

JIM EVANS



THE CHOSIN FEW

Jim Evans, an old Marine, rubs his toes and scooches a little closer to the stove. His feet ache, especially when it's cold. This freezing February day, a few miles north of Hoquiam along Highway 101, is balmy compared to the winter he endured 67 years ago when a cold front plowed into North Korea from Siberia. In 1950, Private First Class Evans was 5,000 miles from home in the craggy mountains surrounding a man-made lake called the Chosin Reservoir.*

How cold was it? "Thirty-five below zero seems to be the agreed-upon low," says Evans, who has read dozens of articles and books about the Korean War. "That's not counting the wind chill, so when some guys say it was 50 below maybe that's their rationale. When it gets that cold, another 10 degrees doesn't matter much. I couldn't feel my feet unless I stomped up and down and kept moving. But I kept them dry. That was important. Some guys lost their toes. Others their feet. And thousands of guys lost their lives. I'm one of the lucky ones."

Jim Evans is one of "The Chosin Few," a fraternity of soldiers who fought in one of history's most storied battles.

GENERAL Douglas MacArthur was certain he had the Reds on the run. He deployed his U.N. troops like armored pincers, intent on crushing the North

* Though "The Battle of Chosin Reservoir" is etched indelibly in U.S. Marine Corps history, Koreans chafe at "Chosin" because it is a reminder of the Japanese occupation of their country from 1910 to 1945. U.N. commanders during the Korean War used maps that featured Japanese place names. The Korean name for the reservoir is Changjin Lake.





Marines stage their historic breakout from the Chosin Reservoir in December of 1950.
Corporal Peter McDonald, USMC photo

Korean army. “They would close the divide between them, form a solid front, and then race north before the long and brutal Korean winter settled in.” Puffing his trademark corncob pipe, MacArthur told reporters, “This should for all practical purposes end the war and restore peace and unity to Korea.” Some of his troops might even be home by Christmas, the general said.

The Marines had turkey for Thanksgiving—cold turkey, granted, but turkey all the same. As Christmas neared, some 30 miles below the Yalu River, they felt like mincemeat. They were outnumbered at least 8 to 1 by the Chinese army. Chairman Mao Zedong had sprung a massive offensive to support his communist ally and protect his borders. One wag posted a sign that said there were “only 18 shopping days” left.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, David Douglas Duncan, a LIFE Magazine combat photographer, captured the equivalent of *War and Peace* when he spotted a vacant-eyed, freezing GI clutching a can of C-Rations somewhere along the Chosin Reservoir. “I asked him, ‘If I were God, what would you want for Christmas?’ He just looked up into the sky and said, ‘Give me tomorrow.’ ”

The 1st Marine Division, Jim Evans’ outfit, recorded 11,700 casualties in the breakout from the Chosin Reservoir—7,300 just from the cold. Old Marines like Jim have learned that cold injury is an incurable disease that only gets worse with age.

IN 1776, soldiers of the Continental Army, “spread thinly along the banks of the frozen Delaware River,” were also cold and dispirited as Christmas approached. Some, lacking shoes, left bloody footprints in the snow. Jim Evans’ third great-grandfather, John Hurlbut III, was a 16-year-old flintlock infantryman. His Rhode Island regiment was part of a force of 2,400 Patriots handpicked for a daring raid General Washington hoped would turn the tide. Around



Rita Evans embraces her husband at the Korean War Memorial on the Capitol campus.
Ben Helle photo

midnight on December 26th, they began boarding flat-bottomed boats to cross the river and storm the British post at Trenton, New Jersey. Taken by surprise, the garrison's Hessian pickets were overpowered. And when the Patriots unlimbered their cannons, the rout was on. "Washington did not lose a single man," historians at the Smithsonian wrote. "News of the triumph heartened Patriots everywhere, and the prisoners and captured colors were paraded through Philadelphia." It was a timely victory for a bedraggled volunteer army. Re-enlistments soared. When America's independence was secured, Captain Hurlbut went on to teach school, farm and found a whiskey distillery.

When Jim Evans heard Hurlbut's life story for the first time in 2016, he let out a chortle. "Well, don't that make you blink? Rita, did you hear all that?" he asked his wife, as if she hadn't. "Bow down!" She just shook her head and grinned. "Don't get conceited!" Rita is 18 years Jim's junior.

It's the second marriage for both. Clearly a good one. They make one another laugh and have hundreds of friends. Rita, a Northrup, is from pioneer stock on the Olympic Peninsula.

Jim retired from Interstate Asphalt Company in Aberdeen nearly 30 years ago. He and Rita live in a comfortable old house on a hillside. There's an apple orchard out back, a 1932 Ford dump truck in the driveway and an Indian canoe in the front yard near the Marine Corps flag. The block-long 1965 Cadillac convertible Jim restored for Rita is secure in a shed. There's a wire-wheeled 1938 MG-TA roadster in the basement. It doesn't run any more but it's all there. You can tell it used to be British Racing Green.

Jim Evans is the kind of guy who knows a lot of stuff and enjoys helping others. In 1950, with bullets whizzing past his helmet, he figured there was a distinct possibility he'd never see his 25th birthday, so you won't hear him kicking much about the aches and pains that multiply as you approach 90.

Dabbling in genealogy, Jim and Rita knew the roots of his family tree run deep, just not so wide. He is also descended from Alsatian German Mennonites who arrived in Pennsylvania around 1715 to avoid persecution by both Catholics and Lutherans; and from Welsh immigrants whose offspring made their way from Virginia to Iowa and Kansas. Jim's paternal grandfather fought for the Union in the Civil War. The branches, improbably, stretch all the way to Humptulips, where Jim was born on November 2, 1927, the son of a logging camp locomotive engineer.



Growing up at Humptulips, Jim was the baby of the family. *Evans collection*

“When I was in the Marines, the First Sergeant squinted at my records, looked up and said, ‘Evans, where in the hell is Humptulips?!’ ” It’s about halfway between Hoquiam and Lake Quinalt on Highway 101. The Post Office for 98552 is next door to the general store/gas station. Truckers and motorcyclists stop for a smoke and a Twinkie. Back when Jim was born, there were logging camps for miles around. Humptulips once boasted several dozen houses, a hotel and a school, even a community band.*

JIM HAD a resourceful, resilient mother—a good thing, too, because he says his father largely disappeared when he was around 5. “He had shell-shock—today we call it PTSD—from serving in World War I and he corrected that with alcohol. I barely knew him. My mom was a strong woman who lived to be 96. When my dad split, she had five kids to support, including three from a previous marriage that also went south. We moved into town and she took in washing to pay the bills. She hated it, but we went on welfare during the Depression. I can well remember the cornmeal mush we ate all the time. What was left over was fried corn meal. We did a lot of cheese bricks and raisins. Sometimes when we got oatmeal I thought we had died and gone to heaven.”

An enterprising boy, Evans at 14 was hired by a tug boat captain turned grocer to oversee the store from 6 to 10 most nights. “I did everything—sliced the lunch meat,

* The Salish-speaking Humptulips Indians (Xamtu’lapc) had several villages along the river that now carries their name. Legendary for its steelhead, the river was difficult to ascend in a canoe, so the natives called it “humptulips,” which meant “hard to pole.” Some sources say the word also means “chilly region.” In a winter drizzle, that one fits too. In 1889, an enterprising settler bought up 480 acres and divided the land into lots for a stillborn “Humptulips City.” There has been a store at the crossroads since the 1890s.

minded the till. I think he was crazier than hell for letting a kid assume all that responsibility, but he didn't know anything about retail sales, and I didn't let him down. It was quite an education."

On December 5, 1941, Jim's social studies teacher at Aberdeen High School told the class, "I don't know how many of you realize it but we are closer to war with Japan than we are with Germany." At twilight two days later, Jim was riding his new Columbia bicycle past a statue of a World War I Doughboy when the lights began to go out in every house. He switched off the light on his bike and pedaled faster. Before long, a caravan of trucks from Fort Lewis was rolling through town. Some military experts believed that if it came to war, the Japanese were likely to launch their invasion of the West Coast by landing along the lightly defended beaches on either side of Grays Harbor. "Everyone had their curtains drawn tight and windows blacked out," Evans remembers. "A Japanese girl who was one of my sister's classmates suddenly disappeared. The family was sent to an internment camp. People of German ancestry were nervous too. Everyone was nervous."

Boeing established three subassembly plants on Grays Harbor to manufacture parts for B-17s and B-29s. The Harbor's machine shops began cranking out shell-casings and hand-grenade parts. "You could get a job if you were lukewarm!" Evans remembers. "I started working part-time at Grays Harbor Prefab, which made boxcar parts. I got to drive a forklift and a big old lumber carrier, the kind that straddled a load of lumber. The kids always said that if you spotted one that wasn't loaded, you could ride your bicycle right under it as it was going down the road."

Jim's older half-brother, a Marine, was somewhere in the Pacific. "His winter greens were hanging in the closet. So on high-school Graduation Day 1945, I put on his uniform; it fit perfectly, too. I got up on the stage and sang the Marine Corps Hymn. I think about a dozen of us 17-year-olds were the only boys left in our senior class. The rest were already in the service."

The war was winding down. Evans signed up for the Merchant Marines, graduating from the U.S. Maritime Service Training School in California. He danced with Marlene Dietrich at the Hollywood Canteen and joined a choir that accompanied Bing Crosby at a war bond rally. Evans can still boom the refrain "Buy a bond! Buy a bond today!" But the voice that was once pitch perfect is now flat. For decades he sang bass in a barbershop quartet called the Chehalis Valley Stump Ranchers. He realized it was time to quit when the notes in his head began to sound muffled. "It was



In the Merchant Marines, 1945.
Evans collection

terrible,” Evans laments. “That was one of my greater losses to old age.”

In the fall of 1945, however, he was a young man on a freighter bound for Europe. “I turned 18 in Italy! The war was over, but the Italian men had not yet returned from POW camps. And a lot of them never would. So it was a good time to be a young guy in Trieste, even though there was rioting in the streets because Tito’s Yugoslavs claimed the area ought to be theirs. That made for some excitement.” In Venice, the black market was a bonanza for sailors and GI’s. Evans traded six cartons of American cigarettes for an accordion. “Pretty soon everybody on the ship had an accordion! Anything that wasn’t bolted down was used for barter. When we went into a restaurant, I said to myself, ‘Jeeze this place looks familiar.’ Blue Merchant Marine bedspreads were being used as table cloths. The waiter gave us an armload of Italian cash for one cartoon of Kools that had cost us 30 or 40 cents.”

The Aberdeen Evans came home to in 1947 was buzzing, if a lot less exotic. He worked at a scrap yard until he mashed a finger, was hired as the head usher at the city’s finest theater, got married and was working his way up to service manager at a tire store. In 1949, at the encouragement of friends, he joined them in Baker Company of the 11th Infantry Battalion of the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve. “At the time, I thought it was a really good idea,” Evans says with a chuckle. Hey, he’d spend some summer-camp days in California with his pals in an elite corps—“semper fi!”—and earn a little extra money. One thing was for sure: He knew “next to nothing” about Korea. In that, he was hardly unique.

FROM 1910 to 1945, Korea was a virtual slave state to Imperial Japan. In the geopolitical maneuvering that followed World War II, the superpowers agreed to divide Korea at mid-peninsula along the 38th Parallel. The north now became a communist sphere, the south ostensibly democratic.

Believing South Korea was of “little strategic value to the United States,” the Pentagon withdrew 45,000 American troops, leaving behind only 400 military advisers. MacArthur endorsed the decision. The Soviets pulled back too after installing a regime headed by Kim Il-sung, a former major in the Red Army and a doctrinaire Stalinist. Before long, Kim had nearly seven divisions equipped with the latest Soviet-made weaponry. Confident of victory, he was itching for civil war.

Syngman Rhee, the 73-year-old president of the Republic of Korea, appealed to the U.S. for more arms, telling President Truman his American advisers were “thinking in terms of piecemeal warfare, whereas we Koreans believe that when war comes it will be full scale and total.”

On June 25, 1950, North Korean troops surged across the 38th Parallel and pushed south. Truman, stinging from Republican accusations that his administration had already “lost” China to the communists, vowed the aggression would not go unchecked. He hadn’t flinched at using atomic bombs to end World War II. Now, however, Truman was anxious

to avoid igniting World War III, especially since combat-ready troops were in short supply. A reporter handed the president a euphemism that still prompts guffaws at meetings of the Marine Corps League and American Legion:

“Would it be possible to call this a police action under the United Nations?”

“Yes,” the president said. “That is exactly what it amounts to.”

That is exactly what it wasn't, or in any rate, what it would quickly become.

“If the best minds in the world had set out to find us the worst possible location to fight this damnable war, politically and militarily, the unanimous choice would have been Korea,” Secretary of State Dean Acheson would recall.

FROM ABERDEEN TO ATLANTA, 33,500 Marine Corps Reservists were mobilized to reinforce the 1st Marine Division, which was deployed to defend the United Nations' Pusan Perimeter some 150 miles southeast of Seoul. All the bridges leading to the perimeter had been dynamited to create a redoubt. The Americans and South Koreans hunkered down, awaiting more troops and air support. The North Koreans now occupied 90 percent of the peninsula. It was imperative that the port of Pusan on the Sea of Japan not fall into enemy hands. Within eight months, military historians note, “reserves comprised 45 percent of all active-duty Marines.” In Korea, 13 would receive the Medal of Honor.

“Some of the guys in Company B had joined up while still in high school,” Jim



Evans, left, with two pals, Gerald Antich and Don Sellers, as Company B of the Marine Corps Reserves prepares to leave Aberdeen in the summer of 1950. *Evans collection*

Evans remembers. “They’d been to summer camp and knew how to handle an M1 rifle and a machine gun. I think I’d been to about a half-dozen meetings and lectures when—Bang!—we were called up on August 4, 1950. Five days later I was on a train headed for Camp Pendleton.”

Baker Company’s five officers and 145 enlisted men marched smartly through the heart of town and formed up in three long ranks in front of the Aberdeen Railroad Station as a crowd of family members and townspeople looked on. Pfc. Marion “Bogey” Bogdanovich, a star running back for the Grays Harbor College Chokers, saw his mom clutching her rosary, tears in her eyes.

When the Marines were at ease to say their goodbyes, Pfc. Tony Vlastelica stood head and shoulders above the throng as he hugged his girlfriend. The 6-5, hook-shooting center for the Aberdeen Bobcats had scholarship offers from 73 colleges. A roll call of the boys of Company B sounded like a page from the Zagreb phone book. Besides Bogey and Tony, the Harbor’s large contingent of Croatian immigrants was represented by Jim’s pals, Jerry and Jim Antich, plus Peter and Steve Bakotich, John Bebich, Bert Jovanovich, Steve Mihovilich and George Svicarovich. “All you itches line up over here!” Evans remembers a sergeant quipping when they got to California.

As the train chugged out of the station, Evans leaned out a window and waved goodbye to his wife.

RESERVISTS by the thousands poured into Camp Pendleton. If you had two years in the organized reserves, plus at least one summer camp and a minimum of 36 drills, it was next stop Korea.

Evans was in good shape—just under 6 feet tall, broad-shouldered and narrow-waisted at 165 pounds. He was older than many of the others but as green as a Marine can get. He was consigned to boot camp—a month of hell with squinty-eyed drill instructors barking in your face every waking hour. “I learned how to squirm along the ground under live machine-gun fire. We did ‘The Grinder’ over and over—running up a hill with a full pack, every muscle aching. I can still hear the DI’s saying, ‘Your souls belong to God, but your butts belong to the United States Marine Corps!’ ”

After four weeks, Evans was ordered to an audience with the First Sergeant. Even standing at attention it was hard not to notice that “CR” was stamped on the cover of his service folder in red four-inch letters. Evans ventured to ask what that meant. “Son, that means *Combattt Readddy!*” the First Sergeant shot back. Evans mimics his drawl, drawing out every syllable like Michael Buffer intoning, “Let’s get readdddy to rumble!”

“It wasn’t long after that that I found myself on the *USNS General Walker*, a troop ship en route to Japan, together with a lot of other seasick Marines.”

Evans professes to not be superstitious. By then, however, he figured he’d grab any lucky charm available. “In Japan, just before we left for Korea, we were marching through a

field when I looked down. Here's this four-leaf clover. I broke formation and snatched that baby up. In the months ahead, I lost guys on either side of me—some very good guys. Somehow I escaped. And I don't know why." Evans shrugs, reaches for his wallet and fishes out the four-leaf clover. It's preserved under plastic.

ON NOVEMBER 8, 1950, Pfc. Evans stepped ashore at Wonsan, a strategic North Korean port. He had just turned 23. The only present he got was live ammunition. The Marines of the 1st Battalion, 1st Regiment, 1st Division—"1-1-1" for short—were now nearly a hundred miles north of the 38th Parallel. Evans was one of the replacement troops.

Six weeks earlier, General MacArthur's daring amphibious invasion at Inchon on the west side of the peninsula was an unequivocal triumph. "Except at high tide, the port was reduced to wide, oozing, gray mud flats." MacArthur's timing was perfect. Marines led the way as U.N. forces scrambled ashore at daybreak on September 15, catching the enemy by surprise. By nightfall, the North Koreans had been routed, with more than 35,000 casualties to 3,279 for the U.N. forces. By Sept. 25 Seoul was back in U.N. hands, together with a nearby prize—Kimpo airfield. The U.S. 8th Army, meanwhile, had broken out of the Pusan Perimeter. The North Korean Army, its supply lines interdicted, was in retreat, though still full of fight. The communist capital, Pyongyang, fell to the U.S. Army on October 19. When Bob Hope arrived to entertain the troops there were betting pools on when they'd be going home.

If Inchon was the boldest stroke of genius of MacArthur's legendary career, his hubris sent his troops a ridge too far. However, until MacArthur and his aides misjudged the Chinese, Truman was all in, relishing the victory headlines.

As U.N. troops advanced toward the Chinese border, Chairman Mao had seen enough. The Americans had sided with Chiang Kai-shek, his foe in the Chinese civil war. He figured MacArthur wasn't about to stop at the Yalu. Since July, Mao and Zhou Enlai, his foreign minister, had been "gearing up for a full-scale war with the United States," certain that



Jim holds the laminated four-leaf clover he carries in his wallet. *John Hughes photo*



General MacArthur, with binoculars, observes the amphibious landings at Inchon. *National Archives photo*

the Americans wouldn't resort to nuclear weapons.*

At Unsan near the Chinese border, the People's Volunteer Army overwhelmed a South Korean infantry division moving toward a dam. Then, by accident, came the first encounter between Chinese and American troops. Swarming into battle on the night of November 1, 1950, the Chinese proceeded to crush the cavalry regiment on the U.S. 8th Army's right flank.

After five days, the Chinese suddenly disengaged. Though they were low on food

and ammunition, it was also a ploy. MacArthur took it as a sign Mao had no appetite for escalation. The five-star general estimated Chinese troop strength inside North Korea at "no more than 30,000." His intelligence reports were spotty at best. In truth, there were 10 times that many, "waiting patiently for the U.N. forces to come a little deeper into their trap."

In *Douglas MacArthur, American Warrior*, an even-handed 2016 biography of MacArthur, Arthur Herman notes:

It is important, however, to remember that MacArthur had good reason to believe that the tools of victory were still in his grasp. [H]e enjoyed overwhelming air superiority. He also had complete control of the seas on either side of the Korean peninsula, with ample port facilities for resupply. Even more, he had a battle-tested army on the march against a devastated North Korean enemy and a primitively equipped Chinese foe in worrisome but still (he believed) manageable numbers.

In his mind the only things that stood in the way of final triumph

* MacArthur was itching to drop atomic bombs along the Yalu River corridor. Earlier, with the support of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, President Truman had publicly affirmed he wasn't ruling out the use of nuclear weapons in Korea. He authorized the Strategic Air Command to transport nine nuclear bombs to Okinawa as a contingency. Truman's successor, retired five-star general Dwight D. Eisenhower, viewed nuclear weapons as a last resort. "If we have a nuclear exchange," Ike warned his advisers later in the Cold War, "we're not going to be talking about re-establishing the dollar. We're going to be talking about grubbing for worms."

were the doubters in Washington and the naysayers at the United Nations...

OBLIVIOUS TO EVENTS way above their pay grade, Evans and Jerry Antich, Jim's pal from Aberdeen, were now members of a new Baker Company. They were replacements for some hapless Marines who had been bayoneted in their sleeping bags. If ever there was a cautionary tale, that was it, Evans says.

"I don't think you ever get enough training to make you feel fully combat ready," Evans says. "There were a few guys all filled with bravado—'I'm going to go over there and get me some gooks!'—and all that kind of tough talk. But when they issue you live ammo and you're in a truck headed to the front with darkness falling, you realize what it means to be a Marine in combat. I was now 100 percent alert, looking around the hills for any sign of the enemy. That was the start of the escalation of that feeling that staying alert and composed under fire was a matter of life or death. You'd better learn that in a hurry."

Evans was assigned as an ammo bearer in Baker Company's machine gun platoon, lugging two 250-round cans that weighed 25 or 30 pounds. "Plus you've got your pack and your M1 rifle. The joke was that ammo bearers started to look like an orangutan, with their arms dragging on the ground."

PUSHING AHEAD with his pincer strategy, General MacArthur was intent on the convergence of the 8th Army and the X Corps, which included the 1st Marine Division. In the rugged hills overlooking the Chosin Reservoir, the winding dirt roads were little more than ox-cart trails. If you strayed to the edge it was straight down. "Even Genghis Khan wouldn't tackle it," especially in the dead of winter, Major General O.P. Smith, a Marine for all seasons, would recall.

On the morning of November 27, an estimated 180,000 Chinese troops descended on the wounded 8th Army, which was outnumbered practically 10-to-one. That night, some 15,000 soldiers of the X Corps found themselves encircled by an enemy force of 120,000. The pincers were now Mao's. Edward "Ned" Almond, the fearless yet habitually over-confident X Corps commander, refused to believe his troops were outmanned. "We're still attacking and we're going all the way to the Yalu," Almond famously declared. "Don't let a bunch of goddamn Chinese laundrymen stop you!"

The Chinese became "a human battering ram of one massed infantry regiment following another on a narrow front, heedless of casualties as the Americans poured on everything they had: rifle fire, machine-gun fire, artillery firing nearly at point-blank range," Arthur Herman wrote. "Then slowly, inevitably, the Americans would give ground, gathering up their casualties, and fall back to the next line of hills as the Chinese would regroup and begin the attack again."

Breaking out from the Chosin Reservoir would cost the Marines 200 men per



Marines make their way down a narrow road along the Chosin Reservoir. *National Archives photo*

mile. When a war correspondent called it a retreat, General Smith shot back, “Retreat, hell! We’re just advancing to the rear.” Along the way, the 1st Division inflicted far heavier casualties on the enemy. Marine Corps historians call it the Corps’ finest hour.

JIM EVANS’ outfit had been guarding the supply routes south of the reservoir. “At 0200 on December 8 it was ‘Move out!’ So we grabbed our packs and ammo and away we went, up into the mountains to protect the guys breaking out from the reservoir. It was snowing like hell,” he remembers, “with drifts as high as three feet. And there I was with my pack filled with nonessentials. I had a lot of extra food and three pair of dungarees—three of everything. I think we went about five miles before I dumped all those nice new clothes. I lightened the pack up to where I could survive. Our job was to open up the road so the 5th and 7th Marine regiments could come back through us. And we were to follow them out. That was the plan.”

Burrowed into the hills along the escape route, the Chinese had also blown the bridge spanning a wide ravine at Funchilin Pass. Do-or-die plans were under way to air-drop girders for a temporary span. The 1st Regiment needed to seize the high ground on Hill 1081 and provide cover. As Baker Company advanced, the wind-blown snow scalded their faces. Jim’s throat was dry, hands and feet numb. His heart began thumping like a bass drum when

they rounded a bend and saw hundreds of tiny footprints in the snow. Just then, a pocket of Chinese opened fire from a camouflaged bunker. Baker Company responded with such ferocity that the enemy fled, leaving behind a kettle of rice cooking on a tiny stove.

“That people are trying to kill you comes as kind of a shock the first time you hear the rounds whizzing past,” Evans remembers. “There’s a double report from a single shot—the first as the bullet breaks the sound barrier.” And when a bullet strikes flesh that’s the worst sound of all. “It’s like you took your hand and slapped a side of beef.”

Baker Company was lucky this day. Its casualties were light as it cleared the Chinese off the flanks of the hill. At sundown, however, the enemy still occupied the top. That it had stopped snowing at first seemed a blessing. Then, as the sky cleared and a million stars twinkled like icy diamonds, the temperature plummeted to 25 below zero and the wind howled down the ravines.

Several members of Baker Company awoke with frostbitten feet. Evans remembers what a relief it was to discover his precautions had paid off. “On the march into the hills, I wore my boondockers, our standard-issue boots. The leather got wet, but as long as I kept moving my feet felt fine.” Evans had kept his rubber-soled, winter-issue “shoepacs” in reserve. “If you marched in your shoepacs, which had felt insoles, your feet would sweat, especially when you were going uphill. And if you stopped moving, the insoles froze and you’d be walking on ice. But if you could get to where you were going and then put on dry socks and the shoepacs, hell, your feet were toasty!” Relatively speaking, at least. Evans had a spare pair of socks tied over his belt under his parka. Body heat kept them dry. He changed to his shoepacs before getting what sleep he could. The nights ahead would get even colder. And no amount of sock-changing and foot stomping could stave off the never-ending numbness.

Whenever they took prisoners, Evans marveled that the Chinese were “a lot worse off” in quilted uniforms that looked puffy but provided little insulation from the brutal cold. “We were freezing too, but at least we had our mittens and parkas with woolen hoods under our helmets. I never saw any of the Chinese with gloves or overcoats, and their shoes were just rubber-soled sneakers. They were



Marines take a break in the bone-chilling cold.
National Archives photo

short on food, too. If they got inside your perimeter, they seemed more interested in looting than shooting. A lot of them just froze to death. Most of the Chinese soldiers we captured were experienced troops from World War II and the Chinese revolution. One guy had been in the states and spoke some English. I asked, 'Why do you guys fight?' He looked at me, shrugged and said, 'It's just a job. Just like you.' No Marine has ever said it's just a job.

A central article of the Corps' "Semper Paratus" faith is that you never leave a brother behind. Evans remembers horrific mounds of frozen bodies and truckloads of wounded men, their stretchers stacked three high. Plasma froze; doctors and corpsmen thawed morphine syrettes by holding them in their mouths. The sick bay tents were so jammed that "the less critical were heaped outside and covered with canvas and straw." In the mountains above the reservoir, Marines were forced to bury some of their dead in bulldozed mass graves. "There were so many they had no choice," Evans says.

Evans found a North Korean propaganda flier in a cave and brought it back as a souvenir. It depicts five British POWs from the UN forces enjoying a hearty meal. "First class treatment" would be accorded anyone who surrendered, the General Political Bureau of the Korean People's Army declared, including "food, tobacco and medical treatment." The alternative was shown as a field of graves. "Come and join us, fellow soldiers, in this fight for peace. Live and let live instead of plugging away in this stupid, unjust American-sponsored war, especially the Reservists, the majority of whom, like us here have families." Evans and his buddies gleefully noted that one of the POWs in the photo was sending a clear signal with his middle finger that it was all bogus.

EVANS PASSED the real-world combat-ready test clearing the slopes of Hill 1081. "That damn hill overlooking the pass was steep. I'm grabbing hold of everything I can grasp. I felt a tug on my sleeve and thought I'd snagged it on some brush. It was a bullet hole. The guy who was shootin' at us was crouched behind a boulder, 400 or 500 yards away. So I crept down on the other side of him. There he was, just sitting there with a bolt-action rifle, picking guys off. The other ammo bearer braced his M1 on my shoulder and whispered,



The North Korean propaganda flier Evans found in a cave. Evans collection

‘OK, don’t breathe.’ With a ‘whoof’ we took him out.”

Evans was still scrambling up and down the hill, delivering ammunition to the machine-gunners, when a lieutenant barked, “Evans, take the gun!”

“I never did find out what happened to all the ammo bearers who were in front of me,” Evans says, “but now all of a sudden I’m a machine gunner.” And he had to get the hang of it in a hurry. “I got so I could crank out two or three rounds at a time. If you fired off too many you attracted a lot of attention. You used the tracer bullets to dial in your aim.”

The GIs and Marines formed a column “and hacked their bitter, bloody way through waves” of Chinese communist soldiers, “moving ever eastward over a corkscrew trail of icy dirt in subzero cold,” historian William Manchester wrote.

Supported by artillery and air power—“We cheered every time a Corsair or F-86 streaked over our heads,” Evans remembers—the Marines secured Hill 1081 on the afternoon of December 9, 1950. The replacement bridge was soon erected. Exhausted soldiers and a stream of hapless North Korean refugees began pouring across the span, which at “that moment in history was without a doubt the most vital bridge in the world,” William B. Hopkins, a Marine Corps company commander at the reservoir, recalled.

During the next two weeks, the Port of Hungnam, some 78 miles below the reservoir, was the site of one of the largest evacuations in military history. Newspapers dubbed it the “Miracle of Christmas.” What was left of the gallant 1st Marine Division, fittingly, was

the first to leave. In all, 100,000 battered U.N. troops, 91,000 refugees, 17,500 vehicles and 350,000 tons of cargo were sealifted south to safety on 193 ships. When the last vessels departed on Christmas Eve, demolition specialists destroyed the docks and cranes.

It was a spectacular way to leave North Korea, Evans remembers. “The whole waterfront just exploded.” They had lived to fight another day. Though the Marines lost 836 brothers at the Chosin Reservoir and the U.S. Army 2,000, the communists had paid dearly to once again control North Korea. Their casualties at the reservoir included an estimated 35,000 dead.



The 1st Division’s Christmas Dinner menu at Pusan in 1950. Evans collection

JIM EVANS SPENT Christmas 1950 bivouacked west of Pusan in a tent city dubbed “The Bean Patch.” There, the 1st Marine Division was treated to hot chow and show-

ers for the first time in months. “When I took off my longjohns, there was a little doughnut of hair and clothing fuzz around each ankle.” Scraggly Marines with bony butts luxuriated under streams of hot water. “It was magnificent!” Evans remembers. As they emerged from the showers, each was issued new clothing—“everything from skivvies and socks to dungarees and field jackets.” The filthy, ragged old uniforms were consigned to a huge bonfire.

Evans still has the hand-lettered menu from the 1st Marine Division’s festive Christmas Dinner: “Roast Young Tom Turkey, giblet dressing and cranberry sauce; fruit cake, hard candies, mixed nuts, cigarettes and cigars.”

Temporarily reunited, Evans and several other Grays Harbor guys swapped war stories and decorated a scrawny Christmas tree. They sent a photo to their hometown papers. *The Aberdeen Daily World* wouldn’t print it because they had used beer cans as ornaments. Given what they’d been through, that priggishness was a hoot. They laughed it off and got ready to head back north.



Evans with one of the young Korean “mascots” the Marines adopted. *Evans collection*

U.N. FORCES recaptured Seoul on March 15, 1951. They were advancing into North Korea when the communists launched a huge offensive with a joint force of nearly 700,000 Chinese and North Korean soldiers. The U.S. Navy launched a blockade of the port of Wonsan on North Korea’s southeast coast. The siege would last 861 days. Lieutenant Commander Jimmy Stewart, a Naval Reservist from Montesano, was in the thick of it as commander of a rocket-launching landing ship. Stewart, who had worked his way through Grays Harbor Junior College and won a Silver Star during World War II, was a hero to the Naval Reservists and Marines on the Harbor. As Jim Evans’ outfit prepared to move out once again, Stewart’s ship was engaged in a running duel with North Korean shore batteries.

Spring found Evans and the 1st Marine Division in vicious combat in the rugged Taebaek Mountains near a “punchbowl” created by the crater of an ancient volcano. The valley below only looked calm. It was a thicket of enemy artillery and snipers.

A Korean proverb goes: “Over the mountains, mountains.” As far as the eye could see, there were steep, dun-colored hills, “speckled here and there with boulders, scrub oaks and stunted firs.”

For Jim Evans the worst day of the war came not long after he was promoted to corporal. A sniper picked off the guy at his side on the run-up to the Punchbowl. "He died while I was holding onto him. When you see the light go out of someone's eyes, you know they're gone." Tears well up; his voice is choked with emotion. The moment is still so vivid after 66 years. It will never go away. "Seconds earlier, he's covering your back. You're covering his. You wonder, How come him instead of me? That sticks with you. And when you try to analyze things, you feel somewhat guilty for surviving. ... When you first go in, you're full of that old gung-ho: I'm gonna get 'em and cover myself in glory. To that I say, Bullshit! I'm proud to be a Marine, and I salute bravery, but there's no glory in death."

Evans says he hasn't met many Marines who love to brag about what they did in the war—any war. Asked about the Purple Heart he received on his second foray into North Korea, he shrugs: "I was hunkered down in my hole when an artillery shellburst sent a couple of ounces of metal into my left shoulder. It was just a minor wound. They patched it up on the spot and I was right back in action." Maybe there was something to that four-leaf clover he carried. Evans counted his blessings, too. Exhausted, he was crossing an open field with a heavy pack when bullets began kicking up dirt at his heels. "Oh boy," he thought, "*this* is close." Adrenalin kicked in. When he made it to safety, he said out loud, "Thank you very much, Lord."

If you want to talk heroism, he'll tell you about the corpsmen who braved withering enemy fire to aid the wounded. And about the lieutenant who was a perfect target as he exhorted his men to keep moving. "A bullet nicked the artery on his throat. There was a corpsman right there. He reached up and snapped a clamp on the artery, and the lieutenant stood there with it dangling, directing traffic. And I thought, 'What a gutsy guy.'"

TRUMAN FIRED General MacArthur for publicly grousing once too often that his hands were being tied by his commander-in-chief and the Pentagon. The war settled into a stalemate. Evans shipped out of Pusan at the end of 1951. At Camp Barstow, California, he bought a beat-up 1936 Plymouth. He got the guys in the motor pool to help him overhaul the engine, slapped on some recapped tires and on February 19, 1952, set out for Aberdeen and the rest of his life. He made it home—1,100 miles—on \$9.80 worth of gas.

Jim got his old job back at General Tire. People were glad to see him, just no confetti. On his lunch break one day, he was sitting at the counter in Addie's café when a military plane headed for the Hoquiam airport buzzed by at low altitude. "The next thing I knew I was looking up from the floor and everybody's looking down at me. I thought I was still in Korea."

The following summer, the Korean War ended in an armistice. Now they call it "The Forgotten War." Jim Evans hasn't forgotten. He's one of The Chosin Few.

John C. Hughes