

NOTE: It was December 10, 1950 that I "celebrated" my 21st birthday and walked to freedom to later board the USS General Randall for a trip southward. Gene Dixon

New York Times

December 11, 1950

MARINES RETURN FULL OF FIGHT AFTER A NIGHTMARE OF DEATH

WITH THE U. S. MARINES, Korea, Dec. 10 - United States Marines walked out of almost a fortnight of freezing hell today, full of fight after a nightmare of death in Korea's icy mountains.

The United States First Marine Division was rolling slowly into the northeastern Korea plains of Hamhung. The men's eyes and bearded faces, their tattered parkas and the strangely careless way they carried their rifles showed the strain.

These thousands of Leathernecks did it on guts. They turned their encirclement into one of the fightingest retreats in military history. It was the longest pullback in Marine records.... the Marine struck right back.

When orders were given to pull back, the Leathernecks responded with an offensive.

For almost a week they matched guts and wits against Chinese mass tactics. Neither was enough to win. They had to pull out.

Five days after leaving Yudam the Marines reached Hagaru, at the south end of the reservoir. There they joined another small group that was encircled by strong enemy forces

Elements of a third Marine regiment were under attack at Koto, ten road miles to the south. At daybreak, Dec. 7, the Hagaru Marines started southward toward Koto. For twenty-four hours they fought one of the bloodiest battles of the Korea War.

When they reach Koto it was a gruesome sight - wounded men with their blood frozen to their skins, their clothes stiff with ice, grotesque dead men lying across trailers and stretchers, live men stumbling along, grimacing from frostbite, using their rifles as crutches.

Four thousand wounded were evacuated by air from Hagaru and Koto up to two days ago. More have been flown out since. Most of these were Marines, the others were remnants of two battalions of the Army's Seventh Infantry Division, which was cut off and sliced up on the east side of the reservoir at the same time the Leathernecks were catching hell on the west.

The count of the dead is high. Two days ago nearly 200 bodies were nosed into a single grave by the bulldozer. There was no time for more elaborate arrangements.

The United States First Marine Division, one of the country's finest, has suffered heavily. The Communist enemy knows this.

The Leathernecks inflicted casualties on the enemy many times those they suffered. The weather also took a heavy toll of Chinese.

Tension greeted the order for all the Marines to break from Koto. One senior officer wept.

A grizzled Marine blurted: "These kids are too good to have this happen to them."

Saturday at sunrise, patrols struck out from Koto toward Hamhung. Intelligence reports had said the enemy was in this area in strength. There were fears that another bloodbath was in store similar to that on the Hagaru-Koto road earlier.

But the patrols reached their objectives on schedule. One suffered moderate casualties; the other made it almost without

incident. Immediately these groups had left, the vehicular columns began to move. Equipment considered more of a burden than its actual value was destroyed. By noon the column was stretched about two miles south of Koto.

Dismal little Koto lies on a plateau 3,300 feet above sea level. For two miles south, the narrow road if anything, goes up.

Then it twists down a narrow gorge twelve miles to the valley. Saturday and today it was covered with ice. The temperature was 25 degrees below zero.

For four hours the column stood motionless. A bridge a mile below the crest had been blown by the Reds.

Before the engineers could work on it, a company of Marines had to drive off a pocket of Chinese guarding it.

This was done. Fifteen Chinese were killed and fifty captured. Others fled.

A new bridge was built.

Then the column started to roll, but road conditions made progress slow. By nightfall Saturday some 200 vehicles had moved across the new bridge. About 9 p.m. artillery dropped several rounds in the vicinity of the bridge. One shell hit a truck.

As the enemy had not used artillery in this area before, and the fire apparently was coming from the bottom of a hill where a friendly battery was known to be in position, observers concluded it was friendly fire.

Throughout the night there was sniping from the hills overlooking the winding road.

Shortly after midnight the column came to a halt. It did not move appreciably for four hours. Two miles south of the bridge, at a hairpin turn, two trucks had skidded and blocked the road. About 100 husky Marines shoved them out of the way.

The column, stretching bumper to bumper all the way up the road, moved in fits and starts. Just before daylight the mountain grade became less severe and the turns less harrowing. The troops were nearing the bottom.

One of the Marines on a truck had a Korean dog. It had been whining most of the night. As the full light of day appeared the dog got up, stretched a bit and wagged its tail. It was 7:30 A.M.

The dog's cheerfulness appeared to have been caught from its Leatherneck companions, for whom nearly two weeks of concentrated hell had just ended. The Marines rubbed their sleepless red eyes and grinned.

The first contact between the Marines and a rescue force was by a marine battalion led by Maj. Webb D. Sawyer of Toledo, Ohio, and patrols of an Army task force led by Brig. Gen. Armistead D. Meade of Huntington We. Va.

There was no formal link-up with the Third Division forces that had thrust up from the south. The Marine column had proceeded in total darkness past individual members of the southern force without stopping.

After daylight, leading elements of the Marines continued southward from the juncture point in the vicinity of Chinhung, too weary to care about any formalities.