



## Fox Company at the Chosin Reservoir and Self-Sacrifice

### Handout A: Narrative

#### BACKGROUND

On June 25, 1950, North Korea launched an invasion of South Korea and rapidly swept through the nation until it controlled all but a small perimeter around the southern tip of the Korean Peninsula. A United Nations coalition of forces led by the United States under the leadership of General Douglas MacArthur counter-attacked and gained back much of the territory. On September 15, 1950, the U.S. Marines landed behind North Korean lines with an amphibious landing at Inchon and quickly took back control of Seoul, the capital of South Korea. Not satisfied with regaining control of South Korea, General MacArthur sent American troops past the 38th Parallel and into North Korea.

On October 5, Chinese Foreign Minister Chou En-lai warned that if U.N. troops crossed the 38th Parallel, China would intervene in the war. MacArthur shrugged off the warning, and U.S. Army forces and their allies took the capital of North Korea, Pyongyang, two weeks later. MacArthur then sent forces further north toward the Yalu River, the border with China. China responded by sending approximately 300,000 troops to battle U.N. forces and drive them out of North Korea. Almost 10,000 Marines of the 1st, 5th, and 7th Regiments, supported by the 1st Marine Air Wing and the 11th Artillery Regiment clashed with nearly 120,000 Chinese forces around the Chosin Reservoir in November and December of 1950. MacArthur visited the area and called it a “merciless wasteland...locked in a silent death grip of snow and ice.”

The Marines fought their way to the village of Hagaru, where Marine engineers were building an airstrip and base at the southeastern tip of the reservoir. Other Marine infantrymen of the three regiments marched to the village of Yudam-ni, fourteen miles away to the west. Fox Company was tasked with the critical job of occupying a hill next to the only road, the Toktong Pass. The Toktong Pass linked Hagaru to Yudam-ni and was essential as it prevented their fellow Marines from being cut off from supplies. The 218 Marines and corpsmen of Fox Company would face an estimated 4,000 Chinese soldiers in a desperate battle to hold the hill and Toktong Pass.

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On the morning of November 27, the 218 Marines and corpsmen of 1st Marine Division, 7th Regiment, Fox Company moved out “gripping openly and vociferously.” Some were able to catch a ride on a truck, but most walked carrying a sixty-pound pack for a seven-mile journey in bitterly cold temperatures of at least ten degrees below zero, falling snow, and winds whipping off the nearby Chosin Reservoir. They were disappointed because they would rather be

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marching with their fellow Marines to where the expected action would be in Yudam-ni rather than guarding a road.

They arrived at Fox Hill as the sun started to set over the mountain terrain. Temperatures quickly plummeted to twenty-five below zero. Because of the conditions, Captain William Barber hesitated on whether or not to order his men to dig foxholes. He did not think they would see any action that night but decided to give the order anyway. The men grouched loudly as their entrenching tools scratched away at the frozen ground. It was difficult work, and they wanted to sleep, but they would soon be glad they dug into the earth. The Marines eventually deployed in a horseshoe formation around the perimeter of the hill, anchored to a high embankment in the road. The front units had standard groups of two foxholes with one behind. The men shared the passwords, and half of them went to sleep in heavy sleeping bags while the other half kept watch. They could not light fires because they had to hide their positions. They were miserable. The moon was up, and the heavens were filled with countless, brilliant stars.

At 2:00 a.m., a large formation of Chinese in white uniforms attacked from the road. They blew whistles and bugles and clanged cymbals, relying on sheer numbers rather than surprise to overwhelm the enemy. Soon, grenade explosions and machine-gun and rifle fire added to the deafening noise. Green and red tracer rounds filled the hill with an eerie glow. There were so many Chinese that the Americans did not even have to aim their weapons. Within minutes, the American front-line positions were overrun and dozens were dead or wounded. Still, they fought back tenaciously and performed heroic deeds for their fellow Marines.

Private Hector Cafferata and Private First Class Ken Benson were in a foxhole together when a satchel charge landed right on top of them. Benson grabbed it before it could explode and threw it back out of the hole. After scurrying to a trench with a few other Marines, Benson reached for another enemy grenade to protect his fellow Marines when it exploded and temporarily blinded him. With shrapnel lodged in his face, Benson blindly loaded ammunition into empty rifles and kept handing them to the others. Cafferata launched several enemy grenades from the trench and swung his shovel like a baseball bat to knock others back down the hill. He went to throw another one when it exploded in his hand and shredded his fingers. Nevertheless, he kept firing the weapons that Benson handed him as they desperately fought off the swarming Chinese. If they failed to stop the enemy, the Marines atop the hill would be overrun and killed. Captain Barber rallied his troops at the top of the hill and courageously moved among his men to bolster their courage and resilience as bullets flew around him.

As the sun rose over the rugged landscape, the exhausted Marines counted twenty dead, fifty-four wounded, and three missing, cutting their effective strength by one-third. Captain Barber counted over 450 dead enemies strewn all over the hill. The extreme cold had clotted the bleeding from most of their wounds, but it also caused numerous cases of frostbite. Some men finally realized that in the chaos of the night's battle they had not put their boots on and their socks were covered in ice. They helped the wounded and ate cold rations. Their spirits were lifted by support from airstrikes by Marine Corsairs and artillery strikes. In addition, cargo planes dropped bundles of medical supplies, food, ammunition, and blankets.

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The Chinese, however, launched another attack that night after midnight. It was November 29, and brutal temperatures again encased the land. Frustrated Marines tried to fight but their guns jammed and grenades did not explode. Still, they helped each other and did whatever they could to survive. By the morning, they had lost more men but had killed over 200 more enemy fighters. More airdrops kept them well-supplied but could not relieve the cases of frostbite and dysentery which affected everyone in Fox Company.

In the early hours of November 30, three Chinese companies comprised of hundreds of men attacked for the third night in a row. As the fighting grew desperate, dozens of wounded men in the field hospital gritted their teeth, grabbed a weapon, and struggled back to the fighting. One Marine noted, "They were all heroes," though they would have said they were just doing their job. One partially paralyzed man with his spine exposed from a gunshot wound tried to get up and fight but was stopped by a corpsman.

Marines on the front line that night hid under white Chinese blankets that blended in with the snow to conceal their position and then fired as the enemy was upon them. Again, the Marines killed hundreds of Chinese soldiers. On the night of December 1, the barrels of the Marines' rifles were so hot that they would warm their hands up from the heat. The next morning, a count revealed that Fox Company had 26 dead, 89 wounded, and 3 missing out of 218. Still, they fought desperately and held the road in order to protect their fellow Marines up at Yudam-ni.

On December 3, the depleted companies of Marines at Yudam-ni had fought their way back to Fox Hill and helped Fox Company open up the Toktong Pass. About 1,000 wounded Marines were carried back to Hagaru on trucks while about 800 wounded fought the pain and cold as they walked back. As dusk settled over the land, the bloody, ragged, unshaven, and unwashed Marines in tattered clothing marched into the base at Hagaru. One lieutenant colonel shouted to the men, "You people will now shape up and look sharp. We're going in like United States Marines." Everyone in the base stopped what they were doing and silently watched the proud men marching in perfect unison singing the Marines' Hymn.

Hundreds of Marines sacrificed themselves for each other at the battles around Chosin Reservoir in late November and early December of 1950. Specifically, the 218 brave Marines of Fox Company fought with every ounce of strength, and many sacrificed their lives to hold Toktong Pass so that their fellow Marines would survive. On their hill, they fought and died for each other.