Voices of the Past

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The Battle of Chip'yong-ni

(Korea, 1951) On the night of February 11, 1951, 135,000 soldiers of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) and North Korean People's Army launched a major offensive on the US and South Korean lines. Their targets included the key road junction in the town of Chip'yong-ni.

The Chinese had driven the US Army back for hundreds of miles since entering the war. Morale was low, and the Soldiers had begun to think of the Chinese as unstoppable. This new attack punched several holes in the UN lines, and the situation was grim. The American commander, General Matthew Ridgway, decided to make a stand at Chip'yong-ni to give the rest of the Army time to recover.

Chip'yong-ni was a small crossroads town half a mile long and several blocks wide, situated on a single-track railroad. Besides the railway station there were several other brick or frame buildings in the center of the town, but most of the buildings were constructed of the usual mud, sticks, and straw. At least half of the buildings were already reduced to rubble as the result of previous fighting.

The town was held by the 23rd Infantry Regiment of the 2nd Infantry Division, who had been there for ten days. They had used that time well. The infantry companies dug in and sent daily patrols into the surrounding countryside. The 23rd Infantry commander, Colonel Paul L. Freeman, made sure his artillery registered on all probable avenues of enemy approach, and that all units established good communications. The unit had the time and the foresight to coordinate the infantry, artillery, and air support into an effective combat team. Air support was critical: air strikes forced the Chinese to attack at night, and once the 23rd was surrounded they

US Army illustration depicting the fourth day of battle. Courtesy of the US Army Center of Military History. http://www.history.army.mil/images/artphoto/pripos/usaia/Chipyong-ni.jpg

This view of the battlefield shows the steep hills and open rice paddies typical of Korea. Photo Courtesy of US Forces, Korea

"You'll die down here anyway. You might as well go up on the hill and die there."
-Lieutenant Thomas Heath, G Company

Gen. Matthew Ridgway commanded all UN Forces in Korea. Photo Courtesy of USAHEC

could only be resupplied by air.

As Ridgway hoped, the 5,000 defenders of Chip'yong-ni quickly became the focus of Chinese attention. Throughout the night of February 13 three Chinese divisions, supported by artillery, probed the two-mile perimeter looking for weak points.

When the shooting started, PFC Herbert G. Ziebell woke his foxhole buddy PFC Roy F. Benoit and said: "There's some firing going on. Get up and get ready." Ziebell did not fire immediately because he could see nothing to shoot, and he was afraid the flash of his rifle would draw enemy fire. Along the line other men heard the firing and sat in the darkness waiting for the attack. The Americans could hear the Chinese out in the darkness, blowing horns and whistles to coordinate their attacks. At times the Chinese were able to advance right up to the barbed wire protecting individual American positions. The Americans fought off the attackers with extensive artillery support and automatic weapons fire from an antiaircraft artillery battalion.

Daylight brought a respite from the attacks, and the American's used the time to rebuild their defenses and prepare for another attack. Mop up from the battle continued during the day too. One American commander, seeing a house some 800 yards from the perimeter, called in white phosphorous artillery fire to destroy it so that the Chinese could not use it if they attacked again. After the third round hit the house began burning, and about fifteen enemy soldiers ran out of it across open ground. Machine-gunners killed eight of them, the others escaped. During the day the 23rd also received 24 air drops of ammunition, and some of the Soldiers got hot meals.

The assaults continued on the night of

February 14. Again the fighting was intense. The Chinese directed their attention to the section of perimeter guarded by the men of G Company led by Lieutenant Thomas Heath. The enemy attack continued without let-up, a persistent, gnawing assault that progressed from one foxhole to the next. The Chinese eventually dislodged G Company and drove Lieutenant Heath from his hilltop. The hours that followed were filled with fighting as intense and as frantic as any in which the infantrymen had ever participated.

The American's were in trouble: part of their perimeter had fallen to the enemy. Due to the fog of war, the American's were slow to realize that their foxholes had been captured, giving the Chinese time to prepare for counterattack. If Lieutenant Heath and his men could not recapture their position the whole regiment could be lost.

Tracers from the enemy machine gun stretched along the hilltop like red beads. Flares popped overhead. The area was alternately dimly lighted, and dark as if someone were turning street lights on and off. When some Soldiers tried to find cover, Lieutenant Heath ran back and forth yelling and pulling at the men to persuade them to stand up and move. "You'll die down here anyway," he yelled, "You might as well go up on the hill and die there." Heath led several counterattacks throughout the night. They all failed.

All of the men experienced a feeling of relief when daylight came on 15 February, because the enemy soldiers usually withdrew then. This time, however, the Chinese did not withdraw. They conducted a determined defense against an attack by the 1st Ranger Company and Company B, 23rd Infantry, supported by air strikes, artillery, and tanks. By evening relief elements from the 5th

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Cavalry began to arrive, and the Chinese finally withdrew.

Ridgway's plan worked. While the 23rd Infantry held on at Chip'yong-ni, he reinforced the battered UN lines. Rather than take advantage of the weakened front to the east, the Chinese had chosen to concentrate on eliminating the US forces at Chip'yong-ni first. But they had chosen poorly, and the respite allowed UN forces time to recover. By February 18th the Communist offensive was spent, and enemy forces began withdrawing to the north rather than attempting to hold what they had taken. The Battle of Chip'yong-ni was a major factor in the defeat of the Chinese counteroffensive in February 1951 and a major boost to UN morale. US casualties at Chip'yong-ni totaled 404, including 52 Soldiers killed. Chinese losses were far greater. Captured documents later revealed that the enemy suffered at least 5,000 casualties.

Left to right: Major General Edward Almond, X Corps Commander, Colonel Paul Freeman, 23 RCT Commander, 23 RCT S-3

Photo Courtesy of US Forces, Korea

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View of Chip'yong-ni showing the 23rd Infantry positions along the Main Line of Resistance (MLR). Photo Courtesy of US Forces, Korea

Sources

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