**CLOSE CALL CHOSIN**

**One of the little-known aspects of the Chosin Reservoir campaign was that Maj. Gen. Oliver P. Smith, the commander of the Marines there, was far more of a “George Marshall man” than were the Army generals to whom he reported. Lt. Gen. Edward M. “Ned” Almond, the Army general over Smith, “was a [Douglas] MacArthur man, and anything MacArthur said, nothing could change it,” recalled Smith. “MacArthur was God.”**

1.      **Smith, rail-thin and white-haired, seemed to have been cut from the Marshall cloth. When he was 7 years old his widowed mother took him to California and raised him in penury (EXTREME POVERTY, DESTITUTION).**

**Smith arrived at the University of California, Berkeley, with just $5 in his pocket and worked his way through school, often as a gardener. He joined the Marines at the outset of World War I but spent the war in Guam, a setback to his career that would help keep him at the rank of captain for almost two decades during the interwar period.**

**In the early 1930s Smith attended the Army Infantry School at Fort Benning, Ga., then run by Lt. Col. George Marshall. There he and his classmates Walter Bedell Smith and Terry Allen were instructed in the use of machine guns by Major Omar Bradley and in tactics by Major Joseph Stilwell. “Colonel Marshall was pretty definite in his ideas,” Smith remembered admiringly. “He was a pretty tough hombre.”**

**As a general the quiet, pipe-smoking Smith hardly fit the gungho image of a Marine, which may be one reason his name is hardly known today. On the eve of landing for the Battle of Peleliu in World War II, for example, he passed the time by reading, among other things, a biography of Oliver Wendell Holmes. Peleliu proved to be a bloodbath for the American landing force, which according to Admiral Chester Nimitz suffered the highest casualty rate—nearly 40 percent—of any amphibious assault ever by American forces. This experience surely helped steel Smith for the carnage he would see during the hardest days of the Chosin fight.**

**It is said that the essence of generalship is what one does before the outbreak of fighting. That is certainly the case with Smith at Chosin. The three most important decisions of the campaign may be those he made before it even began.**

**First, he insisted on consolidating his regiments so they could support one another. This meant bringing in the 5th Marines from the east side of the reservoir and turning over that area to the Army.**

**Second, Smith made it a top priority to have his engineers scrape out two airstrips in the frozen ground, enabling the Marines in the following days to fly in supplies and reinforcements and move out their wounded, unburdening their units and enabling them to move faster through the frozen roads and mountains. A total of 4,312 wounded or frostbitten Marine and Army personnel were flown out in the mere five days that the northernmost airstrip, at Hagaru-ri, was operational, from the afternoon of December 1 to the evening of Dec. 6, 1950, when the retreating Marines abandoned that base.**

**Third, Smith put himself at what he believed would be the key point of the battle. The American forces around Chosin Reservoir were essentially in a giant formation resembling the letter Y, with the Marines on the left arm, to the west of the reservoir, and the Army on the right, to the east. Smith understood that if the Marines held their position west of the reservoir but lost the outpost to the south of it, where the forks met, they would be doomed. So on the morning of November 28 he left his headquarters and flew to that junction, where the two branches came together and the single road out of the mountains, south to the sea, began. This spot, he had determined, would be the decisive point, geographically, in the coming battle. “Hagaru-ri had to be held at all costs,” he later explained. “Here was the transport plane airstrip.Here was accumulated the wherewithal to support the subsequent breakout from Hagaru-ri. Here was a defended perimeter where the 5th and 7th Marines [who were isolated to the northwest] could reorganize, resupply, re-equip and evacuate their casualties preparatory to the breakout therefrom.”**

**In the American system every general has a boss. A seldom-discussed aspect of generalship is understanding the person to whom one reports, whether that is a president, a prime minister or another general. What are that superior’s concerns, his skills, and his shortcomings? A significant aspect of the Chosin campaign was that Smith soberly assessed the combat skills and judgment of Almond.**

**It was said of Almond that “when it pays to be aggressive, Ned’s aggressive, and when it pays to be cautious, Ned’s aggressive.” Chosin Reservoir was developing as one of the latter cases. When Almond visited Smith’s headquarters, he told the general and his Marine division staff, “We’ve got to go barreling up that road.” Smith bit his tongue until Almond left and then said to his staff, “We’re not going anywhere until I get this division together and the airfield built.” Before the battle Smith also wrote a personal letter to the commandant of the Marine Corps, putting his unease on the record. “Our left flank is wide open,” he noted. “I have little confidence in the tactical judgment of X Corps or in the realism of their planning.” At one point in mid-November 1950 Almond had spread his five divisions (three American and two South Korean) across a 500-mile front. Smith’s Marine division had a gap of 80 miles on its left and 120 miles on its right.**

**Smith so distrusted Almond’s judgment that, expecting that his forces eventually would be compelled to retreat, he established along the road back to the sea three fortified base camps, about one day’s march apart, loaded with supplies and well protected by infantry units. The tactical layout of the strong points and other outposts was distinctive, reflecting Smith’s calculations about the fight he was facing. As long as his perimeters held, he could keep his artillery and mortars in operation, which meant the Marines could keep fighting even while heavily outnumbered. This led to the conclusion that it was preferable to have guaranteed close-in kills than just good chances far out. He wanted to prevent as much as possible having handfuls of Chinese soldiers slip inside his lines to suicidality attack machine gunners and artillery and mortar crews. So Smith drew his units together, sacrificing some tactically significant positions atop hills in order to establish extremely tight perimeters.**

**As for Almond, his account of what happened at Chosin frequently rings false. The evidence indicates that Almond lied in his official oral history and elsewhere, repeatedly claiming that he had all but forced Smith to build the landing strips that would prove so vital. But Almond’s assertions run contrary to both logic and the documentary record. He was urging the Marines to charge 100 miles northward, so why would he want them to pause to establish an airfield just a short way from the sea? As it happens, Smith, in a letter to his wife weeks earlier, had mentioned that among his concerns he considered building airstrips absolutely necessary for supporting any combat operations around the Chosin area. Also, when Smith asked for the help of Army engineers to build the airstrips, X Corps staff refused his request. As Smith put it in an interview decades later: “The [X] corps at the time [early November] wasn’t interested in any field up there. I told Almond that we ought to have a field that would take transport planes to bring in supplies and take out casualties. He said, ‘What casualties?’ That’s the kind of thing you were up against. He wouldn’t admit there ever would be any casualties. We took 4,500 casualties out of that field.”**

**Even as Almond urged him to charge north to the Yalu, Smith and his Marines began to notice ominous signs around them. Korean children, normally eager to beg for candy, were nowhere to be seen. Deer were moving down from the ridges, as though displaced by something. When Smith learned that the Chinese had left a bridge intact over a chasm, he was alarmed, believing that it was part of an enemy plan to lure the Marines northward. History has revealed that Smith’s suspicions were correct: Peng Dehuai, the top Chinese commander in the war, had told his subordinates at a campaign planning meeting on November 13, “We will employ a strategy of luring the enemy forces into our internal line and wiping them out one by one.” The Chinese gambit of entrapment was exactly the right move to make against Almond, who was being overaggressive while underestimating his enemy.**

**Chinese commanders in North Korea had explicitly been given the mission to “encircle and exterminate the U.S. Marines around the Changjin [Chosin] Reservoir.” Sensing this, Smith’s plan “was to slow down the advance and stall until I could pull up the 1st Marines behind us and get our outfit together. I was unable to complete that until the 27th of November.”**

**That Marine consolidation came just in time. The same night, November 27–28, the two Marine regiments isolated at the northwestern end of the Marine line were attacked by two Chinese divisions. A third division swept in behind them to try to cut off their line of retreat to the southern end of the reservoir.**

**The confidence of the Marines’ response to these relentless attacks was striking—and infectious. They knew they had lavish and accurate close air support available. At night, when those planes could not operate, the Marines had artillery batteries standing by, ready to fire at prearranged coordinates in the draws and gullies in which Chinese attackers were most likely to creep toward American lines. When Smith asked Colonel Lewis B. “Chesty” Puller how he was doing, Puller responded, with no irony, “Fine! We have enemy contact on all sides.”**

**The two Marine regiments fighting on the western shore and the third regiment, trying to hold open the road to the south, were led by commanders who knew how to use communications, logistics, and maneuver and fire support. Because of that, they would bring out all their wounded and most of their vehicles and artillery pieces, as well as many of the wandering Army soldiers they encountered. When their infantry attacked, it generally could count on swift and effective support from mortars, artillery and aircraft. Both enlisted men and officers had stored up hundreds of small combat ruses and ploys in World War II: When the enemy makes a noisy probing attack, he probably is trying to locate your machine guns, so respond only with grenades and rifle fire if possible. When withdrawing, buy a few precious moments by building a fire and throwing in some bullets as you depart, which as they cook off could make the enemy believe the abandoned position is still being contested.**

**There was a hardness in the Marines. The 7th Marines’ Fox Company had been left atop a hill in a key pass to try to keep the road back to the southern end of the reservoir open. Resupplied by air, Fox Company fought for five days, finally operating from behind improvised barricades that included stacks of frozen Chinese corpses.**

**The key to getting the two Marine regiments from their outposts on the west side of the reservoir down to the junction at Hagaru-ri, where Smith and supplies were waiting, was to break through the Chinese roadblocks and get the road open. Two attempts were made to clear the road directly; both failed. The regimental commanders, Lt. Col. Raymond Murray of the 5th Marines and Colonel Homer Litzenberg of the 7th Marines, recognized that a radically different approach was needed.**

**In what might have been the crucial tactical moment of the entire campaign, Murray and Litzenberg sent Lt. Col. Ray Davis to lead his 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, overland through enemy-held territory. The temperature was 24 degrees below zero. Few movements are as physically draining as going up and down hills covered with snow, but Davis’ battalion marched eight miles through waist-high drifts and over three frozen ridges. At times the Marines were so near Chinese troops that “we could smell the garlic and hear them talking,” recalled Sergeant Charles McKellar.**

**The weather was a physical threat but also a tactical ally. The snapping wind covered the sounds of hundreds of heavily laden men moving and climbing in the snow, and encouraged enemy soldiers to keep their ears well covered. It was too cold, and the men were too fatigued, to allow any stops, so the column moved almost continuously for 24 hours, then collided with the rear of the enemy along the road, ambushing the would-be Chinese ambushers and relieving the beleaguered Fox Company. When Lt. Col. Davis’ battalion arrived, it saw some 450 Chinese corpses splayed out around the company’s perimeter. Over the course of six days, Fox had suffered 26 killed, 89 wounded and 3 missing, out of about 220 Marines in the reinforced company. Davis and Fox’s commander, Captain William Barber, would both receive the Medal of Honor. (A total of 14 Marines in the Chosin campaign would receive that highest of American military honors.) Davis’ battalion then moved down and held open the pass until the Marine column could move southward through it.**

**Over four days and three nights this epic march and attack enabled the 5th and 7th Marines to push the 14 miles back down the left arm of the Y to Hagaru-ri, fighting Chinese attackers most of the time and the cold always. There were seven Chinese roadblocks along the way that needed to be attacked and cleared. Moving slowly and carefully, the two regiments brought with them all 1,500 of their wounded— 600 of them stretcher cases—as well as their dead. Patrick Roe, an intelligence officer for the rearguard battalion, wrote later, “No one ever doubted the troops from Yudam-ni would make it, but there was always a question of how many would.”**

**Smith and his chief of operations, Colonel Alpha Bowser, were in a tent at Hagaru-ri one night, working on the issue of how to replace a blown bridge on their line of retreat, when they heard an unfamiliar noise, one of human voices gradually growing louder. The voices were those of the lead element of the two regiments coming into camp, singing the Marine Corps Hymn and other familiar tunes. Bowser looked at Smith and said: “Our troubles are over. We’ve got it made.”**

**Hagaru-ri itself was under assault by yet another Chinese division. Smith took two days to allow the two arriving regiments to recuperate and refit, and also to fly out all the wounded and some of the dead. With the additional infantrymen, plus ammunition brought in by air, Smith calculated he had sufficient combat power to hold Hagaru-ri indefinitely, despite being greatly outnumbered by Chinese attackers.**

**Elements of six Chinese divisions stood along the sole road leading from the junction of the Y south to the sea. On December 6 Smith began the march of his 10,000 Marines to the coast. It was planned even more carefully than an attack, with Marines moving along the flanking ridgelines to protect the column. There were 1,000 trucks, tanks and other vehicles in the column, but by Smith’s order only drivers, radiomen, medics and the wounded were allowed to ride. Everyone else would walk, the better to stay warm and to ward off enemy attacks. It took 39 hours and cost 600 more casualties to fight southward 11 miles through nine more roadblocks to the next of Smith’s prepared strong points, at Koto-ri. Almond flew over the convoy and was outraged to see it stopped at points, so he had his aircraft land at Koto-ri, where he lectured Smith on the need to move rapidly.**

**The final obstacle, where the road ran along the top of a 1,500-foot cliff face, was a deep notch in the cliff whose bridge had been almost completely destroyed by the Chinese. Without it, troops could walk out, but Smith’s 1,400 vehicles (he had picked up 400 more at Koto-ri) were stuck—and on them lay the truck-bound wounded. “To leave them was unthinkable,” said Lieutenant William Davis of the 7th Marines. The division engineer, Lt. Col. John Partridge, came up with a novel way to address the problem: Drop bridge sections by air.**

**Smith was skeptical of the unprecedented plan for the bridge and questioned Partridge closely about it. “He was kind of a grouchy guy,” Smith recalled of his engineer. “He admitted that the Air Force had never dropped Treadway bridge sections.” Smith pressed him, asking how he knew it would work, whether test drops had been conducted, what would happen if some sections were damaged while being parachuted in, and whether there was a backup plan. Finally Partridge tired of the questions and exclaimed: “I got you across the Han River! I got you the airfield! And I’ll get you a bridge!” Smith laughed and told him to proceed. The bridge project worked, and the Marines were able to move out of the mountains.**

**Smith, vastly outnumbered, had mauled the Chinese divisions— at least nine of them, and perhaps even 12—arrayed against his one division. Afterward, he wrote to the commandant of the Marine Corps that his men “came down off the mountain bearded, footsore and physically exhausted, but their spirits were high. They were still a fighting division.”**

**Smith’s pride was justified. According to Russell Spurr’s groundbreaking history of Chinese involvement in the war, Enter the Dragon, after the Chosin battles the Chinese commander in Korea, Dehuai, flew to Beijing. There he confronted Chairman Mao Zedong, telling him bluntly that the forces given him were unequipped, untrained and undersupplied. As a result, he said, the attack on the Marines had been a disaster. The Chinese divisions that attacked the Marines at Chosin suffered 25,000 dead, 12,000 more wounded and tens of thousands of frostbite cases. These divisions were withdrawn from fighting until March of the following year.**

**Nonetheless, the campaign was a strategic victory for the Chinese. They had taken on the Americans, the world’s leading military power, and, fielding an illiterate, unmechanized peasant army, had pushed them out of northern Korea. And they had done it against one of America’s most prominent generals, Douglas MacArthur, the conqueror of Japan. “Communist China—until then considered to be a rogue regime of doubtful legitimacy—become a power with which to be reckoned,” concluded Roe. Lt. Gen. Matthew Ridgway admired Smith’s performance at Chosin: “If it wasn’t for his tremendous leadership, we would have lost the bulk of that division up north. His leadership was the principal reason it came out the way it did. He was a great division commander.”**

**When Smith retired, S.L.A. Marshall, the Army historian, went even further, calling his Chosin performance “perhaps the most brilliant divisional feat of arms in the national history.” It is difficult to overstate what Smith achieved. Had he simply followed orders and charged toward the Yalu, he might well have lost more than 10,000 Marines, which would have been perhaps the greatest military disaster in the nation’s history. If the 1st Marine Division had been wiped out, it would have been a triumph for communism, with consequences for the Korean War and the larger Cold War that are incalculable. The United States might have withdrawn from the peninsula and into isolationism, or it might have escalated and used nuclear weapons in Korea. Neither prospect is appealing.**

**Surprisingly, Smith is not much remembered or honored in today’s Corps. Ask a Marine who commanded at Chosin, and he is likely to say Chesty Puller or perhaps, even more mistakenly, General H.M. “Howlin’ Mad” Smith of World War II fame. A major reason for the relative obscurity of O.P. Smith likely is the friction between him and General Lemuel C. Shepherd, his immediate superior in the Marine Corps during the Chosin campaign, which probably is why he was never invited to the Marine base at Quantico, Va., to teach fellow officers about the campaign. “Regimental commanders spoke, company commanders spoke—everyone spoke but O.P. Smith,” wrote his granddaughter, with evident bitterness.**

**This neglect continues even now. The exhibit on the Chosin campaign at the National Museum of the Marine Corps near the Quantico base is magnificent. Especially chilling is the room-sized re-creation of Fox Company’s hilltop stand, with its depiction of tracer fire arcing across the night as mortarmen run low on shells and the dead are covered by snow. CHOSIN REMAINS A TOUCHSTONE OF MARINE CORPS HISTORY, a nearby sign states. Yet the exhibit treats O.P. Smith as an afterthought, sharing a small display case in a corner with Chesty Puller. The only Marine general from the Korean War honored with a prominent yellow-on-red biographical plaque, oddly enough, is Gerald Thomas, who succeeded O.P. Smith as commander of the 1st Marine Division.**

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