

Virginians at War

Korean War: Back from Yalu

Transcript

NARRATOR: Virginians have always stood at the crossroads of the fight for freedom. It is a battle in which we all reap the benefits.

After the close of World War II, Korea was divided at the 38th parallel with a Communist government supported by China and the Soviet Union to the North, and a Democratic government supported by the Western allies to the South.

On June 25, 1950, less than five years later, the United States found itself again drawn into war. The Korean War, often called the Forgotten War, was the first military action conducted by the United Nations. 22 nations supported the UN Resolution and moved to defend South Korea from an unprovoked invasion from the North. Spearheaded by US forces, in a country halfway around the world, the Korean War became a study in frustration, punctuated by weather extremes, geographic hardships, political influences, and fluctuating front lines. The result was 33,741 Americans killed in action, with the enemy being held at the 38th parallel by the signing of an armistice. Today, the United States still monitors that border.

Following the successful amphibious landing at Inchon Harbor, and the ensuing Pusan Breakout, the mission for the United Nations forces changed. The fight on the Korean peninsula was becoming a symbol of the greater struggle between the United States and its allies, and the Communist countries of China and the Soviet Union, and their allies. As the North Korean forces retreated north toward China, plans for liberating North Korea from communist domination were drawn. As US troops approached the Yalu River, the border between North Korea and China, the temperatures dropped to subzero, and overwhelming numbers of Chinese troops entered the conflict. Dreams of home by Christmas were replaced with orders to immediately withdraw, and head back towards South Korea. What followed was some of the most challenging days American forces have ever faced.

**BACK FROM THE YALU
HOME BY CHRISTMAS**

LAWRENCE: On the 24th, MacArthur came to Korea and with the [] headquarters to observe what he called a massive offensive which was going to end the war by Christmas, and he went back to Tokyo and some porter asked him about when the troops were going to get out and he said he hoped we'd have the troops out of Korea by Christmas.

BERKLEY: We thought we had the war won. They told us we'd be back in Japan by Christmas, that was the rumor going around. And you can't imagine how happy, you know, it made us feel. But, after we got into North Korea, the tables turned on us again.

GRAY: But the rumors were, and all the talk that the war's over, it's all finished. And everybody's going back to Japan. We had set up in a position and we had no idea that Chinese were in battle there, we didn't. And on November the 4th we were hit early in the morning, and I was captured that day with six other people. I was captured by the Chinese, it's just about the worst that could happen to a human, short of dying.

THIRTY BELOW ZERO

BRAMMER: I went all the way in, in the reservoir, right to the Yalu. We could see it right out in front of us. It was all ice.

BELBUSTI: Well I heard it got to 25 or 30 below. And we were outside. When the sun went down, if you had, if you didn't have a sleeping bag, you were dead.

TROWBRIDGE: Because we had these down sleeping bags, and they really, they really did a good job. But you didn't want to get caught in them at nighttime because numerous people got killed in their sleeping bags.

ADKINS: We just didn't have the clothing for weather like that, in fact, someone stole my winter sleeping bag, and I was able to find a summer sleeping bag so that's all I had.

GOOD: But the worst thing is we didn't have adequate clothing that first winter in Korea. We had those shoepacs and we probably, Marines had practically 100% of frostbite. Our biggest problem was the cold. They say around 35 below without the wind blowing, and that wind did blow, and of course you had snow blowing. That's

the reason my feet are numb, my toes and all are numb now. Have been for 50-some years, from the frostbite.

RANSONE: The fighting was real bad, but the weather would just about as bad, it took just about as many injuries as fighting. And not all the Chinese had the same problem.

ADKINS: That was, that was one cold place. And we had a lot of people killed, a lot of people wounded, a lot of people missing. You were so miserable, I don't think you really cared if you died. I heard stories, I never did see this myself, but I heard stories that some guys would shoot themselves in the foot or the leg, you know, to get out of it. Got up to the, all the way up to the Chosin Reservoir, and cold, it was cold...I never felt cold like that in my life. We were told later that it was down to 20 to 30 below zero. And snow up to your, some places up to your knees. It kept reporting that they'd seen Chinese, but General Almond, he was commanding general of the 10th Corps, he said nah, there's no Chinese up there. But the hills, found out later the hills were full of them, full of Chinese.

ENTER THE CHINESE

JONES: Kept running into small units, who defended areas of high ground along the road. Largely Chinese, these were thought to be volunteer troops who had come down to assist the North Koreans. Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Regiment was badly beaten at [], and then the Chinese had withdrawn. So really the information was vague and spotty, about Chinese, but we knew they were there.

LAWRENCE: Before we started up this ten mile pass, we were hit by a...on the 4th of November, we were hit by a Chinese communist division. And by the 7th of November, the Chinese disappeared. The Chinese let us march right on up through there, they didn't make any effort to impede our progress. This is what the Chinese had been waiting for, they had lured us up, let us out, and we attacked and they, they closed in on us.

WOOD: Late November, we were then 75 miles from the Manchurian border, and rumors had been that there were a few Chinese volunteers had come in. Those few volunteers turned out to be 2 field armies of 400,000 Chinese troops. 400,000 Chinese troops. It was unbelievable. It was unbelievable.

TROWBRIDGE: Those Chinese, they just came and they came and they came, oh boy. You say, is there no end to these people? I mean all night long, I mean just unbelievable how those guys, I...you just, you're not even thinking really, you're just doing what you have to do and when the Chinese entered the war, they hit like November the 27th. And at Yudam-ni, and they hit the Army on the East side, and the Army was almost annihilated over there.

RANSONE: Chinese were everywhere, they were all in these bridges that crossed these roads, they were hiding everywhere. Every nook and cranny, you'd see them there, you know. So you'd just shoot them.

CHURCH: They'd just overrun us, they were just so many of them, they were just overrun our position. Some of them didn't have anything but a bugle, some of them had sticks, beating tin pans. Some of them had just hand grenades, some of them had rifles. And they all had these quilted, nice, warm, uniforms. Just target practice, I mean you could just shoot shoot shoot. They were just hordes of them. Just kept coming.

TROWBRIDGE: Their objective was to annihilate the 1st Marine Division. And they sent in like a hundred some thousand troops against probably, where we were, and North of us, we might have had like ten, eleven thousand troops. We were surrounded in a sense. In the daytime, they didn't attack, because we had good air coverage, they didn't have any aircraft. See they didn't have good radio, you know, communication either. And they did it with the whistles and their bugles. They had us all surrounded. So we had to fight, I mean every day.

FIGHTING OUR WAY OUT - US Marine Corps

GOOD: We moved out all the way to Yudam-ni which is another, I'd say 15 miles. And that's when we really got in trouble, they'd come in on all sides and trapped us. The Army went up to the right and we went to the left.

BELBUSTI: We got the word after that night that we were to pull back, and we said "wow, pull back, that's strange, we've never done that before" you know.

BRAMMER: Well we fought our way out, we left a lot laying behind us, but one thing we didn't do is didn't leave nothing that they could use, we didn't leave the wounded or our dead. You don't think about what's going to happen to you, it's what's going to happen to your buddy. We were at the Reservoir when the real

mass hit us, and it was just like getting all of a sudden, horns were blowing, whistles, and everything else. And you could just barely see out through, but just looked like masses of them.

GOOD: We flew out all of our wounded, and all of our dead, out from Hagaru. And then we regrouped and headed back towards [Co-durree], and Chesty Puller with the First Regiment was holding [], it was....I walked for 23 hours. From Hagaru to [] about 35 below zero. I got the feet to prove it. We started down the mountain and they had blown out the bridge on the mountain, so the Army dropped us a bridge, and the Third Platoon of my company put the bridge in, put the bridge over what was about a 190 foot drop. But they brought all the light equipment across first and brought the tanks across last in case, you know, it did give out. But we got everybody across. The convoy was about ten miles long. Plus there was about 100,000 civilians mixed up in the convoy too. And you didn't know whether they were enemy or foe. We actually bought a hundred thousand of them out on board ship. I wouldn't be here if it wouldn't be for the Air Force. They really gave us close air support. The Corsairs was the greatest thing in this world, that's what really cleaned them out, but the air support got us out. But we'd have never gotten out. The Chosin was a mistake. We went too fast in the wintertime.

O'BRIEN: We were fortunate in that respect. We had good, good command at our head, you know and General [] was one of the best, and Chesty Puller, you couldn't ask for a more...leader, you know. And Colonel Listenburg was just as good, and Col. Murray were all good.

DAVIDSON: The Marines started coming back in, they stopped about a hundred yards out. This was a day or two later, and formed up into formation and came in singing Marine Corps hymn. They'd been beat on...bandages and everything. Beat up in all days, and I thought that was, that was one of the best Marine Corps things I ever saw in my life.

TROWBRIDGE: You know it was like 78 miles to Yudam-ni, back to Hamhung where we got evacuated from. But we fought all the way back out to that area.

WAITT: Then in Hungnam, we were picking up Marines and the soldiers and taking them back. Physically, they were pretty well worn out. I had the watch at sea and I'd come down and there was one Marine laying in my bunk, so I said, of course let him stay there, I wasn't about to wake him up. I mean they were...they weren't beaten, I

won't say that, they never give up. But they did one hell of a job to get out of there. They got out of there alive. Well, the Army was just as tough too.

FIGHTING OUR WAY OUT - US Army

SHOOK: They told us that we were cut off, we were out of ammunition, come to find out our rifles were [], got us started moving out, and I was a rear guard on the road and it was still cold and had to walk through []. We traveled all that day and up into the night, I don't know what hour that we finally got back to where our outfit was. All we had was our curve [], we had lost everything. And we got a little ways there, and we got halted, of course when they halted me I fell on the ground. I was wore out, and so I reckon I went to sleep because I woke up the next morning and they fired all night, and I woke up the next morning, I had a blanket on me, my section chief had put a blanket on me and I sat right there and slept. And they had turned the gun around and was firing back the way we came. And I slept right through it because I was used to my fire.

CHURCH: ...the plan to drop back to Hagaru if we could get there. So they unloaded all the trucks, I think we had about 30 trucks...30 vehicles, not all trucks, some were Jeeps and other things, and loaded them with wounded and dead.

JONES: When we got to Kunu-ri, the attack continued and some four or five miles further from Kunu-ri on the night of the 25th of November, the Chinese hit us in full force. From then on, it was terribly difficult, costly, confused, withdrawl back toward Kunu-ri. With heavy losses.

CHURCH: From 3000 men, and I think they said after, the best count that they could figure, that came through Hagaru down there, it was about 350, 345 I believe they said that was qualified to still, still fight. The rest of them was wounded, dead, or captured.

WOOD: So from Kunu-ri to an area which turned out to be what they called the Gauntlet was a mountain pass, and that was about a seven mile narrow muddy road. In two weeks time, two weeks time, the division lost around 4,900 men, and a lot of bravery. A lot of bravery, a lot of deaths, but a lot of bravery.

ADKINS: We finally got out of there, and I think to this day we owe it all to the pilots. We had Navy pilots, Marine pilots, Air Force, and I just...those guys, they come in there and those Navy Marines with those little Corsairs, it dropped out napalm and

I tell you, that napalm would go everywhere. And so, we'd have never made it out of the mountains if we hadn't had the pilots that did such a great job.

CHURCH: Many people don't know anything about the Battle of the Chosin Reservoir. They say, historians say the hardest fought battle that United States had ever had included World War I, II, and Vietnam, and the whole bit.

RANSONE: All the men had fought in the perimeter for above and beyond the call of duty. Above and beyond the call of duty. I don't claim to be a hero, my buddies died there, they're the heroes.

WOOD: What would happen had the North Koreans taken Korea. There's no comparison between...reading the history, reading current news reports, there's no comparison between South Korea and North Korea from an economic standpoint. We have a thriving community in South Korea.

NEWMAN: Well when I left there, I was only back there twice. That's as far South as I ever got. It was shambles, and to know that 42 million people are living free today...we paid a tremendous price for it. And we had a Korean minister come and tell us that...how much he appreciated what we did, and that he wouldn't be alive today if it hadn't been for guys like was in that room that he was talking to. And he said his family wouldn't be alive, and he said I want you guys to know how much I appreciate it. And he was a North Korean when he started out. But I think it was worth it. They're free. And who wouldn't want to be free, I mean everybody wants to be free.

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