A Star, A Battle And A Mountain To Match The Men

While shopping just after the holidays this winter I noticed my friend Peggy Beasley, who used to belong to the same club I do. It had been a while since she'd been there, so I sidled my cart next to hers and we exchanged news. After a while I noticed her attractive lapel pin. It was a gold star with multiple arms as if streams of light radiating from the center which held the letters CR.

“Is this from your church?” I asked thinking it was a Christmas pin.

“Oh, no!” She exclaimed with a prideful smile. Then she proceeded to tell me the most amazing story that involved her Marine husband John, one of the most notable battles in Marine history at Chosin Reservoir, the special star that gave the troops hope, and a mountain to commemorate it.

It was June 25, 1950. North Korea (NK), supported by Communist China and Russia, invaded south of the 38th parallel and quickly overran the totally unprepared Republic of South
Korea (ROK) whose democracy was backed by the U.S. At that time there was only a small number of U.S. military personnel and three dozen ships in South Korea. ROK were troops were inexperienced and had only light weapons. They were quickly overcome and pushed all the way south to the port city, Pusan.

Immediately the United Nations Security Council committed support to South Korea. President Truman, who promised to oppose Communism in the Truman Doctrine just three years prior, agreed to commit American combat units, mostly Marines. Twenty- one other countries contributed to the effort; sixteen committed combat troops and five provided medical support. American General Douglas A. MacArthur, still popular from WWII, was put in charge as Commander of Forces.

By early July U.S. war ships had damaged or destroyed some North Korean targets including airfields, railroads, bridges and power plants. By August, United Nations Command (UNC) troops reinforced U.S. and ROK forces around Pusan, but were at an impasse against the North Korean army and could not advance further inland.

On September 15th, MacArthur ordered a bold surprise amphibious landing at Inchon located on South Korea's western coast behind enemy lines and close to the capitol, Seoul. Narrow straits and 33-foot tides made landing timing critical – possible in only six out of 24 hours.
Eighteen- year-old Private First Class John Beasley trained as a Marine combat radioman and was assigned to the 1st Marines led by Colonel Lewis “Chesty” Puller, who later became the most decorated Marine in history. John's duty was to keep the communications in working order. He prepared for his first battle aboard one of the 230 landing tanks, each holding 200-250 men. After a traditional pre-invasion steak and egg breakfast, they silently waited hours before transferring to amphibious tractors. John landed in the second wave. With heavy pack and communications gear strapped to his body and rifle in hand, he began scaling the high rock seawall using ladder and net while the enemy raked the beach with machine gun fire and mortars. Heavier combat equipment was off-loaded hours later after the seawall was destroyed. Combat was fierce, often house to house and hand to hand. Despite this, UNC forces were able to push back the North Koreans and re-take Seoul by September 28th. Fighting continued further inland. With courage and determination UNC troops pushed the enemy out of all South Korea. John recounts, “They hurt us, but it didn't matter, we had a job to do and we did it without hesitation.”

Encouraged, MacArthur demanded North Korea's surrender on October 1st. With South Korea once more secure, President Truman allowed MacArthur to proceed through North Korea. China's Communist leader Mao Tse Tung answered Mac Arthur's demands with a message sent through the Indian ambassador: If the UNC crossed north of the 38th parallel, he would send
Chinese troops into Korea and annihilate them. Unfortunately, this threat was disregarded by both President Truman and his generals.

Many of the same Marines who landed at Inchon, including John, were shipped to the east coast North Korean town, Wanson. Wanson was deserted, but ships needed a three-day delay before docking while the Navy and U.S. Coast Guard cleared mines. UNC troops destroyed a railroad roundhouse blocking the North's supply line then headed by rail and eventually motorized column inland toward the Chosin Reservoir, a man-made body of water with a power plant in a sparsely populated area.

Chosin is the Japanese name for Changjin. Since the UN still used area maps from the Japanese occupation, the name stuck. UNC troops were were authorized to proceed beyond the Chosin Reservoir to the border with Manchuria as long as Russia or China did not intervene. Truman did not want to start WWIII.

To get there, troops had to travel their way along a main supply route (MSR) which was the only way in and out of the area. It was only a trail in places, barely wide enough for a tank, and over rough mountain terrain marked by steep drops below and jagged cliffs above. En route, Marines engaged, captured and questioned a few well-equipped Chinese soldiers who admitted the size of their force. But, headquarters again disregarded the reported threat.

Near the northern end of the MSR was Koto-ri with an airport. About 3,000 supply
personnel (cooks, drivers and clerks) were situated there. Eleven miles north was Hangaru-ri. From there, combat troops proceeded north on either side of the reservoir. Army soldiers fought their way east toward Sinhung-ni. Marines fought their way 14 miles west to Yudam-ni over the 4,000 foot high Toktong pass.

Mao kept his word and sent an overwhelming Chinese Communist Force (CCF) estimated between 67,000 and 120,000 determined to eliminate the 30,000 UNC forces at Chosin Reservoir. Many of the CCF were Soviet trained with WWII experience and heavily armed. Alongside the CCF were recruited Chinese peasants in a People's Volunteer Army; these were poorly outfitted with only rifles and shod in light-weight cotton clothing and canvas shoes. Of the peasant soldiers John remembers, “They wore bandoleers of rice and garlic to ward off the common cold.”

The Chinese attacked ferociously in hordes. John recalls, “The night they hit, it was like a wave of people coming at us. People after people. We fought firefight after firefight.” The Chinese were relentless with round-the-clock raids, ambushes, grenade blasts, bombings and terrifying “screaming mimis” (multiple rocket launches at at time). UNC troops fought back with intense resolve, skill and sacrifices while fighting fatigue and overwhelming odds.

To complicate an already dire situation, on November 14th the weather changed to what was to be the coldest winter in 100 years. After Wanson, UNC troops received parkas and boot
packs, but still lacked warm pants and had only a spare pair of socks. Most men did not have or use gloves. Men suffered intense cold often down to -40 (with wind, a chill factor of -60). Frostbite was rampant. The cold also reduced effectiveness radio and vehicle batteries, caused rifles to jam and roads to ice up.

Warm-up tents were few. Most of the time John and his company lived in foxholes they’d dug and lined with rice straw. Flea bites added insult to their discomfort. Meals were C-rations usually consumed frozen, the men having to pry hard plugs with their knives. The cold limited how wounds could be handled. Exposed flesh would freeze before it could be treated; so would plasma or antibiotics. Navy physician Stanley Wolf successfully improvised a unique technique of packing open wounds with rice straw to staunch the bleeding.

One night, CCF advanced toward the supplies intending to steal rations and attacked men still in their sleeping bags. After the Marines' response, John could hear the wounded Chinese crying and moaning in the night, then quieted as they succumbed to their wounds and the elements. He thought, “Good Lord, just help me live through tonight.”

Despite the harrowing condition and bloody battles on both sides of the reservoir, MacArthur remained confident of victory and proclaimed a “Home by Christmas” campaign on November 24th. However, UNC forces already struggling using all their resources at all hours were hit even harder. By November 27th they were completely surrounded by CCF. The situation
seemed desperate.

Fighting was relentless and brutal. By November 28th, 80% the army troops to the east at Sinhung-ni were decimated. The remnants struggled back south to Hangaru-ri. Marine forces fighting in the west at Yudami-ni were surrounded and cut off from the MSR and needed rescuing. It was then that the 3,000 supply staff were ordered north from Koto-ri to Hangaru-ri to become rifle men. Every man was put on the front line in an effort to survive.

On November 29th combined forces of U.S. Marines, Army, and 250 British commandos (altogether 1,200 men) were sent 11miles north from Koto-ri to Hangaru-ri to keep the MSR open. They fought forcefully against an enemy still estimated to number 65,000. CCF intensified the attacks capturing several prisoners and offering safe passage with surrender. Many ROK forces fled. The offer of surrender was refused vociferously. The Chinese killed many prisoners; some escaped and were never seen again; some escaped and managed to reunite with the friendly forces.

UNC forces continued the battle vigorously in what was to become known as “Hell Fire Valley”. They struggled 12 hours to advance just 12 miles through the gauntlet of CCF snipers, rockets, bombs, even Napalm from above. In this mission alone, 169 men were killed, 159 wounded and 300 soldiers taken prisoner. The MSR was littered with destroyed vehicles. But they succeeded in securing it. That battle strengthened forever the bond between US and British
forces.

Segments of Colonel Puller’s Regiment were ordered 12 miles further north to Yudami-ni to keep the MSR open and help the men there make their way south. Back in Koto-ri, John and his fellow Marines were exhausted and under sporadic sniper attacks. John remembers despairing, “I was sure I wouldn't get out alive. A Navy pilot jumped into my foxhole and I wrote a letter to my parents telling them I was not coming home and what to do with my insurance money.” That pilot got out and mailed the letter. Receiving it depressed them so profoundly that John, “regrets it to this day.”

On December 1st Marines began fighting their way back south toward Hangaru-ri. UNC aircraft were able to lift out the dead and wounded and replenish supplies, They reached Hangaru-ri December 3rd with the help of close air support. Instead of calling it a retreat, commanding General Smith described it “advancing in a different direction.”

On December 7th a raging blizzard hit making it impossible to see forcing the conflict to a standstill. No aircraft could carry wounded out or supplies in. The MSR south of Koto-ri was badly damaged and a critical bridge destroyed. To make further progress out, they needed clear skies. Bad weather darkened an already difficult situation. Many men felt certain they would freeze and die in place. Many prayed for a sign that God had not abandoned them in that foreign land. Desperate, they hunkered in foxholes and waited.
Then, around midnight on December 8th the sky began clearing. As the men looked up through the frost, they could see a single bright star. That shining symbol seemed to be the miracle they waited for. Emotionally stirred, many began singing the Marines' Hymn. Spirits lifted as clouds lifted. They now felt certain God was with them. Re-invigorated, they prepared to advance south to safety.

Aircraft flew again to evacuate the dead and wounded. The Air Force delivered eight one-ton bridge segments. Within only three hours Marine engineers repaired the bridge. The breakout began. All serviceable vehicles were put into convoy, a Sherman tank in the lead. Wounded were put in trucks, jeeps and ambulances. Assisted above by air support they mustered all the remaining working tanks. Some CCF still attacked from all sides; others capitulated. UNC troops worked their way, sometimes single-file, 78 miles along the MSR to the North Korean east coast port, Hungnam. There an armada of 193 Allied ships awaited.

The first men arrived at Hungnam December 11th. John remembers being so weak he could barely make it aboard, collapsing immediately, then was revived by a friendly sailor with a cup of coffee and six boiled eggs. By December 24th all survivors were out. They brought out 1,000 vehicles. Most amazingly, they also secured 98,000 civilian refugees making it the greatest civilian rescue in history. After the ships evacuated all, the port was destroyed.

In the Chosin Reservoir battle, 400 were killed, 2,265 wounded in battle, and 90 were
missing in action. An additional 1,395 suffered non-battle wounds, mainly frostbite. Many of those evacuated, including John went on to continue fighting in South Korea until the end of hostilities July 27, 1953.

Ironically, the vicious fighting in Korea was never officially declared a “war” by the U.S. congress. Also, there was never a final peace declared. After many negotiations all sides agreed to an armistice and established new borders, creating a 4,000 meter wide Demilitarized Zone. Tragically, of the 932,964 non-American UNC troops who served, 95,700 were killed, and 200,000 wounded. Of the 1.8 million Americans who served 36,076 died; 103,284 were wounded; 8,100 are still missing. The majority of survivors suffered severe frostbite including John who still has loss of feeling in his feet, frostbite to his face and hearing loss from tank blasts. To a man, the survivors were–and are still–heroes. Of those who served at Chosin Reservoir, seventeen men received the Medal of Honor; seventy received the Navy Cross.

While in battle, the men at Chosen Reservoir called themselves, “The Chosin Frozen.” Later, survivors began calling themselves, “The Chosin Few.” In 1983 a friend of one of the Marines designed the Chosin Reservoir pin and in 1984 The Chosin Few began official reunions. In 2012, John Beasley and fellow Chosin Few Marine Richard Lilly of Wasilla petitioned the
government to name a mountain in Alaska *The Chosin Few*. They spoke with Governor Sean Parnell, Lt. Governor Meade Treadwell, and Representative Don Young. Young introduced the Chosin Few Bill to congress. However, the U.S Board of Geographic Names acted on a separate request from Beasley and Lilly and officially named it on June 15, 2012. Mount Chosin Few stands 8,412 feet tall in the Chugach Range approximately 28 miles northeast of Cordova.

Today, John and Peggy Beasley express pride in his service. They continue to tell the story of the Chosin Reservoir to whomever will listen to memorialize the dead, to honor the survivors and to ensure that what happened in Korea will never be forgotten. Though long retired, John serves as current President of the Chosin Few, Inc. and continues his work with meteor burst communications research.