

Remembering the ‘Frozen Chosin’ – A Deadly Retreat That Was Also A Proud Moment in Marine Corps History

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For many of us, the Korean War is truly a ‘forgotten war,’ lost to our consciousness between America’s triumph in World War II and the tragedy of the Vietnam War. But for the last two decades the Korean peninsula has once again caught our attention, chiefly because of the incessant saber rattling by one of the newest nuclear powers, North Korea, led by the world’s most enigmatic leader, Kim Jong-un.

With that in mind, it is worth remembering the Marine Corps’ desperate fight in late 1950 at the Chosin Reservoir, deep inside North Korea. Carl Greenwood, a young Marine with the First Marine Division, was there, fighting in bitter cold as the Marines and U.S. Army troops were overwhelmed by a flood of Chinese soldiers. The Marines were forced to withdraw, but with such valor that the Chosin Reservoir is heralded as one of the Marine Corps’ finest moments.

Greenwood was only 19 in 1950, a young kid from the river town of Havana, Ill., where his father hunted and fished in order to keep food on the table. Greenwood followed his dream and joined the Marines in 1947.

The Korean War began in June 1950 when Kim Il-sun, Kim Jong-un’s grandfather, unleashed the North Korean Army in an attempt to unite the Korean peninsula under communist rule. The United States rushed troops to the port city of Pusan and with the aid of the United Nations, halted the Communists just short of their goal. Then came the Marines’ surprise landing at Inchon, followed by the UN’s drive deep into North Korea toward the Yalu River and the border of China. By the end of November, the Marines had reached the Chosin Reservoir.

Greenwood was assigned as a machine gunner in his unit’s heavy machine gun platoon. His weapon was a water cooled .30 caliber machine gun they named Beulah. Their mission: dig in at Koto-ri and guard the road connecting the lead Marine and Army units a few miles north at the Chosin Reservoir with the Korean port city of Hungnam.

But then came one of the worst intelligence failures in American history. The Chinese launched a massive offensive on Nov. 27 with hundreds of thousands of seasoned troops, veterans of the Chinese Civil War, who caught the Americans flat footed. They quickly surrounded the UN forces at the Chosin and along the entire length of the road, cutting it in several places.

Greenwood remembers one night vividly. It was bitter cold, and he and his squad mates were fighting a losing battle to stay warm.

“We had a cup of cocoa out of the C rations,” he explained during an interview with the Oral History Program at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. “That cocoa tasted pretty good. ... Just before dark, before we settled in—we’re just finishing

off this little cup of cocoa and Lucas said, 'I thought I heard a bugle.' And I said, 'Well, I know darn well I did.'”

“The bugle blew and here they come, screaming, hollering. Well, they walked into a pair of heavy machine guns down on that flat ground.” Before it was done, recalled Greenwood, some 300 Chinese lay in the snow.

That was only the beginning of a desperate fight against a relentless foe, fought in the rugged North Korean terrain where temperatures dropped as low as 40 below zero.

“It was a combination of hell,” said Greenwood. “It's bad enough just trying to survive during that condition. ... That cold weather just plays on you.”

“You're sleeping on the ground, and it's just a gradual deterioration of your body,” he continued. “... And then when the people are shooting at you at the same time, it's a nightmare. But when you look around, you see your other guys doing the same thing, and if they can do it, you know, by God, you can do it.”

Greenwood and his buddies kept their sector of the road open, then fought their way south along with the rest of the UN forces, with the Marines taking their casualties and their equipment with them. Over 2,900 Americans died during the battle, and thousands more were wounded. Another 7,000 Marines suffered cold weather injuries, including Greenwood, who ended up with a case of “walking pneumonia.” His lungs have been scarred ever since.

“I'm not a hero,” Carl stated at the end of his interview. “I didn't do anything that anybody else didn't do.” The Marine Corps takes a different view, however. They consider the fight at the Chosin Reservoir to be one of their finest moments, a heroic stand against overwhelming odds.

Mark DePue is the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. You can hear Carl Greenwood's entire story, as well as hundreds of other veterans, at the program's web site at www.oralhistory.illinois.gov.