

Part 5 - Reflections

In the press of continuing war the collapse of RCT 31 was soon forgotten. The regiment, reorganized, was back in action under new command by February and fought well. Years later William McCaffrey, now a retired lieutenant general, who was given command of the 31st Infantry in March thought the disaster was a collapse of leadership from the top down:

“...I suggest the unraveling of the 31st RCT was a reflection of incompetence and misconduct on the part of Gens Barr and Hodes, a lesser degree of incompetence on the part of the field grade officers, who, nevertheless, in general, died or were overwhelmed by the cold, the enemy and the enormity of the problems that cascaded over them. In three days the chain of command ceased to function and leaderless men faced death from the enemy and the cold with no guidance and only whatever desperate courage could be summoned up from their innermost sources of their being.”¹

Recriminations reverberated for a short time then faded away. LtCol Anderson was reported to have preferred charges against some of the task force officers. Fr. Otto Sporer, the 5th Marines chaplain who had observed and heard of some of the unseemly conduct was quoted in an inflammatory article in the Saturday Evening Post. An official inspector general investigation was conducted and men still in the regiment were interviewed and asked if they had seen any misconduct. Not surprisingly for men who still faced combat with some of those same officers, none could think of any such instance.

Lieutenant Edward Magill who served as a member of B Battery, 57 FAB at the Inlet thought the disaster deserved more attention. In a letter to historian Roy Appleman in 5 June 1991 he offered this thought:

“It has always been my opinion that the Army high command was not very proud of the operation on the east side of the Reservoir. Since that operation provided textbook examples of every conceivable type of command and staff failure humanly possible, their reaction was to sweep it under the rug and forget it. And forget it they did!”²

Magill was not the only one. It is interesting to note that the first volume of the Army's Korean War history series, *South to the Naktong: North to the Yalu* by Roy Appleman, covering the war from its start to the Chinese intervention, was published in 1972. The second volume, *Ebb and Flow* by Billy C. Mossman, dealing with the Chinese intervention was not published until 1990, long after the major players had retired or died. It appears the Army did have a difficult time dealing with those events. But, as any student of military history knows, there often is more to be learned from failure than from success. So, not only for the lessons it may have for future combat leaders but so the men still living who endured that ordeal can know how and why it came about, it is worthwhile examining all aspects.

X Corps Plan

While the leadership of RCT31 may have collapsed from the top down, the problems of RCT31 began with General MacArthur's decision to attack north through the mountains with winter weather in full force knowing the troops in Korea were not clothed and equipped for such conditions. MacArthur may well have had sound tactical reasons for taking that risk. There is no record of them so far. He published his book *Reminiscences* in 1964. Much of the Korean War material had not been declassified by then so he was not at complete liberty to report on his actions and decision. It was

never realistically possible to to attack sixty five miles west over another mountain pass and through a narrow valley to Mupyong-ni at that time of year and under those conditions. It was obviously intended only as a demonstration.

General Ridgway, thought “attack” was the wrong word. “Although MacArthur described this movement toward the Yalu as an ‘attack’, it was really no more than an advance to contact. It is not possible to attack an enemy whose positions are not know, whose very existence has not been confirmed, and whose forces are completely out of contact with your own.” General Almond admitted as much in later years.³ The distinction is more than a matter of technical semantics. An advance to contact requires a certain amount of caution, the need to be prepared for a collision with an unknown force. Almond’s attack order with the 1st Marine Division’s first objective sixty five miles away and RCT 31's first objective forty five miles to the north was the kind of reckless order given for pursuit of a beaten enemy, not the kind given when advancing toward an unknown but potentially powerful enemy.

The corps order was unusual in another way. It provided for an attack in three different directions. The 1st Marine Division would attack west. The 7th Infantry division, initially using RCT 31 only, would attack north. I ROK Corps would continue advancing to the northeast. This would be something less than the “massive compression envelopment” General MacArthur referred to in his communique announcing the resumption of the attack.

Almond in his “can do” response to General MacArthur was in a great hurry to demonstrate the flexibility and mobility of his command in contrast to what he thought of as the more plodding advance of Eighth Army. He allowed only two and a half days from the time his warning order was issued for units to redeploy for the attack. Given the wide dispersal of the corps, the weather, the terrain with its limited road net, and the shortage of trucks, it simply was not within the capabilities of the corps to be ready in the time allowed. When the Chinese attack began all of the 7th Marines had not reached Yudam-ni, all of the 1st Marines had not reached Hagaru-ri, and the 3rd Division had not been able to assume responsibility for the MSR from Hagaru-ri south. Most importantly the full 31st Regimental Combat team had not been able to assemble.

In X Corps there were forty eight infantry battalion in sixteen regiments, including the KMC regiment. The corps was so dispersed that the initial attack by seven Chinese divisions, sixty three battalions, was born by only ten battalions, portions of five regiments. They were the 5th and 7th Marines, the 31st Infantry (less one battalion), one battalion of the 1st Marines and one battalion of the 7th Infantry. It was nine days, not until the 5th of December that any units of the corps had reached a position where they could potentially be of help to the 1st Marine Division and two or three more days until they actually able to render any help.

RCT 31 Plans and Disposition

Whatever contribution higher headquarters might have made to the RCT 31 disaster they were drastically magnified by the decisions and dispositions of the regimental commander. The poor opinion of the Chinese and the casual practices adopted by Colonel MacLean and some of his subordinate commanders were major factors in the disaster. Captain Herbert Bryant, CO Headquarters Company, 3/31 tells of taking three hours off to go hunting with Major Crouch, the battalion executive officer, while deployed around the Fusen Reservoir. Bryant said later, “...this shows how relaxed this operation was and the assurance that we were in control. We had no knowledge of the danger we faced from the Chinese.”⁴ LtCol Faith’s offer to attack north before the remainder of the task force had assembled in another indication of the casual habits and lack of

concern about the Chinese that seemed to be pervasive in the task force.

In the face of an unknown situation it was certainly improvident of Col MacLean to move his advance battalion forward, then string the remainder of his force out in seven different locations spread over ten miles in depth with his principal command post, his staff, separated from the main body by a very critical terrain feature, Hill 1221, and with very tenuous communication with the advance elements. With nearly all thinking focused on advance to the north the artillery was emplaced where it could support the advance battalion, but do little to support 3/31 except by direct fire, not the most efficient use of artillery.

In addition to the artillery and the 4.2 mortars the two most powerful supporting weapons the task force had were the tanks and the automatic weapons of the AAA battery. Lacking instructions the tanks remained at the rear CP and the AAA battery was attached to the artillery battalion, presumably because they were a species of artillery. Either or both in the Inlet perimeter would have made a key difference the first night. Added to MacLean's other shortcomings then was ignorance of the value and use of his supporting arms and the ability to coordinate their use with other assets.

Communications

There seems to have been a similarly careless view of communications. All units in Korea found the mountainous terrain and the distances over which they had to operate seriously limited radio transmissions. The radios in use simply were not designed to cover such distances. So communications were stressed to the limit. Col MacLean surely realized this when on the 28th he was unable to communicate either with his 3rd Battalion, 31st Infantry, or with his rear CP. The rear CP could not communicate either with the division or with either of the advance battalions. It was a factor which should have been considered when locating his CP and probably led to his decision to set up an advance CP closer to the lead units. But that was only a skeleton group and was not fully organized by the time the Chinese attacked. General Hodes' radio van would have helped the rear CP reach division but, traveling up the pass it had stalled and could not be restarted so it was pushed over the side.

Available historical information gives no specific details, but, aside from the regimental nets, the artillery battalion certainly should have had equipment able to reach the division artillery headquarters if that equipment had not been destroyed in the attack on the morning of the 28th. That same equipment should have been able to reach an artillery liaison officer at the regimental CP if there was one there. Stamford's jeep radio would have been able to reach the tactical air direction center which could have relayed messages as could the planes Stamford was in contact with. Most interestingly and overlooked was the air warning net. Lt. James Dill, who commanded a 155mm howitzer battery in the 7th Division, reported hearing a running report of the final action at the Inlet over the air warning net while at his parent battalion headquarters at Kapsan in the 7th Division zone. The report was coming from the AAA-AW battery attached to RCT 31 on a net monitored by all artillery battalions and presumably, by someone in the division headquarters.⁵ Neither MacLean or Faith was ever aware of this capability.

General Barr could and certainly should have done more. When radio communication with RCT 31 was cut off in the early morning of 28 November it was his responsibility to re-establish it. No records available indicate any effort by 7th Division to learn more of the situation or to provide RCT 31 with information or instructions.

Information and intelligence dissemination were an early casualty of the over-stressed and unreliable

communication. By late afternoon on the 27th there was certainly plenty of information indicating an entirely new situation was developing. Little of it got into the right hands, and information obtained locally from civilians and from the 5th Marines made little impact.

Command relationships

If, as the X Corps report claims, RCT 31 was to provide flank protection for the 1st Marine Division, it should have, initially, been placed under that division's command. Under any circumstances it should have been placed under the Marine Division for the initial part of the advance. The RCT was operating in the same terrain compartment as the division, initially. Had the RCT been under Marine Division control it doubtless would have followed Colonel Murray's advice, advice General Smith also passed on, and not advanced beyond Hill 1221 at least until the entire unit was assembled. The outcome of the battle would have been drastically different. One is tempted to assume that the aggressive Almond was so obsessed with his differences with the cautious Smith that he was determined never to place any army units under his command. Turning command over to Smith on the 29th when the situation had turned desperate only confirmed what he should have done in the first place.

Logistics

The advance toward the border strained corps logistic capabilities beyond their limit. The road capacity was heavily taxed. General Barr's command post was at Pukchong. RCT 31 was 129 road miles and 56 air miles to the northeast. The distance between the two most advanced units of his division, RCT 31 and the 7th Infantry, was 263 road miles or 80 air miles. His ability to provide logistic support to the 31st Infantry was non-existent. Once Col MacLean arrived and assumed command the task force became a virtual orphan without support, communication or direction from higher headquarters.

No information is available on the 7th Division's administrative plan. It must have been assumed that, with light resistance expected and ammunition usage minimal RCT 31 could carry on with its basic load, if it had one, until traffic on the MSR could be straightened out and the task force re-supplied.

Leadership

General MacArthur was extremely upset that he was called away from his headquarters for something more than sixteen hours on 15 October to a conference with President Truman at Wake Island at a far less critical time, yet he kept Walker and Almond away from their commands for twenty four hours at what was one of the most crucial times of the war. The conference began about 2130 and ended at 0100 the next morning, yet Almond's diary says he did not leave Tokyo until noon the next day. Just what was it he was doing that was so urgent that he leave his command unattended for the extra twelve hours? True night operations could not be conducted at Yonpo, but he could have timed his departure from Tokyo arrive there in the morning with enough daylight to land.

It is, however, to MacArthur's credit that he had a more realistic view of the situation, even from the remoteness of GHQ, than did either of his field commanders. There is evidence that MacArthur was alert to the possibility of such a reverse and was prepared react to it while his field commanders were not. His quick reaction to the situation does lend some weight to his later claim that the advance in late November was in the nature of a reconnaissance in force.

General Smith reported that, with the situation drastically changed, it was two days before he received any order from corps. In General Almond's absence the corps staff must have realized the need for reappraisal and new instructions. Some units such as RCT 31 were in desperate trouble and needed instructions; but none were given. By contrast the Eighth Army staff, in General Walker's absence, took the initiative and ordered a withdrawal of the army south of the Chongchon River. On Walker's return he not only approved the order, he accelerated it.⁶

It is difficult to explain or understand the innocuous part General Hodes played in this tragedy. Once he reached Hagaru-ri and learned the situation there he could not help but realize there would be no outside help for RCT 31 in the foreseeable future, that their only course of action for them would be to make their own way south. RCT 31, initially, had a much stronger force than was available at Hagaru-ri. By the 29th because of the heavy casualties, in particular among officers and NCOs, with the consequent disorganization, together with the inexperience or incompetence of some of the remaining officers, it had lost much of its combat power and was unable to make a coordinated effort. Despite this it would only be weakened by further delay. Hodes could have returned to Hudong to do whatever was possible, such as require Drake to make an all-costs effort. He could have gone to the inlet in the helicopter he was able to send for evacuation the following day, and taken charge. Coordinating an attack south with an attack north by the tanks might have put enough pressure on the Chinese to allow a breakthrough. As it was, by the time the much weaker task force did start south two days later they had two more Chinese regiments to contend with and many more casualties to care for.

Hodes could also have taken steps, either through the 1st Marine Division or X Corps, to improve communication by providing the cut off units with Marine frequencies. He could have called X Corps and asked permission to direct the units there withdraw to Hagaru. On the 28th communication was available to the forward units by relay from liaison aircraft overhead. For Hodes to have gone to the Inlet would have been to accept what turned out to be, and what was probably apparent then, a very hazardous mission. But, unless he had strict orders to the contrary, that is just exactly the kind of mission that assistant division commanders have historically performed. Brigadier General Teddy Roosevelt's rallying the troops at Omaha Beach is one of the finest examples. Hodes might have been lost, and a very successful future career leading to four starts with it. But, with all the talk of front line commanders in Korea, the truth is that the only general officers who were lost were to heart attacks and traffic accidents.

According to Major Lynch, Hodes G-3 assistant, the only, and last, things that Hodes did for the task force were to send a med-evac helicopter to the inlet which made two trips, and to have an L-5 liaison plane from Hagaru-ri drop a supply of morphine, both on the 29th.⁷ General McCaffrey had a harsher judgement of Hodes. He felt he had absconded and should have been court-martialed.⁸

Illustrative of the breakdown of control at the regimental level, and down the chain, was Colonel MacLean's action on the 29th. His communication collapsed, his staff out of reach, totally ignorant of the situation, he began to run across the ice to halt what he believed to be, wrongly, a fire fight between two of his units.

The two wounded battalion commanders who made up half of the only four to be evacuated by helicopter may very well have been the most seriously wounded, or, in terms of triage, the ones who could most benefit from air evacuation and prompt treatment. Still, it is hard to explain when there were so many other wounded.

Last, in all candor it has to be recognized that the very serious losses occurring the first night,

particularly in the 3rd Battalion, 31st Infantry, were due lack of vigilance by the security. The resulting toll on officers and NCOs severely impacted the capabilities of both battalions and was a major factor in the subsequent breakdown of the task force.

In Extremis

The eventual erosion of tactical integrity had tragic results for the wounded in the truck column. After the block at Hill 1221 had been broken any functioning chain of command ended. Had it remained intact it would have been apparent at the railroad trestle that further resistance was futile and the column was halted for good. As a matter of elementary compassion the senior officer should have taken the opportunity to surrender the column and the wounded. There is nothing whatsoever that the Chinese could have done to the surrendered wounded that would have been any worse than what actually did happen to them. It might have saved some of the senseless and random slaughter of wounded that did occur.

Two nights earlier Major John McLaughlin did exactly that when his portion of the Drysdale task force was cut off, isolated, surrounded and encumbered with a large number of wounded. MacLaughlin could have gotten away himself. Instead he chose to surrender on the agreement of the Chinese that they would take care of the wounded. The Chinese reneged on their agreement, but some of the lesser wounded did manage to escape.

With Faith dead and Major Miller, his executive officer, incapacitated by wounds, the next senior man was Major Curtis. Curtis did not attempt to take command of what was left of the column. As it ground to a halt at Hudong he left the column and made his way to Hagaru-ri. Asked about it years later Curtis, then a colonel, said he thought he was the senior man and that he should have assumed, or attempted to assume command regardless of the consequences but said he would probably do the same thing in similar circumstances. He justified it by saying that the column was moribund, unable to resist. Neither he nor any other senior officer has ever admitted to considering the need to surrender in an attempt to save the wounded.

The outcome

Whatever one can say about RCT 31 the striking thing is that they took, proportionally, the hardest hit of any major force at Chosin. The comparison in Table I (attached) is made on the basis of battalions since the size of the US and Chinese infantry battalions were similar. This ignores the relative differences in organic fire power, supporting arms, logistics and a host of other factors. But, since the Chinese made such prodigal use of their infantry, comparison of infantry strength is important although not necessarily decisive. One of the great tragedies is that because of the command failures, poor communication, failure to make coordinated use of supporting arms, and non-existent logistic support, the men of RCT31 were forced to fight on an almost equal basis with the Chinese. Whatever advantage US forces had in terms of command, control, communication, materiel, fire support and logistics, were thrown away by ignorance, incompetence and indifference.

The two Chinese divisions involved in the attack on RCT31 essentially exhausted their strength in that effort. Much of the credit for that must go to the air support the task force received and to the tremendous fire power of the self propelled AA weapons. Neither of the Chinese division was identified in the attack on Hagaru-ri. One was identified in a brief contact later in the month in the shrinking Hamhung perimeter. Both had been so severely mauled they were not identified in action again until early in April on the central front. So the task force did succeed in engaging two divisions which otherwise might have struck a decisive blow at the critically stretched defenses of Hagaru-ri.

Given that RCT 31 was essentially moribund, immobilized by the wounded, by 29 November a legitimate question is: Why didn't the Chinese bypass RCT 31 and strike directly at Hagaru-ri? In nearly all Chinese accounts of Korea there is repeated emphasis by leaders on efforts to "wipe out" a UNC regiment or division. The Chinese character translated as "wipe out" infers a complete destruction, a battle of annihilation which to the PLA meant to either kill or capture most of the members of the unit. They were totally fixed on this. Both Mao and Peng repeatedly urged efforts to "wipe out" a unit, or several units, one after another. That was their tactic, to break up a unit into fragments and destroy them one by one. With two divisions, and possibly a third, available east of Chosin, a small force could have contained the remnants of RCT31 while the remainder were re-directed to Hagaru-ri. Several factors played a part. One was the very slow and sluggish Chinese communication making the Chinese command very slow to react to a changing situation. Another would have been the split command with the 27th Army in charge of the battle both at Yudam-ni and East of Chosin. But perhaps the controlling factor was the Chinese fixation on a battle of annihilation.

Whatever the cost, the troops of RCT31, regardless of their assigned mission, did provide flank protection for the 1st Marine Division. In so doing made a significant contribution to the successful withdrawal from Chosin. The same result could, and should, have been accomplished at far less cost. For the men of RCT 31 the tragedy is that through a cascading and expanding series of command failures the men of RCT 31 were denied the ability to fight as a coordinated, cohesive, and well controlled force.

Bibliographical Note

Much of the material in this monograph was collected during research for my book *The Dragon Strikes*. This monograph was originally prepared as a background briefing for those involved in working for the extension of the PUC for Chosin to include RCT31. Since then it has been re-written and expanded. It is not intended as a detailed day by day, unit by unit history, but more as a study of the major command decisions and their results. The most thorough treatment of this story is Roy Appleman's *East of Chosin*. But, as he did in his history of the Chinese attack on the Eighth Army, *Disaster in Korea*, he focused on the day by day story of the infantry units with less attention to the command conduct and decisions at division, corps and army level. I have relied on Appleman extensively for the main thread of the story. Since then a considerable body of new material has been collected, much of it in the hands of Colonel George Rasula who has generously made some of it available in his newsletters and internet journal. Much material is available at the Army's Military History Institute at Carlyle which has Appleman's papers and those of Clay Blair and General Almond, all with valuable material still to be reviewed. The records of X Corps are in Record Group 338, boxes 90-94 and 11086-96 at the National Archives. 7th Infantry Division records are in Record Group 407 boxes 3173 -3185.

Table 1

Place	Ratio	UNC Forces	Size	CCF Forces	Size	Notes
East of Chosin 1 st & 2 nd nights	6:1	1 ST Bn 32 nd Inf 3 rd Bn 31 st Inf	2 bns	80 CCF Div Regt 81 CCF Div	12 bns	1
East of Chosin 3 rd & 4 th nights	9:1	1 ST Bn 32 nd Inf 3 rd Bn 31 st Inf	2 bns	80 CCF Div 81 CCF Div	18 bns	
Hagaru-ri 28 Nov	8:1	H & I Co 1 st Mar Service troops	1-1/2 bn?	58 CCF Div Regt CCF 59 Div	12 bns	2
Hagaru-ri 30 Nov	4.8:1	3 rd Bn, 1 st Mar 41 Commando Service Troops	2-1/2 bns ?	58 CCF Div Regt CCF 59 Div	12 bns	
Yudam-ni 27 Nov	3.9:1	5 th Mar 7 th Mar (- 1 Co)	5-2/3 bns	79, 58 CCF Divs 4 bns 89 CCF Div	22 bns	
Yudam-ni 28 Nov	5.5:1	5 th Mar 7 th Mar (- 1 Co)	5-2/3 bns	79, 58, 94 CCF Div 4 bns 89 CCF Div	31 bns	3
Koto-ri	4.5:1	2 nd Bn 1 st Mar 2 nd Bn 31 st Inf	2 bns	60 CCF Div	9 bns	

Notes to Table 1:

1. This does not include any forces which might have come from the 94th CCF Division, the fourth division in the 27th CCF Army. It may have been prepared to assist the 80th and 81st Divisions at the Inlet, however, a map on one Chinese history shows the 94th CCF Division at Yudam-ni on the 27th of November.
2. Without the use of service troops the ratio at Hagaru would have been the same as in the RCT 31 area. But, the defense there had two advantages. There was a one day warning so attack was expected, and the numerous service troops played a vital role,
3. This assumes the 94th CCF Division was at Yudam-ni, although no PW identification confirms this.

Notes

1. Ltr LtGen McCaffrey to the author - no date
2. Letter Ted Magill to Roy Appleman June 5, 1991
3. Ridgway, Gen. Mathew *The Korean War*. New York: DeCapo Books (paperback) 1967. Almond interview w/Ferrguson pp 6-7 side 1 tape 5
4. "Four Days and Five Nights" by Herbert L. Bryant, Commander of Headquarters Company, 3d Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment. 27 November 1992 - Courtesy of Col George Rasula
5. Dill, James E. "Winter Along the Yalu" American Heritage Magazine. date unknown

6. Mossman, Billy C. *Ebb and Flow* p 109

7. Appleman *East of Chosin* p 167

8. McCaffrey letter op. cit.