



On Desperate Ground: The Marines at the Reservoir, the Korean War's Greatest Battle by Hampton Sides.

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The battles around North Korea's Chosin Reservoir (Nov.–Dec. 1950) have become emblematic of Marine professionalism and grit. Unlike most engagements in the Korean War, the fighting around the reservoir has attracted many chroniclers over the years. This new account by Hampton Sides, a professional writer with an interest in history, draws on both existing literature and interviews with surviving veterans to tell a compelling story rather than analyze the Chosin campaign in detail. Sides begins his story at Inchon in September 1950, and ends with the withdrawal of the battered 1st Marine Division from North Korea in December of that year. Forty-five compact chapters present vivid moments of combat or vignettes of policy-makers at work in Washington, DC, and elsewhere. The book reads like a TV script rather than a continuous narrative, featuring a cast of such compelling characters as: Oliver Smith, Lewis Burwell “Chesty” Puller, John Yancey, William Barber, Raymond Davis, Hector Cafferata, and Thomas Hudner.

The 1st Marine Division was ordered to North Korea as part of X Corps, which comprised over 100,000 men commanded by Maj. Gen. Edward Almond. Its mission was to pursue the defeated North Korean forces up the eastern side of the Korean peninsula. While Army forces moved east and north—some of them eventually reaching the Yalu River—the Marines were dispatched northwestward to connect with the 8th Army. Larger than the typical Army division, it consisted of many World War II veterans, the “old breed,” who saw themselves as “a select and elite legion” and an egalitarian tribe (111–12). They deployed over ca. thirty-five miles in strong points linked by a single-lane road: Yudam-ni (the northern-most force), Hagaru-ri (with its air strip), Koto-ri, and finally Chinhung-ni. Amid “one of the coldest North Korean winters on record” (115), the Marines withstood assaults by massed Chinese forces. Despite heavy casualties, they fought clear of this gigantic ambush with most of their equipment and many of their dead. Their commander, Maj. Gen. Oliver Smith, described the operation as not a retreat, but an attack in another direction. In the end, it was a strategic failure but, with the support of artillery and airpower, it won a series of tactical triumphs (326). Sides concentrates on the Marines; the tragedies of Army troops to the north and east get less attention.

The clashes within the American camp constitute a key subplot, featuring a clear hero and anti-hero. The former is Oliver Smith, whose nickname was “the professor”; he was a “cerebral,” “ascetic,” and widely read man who could speak French and rarely raised his voice. Beneath that calm, studious exterior, however, was a tough veteran officer who had led Marines in the fierce island campaigns of the Pacific War. Behind the calm exterior lay a “professional killer ..., tenacious, cunning, ... and tough” (11–12). His concept of war, according to one observer, was “to find the enemy and kill him—with a minimum of casualties” (13).

Smith's foil was Edward Almond, commander of X Corps and Gen. Douglas MacArthur's Chief of Staff. He was described as “vain,” “brusque,” and “supercilious,” a “whip-cracking officer” who often made “rash” decisions without considering the realities on the ground (17, 31, 46). In a fit of

pique, Smith once described Almond as “crazy” (187). He was seen by Marines (and by Sides) as a natural product of MacArthur’s headquarters. The pompous MacArthur was something of a drama queen (11). He staffed his Tokyo headquarters with yes-men who worked in a weirdly cultish environment (16). Smith, who feared his division would be stationed in a series of weak positions subject to lethal ambushes, pushed back against Almond and MacArthur’s view that the Chinese were not a threat. Almond, for his part, saw Smith as an over-cautious, pedantic prig (76). Sides tells the tale of Smith’s efforts to save the 1st Marine division from the arrogant incompetence of his superiors.

The author’s prose is often colloquial, verging on the macho: as the men of the 1st Marines relaxed on the eve of their first major contact with the Chinese, “it felt almost like a hunting trip— young men camped in the boonies, smoking and bullshitting around fires, fiddling with motors and guns” (96). When the officers, including Almond, reached the Yalu, they “whipped out their equipment for a ritual piss into the stout waters of the [river]” (125). Sides is prone as well to odd similes and metaphors. The Inchon beachhead “flared like a fast-growing spore. Ziggurats of war stuff swelled upon the docks” (29). The assault forces who crossed the Han River into Seoul looked like “colonies of determined beavers” (32). General Smith emerged from a conference with Almond “hot as a hornet” (116). Yudam-ni was as “bleak as a Siberian ice station” (113). The base/airfield at Hagaru-ri was “like a protected cyst embedded in a foreign body” (122). Later, on Fox Hill, as thousands of Chinese surrounded his position, Capt. William Barber was “a stirring spectacle ... hobbling around like a mad prophet” (217).

But the book is rife with esoteric vocabulary as well. (Sides teaches “narrative non-fiction.”) Liberated Seoul reeked of the “feter of decaying flesh” (51). A “bright gibbous moon” (147) shone over the massive Chinese attack at Yudam-ni. The isolated marines at Fox Hill looked out on a landscape “suffused in a cyan haze” (156). At Hagaru-ri, filled with a “snaggle of weather-scabbed shanties” (119), a determined Chinese attack on East Hill opened “in the gelid hours before dawn” (247).

More seriously, the book contains some factual errors and misleading statements. For instance, the 11th Marines was a standard artillery outfit, not a heavy artillery regiment (142). And the Corps ground combat units were not racially integrated in 1950 (44, 144). Casualties at Chosin were substantial: almost 4400 Marines killed and wounded, another 7000 otherwise incapacitated, mostly by the extreme cold. Do these figures make Chosin, in Sides’s words, “the Korean War’s Greatest Battle” or “one of the more harrowing clashes in military history” (5)? Sides quotes military writer S.L.A. Marshall’s argument that the campaign was one of “the most brilliant division feats of arms in the national history” (328), but mounts no fact-based argument to support such a claim. Over thirty thousand Americans died in Korea and another hundred thousand were wounded. Horrific figures, but do they justify comparing Chosin to, say, the Battle of the Bulge or the Meuse-Argonne? Similarly, the author praises Oliver Smith as one of the “great underrated generals in American history” (9), but he was passed over for Marine Corps Commandant *by the Corps itself*.

Hampton Sides’s lively story-telling and hyperbolic prose may attract and please casual readers with no prior knowledge of the campaign around Chosin. I can only hope that such readers will turn next to one of the fine, available broader studies of the Korean conflict¹ and then to detailed analytical works on Chosin in particular.²

1. E.g., Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1987), or Eric Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War* (NY: Hyperion, 2007).

2. E.g., Roy Appleman, *East of Chosin: Entrapment and Breakout in Korea, 1950* (College Station: Texas A&M U Pr, 1987) and *Escaping the Trap: The US Army X Corps in Northeast Korea, 1950* (id., 1990).