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1<sup>ST</sup> PLATOON, COMPANY A., 1<sup>ST</sup> BATTALION, 23<sup>RD</sup> MARINES

*THE LAST STAND OF FOX COMPANY*

There is a generation of forgotten Marines. A generation comprised of World War II veterans and Marines like myself – reservists.

It was November 27, 1950 and the Marines of Fox Company, Second Battalion, Seventh Regiment of the First Marine Division had descended on the Korean Peninsula under the command of Supreme Allied Commander, General Douglas MacArthur.

The First Marine Division, led by Major General Oliver Prince Smith, was composed of about 15,000 Marines and stretched “along sixty-five miles of rutted North Korean road that ran north to an enormous man-made lake the Americans called the Chose Reservoir – a Japanese bastardization of the Korean name, Changjin – or the frozen Chosin.”

It is in the book *The Last Stand of Fox Company*, that Bob Drury and Tom Clavin reveal the extent of Fox Company’s stand on Fox Hill, a frozen rocky hill in the Tektong pass between the Korean cities of Yudam-Ni and Hagaru-ri.

Of the roughly 15,000 Marines of the First Marine Division, it is estimated that nearly half were reservists. So depleted after the Pacific Campaign during World War II, the First Marine Division was forced to call up reserve Marines with no combat experience and little training. At the time, reserve Marines were required to attend 72 consecutive drills, or 36 drills in back to back summers. For the Marines being thrust into combat, there was no boot camp or modern day infantry school.

*The Last Stand of Fox Company* tells not the story of a glory filled campaign, no, it tells the story of how Fox Company Marines found survival within their dedication to duty and their love for one another.

At the time, General MacArthur’s strategic “plan was to sweep North Korea free of the communist dictator Kim Il Sung’s fleeing North Korea People’s Army all the way to the Yalu River.” General MacArthur arrogantly believed that the allied forces would be home by

Christmas, a statement that would later reveal how ignorant allied intelligence was of Chinese troop movements.

As the Marines of Fox Company started moving towards Fox Hill, they began to mentally prepare themselves to fight their oriental opponent. Unlike General MacArthur, and thanks in part to a skirmish in early November, the Marines were beginning to understand the berserk like attack style of Chinese infantry that was borderline foolish.

Among the Marines of the First Division rumors began to spread of how one American machine-gun emplacement could take out half an enemy infantry company, and the remaining half would still keep charging. This is a tale that accurately depicts the Chinese Infantry. They were an enemy who would apply tourniquets to their limbs before battle, an enemy that displayed a willful and wanton disregard for their own life. For the Marines of Fox Company this was equally laughable as it was alarming. What would cause an enemy to fight this way?

While the Marines of Fox Company began to prepare for their march to Fox Hill, they were also preparing to welcome a new commanding officer. Captain William Edward Barber was a decorated World War II veteran who didn't take command of Fox Company until they were already in Korea. A mustang, Barber left college in order to enlist prior to World War II and then received his commission in 1945. For Barber, combat was nothing, new having led a rifle platoon on Iwo Jima as a young second lieutenant.

As Barber prepared to establish his company defense, he was skeptical of the new Marines in his charge. But nevertheless, Barber chose to defend Toktong Pass using the main hill in the pass. "He would align his men up the gentler eastern grade, across the crest, and down the steep western slope in the general shape of an inverted horseshoe, the "reverse U" position taught a Quantico." With the Marines of Fox Company dug in, the only left to do was wait for an attack and try not to freeze in the process.

Unlike the Marines, known for their ability to improvise, adapt and overcome, Chinese officers and NCO's were not permitted to alter battle plans once issued. It was because of the inflexibility of Chinese leadership that would cause Chinese soldiers to charge straight into a slaughter and fight till the last man no matter what. This is exactly what would happen at Fox Hill.

Unbeknownst to the nearly 250 Marines at Toktong pass, nearly 100,000 Chinese soldiers were

moving on the Chosin Reservoir with the plan of splitting the American forces into five different parts. At the center of that plan was the defensive positions of Fox Company.

On November 27<sup>th</sup>, “Just before midnight, Captain Barber radioed Lieutenant Colonel Randolph Lockwood in Hagaru-ri. He informed his superior officer that 234 Marines, twelve corpsmen, and one civilian interpreter of Fox Company, Second Battalion, Seventh Marines, were ready, able, and effective.”

Over the next five days the Marines of Fox Company would withstand attack after attack. Aided by Marine Corps artillery, the Marines overcame faulty weapon systems, below freezing temperatures, and little to no resupply of their position. But on December 1<sup>st</sup>, their 5<sup>th</sup> day dug in, the defensive positions of Fox Company began to break, one fighting hole at a time.

While Fox Company struggled for survival, the eyes of the world and the American military commanders finally began to accept the fact that the some odd 8,000 Marines in the Chosin Reservoir were trapped and surrounded.

Understanding the precarious situation that Fox Company was in, Marine Corps leadership tasked Lieutenant Colonel Ray Davis with leading reinforcements to relieve Fox Company. Davis was given some 350 Marines, a rag tag collection from the remnants of First Battalion’s Abel, Baker and Charlie rifle companies. As their fellow Marines from the Fifth, Seventh and Eleventh regiments prepared to make a frantic withdrawal from the Chosin, Davis’s men realized they would not be evacuating, but none of them knew why.

“Enlisted men in battle usually receive small-bore intelligence, faulty or incomplete. But on this occasion Davis believed his Marines had the right to know what they would be soon up against. After several uncomfortable minutes he swept his arm to encompass the controlled chaos of more than two Marine regiments breaking camp and turning themselves around to head fourteen miles south.”

“They are going down the road,” Davis told his men. “We are not. Fellow Marines are in trouble, and we are going to rescue them. Nothing is going to stand in our way.”

Davis’s plan was to follow the First Battalion two miles down the MSR. At Turkey Hill, Davis’s rescue mission would break off the road under cover over darkness and begin the approximately

six mile trek overland to the Toktong Pass. It was during the fighting at Turkey Hill when Davis's men broke off from the First Battalion that the famed "Ridge Runners" nickname would be coined in reference to Davis's rescue mission. To this day, it is enshrined in Marine Corps history.

It took Davis and his Marines nearly two days to reach Fox Hill, when they arrived, they found a frozen wasteland so covered with bodies of dead Chinese soldiers that the "Ridge Runners" couldn't walk without stepping on them.

On December 4<sup>th</sup>, Lt Col Ray Davis's rescue mission was considered a success as they relieved Fox Company, and at roughly 1:30 a.m., the sixty or so remaining Marines and corpsmen of Fox Company arrived at the American occupied town of Hagaru-ri.

"The road barriers were raised and the column was allowed to pass. The ragged remains of Fox Company, Second Battalion, Seventh Regiment parade-marched into Hagaru-ri four men abreast, to a drill sergeant's cadence count. Someone began humming, softly at first, the Marine Corps Hymn. One by one, though their throats were dry and raw, the entire company picked up the tune. Soon each man was singing. *From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli, we will fight our country's battles, on the land as on the sea. First to fight for right and freedom, and to keep our honor clean, we are proud to claim the title of United States Marines.* As Fox Company crossed the checkpoint, a Navy corpsman stationed at the gate shook his head. He turned to a guard. "Will you look at those magnificent bastards," he said."

Captain William Barber survived Fox Company's heroic stand at Toktong pass. After spending months in the hospital, Barber returned to the United States in 1951 and in August 1952 he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor by President Truman for his leadership. Barber remained in the Marine Corps and retired a full colonel in 1970.

The Last Stand of Fox Company is considered one of the greatest, single feats in military history. However, it came at a cost. By the time Fox Company evacuated Korea on December 11<sup>th</sup>, over three quarters of the company were either dead or wounded.

As a Marine, The Last Stand of Fox Company epitomizes the warrior ethos instilled in Marines during boot camp. Whether infantry or supply, reservists or active duty, Marines still embody the same warrior spirit across the Corps.

For the forgotten Marines of Korea, in a war that many believe meant nothing, present day Marines are provided with a valuable lesson – one that empowers us as we represent the Eagle, Globe and Anchor daily.

In closing, there is one specific paragraph in *The Last Stand of Fox Company* that I believe epitomizes the warrior spirit of the Marine Corps.

“No one came. Garza spent the next four hours holding his friend’s chopped and sliced legs and buttocks together to prevent him from bleeding out. Now, as dawn broke, two Marines appeared. Together they managed to deliver Belmarez to the med tents alive.”

“Hell you think you were doing out there in the middle of a firefight?” one of them asked Garza.

“He’s my friend,” Garza said. In fact, Belmarez was the only man who knew that Garza had lied about his age on his enlistment form. Garza, the human tourniquet, had just turned sixteen.”