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Let no one forget the Chosin Reservoir campaign

By Steve Halverson May 14, 2020

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Series revisited

The Herald-Independent and McFarland Thistle is republishing a series of columns written by Steve Halverson in 2009. The columns preceded the dedication of the Dane County Veterans Monument in Ahuska Park in Monona. Now, that monument is being refurbished, with a rededication planned for later this year.

April 30: The D-Day invasion at Normandy.

May 7: Bataan Death March.

Today: Chosin Reservoir.

May 21: Vietnam.

May 28: The heroes that live among us.

The Korean War is often referred to as "The Forgotten War." But it is not forgotten by the men who fought there. The most notable battle of the Korean War was the Chosin Reservoir, where the United Nations troops fought the North Koreans, the Chinese and the weather.

After World War II, Korea was essentially cut in two by the 38th parallel. In the North, the Soviet Union approved and promoted the rise of a communist government led by Kim Il-Sung. In the South, the anti-communist government that emerged was led by U.S.-educated Syngman Rhee. Minor fighting was common along the border, but there was nothing common about the predawn attack on Sunday, June 25, 1950. After a first storm of artillery, North Korean troops crossed the 38th parallel in a massive invasion. Shortly after the invasion, the United Nations Security Council passed UNSC Resolution 82, condemning the North Korean aggression. The vote was unanimous, because the Soviet Union (who has veto power) had been boycotting the proceedings since January.

On June 27, 1950, President Truman ordered U.S. air and sea forces to support South Korea.

The Korean War's beginnings had parallels to the beginning of WWII; we were ill-prepared and were attacked by superior forces. The well-trained North Korean army was equipped with 274 tanks, 150 Yak fighters, 110 attack bombers, 200 artillery pieces and an estimated 231,000 soldiers. By contrast, the South Koreans had 98,000 soldiers, and only 65,000 were trained for combat. Their air force was mostly trainers and small number of fighters. And they possessed antiquated tanks and artillery.

The decision to join in the fight came easy for President Truman. He vowed not to repeat the mistakes of appeasement that led to the rise of Hitler, Mussolini and the Japanese.

Superior forces and substantial supply lines allowed the North Korean forces to drive the South Korean forces and the U.S. 8th Army to the southeastern corner of the Korean Peninsula around the city of Pusan. As the North Koreans advanced, they rounded up and killed civil servants, and committed further atrocities against South Korean civilians and captured U.N. troops.

U.S. air power soon went to work, destroying 32 bridges, critical for the North Korean supply lines. B-29 strategic bombers closed rail and road traffic. And naval air power forced trains to hide in tunnels until nightfall. The tide of the battle was turning as American supplies poured into Pusan, and Gen. Douglas MacArthur orchestrated the famous Inchon Landing – behind enemy lines. The U.N. forces had crossed the 38th parallel and were edging closer to the Yalu River, the border between North Korea and China.

Gen. MacArthur ignored the intelligence reports of tens, even hundreds, of thousands of Chinese amassing along the border. In late November, the Chinese struck and completely overran several South Korean divisions. The U.S. 8th Army faced the longest retreat of any military unit in history.

The 8th Army escaped annihilation, in part by the rear guard action of a Turkish brigade that would descend upon the Chinese at night, silently killing them with knives, causing panic among the troops.

At the Chosin Reservoir, 150,000 Chinese soldiers had the U.N. troops surrounded. It was up to Gen. O.P. Smith, commander of the 1st Marine Division, to fight his way out of the trap. General Smith wisely built up supply points along the way, which not only saved his marines, but other U.N. forces as well. Smith concentrated his forces and made an aggressive assault to break out of the encirclement. When asked if he was retreating, his answer was, "Retreat? Hell, we're attacking in a different direction!"

On the Army side, a 3,000-man combat team from the 7th Infantry Division was also surrounded. Greatly outnumbered, and worn down by unending attacks, the combat team was virtually destroyed. The few survivors eventually reached the marine lines.

On the morning of Nov. 29, Col. "Chesty" Puller was ordered to send a task force to open the roads for the remaining marine division. A Chinese ambush cut the task force to pieces. Task Force DOG was formed to assist in extracting the 1st Marine Division from the Chinese trap. On Dec. 7, Task Force DOG fought their way to the 1st Marine Division. On Dec. 9, the marines finished constructing a critical bridge with bridge sections that were parachuted into place. The bridge enabled their escape with their vehicles. It was reported that every vehicle was covered with dead marines, their comrades making sure to bring them out.

In the final analysis, the subzero temperatures inflicted as many casualties as the Chinese. The marines consider the battle of the Chosin Reservoir to be one of their proudest moments – and it should be. Eleven marines were awarded the Medal of Honor for the Chosin Reservoir campaign.

The marines and army were not the only troops fighting day and night. Sailors from Task Force 77 were sending hundreds of sorties to attack the encircling Chinese with devastating effect. The F4U Corsair provided close air support that raked the Chinese infantry with machine gun, 20 mm fire and napalm. Without the coordinated efforts of all branches of the military, the Chosin Reservoir campaign could have been a terrible tragedy in U.S. military history.

Let no one forget "The Forgotten War."

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Kevin Passon



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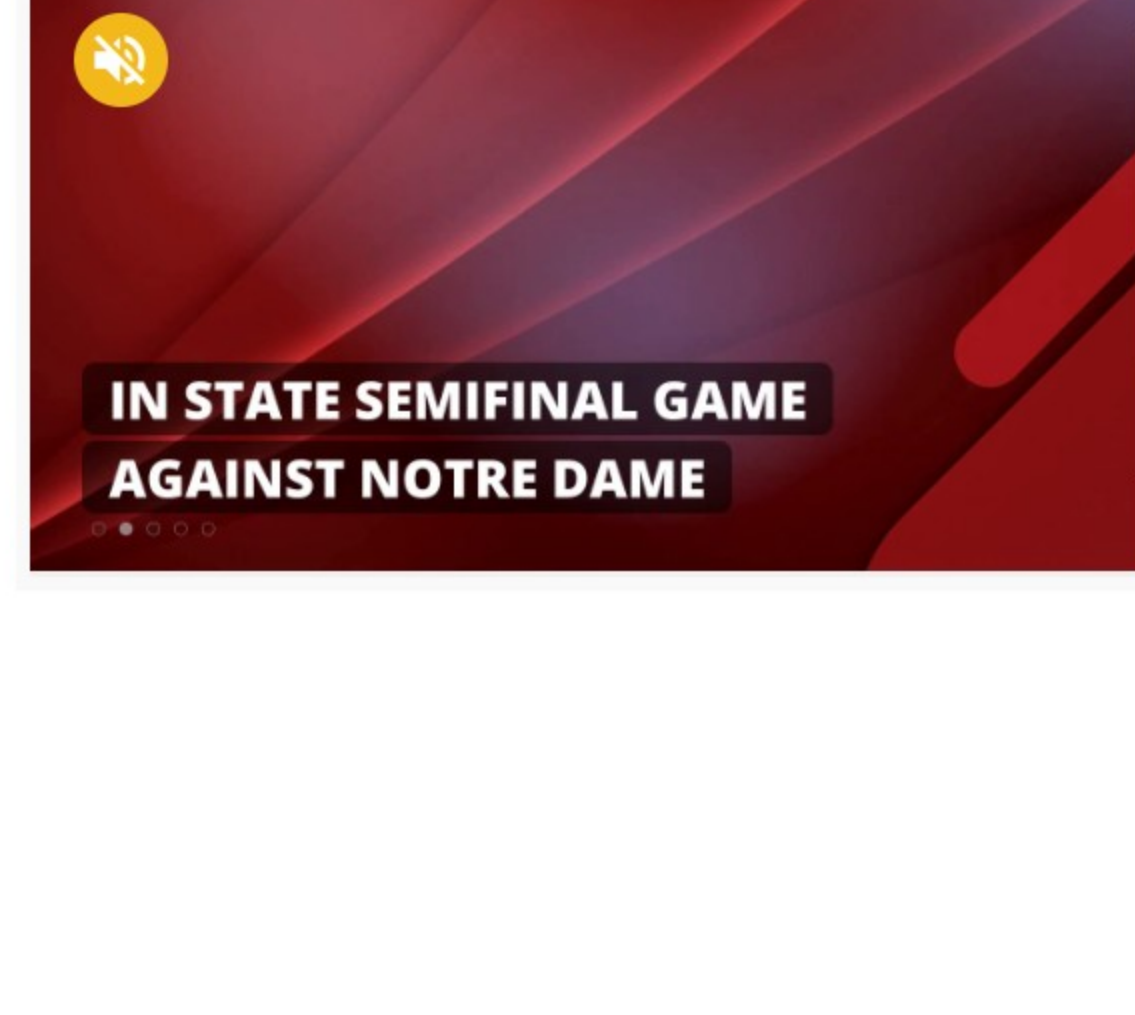
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