

Joseph Wheelan's 'The Farthest Valley'

The U.S. Marines waged a terrible fighting withdrawal from a Chinese trap at the Chosin Reservoir in December 1950.

By Christopher Miskimon

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The Chinese assault troops lay down in the snow to hide from the U.S. Marines guarding the American perimeter at Yudam-Ni, November 27, 1950. Small groups of them probed that perimeter, searching for weak spots. The Marine sentries could hear them talking. More pungently, the Marines could smell them. The Chinese troops reeked of garlic, issued to them as a cold preventative. Whether there were weak points or not, the Chinese had to attack; their men were starving and freezing to death. They had to move or die.

They attacked in columns, sounding bugles, whistles and duck calls. Many of the Chinese troops threw grenades, other fired submachine guns or rifles. Lt. Col. Ray Murray, commanding the 5th Marine Regiment, ducked as a burst of machine gun fire ripped through the top of his headquarters tent. It was eerie, scary," he said. "I heard all these bugles and all the hell raising. They were screaming and shouting and then I heard the firing start." Over 30,000 Chinese soldiers surrounded 8,200 Marines at Yudam-Ni.

The Marines fought back, pouring fire into their advancing enemy. John Cole, A Marine in I Company, 5th Marines, recalled the attack. "You never saw so much movement. They were loading up to attack, that whole field stood up and started running at us, screaming "Marine you die tonight, you die tonight. We just kinda leveled in and let them have it."

ESCAPING THE CHINESE TRAP
AT THE CHOSIN RESERVOIR



THE FARTHEST VALLEY

JOSEPH WHEELAN

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Americans concentrated their firepower. The commander of the Chinese 2nd Battalion, 235th Regiment, knowing his men were succumbing to the frigid temperatures, sent all 800 of his men into the attack. The Marines waited until the Chinese infantry were only 15 yards from their position and opened a deadly fire. The attack crumbled under the weight of steel and lead the Marines threw at it. The Chinese repeated their attack several more times to the same end. By morning the Chinese battalion lost 650 men.

Red and Green tracers flashed across the battlefield; Some ricocheted into the air while others stopped in the bodies of men. One Marine machine gunner changed the barrel in his Browning .30-caliber three times that night, using an asbestos glove to remove the overheated ones. Platoon leader Lt. Jack Nolan said, "I didn't comprehend the magnitude or scope of the attack until I saw the bodies in the morning." He counted 201 enemy dead sprawled on the ground in front of his company's positions. Some were only five yards from the Marine's defensive positions.

This attack was only the beginning of a long ordeal for the Marines, US Army troops and Chinese soldiers at and around the Chosin Reservoir. Ten thousand Chinese troops were lost on the first night, but they continued their encircling attack, hoping to cut off the US forces from escape. The cold proved as deadly an enemy as shellfire or enemy bullets. For two weeks the US forces fought their way through the Chinese until they reached the Sea of Japan. Their story of bravery and determination, and of Chinese perseverance, is told in **The Farthest Valley: Escaping the Chinese Trap at the Chosin Reservoir** (Joseph Wheelan, Osprey Publishing, Oxford UK, 2024, 384pp., maps, photographs, bibliography, index, \$35, HC).

This latest work by an established author of military history stands out for its detailed and graphic depictions of the combat and suffering of both sides. The extent of research is apparent in the narrative, which intertwines the American and Chinese perspectives of the battle. Most accounts of the Korean War tend to leave out North Korean and Chinese viewpoints; this book is all the better for its inclusion of the Chinese experience. The Chosin Reservoir is one of the most famous battles of the Korean War, but this new book adds a new depth of understanding for the reader, who can follow the action from both points of view in this well-written and readable volume.