Frozen Chosin: The Naval Air War in Korea, November—December 1950

By Mark L. Evans

By late October 1950, the Korean War was considered over. North Korea's invasion had been defeated, the shattered North Korean People's Army (NKPA) was fleeing north toward the Yalu River pursued by victorious United Nations (UN) troops, and talk of Christmas homecomings raised hopes for a swift peace. One newspaper summarized the prevailing feelings: "Except for unexpected developments, we can now be easy in our minds as to the military outcome." Tragically prophetic, "unexpected developments" exploded upon the scene.

Despite East Bloc warnings since August 1950 that any UN advance north toward China would be considered an act of war, allied forces continued their drive north (see "The Navy's Air War in Korea, September–October 1950," Sep–Oct 00). Hoping to end the war before the onset of the fierce Korean winter, on 24 October General Douglas MacArthur ordered his commanders to push northward as rapidly as possible. Unfortunately, the East Bloc carried through on its threats, and within days pilots were spotting signs of an offensive

During heavy fighting near Chosin in December 1950 F4U-5 *Corsairs,* one of which is visible in the midst of the smoke rising from the strike, blast the enemy for the hard-pressed Marines.

buildup by Chinese "volunteers." There would be no more Christmas homecomings until after the cease-fire of 27 July 1953.

The Yalu River winds almost 500 miles to the Yellow Sea, marking the borders between China and North Korea for much of its length. In 1950 the river's size restricted large troop movements to one of 17 bridges. Of the six major ones, the twin spans (one railway, one highway) connecting Antung, Manchuria, with Sinuiju, North Korea, were the two most important. The Chinese were pouring across these bridges and they had to be stopped. It was the fleet's job to drop the bridges, which meant a 225-mile flight from the carriers operating in the Sea of Japan off Korea's east coast all the way across the peninsula to their targets on the west coast.

On station were *Leyte* (CV 32) with Carrier Air Group (CVG) 3 embarked, *Philippine Sea* (CV 47) carrying CVG-11 and *Valley Forge* (CV 45) with CVG-5. Launching primarily close air support missions were two smaller carriers, *Badoeng Strait* (CVE 116) with the embarked Marine Fighter Squadron (VMF) 323 *Death Rattlers* and a Helicopter Utility Squadron (HU) 1 detachment operating HO3S-1 helicopters. *Sicily* (CVE 118) carried the VMF-214 *Blacksheep*, Air Antisubmarine Squadron (VS) 21 and another HU-1 detachment.

Each ship's strike group numbered from 24 to 40 aircraft, comprising 8 bridge-busting AD *Skyraiders* carrying either two 1,000-pound bombs or one 2,000-pounder; 8 to 16 flak-suppressing F4U *Corsairs* with a mixed package of eight 5-inch rockets or eight 100-pound bombs, or a 500-pounder and six 5-inch rockets (some carried an 11.75-inch Tiny Tim rocket); and 8 to 16 F9F *Panthers* as high cover.

Split-second timing was crucial, since the high fuel consumption of the jets required special considerations. The *Panthers* took off in three intervals, the first wave 50 minutes after the initial "props," and the second and third at succeeding 15-minute intervals. This way, the first *Panthers* took the strike in, the second were over the targets, and the third brought them home. It was a planning nightmare, but it worked.

The realities of the tactical situation added to the difficulty in attacking the Yalu bridges. Due to the high escarpments rising along both sides of the river, the approach to Sinuiju had to be made parallel to the river, making aircraft predictable targets for enemy gunners. Normally, the gunners had to make educated guesses at the pilots' altitudes and set the fuses of their shells accordingly. This prompted pilots to vary their approach altitudes. Unfortunately, the topographic setting for the Yalu bridges did not allow such niceties. Expecting pilots to fly the gauntlet of this shooting gallery was harsh, but necessary if the ground war was to be properly supported.

Not being able to fly over Manchuria, then under Soviet guarantees of protection, further complicated the scenario. The Fighter Squadron (VF) 51 *Screaming Eagles'* command history report described the scene. "During all attacks, antiaircraft fire was heaviest from the Manchurian side due, no doubt, to the fact that they, unlike Korean gunners, were unhampered by aerial attack." VF-33's report noted: "Our photoreconnaissance revealed that the enemy guns were being moved from the south side of the Yalu River where we could hit them to the north side where we couldn't. The Reds were alert to recognize and take advantage of our self-imposed restriction. We even noticed that while the guns on the Korean side of the river were well camouflaged, the ones on the Chinese side were not."

Top, LCdr. William T. Amen was the first Navy pilot to down a MiG-15. Above, one of the MiG-15s encountered on 23 November. Opposite, *Leyte's* strike drops three spans from the highway bridge at Sinuiju on 18 November 1950.

During the initial strike against the Sinuiju bridges on 9 November, VF-111 *Sun Downers* CO Lieutenant Commander William Thomas Amen made the Navy's first MiG kill. Amen's group of F9F-2B *Panthers* was flying cover for the strike force of *Corsairs* and *Skyraiders* when they were attacked by at least five MiGs flying from Antung. Losing no time, the *Panthers* screamed in to protect the strike force, the battle raging from just above ground level up to 18,000 feet. Turning inside of a tight loop on the tail of a MiG-15, Amen closed the gap and opened fire, downing his opponent with a quick burst.

Like many pilots, Amen had already chalked up quite a record and numerous medals during WW II and the earlier strikes over Korea. Following no less than 35 missions over Korea, Amen was further awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross "for extraordinary heroism and meritorious achievement in aerial flight in operations against the enemy in the Korean Theater from 5 August

1950 to 1 February 1951."

ADs of the Attack Squadron (VA) 115 *Arabs* scored three direct hits and five near-misses on the Sinuiju bridges during the first strike, and at 1400 went after the railroad bridge at Manpojin with 2,000-pounders, scoring four hits. Not a single *Skyraider* was lost, though the squadron reported that the ground fire was "heavy, intense and accurate over the target."

For all the horror and fear of war, this first tangle with the dreaded MiGs produced its own comedy. Upon returning to the ready room on board *Valley Forge* (CV 45), VF-51 CO Commander Albert D. Pollack was surrounded by his admiring *Panther* pilots. "Were you nervous about those MiGs?" they asked. "No, I was just keeping an eye on them," Pollack replied. "Then, why did you report 20,000 MiGs coming in at five feet?" his pilots quipped.

Tragically, the grim realities of war returned on 11 November when more strikes by *Leyte* and *Valley Forge* against the Yalu bridges encountered fierce opposition from both Yaks and MiGs as well as flak, and a *Skyraider* was lost over the target. Altogether, 19 MiGs were spotted on the 10th and 15 on the 12th, a bleak portent of things to come, though VA-115 did drop one span on the southwestern bridge, as well as damaging the approach to the northeastern one.

On the 14th and 15th snow-covered decks and heavy seas severely hampered operations and gave the enemy the chance to repair the bridges, so on 16 November VF-54 conducted a reconnaissance flight to photograph the targets. Both aircraft barely made it back through some of the most intense and accurate flak of the war, confirming the hard way that most of the guns had been transferred to the Manchurian side.

The enemy's supply lines had to be cut, however, so between 1325 and 1645 on the 18th one of the toughest fights of the month occurred when the carriers had another go at the Sinuiju bridges. Just as the F4U-4B *Corsairs* of VF-54 rendezvoused at 31,000 feet with F9F-2 and F9F-3 *Panthers* a few minutes prior to the attack, the strike group was jumped by no less than 12 MiGs. As the jets tangled it up in a wild melee, the *Corsairs* went after the guns with 500-pound bombs, giving the AD-4 *Skyraiders* of VA-55 a chance to tackle the bridges. Unfortunately, hitting the dug-in guns was difficult, and intense flak riddled a couple of *Skyraiders.*

Nevertheless, the twisting dogfight gave the fleet the chance to even up the score as two VF-52 aircrews each downed a MiG-15, while VF-31 blasted a third out of the sky. Though some guns were knocked out, the bridges were only damaged, and a VF-54 pilot had a close call when forced to make an emergency landing at Wonsan with hung wing bombs. The men were learning in the toughest school of all. In the unforgiving strikes over Korea, pilots did not get a second chance.

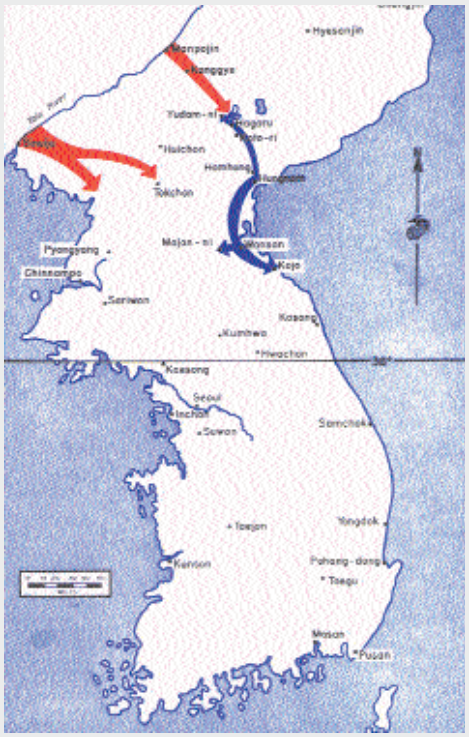
The failure to drop the bridges became a matter of life or death for the men on the ground as the Chinese stragglers suddenly burst into a horde. Two Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) divisions, numbering over 300,000 men, entered Korea practically undetected and began closing the jaws of a giant trap.

Retired Marine Lieutenant Colonel Charles A. House

W. C. Rockwell

Left, exhausted Marines struggle through the snow around Chosin during the retreat. Below, this map depicts the enemy's movement across the Yalu River to "close the sack" during November–December 1950. The only hope for the Marines was to fight their way down to the coast where the fleet could get them out. Opposite, artist John DeGrasse, Master Sergeant, USMC, and one of "The Chosin Few," captures the desperation of the beleaguered Marines as they watch a *Corsair* pound dug-in enemy soldiers. The side panel markings reduced aerial recognition problems.

flew an F4U-4B *Corsair* with VMF-323 from *Badoeng Strait* and acknowledged just how tough these Chinese veterans were: "They may have been poor shots, but they were highly disciplined. When they heard us coming, they would kneel in the snow and hold their rifles close to their body. Even when we strafed them with 20mm cannon and rockets, the survivors would not move. This made it more difficult to see them. Only napalm would make the ones on fire run."



Now, the PLA rallied the NKPA and together trapped the outnumbered allies in a massive double envelopment. Their revered leader Mao Tse-tung had prepared them by ordering every man to memorize one of his favorite doctrines: "Enemy advancing, we retreat; enemy entrenched, we harass; enemy exhausted, we attack; enemy retreating, we pursue." The Chinese generals further instructed their men in the rudiments of strategy by expanding upon these orders with a seemingly innocent Confucian lesson, "The Cat in the Sack": Confucius decided to visit his family and introduce his cat to them. The easiest way to carry his friend was in a sack. However, when Confucius opened the sack the obstinate creature refused to jump in. Confucius opened the sack a little wider and then wider and, finally, the cat's curiosity got the better of him and he leapt in. Singling out the Marines as an example, the Chinese were perfectly aware of the Corps' aggressiveness and opened their sack by cunningly striking at the ends of the UN lines.

The allies never knew what hit them. Deceived by previous clashes when the enemy slyly disengaged and retreated, UN intelligence still believed that only a handful of "volunteers" were moving toward them. For days, Navy pilots had reported thousands of footprints in the snow, and even when VA-115 knocked out a pair of medium tanks north of the Chosin Reservoir on the 14th, the allies were still unprepared for the fury that erupted against them between 25 and 28 November.

There simply were not enough men to hold the front. Chinese infiltrators divided into platoons and companies and slipped through the gaps at night, breaking the darkness with terrifying bugle calls, police whistles and screams as they struck at the weakest points. Officers went down so fast that a Marine platoon commander found himself in command of the entire company; in another instance, after being driven from his hilltop position three times and retaking it three more, a company commander discovered that only 14 of his original 200 men were still standing. Though badly wounded, another company commander bravely continued to lead his men from his stretcher. Newspaper reports of "human wave assaults" were exaggerated, but hundreds of Americans vanished in the chaos, and within days the entire front was crumbling.

For the 1st Marine Division caught in the sack, it was another race against time. Joined by two Army battalions, British Royal Marines who had requested the honor of fighting alongside their U.S. counterparts and some Republic of Korea (ROK) troops, their only hope was to fight their way 78 miles down to Hungnam on the east coast. On 27 November their combined column mustered 25,473 men, but they were pitted against elements of 11 PLA divisions, numbering 60,000 troops.

Time and again the only thing that stood between the

Marines and the enemy were the aircraft of the fleet, as the air tempo shifted back to close air support. *Sicily* CO Captain John S. "Jimmy" Thach summarized it well: "It's like having artillery right over your shoulders." *Philippine Sea's* pilots were told by their Marine tactical air controller that their support on 28 November had been "very good. The enemy has been stopped." On the 29th alone, 123 aerial sorties made 1,131 runs over the target, an incredible average of 9.2 runs per sortie, while the next day *Leyte's* aircraft flew five continuous maximum close air support missions.

VF-33 CO Cdr. Horace H. Epes, Jr., remembered these flights: "Occasionally we caught white-uniformed Chinese troops in the open. I vividly recall catching a couple of Red soldiers hotfooting it down the road carrying a long pole with a big kettle of what looked like soup—that no one ever drank." On 2 December a Chinese roadblock was blasted out of existence by no less than 22 aircraft. Two days later Major General Field Harris, Commander 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (MAW), signaled Commander Task Force 77: "I was up on the hill today [at Hagaru-ri] and saw the 5th and 7th Marines return. They thanked God for air. Tell your pilots they are doing a magnificent job."

Forward air controllers marched with each battalion column, while tactical air controllers flew ahead. On 6 December Marine Transport Squadron (VMR) 152 provided the 1st MAW an R5D *Skymaster* for a unique conversion into a Tactical Air Direction Center with situation maps and an extra radio; the aircraft took off just before dawn and circled the area until after dusk. Air Force C-119 "Flying Boxcars" also dropped supplies to the Marines, but on 7 and 8 December the Chinese closed the sack by blowing the bridge across an otherwise impassible 1,500-foot-wide gorge south of Koto-ri. Without help, the Marines would be forced to leave behind their heavy equipment and make it out on foot, a trek many of the wounded and frostbitten would not survive. Air Force C-119s again answered the call and dropped eight two-ton spans of a treadway bridge for Marine engineers, who kept the column moving by bridging the gap under intense fire.

Another fierce fight broke out on 6 December when the PLA again hit the Marines. Eighteen *Corsairs* from VMF-214 clobbered the enemy with rockets and 500-pounders, but the Chinese refused to budge. Eight F4U-4s from VF-33 followed, led by Cdr. Epes who recalled: "A ground controller called me by voice radio. 'I'm in the lead jeep; I have a fluorescent panel marker on my hood. Fly over me and rock your wings.' Our empty cases fell among the Marines, our bullets and light bombs landed

on the Chinese 50 yards ahead of them. Then the ground controller said, 'Come back with napalm.' After the first *Corsairs*' napalm dropped, the ground controller snapped, 'Move it closer.' We dropped napalm bombs on the sides of the hill, with Marines all along the road directly beneath. If the temperature hadn't been 25 degrees below, I don't believe the Marines could have stood the heat." VF-33's *Corsairs* flew so low that Marine 81mm mortar rounds arced over the planes as they made their passes!

Second Lieutenant Patrick C. Roe, assigned as the intelligence officer of the 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines, later recalled what it was like to be a "Mud Marine" on the other end of the Naval Aviation chain during the break through from Yudam-ni on 3 December: "That morning a truck turned off into the courtyard of an adjoining Korean farmhouse. A detail began unloading dead Marines from the truck. They were all frozen solid, some of them in grotesque poses as they had fallen. The bodies were stacked in a corner of the courtyard. The earth was so hard it could not be dented by a pick or shovel. The chaplain read the burial service. There were tears running down his cheeks. Then he closed his bible, stepped forward and spoke again to the few who had stopped for the brief ceremony. 'Come and help me cover them with rocks,' he said. It was all we could do for them."

The bitter Korean winter had set in with a vengeance, with foot-deep snow and drifts often above the men's heads. The enemy had surrounded the Marines and time had run out. Roe remembered, "Lt. Morgan, the assistant forward air controller, was standing next to me scanning the hills to the north with his field glasses when he froze in his position and gave me one of the greatest shocks of my life: 'Here comes a million of them!'

"About two miles to the north, coming over the crest of a low hill, was a column of Chinese. I could not see the head of the column for there was an intervening hill, and the tail was still below the crest to the north of the hill. I could only observe about 600 yards, but to me it was one of those endless columns. Morgan fired up his jeep radio and requested planes. I pointed out the column to Lt. Col. William Harris, who immediately called for the mortar platoon commander: 'Mr. Caridakis, give them a mortar barrage.' George answered, 'Yes, sir. Both rounds?' We had to depend on planes.

"It was not long before four *Corsairs* raced over the column in a dry run while Morgan gave them directions on the radio. At the first run of the planes the Chinese scattered and took cover, disappearing completely from view in the telescope. But the planes banked around and commenced several firing runs, strafing and dropping napalm. When the smoke and flames cleared there was no more movement on the hill. But more than ever I felt then that we must not remain another night in that valley.

"It was getting darker, and little black figures showed themselves along the ridges with ever-increasing frequency, watching us. Artillery fire support was not

available, and our mortars were out of ammo. Planes were our only hope again. Morgan was able to get a flight of four. They came in strafing and dropping napalm. Lt. Col. Harris wanted Morgan to have the planes work the top of the ridgeline and Morgan relayed that information to the planes. The answer he got from them was that there were a hell of a lot more Chinese on the reverse slope, just over the top of the ridge, then there were along the crest, and that the planes would work that area."

After that frightening revelation, the Marines got out of there and marched all night in sub-zero cold. Roe continued, "First light showed the sky gray and overcast. No planes. The men in the column lifted their filthy faces upward and scanned the sky, then dropped their eyes to the ground and shuffled on. Then the column came to a halt again. The Chinese were across the road ahead of us.

Freezing winds and blinding snow almost shut down *Philippine Sea* (CV 47) on 15 November 1950.

We would have to fight our way through.

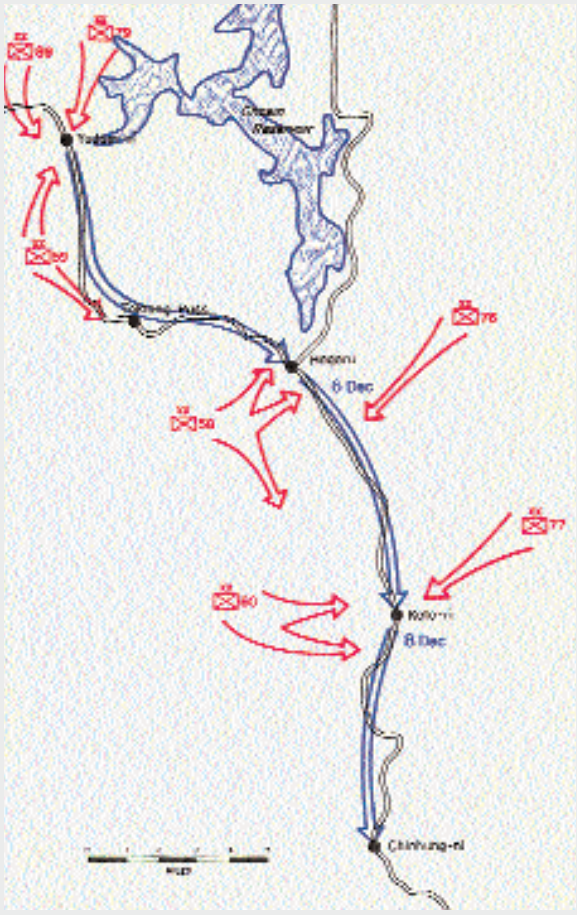
"Through my glasses," Roe said, "I watched Marines fix bayonets and start up the hill toward the Chinese. At the same time, we heard the roar of engines and a flight of Navy ADs dropped down through the thinning overcast and passed over the column, rocking their wings. We had never seen them before. They were, to us, magnificent airplanes. The sight of the planes brought the sting of salt to the eyes of more than one man in the column. I was never quite so happy to see planes, especially those big Navy ADs with their fat load of bombs and rockets—sudden death for the Chinese. The Chinese must have seen them at the same time as we did and must have felt the same way for as those planes roared down upon them, they gave up the hill."

The enemy often attacked after dark, and Naval Aviation did what it could to deny the enemy the night. But nighttime missions bred their own problems, especially where recognition was concerned since the pilots were naturally worried about hitting their own men. Even when the Marines marked the enemy with "Willie Peter" (white phosphorus) rounds, it was often a case of hit and miss. Retired Marine Colonel Lynn Williams (then a captain in Marine Night Fighter Squadron 513) described another reason it was dangerous: "It was very hazardous for the pilot to dive down into the black and not know where the ground was. Even if there were some ground fires, you often had to pull up into the black unknown." To throw off communist fire, VMF(N)-513 pilots developed the trick of turning off their lights while making runs and switching them back on as they finished, presenting a ghostly image that certainly must have

rattled the enemy.

Life or death for casualties was often only a matter of minutes, and the fastest way to save them was by air. Between 27 November and 10 December, 5,493 men in the bitter fighting around Chosin owed their lives to the dedication of air evacuation crews from the Air Force flying C-47s, along with Marine R4D *Skytrains*, HO3S-1s, OY-2 *Sentinels* and TBM-3E *Avengers*.

On 4 December Ensign Jesse L. Brown of VF-32 embarked on board *Leyte* was hit by antiaircraft fire during a close support run over Hagaru-ri and was forced to make an emergency landing in the rugged mountains northwest of the Chosin Reservoir. Pilots circling overhead observed him to be alive but apparently pinned by the wreckage of his F4U-4 *Corsair*. His plane was burning and darkness was falling fast, along with the temperature. The likelihood of Brown surviving the night in the subarctic cold was grim. Without hesitation, Lieutenant (jg) Thomas J. Hudner made a successful wheels-up crash landing and tried to pull Brown from the wreck. Unfortunately, Brown's legs were pinned in the buckled fuselage, so Hudner packed snow around him in an attempt to extinguish the flames. Going back to his aircraft he radioed for a search and rescue helo and cutting tools. When the helo arrived, Hudner did everything he could to cut Brown out of the plane, but the downed pilot died before he could be freed. For his extraordinary efforts to rescue his squadron mate, Hudner was awarded the Medal of Honor.



A detailed view of Chinese attempts to "close the sack" as the column fought its way through continual attacks to freedom.

During a run on enemy emplacements near Hagaru-ri on 7 December, Marine Technical Sergeant Hugh F. Newell's *Corsair* was hit by ground fire and his napalm tank erupted in midair, causing him to crash into a nearby hill. On 12 December VA-35 *Black Panthers* CO LCdr. Ralph Maxwell Bagwell was downed near a railroad bridge, where he took refuge. Twenty enemy soldiers tracked him down, and he spent the rest of the war in a prison camp.

Whether loading ordnance, maintaining engines or fueling aircraft, ground crews had some of the grittiest and least appreciated jobs of the entire campaign, yet without them there would have been no air support. Working in freezing temperatures, struggling against the Manchurian winds that penetrated every layer of clothing, they kept the birds aloft. It was hard enough for the men ashore, but on board the carriers a wrong step on an icy, pitching deck could be the last a man took, disappearing into the frigid waters of the North Pacific. On 25 November heavy seas, high winds and low visibility forced *Leyte* to cancel flight operations, and on the 27th a fierce snowstorm forced 19 aircraft to land at Wonsan when they could not make it back to the ship. VMF-214 cancelled operations when 68-knot winds, sub-zero temperatures and heavy seas combined to cover *Sicily* and her aircraft with a thick coating of ice.

VMF-212 pilots Capt. Irving J. Barney and Technical Sgt. Charles L. Radford were returning to their field after hitting targets at Apungsan. Running into brutal weather among 6,000-foot peaks, Radford's gyro went out, his pitot tube froze and a pair of hung rockets would not shake off. Breaking through the clouds, they sighted *Badoeng Strait* and decided to try an emergency landing rather than ditch in the freezing water. The alarm brought Marines racing on deck to taxi their aircraft forward to make room; with only a minute's gas left Barney just made it aboard. Coming in out of gas on his second try Radford caught the final wire, nicking the barrier with his prop. It was his first accident in 120 landings, but he was understandably not upset.

It took the Marines 12 days of bitter fighting to reach Chinhung-ni, where they linked up with other UN troops on 9 December, just as MacArthur authorized the evacuation of the X Corps by sea. Some of the men were to go through Wonsan, but the main effort was to be made out of Hungnam, an ideal choice because it was a protected port with a tidal range of less than a foot; the Eighth Army was to go via Inchon and Chinnampo. Besides getting the men out, Commander Naval Forces, Far East Vice Admiral C. Turner Joy was also concerned over possible Soviet intervention or a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, and he ordered the evacuations hurried.

Allied vessels rescued 105,000 troops and 91,000 civilians from Hungnam, 3,800 men and 7,009 civilians escaped from Wonsan, while 68,913 men were rescued

A VF-32 ready room scene aboard *Leyte* (CV 32) in 1949 includes Ens. Jesse L. Brown, left, the first African American to complete the Navy's basic flight training program for pilot qualification and become a Naval Aviator.

from Inchon and 7,700 from Chinnampo. In addition, between 14 and 17 December, 112 aircraft from the Air Force's Combat Cargo Command supported by 10 from VMR-152 flew over 400 sorties from Yonpo airfield, lifting out 228 wounded and 3,891 more men, as well as hundreds of Korean refugees. British *Fireflies* and *Sea Furies* from HMS *Theseus* covered the Eighth Army evacuations, while the carriers operating in the Sea of Japan were joined by two more.

Princeton (CV 37) with CVG-19 embarked began operations on 5 December, joined by *Bataan* (CVL 29) carrying the VMF-212 *Devil Cats* and VMF-312 *Checkerboards,* both equipped with F4U-4 *Corsairs,* and HU-1 Det 8 flying HO3S-1s. The exhausted men of *Valley Forge* departed Yokosuka, Japan, on 23 November, arriving home in San Diego only to suffer the heartbreak of having all Christmas leaves cancelled by their recall. The carrier left on 6 December, this time embarking CVG-2.

Naval Aviation again proved indispensable, flying over 1,700 sorties. Naval gunfire support kept the enemy at bay, while radar picket destroyers patrolled 50 miles out to provide early warning for MiGs, though the enemy had learned their lesson and declined the invitation. Because so many evacuees were taken off, not all the ordnance (including 400 tons of frozen dynamite and 500 1,000-pound bombs) could be removed, so to deny its use to the enemy it was blown up. The entire Hungnam waterfront was ripped apart by the ensuing mushroom cloud and after the smoke cleared the PLA began moving in. The last pilot overhead was Lt. R. B. Mack of VC-3's Det F from *Princeton,* who flew over the city that night in his F4U-5N. He recalled, "There were fires everywhere throughout the area, and flames broke out around the docks, growing and spreading until the whole waterfront seemed ablaze. As I took departure for *Princeton,* I called for *Mount McKinley* (AGC 7) and we exchanged [holiday] greetings—for it was Christmas Eve 1950."

Every effort was made to rescue Korean civilians who the Communists had designated "enemies," since no one who had experienced communist methods doubted the fate of these people if left behind. When they began loading them at 0500 on 7 December, the crew of the transport SS *Lane Victory* expected to receive 1,000. By midnight, 7,009 were packed on board. The men of the fleet did everything they could for the refugees, and at Hungnam kept fires going around the clock to warm them as well as distributing pallet loads of rice. Following the evacuation, Rear Admiral James H. Doyle, Commander Amphibious Group 1, recalled that "two civilian representatives from the ROK government came to thank [Vice] Admiral Joy and me with tears in their eyes for our compassion toward their fellow countrymen during the Hungnam withdrawal."

***Begor* (APD 127) stands by as the Hungnam waterfront erupts on 24 December 1950.**

To this day, the Marines of the 1st Division who survived the retreat proudly call themselves "The Chosin Few," and most will unhesitatingly say that only through the support they received from the air did any of them come home.

Some years after the war, Cdr. Guy Bordelon, the Navy's top Korean ace, was asked who he thought was the best pilot he ever met. After carefully considering the question, he responded with a laugh: "Every Navy pilot thinks he's the best." That confidence, combined with tremendous skills and bravery, enabled Naval Aviation's success.

Mr. Evans is a historian in the Naval Historical Center's Aviation History Branch. Special thanks to Patrick C. Roe for his stirring accounts from *The Dragon Strikes,* Presidio Press, 2000, and to W. Stephen Hill, Marine Corps Historical Center, and members of "The Chosin Few" for their contributions to this article.