from the perspective of land territory, the Chinese military lost around fifty thousand soldiers which halted the advance on the American troops until the spring of 1951. Due to the delay of Chinese forces, the American troops managed to escape to Hungnam Port and some of the survivors returned to the front and helped mark the 38th parallel we have today. The Battle of the Chosin Reservoir is one of the cruelest battles and conditions due to its terrain and sub-zero temperatures. The battle became one of the worst experiences an American soldier had gone through but served as one of the most successful evacuations in the United States military.

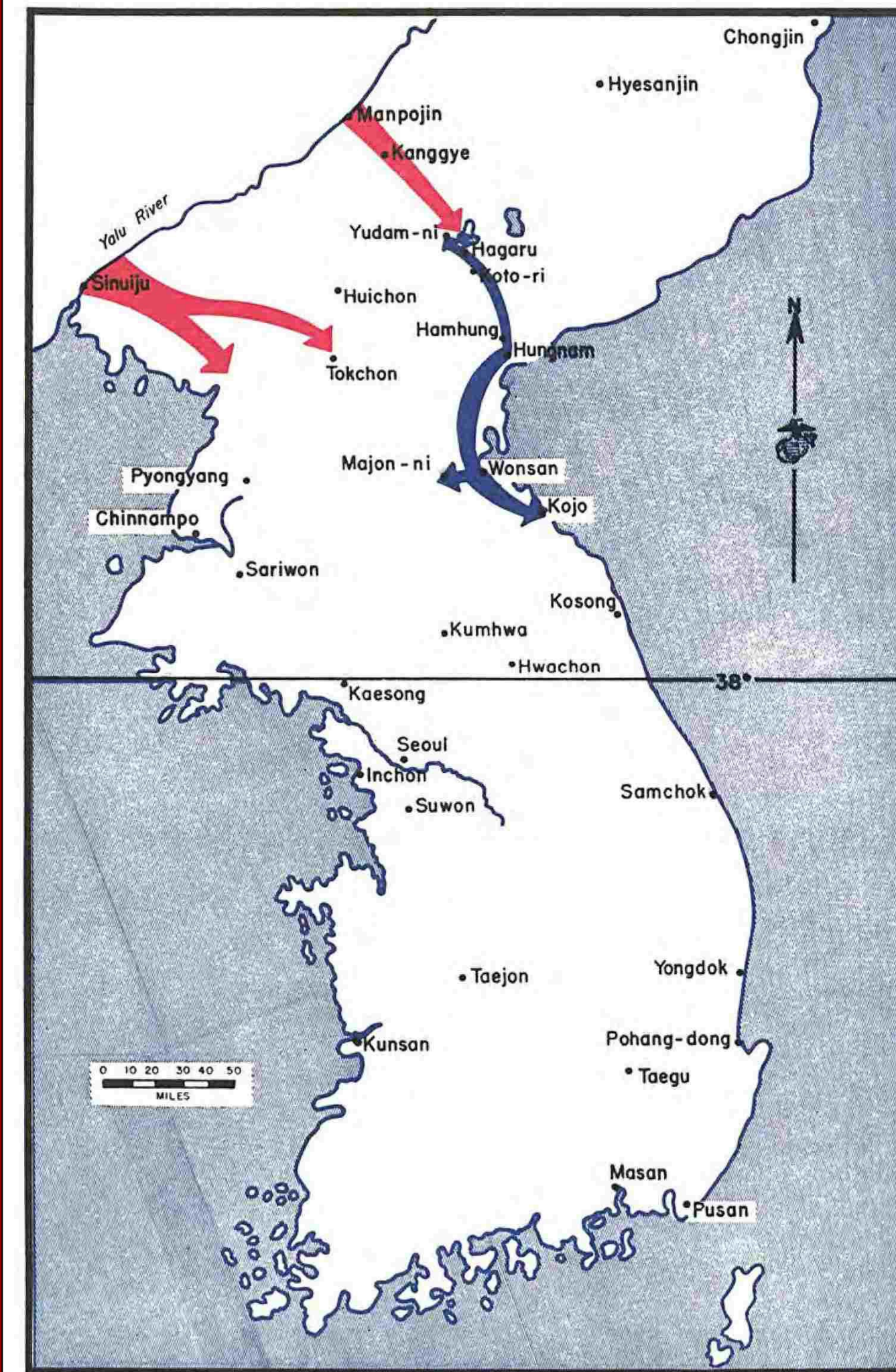


Figure 1: Korean Peninsula Map



Figure 2: Chosin Reservoir Battle Map

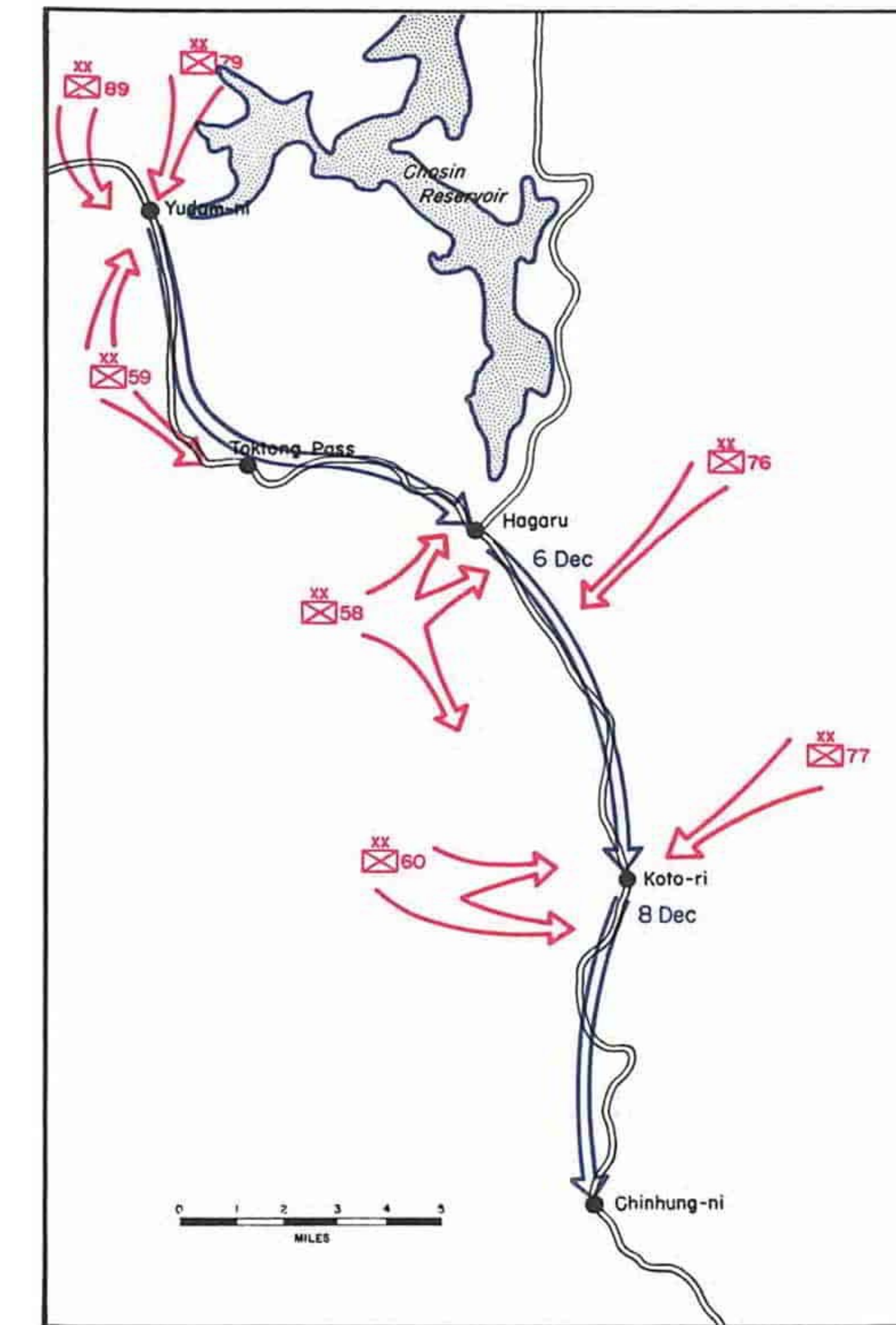


Figure 3: Evacuation Battle Map

Introduction and/or Research Question

After the victories at Inchon and Seoul, the 1st Marine Division was rerouted and conducted an amphibious landing in Wonsan, on the Korean Peninsula's northeast coast. After arriving in Wonsan, the forces of the 1st Marine Division headed north. Major General Oliver P. Smith, commanding the 1st Marine Division, attempted to bring the division into closer contact but his officers prevented him from doing so. Because of the dispersion of the troops and regiments, it was necessary to connect artillery battalions to regimental combat teams (RCTs). On November 16, the 1st Marine Division arrived at the southern point of the Chosin Reservoir. The 1st Marine Regiment would be positioned in Koto-ri to secure the only supply route that led back to Hungnam. The 3rd Battalion of the 1st Marines was stationed near Hagaru-ri, where the division headquarters were located, and was constructing an airstrip. The Marines at Hagaru-ri were engineers and did not have proper infantrymen to support them thus while working non-stop, all would have to drop their tools and pick up their rifles to fend off the Chinese forces. A small group of Fox Company's 7th Marines was sent to guard Fox Hill between Yudam-ni and Hagaru-ri. A mile or so north, Charlie Company of the 7th Marines was posted at the Toktong Pass. MacArthur was hopeful that the X Corps on the east along with the 8th United States Army on the west of the Taebak Mountains would advance their way up to the Yalu River, the border between Korea and China. MacArthur believed that his “Home by Christmas” plan would end the war and bring about peace in a united Korea. Once again, MacArthur did not imagine China entering the war due to the lack of a formal army and technological disadvantage against U.N. forces. He was wrong.

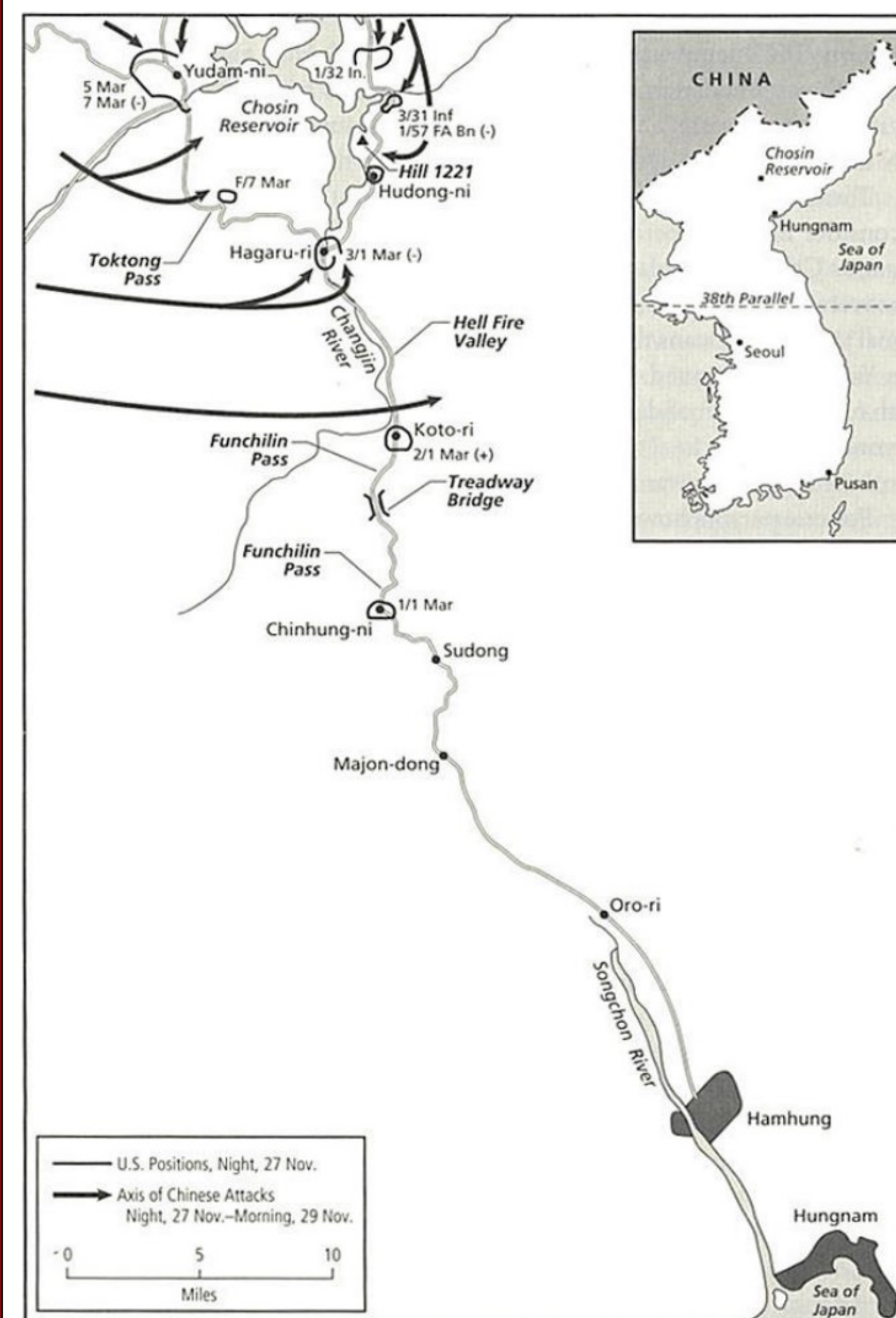


Figure 4: Escape to Hungnam Map



Figure 5: Newspaper Clipping of Jacob Chavez (Grandfather) in Pusan



Figure 6: Grandfather's Portrait

Methods

On November 16, the 1st Marine Division arrived at the southern point of the Chosin Reservoir to secure the only supply route back to Hungnam. The 3rd Battalion of the 1st Marines was stationed near Hagaru-ri, where the division headquarters were located, and was constructing an airstrip. Fox Company's 7th Marines was sent to guard Fox Hill between Yudam-ni and Hagaru-ri. On November 24, General Smith directed the 5th and the remaining 7th Marine Regiments to advance across the western bank of the Chosin Reservoir to the North Korean settlement of Yudam-ni. With support from the Able, Baker, and Charlie Batteries of the 11th Marine Regiment, the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines was based in the valley between the South and Southwest Ridge points. On Thanksgiving Day, the Marines were air-supplied for a Thanksgiving dinner in sub-zero conditions. The Chinese Army made their way across the Yalu River, designed to catch U.S. forces by surprise. General Smith directed the 5th and 7th Marine Regiments to advance across the western bank of the Chosin Reservoir to the North Korean settlement of Yudam-ni. The Chinese Army increased its onslaught with incoming mortar fire and flat trajectory weaponry, weighing hard on the 11th Regiment's artillery. The Marines arrived in Hagaru-ri and completed relief for the 1st Marine Regiment the next day. The 5th and 7th Marine regiments burst through the CCF divisions on 30 November to reach the perimeter at Hagaru-ri on 4 December. The 1st Marine Division reassembled and prepared to fight their way south to the shores of Korea. On December 11, the 1st Marine Division passed through defensive lines at Hungnam.



Figure 7: 1st Marine Division Evacuating the Chosin Reservoir



Figure 8: Refugees being Evacuated at Hungnam Harbor

Results and/or Conclusion

Results
The 1st Marine Division preceded to arrive at Hungnam and then troops from the Republic of Korea, the U.S. Army's 7th Division, and the 3rd Division came shortly after. Fortunately for all who evacuated, the Chinese had halted their assault on the UN Forces considering their division had been devastated by frigid temperatures, malnutrition, and relentless battle with the X Corps. The Chinese also feared heavy artillery fire from aircraft and the navy warships. Almost all the X Corps were transported to Pusan where most would recover and return to service in Korea. Once the UN forces had left the Hungnam harbor, the battleships bombarded the harbor to prevent the Chinese from any use of it. In total, the number of casualties that came upon the Marines specifically was 4,385 out of the 25,000 Marines who were at the Reservoir. The Chinese had an effective force of 150,000 soldiers and 50,000 died, of which 19,000 deaths were from combat and roughly 29,000 died from frostbite and starvation. Although Private Chavez says he does not remember walking back to Hungnam because he was so tired and impaired, he believes that God protected him and his men. He states, “I say, God blessed all of us and blessed the whole group. He was with us...I tell you, when I served the Lord with those guys [the mass service], I mean, I tell you that was our blessing...He gave me a chance.” In just a matter of two weeks, the largest seafit since the Okinawa operation five years prior entailed the evacuation of approximately 17,500 vehicles, 90,000 escaping refugees, 100,000 soldiers, and 350,000 tons of cargo. Not one thing was left behind, so the Chinese were unable to seize the various weaponry and transportation.

Conclusions
As a result of the failed attempt to unify Korea, the policy of the United States government to be the policeman of the world in hopes of stopping the spread of communism would only increase. The policy would build the military might and the foreign policy that is in place today. The Battle of the Chosin Reservoir is displayed as one of the cruelest battles the United States had ever gone through due to its harsh weather conditions and the ten-to-one odds against the Chinese Army. However, the Chosin Reservoir serves as one of the most successful military evacuations in United States military history. By understanding the history behind the Battle of the Chosin Reservoir, historians, as well as military officials, will be a reminder of the United States' military might when facing multiple disadvantages. As for those who survived the Chosin Reservoir, they will be remembered as the few, the proud, the chosen.

Future Work

1. Examine the Battle of the Chosin Reservoir from an Air Force perspective
2. Distinguish between the Chinese experience and the UN experience
3. Compare and contrast the Battle of the Bulge and the Chosin Reservoir

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