

#### Part 4 - Decisions at Corps and Division

On the 29<sup>th</sup> General Hodes had reported to General Smith that the force at Hudong had made two unsuccessful attempts to reach the Inlet. He said the cut off units had 400 casualties and that it was impossible for them to fight their way out. To General Smith the inference was they should be extricated by a larger force. But there was nothing at Hagaru-ri which could be spared. The Chinese had attacked Hagaru in division strength the previous night and the threat still existed. At the time Hodes was seeking help from General Smith, General Smith was ordering all available units, the commandos and others at Koto-ri to make an "all costs" attempt to reach Hagaru-ri to reinforce the defense.

It was Smith's opinion that the forces at the Inlet could improve their situation by attacking toward Hagaru using the abundant air support which was available. Late in the afternoon when Smith learned he was now responsible for RCT 31 he had General Hodes draft a message advising Faith that his command was now attached to the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division, that no actual troop assistance could be furnished but that unlimited air support was available and that he should make every effort to move south toward Hagaru-ri at the earliest. The dispatch further stated that he should do nothing which would jeopardize the safety of his wounded.<sup>1</sup>

There is no record of how this message was delivered. Wire communication with the 31st Infantry CP at Hudong was still working on the morning of the 30<sup>th</sup>, as well as communication via the tank radio General Hodes had brought with him to Hagaru-ri. Whether the RCT 31 CP still had communication with the cut off units is not known. Two separate officers recall hearing this message, transmitted in the clear, on Captain Stamford's TACP radio on 1 December an indication that an attempt to contact the task force through the tactical air request net which Stamford monitored with his jeep radio. Previous attempts may have been made to send it on that frequency but Stamford's radio had been inoperative for some time and had to be repaired.

The morning of the 30<sup>th</sup> General Barr arrived at Hagaru-ri to confer with General Smith. He then borrowed a helicopter, flew to the Inlet and talked in private with Faith for about twenty minutes. He learned for the first time that MacLean was missing and Faith was in command. Faith never disclosed the contents of this conversation to any other officer in the perimeter. Nevertheless it is difficult to believe that General Barr would not have delivered General Smith's message.

At Hagaru-ri General Almond arrived at the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division CP at 1420 on the 30<sup>th</sup>. He wanted to stress the need for haste in withdrawing the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Marines from Yudam-ni and action to get RCT 31 out. In the discussion General Almond told General Barr that if the acting regimental commander (Faith) did not attack he should be relieved.<sup>2</sup> Almond failed to say how and by whom Faith was to be relieved. General Barr objected and said LtCol Faith was an excellent officer in whom he had great confidence. Almond directed Smith and Barr to prepare a plan for withdrawal of RCT 31. Barr was to bring it with him when he returned Hamhung that evening. Smith and Barr conferred after Almond left and agreed that there was no question of any detailed plan or time schedule, that nothing effective could be done until RCTs 5 and 7 arrived from Yudam-ni.

At Hudong there were indications of an enemy buildup. LtCol Anderson talked to General Hodes on the radio. There were concerns that Anderson's small force would be unable to hold out against a determined Chinese attack. Word was that the 2nd Battalion, 31st Infantry had been cleared by X Corps to advance up the MSR to Hagaru-ri. If the Hudong force, including the tanks, withdrew from Hagaru-ri they would be on hand to bolster the battalion and guide it back to rescue the cut off forces.

Some time between 1400 and 1600 the units at Hudong were ordered to withdraw into the perimeter at Hagaru. Captain George Rasula was particularly impressed by the air of utter confusion attending the move, which seemed to him more of a headlong flight than a deliberate withdrawal. That evening the available forces, including the tanks, took their place in the defensive lines at Hagaru with the tanks playing a vital role.

The final breakup of the withdrawing task force column occurred just about the former location of the Hudong force. Had friendly forces remained there many of the wounded, otherwise killed or captured, might have been saved, provided the Hudong forces had not been over-run by the Chinese. For this reason the order to withdraw has always been controversial. General McCaffrey, then the deputy corps chief of staff has stated the order for withdrawal originated with General Barr. Later, when asked about it by General Almond Barr stated he could not see any good coming from losing more men in behalf of those already lost.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the order could not have been given without General Smith's approval. Would the Hudong forces have been able to hold their position and render effective aid to the task force will always remain a question.

### **The Worst Night - 30 November - 1 December**

Stamford had a busy day directing air strikes on the 30th. Planes repeatedly struck the high ground and ridges surrounding the perimeter. There appeared to be no shortage of targets. Song Shilun's revised plan was under way and Chinese reinforcements were arriving. Faith and his S-3 worked out a plan to counterattack a penetration in any part of the perimeter. Wire communication within the perimeter were improved and ammo redistributed. The troops had hopes a relief force would reach them. But, with time passing it became apparent no relief force would reach them that day. As darkness came on the word was passed: "Hold out one more night and we've got it made." Their greatest fear now was of being wounded and immobilized. Without adequate clothing or shelter being immobilized would mean freezing to death.

The enemy attacks renewed earlier than usual, and with more determination. Snow began fall. The approach to the perimeter across ice from the north was a favored enemy avenue. The 4.2 mortars attempted to break the ice there but it was too thick. The intensity of the enemy attack built up toward midnight, but no penetration had yet been made. Increased mortar fire fell in the perimeter including 120mm mortars, and with increasing accuracy. Then the enemy penetrated the east side held by the skeletal 3/31. Other attacks came from the road to the west. The perimeter was penetrated at five different points. Local counterattacks were able halt the penetrations but not always restore positions. In the early morning hours there was doubt the perimeter could hold out until daylight. When daylight did come enemy attacks subsided but the enemy did not pull back as previously. They remained in the low ground in contact with the perimeter.

Still trying to reach Chosin the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry had reached Majon Dong on the 29th. Finally on the morning of the 30<sup>th</sup> trucks did arrive. The battalion loaded up and proceeded north into the pass. Climbing into the pass the battalion came under fire by the Chinese and was halted. LtCol Reidy prepared to assume a perimeter defense for the night and sent a messenger to X Corps to report the pass was not secure. Marine air had seen the battalion halted and reported to it Hagaru-ri. Learning of the problem General Almond, then at the 1st Marine Division CP. called his chief of staff and directed him to send a message to Reidy ordering him to move forward immediately to join Col Puller at Koto-ri.

Major Joseph I. Gurfein of the corps staff was sent to deliver the message personally. When Gurfein arrived he found Reidy "frozen and paralyzed." Gurfein delivered the message. By 1900 Reidy was

sufficiently organized to issue an order to his company commanders for the advance which eventually got under way about 2330. Gurfein reported what happened next

“At approximately 2345 a booby trap on a bridge in front of the column exploded, wounding one man. The leading company started rumors that it was an antitank gun, that it was the enemy shooting, that the Chinese were coming, and that they were ordered to move to the rear. Within ten seconds a near route had started with the tail and lead companies turning to the rear and starting to overrun the battalion command group. Jeep drivers turned their jeeps around and headed to the rear. The driver of a 1/4 ton truck started to unhitch his trailer to turn around. Not an NCO nor junior officer raised his voice to stop the route. The battalion commander, pushed aside by the troops, stood there silently. I had to personally step in and stop the men, order them to halt, and turn them around. That started their moving forward again. By this time the battalion commander was moving back with the column. To the best of my knowledge he did nothing to stop the route or to control his men. During the commotion not a single shot had been fired by the enemy or us.”

As the battalion neared the top of the pass the Chinese attacked and split it in two. Some of the men continued to move forward while one company set up a defensive position and remained there the rest of the night. Various portions of the battalion reached Koto-ri between 0230 and 0900 the next morning leaving some of their vehicles. At Koto-ri Colonel Puller told them they were attached to him and placed them into his defensive perimeter.<sup>4</sup> Almond, inspecting units at Koto-ri, awarded Reidy a Distinguished Service Cross for getting the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry, to Koto-ri. Gurfein, somewhat later, got a Silver Star.<sup>5</sup>

### **Breakout, Disintegration and Destruction**

At the Inlet the day broke with a dishearteningly low ceiling precluding air support. About 1000, a lone Marine Corsair penetrated the overcast and buzzed the perimeter. Through Captain Stamford's radio the pilot reported that the forecast was for some improvement and that he would lead a flight of planes to the perimeter as soon as weather permitted. Faith made plans to make a run for Hagaru-ri. By 1300 planes were on station. All trucks were unloaded and loaded with wounded. Gas tanks of inoperable vehicles were drained for fuel and what ammunition was available was redistributed. Tragically, the 40mms were out of ammunition and ammunition for the quad .50s was very limited. Both weapons had played a decisive role in keeping the perimeter from being over-run.

With the Company C, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 32<sup>nd</sup> Infantry leading, the column began its advance when a prematurely released napalm tank hit at the point of the column killing several soldiers and injuring others, demoralizing and disorganizing the advanced units. But, the same attack suppressed Chinese resistance and the column lurched forward. Major Curtis described the situation:

“At the initial success of the breakout a sort of hysterical enthusiasm seized the troops. They flooded down the road like a great mob and tactical control broke down almost immediately. Officers and NCOs tried frantically to re-establish control and to order men up on the high ground where they could protect the truck column, but every man seemed to want to reach the head of the column and thereby increase his chances of reaching safety. Enemy small arms fire was encountered all the way, but men attacked and over-ran enemy positions frontally with seeming disregard for basic tactical principles and their own safety.”<sup>6</sup>

Under heavy small arms fire the column proceeded. As troops took cover from time to time units became intermingled and increasingly disorganized. Because of the loss of key officers and NCOs

effective control was lost. It became a battle of individuals and small groups but still focused on the truck column with the wounded.

The advance and breakup of the column produced some of the worst chaos and some of the most transcendent behavior of the entire battle. For a few others the stress had the opposite result. Descriptions of the breakup of the column are fragmentary, sometimes conflicting as each individual saw isolated events. The essential events of the breakout can be quickly described.

The column halted at the first blown bridge. Each truck had to detour across a marshy area and through a bypass. Some trucks stalled and required help. Much time was lost. Chinese fire took its toll of drivers. Others were prepared to pull dead or wounded drivers from the cab and drive themselves. The tortuous passage of the river was dominated by Chinese on Hill 1221 to the south, the hill which had foiled Captain Drake's efforts to break through to the task force. The delay in crossing the river enabled the Chinese to north the react. They began to close in on the flank and rear of the column.

Once past the first blown bridge the convoy was again halted by another road block at the hairpin turn on the east side of Hill 1221. While Faith took personal charge of efforts to break this block, other officers and NCOs, individually and with whatever small group they could recruit, attacked Hill 1221. The crest was reached but a misdirected air strike strafed the soldiers on Hill 1221.

The road block was broken but Faith was badly wounded and shortly thereafter died. With Faith dead the task force became totally leaderless. From Hill 1221 some men continued down the hill to the road again while others veered to the west onto the ice of the reservoir. The truck column was again halted south of Hill 1221 by the second blown bridge. Agonizing efforts were made to continue south by driving the trucks across a railroad bridge. Some trucks succeeded but were finally halted completely by Chinese in the vicinity of Hudong. Some who had stayed with the trucks remained to the last possible moment, then made their way individually and in small groups out onto the ice and toward the Marine perimeter at Hagaru-ri. The Chinese wreaked havoc upon the wounded in the stalled truck convoy.

For the next two days individuals and small groups, many wounded, most exhausted, made their way into the Marine perimeter at Hagaru-ri, many of them through that portion of the perimeter held by LtCol Olin Beal's 1<sup>st</sup> Motor Transport Battalion. Thinking there might be wounded and stragglers still out on the ice Beal organized rescue parties and reported bringing in more than 300 men over the next few days. An old mustang who had worked his way up through the enlisted and warrant officer ranks Beal set very high standards of military conduct for himself and for others as well. He was appalled at what he saw and bitterly criticized the performance of some, but reported of others:

“There were many brave men here this day; men shot through the body helping a buddy; men with hands frozen helping a buddy with a broken leg; men with both legs broken dragging themselves along with their hands and elbows. One case where the undersigned crawled within fifty yards of a Chinese machine gun the man yelled, “Go back, go back, they’ll kill you.” When he was dragged out and was being carried in my arms he cried and said, “Surely God will take care of you, colonel.” It takes a brave man to sit in sub-zero weather with both legs broken and frozen and tell another man to go back or he will be killed, a damn brave man in any sense of the word”.<sup>7</sup>

On the 2nd one Marine aircraft flew low over the reservoir and reported a column in single file out on the ice. Another flew over the trucks and saw wounded who tried to wave. No enemy were observed

around the trucks. A mile and a half north were more trucks with dead and with wounded who tried to wave and some troops standing about.<sup>8</sup> On the 3rd Beale was able to cross the ice and reach the abandoned truck column. He reported that all those in the trucks were dead, some 300.

The appearance of the survivors made an indelible impression on the Marines manning the perimeter. General Smith reported:

“I had quite a time with those Army people -- they had no spirit. We tried to help them out as best we could. We had to fly in weapons to re-arm them. They'd thrown away all their weapons. I put LtCol Anderson (of the Army) in command of them. They didn't want to put up tents -- they felt it was up to us to take care of them, feed them, and put up tents for them. We disabused them of that idea. We eventually salvaged 385 of them.”

General Hodes had a different view. He reported to corps by telephone about noon on the 2<sup>nd</sup> saying about 750 men had come in. Of these thirty per cent were wounded and thirty percent had “trench foot.” He reported morale was very good with few exceptions and that every man had his weapon.<sup>9</sup>

The wounded and those badly frostbitten were processed through the aid stations, sent to the Hagaru-ri airfield and evacuated. Some unwounded survivors were able to work their way aboard evacuation aircraft. Medical authorities in Japan where survivors were arriving complained that some with mild frostbite were coming through. More stringent controls were initiated.

## **The Loses**

Precise figure on losses in RCT 31 are not readily available. Appleman estimates that, including the forces at Hudong, there were about 3,200 men in RCT 31, including KATUSAs. Other estimate ranged as low as 2,500. Out of those reaching Hagaru-ri nearly 1,500 were evacuated with wounds or frostbite. There remained 385 members of the RCT who were formed into a provisional battalion under LtCol Anderson and served with the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division on the breakout to Hamhung. This would indicate 1,000 killed or captured.

No reliable estimate of the Chinese losses can be made. Nevertheless they were horrendous, as much or more from air attack and cold as from ground fire. The 80<sup>th</sup> Division was identified, briefly, opposite the perimeter protecting the evacuation of Hamhung. Otherwise the 80<sup>th</sup> and 81<sup>st</sup> CCF Divisions, like the remaining divisions of the 9<sup>th</sup> Army Group, were not identified in combat again until early April.

Before leaving this part of the story and going on to an analysis of the action something has to be said about the condition the individual soldiers were in. Melville Coolbaugh, who was a BAR man in L Company, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry has put it very eloquently in his story:

“I hope to make the point that our actions and reactions during our withdrawal from the Inlet were affected not only by our exhaustion from those five days and four nights of continuous enemy contact, but also by the fact that we were already in an advanced state of exhaustion and numbness from many hours of intense activity and long exposure to the cold before we reached the Reservoir. Our condition upon arriving at the Reservoir, together with the continuous enemy night attacks while there, left us as hardly rational human beings.”<sup>10</sup>

1. Smith - "Aide Memoire"
2. Smith diary

3. Appleman *East of Chosin* p 186 quoting conversation with McCaffrey
4. Appleman *East of Chosin* p162 quoting statement of Maj. Joseph I. Gurfein, GHQ, X Corps, G-3 Air dated May 26, 1951, 7th Division command Report, Blair pp 512-513
5. Blair pp512-13
6. Curtis MSS
7. Statement of LtCol Olin L. Beall, USMC
8. X Corps G-3 Jnl J-115 2 Dec
9. X Corps G-3 Jnl J-47 1250 2 Dec
10. "My Notes on Korea by Melville J. Coolbaugh, L/3/31 Inf" - Courtesy of Col George Rasula