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Book Review

Robert Smith, PhD

Korea. Few Americans know anything about the Korean War. Very few could name a book or a movie based on that war. There was *The Bridges at Toko-Ri*, a dull movie. Clint Eastwood loosely centered *Heartbreak Ridge*—named after another movie in its own right—on the emotional nexus that leads to redemption at Grenada. Korea is a war that people do not even think about, much less remember. Ever hear about the Task Force Smith debacle in the summer of 1950, when American soldiers tried to halt North Korean T-34 tanks with bazookas that could not pierce the tanks' armor? At most, some may vaguely know of Frozen Chosin. When Jeff Shaara offered up his newest work of fiction on the deadly campaign of June 1950 in Korea, this reviewer eagerly accepted, curious to see how he would “attack” this conflict that has been relegated to the shadows of the collective American memory.

Surprisingly, Shaara started the book with the post invasion period of Inchon. It seemed that a lot of the drama was already missing. Here was the perfect story of the near disaster to American and Republic of Korea (ROK) arms, the Pusan Perimeter Line, and the breakout to the north spurred by OPERATION CHROMITE, the invasion at Inchon. It seemed that this would be a good read, but due to his timeline, missed the glory days. However, on his personal web page, Jeff gave us a sense of his vision for this work,

This is a very different story than I have told before. The struggle by American and United Nations troops against an enormous Chinese juggernaut is a part of our history that very few Americans (and our allies) are aware, and even if you've heard of The Chosin Reservoir, you may not realize just how that story came to be—nor how and why it concluded the way it did.¹

The book starts slow, but it is historically accurate, as the Marines after landing at Inchon met little resistance but American and ROK political considerations led to some poor operational and strategic decisions, such as the retaking of Seoul block

by block. Army folks give their brothers in arms, the dog faces from the Marines, grief, and they are just as the bad cliché goes, a brother from another mother. But what the story line delves into early on, and does so well, is that many of these Marines are recalled World War II veterans. Because of the Marine Corps smaller size, many of these men know each other or have common ties. They were the “strategic reserve” in a sense, as after World War II, the nation took to peace with a vengeance. The Truman Administration did little to keep the military in any posture to respond. All of this swirls around the book in an undercurrent. The story is about life in a frozen hell in the winter of 1950 in Korea. What our soldiers faced there was almost as bad as anything that George Washington’s army faced in the darkest hours of 1776 during its perilous retreat, staying just ahead of impending disaster at the hands of General Charles Lord Cornwallis. Most Americans have never really been cold. Perhaps those who did duty on the German border during the Cold War have some understanding, but Chosin was its own special brand of historic cold.

As in a Greek play, during the drama at Chosin, the hulking Olympian figure of General Douglas MacArthur was warm and safe back in Tokyo. Ned Almon, one of his acolytes, fought his war; a man whom the Marines would soon learn to their misfortune was out of his league. Almon is proof that when the system fails, it does so in a massive way. Moreover, he seems to fit the adage of being under the tutelage of the WPPA, the West Point Protective Association, for it is hard to imagine anyone with so little skill or of this background getting a major combatant command. Although Shaara does not spend a lot of time with him, the portrait is both unflattering and illustrative of a man floundering in command, consigning others to an unjustified doom. One comment alone speaks volumes to his unfitness for command, telling his subordinate commanders they should not let a bunch of Chinese laundrymen stop them!

Contrast him with General Oliver Smith, the man remembered for the quote “Retreat hell! We’re attacking in a different direction,”² which was of course a bit more graphic. Smith is the epitome of what an officer and leader should be, carefully managing resources and his subordinates as well as one who actually goes out to see the ground. Without Smith at that moment in time, it is possible the entire Tenth Corps would have been lost in an epic disaster. Most Americans will have never heard of Smith, and that is simply shameful. Shaara, as always, gives equal coverage to the other side of the fence. Here, he does so in the guise of General Sung Shi-Lun of the Red Chinese Army. The portrait of Shi-Lun is fascinating, for looking at a conflict from the other side of the hill always adds to the story and here, readers get a better sense of the Korean conflict. As always,

Shaara speaks to the travails and heroism of the American archetype hero, in this case the Marines of the First Marine Division, told primarily through the lens of Private First Class Pete Riley and his platoon. He includes stories of men like Private First Class Hector Cafferata who, with frozen feet, single-handedly holds off a Chinese Battalion—sans boots, shoes or coat: “For the rest of the night I was batting hand grenades away with my entrenching tool while firing my rifle at them. I must have whacked a dozen grenades that night with my tool. And you know what? I was the world’s worst baseball player.”³



Figure 1. *The Eternal Band of Brothers, Korea*, by Charles H. Waterhouse. Used with permission.

There are moments and instances that will stand out to the reader—not just at that moment that they are read—but will come back later, such as the importance of Tootsie Rolls. In the harsh environment of Korea, Tootsie Rolls became a lifeline to many in terms of sustenance. Or imagine soldiers having their hot Thanksgiving dinner freeze solid before they had a chance to chow it down. On the other side, Shaara writes of the Red Chinese Commander going into a cave, where many of his soldiers, while awaiting the order to attack again, simply froze to death overnight as they were not allowed fires during the daytime that would reveal their position to a pounding by American airpower. Or, as Shaara tells the reader, “Not all the Chinese were spoiling for a fight. In many encampments, the Americans crept forward to find huddled groups of frozen enemy soldiers, men who had died because their orders kept them on the hills, waiting to confront an enemy they did not live to

see” (p. 470).

Certain elements offer surprises, such as the footwear worn by the Communist Chinese. Rather than being outfitted in either captured Nationalist Chinese footwear—American boots since the United States had outfitted the defeated Nationalists in the Chinese Civil War—or even, perhaps, Japanese footwear left over from World War II, they wore shoes of soft canvas with rubber soles that did little to ward off the thirty-below temperatures. Of course, Chinese medical care was almost medieval. Those wounded or with any ambulatory ability (as many Chinese soldiers had lost their feel to frost bite) could walk north for perhaps a chance for survival. Shaara provided another vignette: the American Air Force air-dropped bridge spans weighing two tons and combat engineers rebuilt bridges under conditions of unimaginable cold and enemy fire, speaking to the intrepid spirit for survival. As the last Marines came out of the pocket, dirty, wounded, ragged and unshaven, they—including the walking wounded who wanted to participate—formed up into a column and marched into safety singing the Marine Corps Hymn, “From the halls of Montezuma, to the shores of Tripoli.”

In an era when Americans cannot remember the fight at Fallujah a decade ago, this book is a must to recall and honor those who served in Korea. For this reviewer, the book served as a bit of a personal catharsis. Korea was not my war. It was nothing like my war in Iraq and Afghanistan, yet somehow the struggles, fear, and the sheer struggle to survive resonated deeply with me. After reading several smaller works on Korea, *The Frozen Hours* nicely reflects the works of the “real” historians with just the right feel. The bonus for the reader is that Shaara put a human face on the Red Chinese. Its portrayal of the victory and courage of the human spirit, and the American fighting man brought to life in these pages makes it easy to highly recommend *The Frozen Hours* for its overall history. It is a great summer read.

1. Jeff Shaara, “A Personal Note from Jeff,” Jeff Shaara: Official Web Site, June 13, 2017, accessed June 17, 2017, <http://jeffshaara.com/index.php>.

2. Major General Oliver Smith, *The Marine Officer’s Guide*, quoted in *Retreat, hell! We’re attacking in a different direction*, accessed June 17, 2017, http://www.vincehuston.org/quotes/marines_chosin.html.

3. Matt Schudel, “Hector Cafferata, Medal of Honor recipient in Korean War, dies at 86,” *Washington Post*, April 14, 2016, accessed June 17, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/hector-cafferata-medal-of-honor-recipient-in-korean-war-dies-at-86/2016/04/14/9c7711a6-0259-11e6-b823-707c79ce3504_story.html?utm_term=.7bde69ba97e7.