

Inchon 1950

Amphibious Assault in Two Acts

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

"The best I can say is that Inchon is not impossible."

—RADM James H. Doyle, USN

The Korean War began 25 June 1950, a Sunday morning, when North Korea's communist dictator Kim Il-Sung sent his Soviet-equipped army crashing across the border into South Korea. Greatly outnumbered and poorly equipped, with no tanks or air support and little artillery, the four understrength Republic of Korea (ROK) divisions, deployed along the line separating the two Koreas, were ground under and swept aside.

Rushed hurriedly from occupation duty in Japan, U.S. Army units, equally under-strength, fared no better. By late August, friendly forces had been compressed into a small perimeter around the vital port city of Pusan on the southernmost tip of the Korean Peninsula. Daily, the North Koreans were throwing everything they had at the small brigade of Marines blocking the most direct approach to the city. Were Pusan to fall, all of Korea would become a communist state, a dagger aimed directly at Japan and a mortal threat to American interests in northern Asia.

With all attention focused on the fight for Pusan and the outcome of the war hanging in the balance, one American was thinking of something else.

General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, the supreme commander in the theater, saw more of an opportunity than a threat. He would launch an attack of his own. The North Korean forces hammering at the vital ring around Pusan were at the end of a long supply line, confined to the meager Korean road network. That supply line would be severed by an amphibious landing force sent ashore at the port of Inchon on Korea's west coast. At the same time, friendly forces would break out of their defensive positions around Pusan and strike northward. Caught between both forces, the North Korean invaders would be smashed.

The plan hinged on three considerations: two were highly promising, while the third held disturbing elements. The



Above: First Lt Baldomero Lopez, platoon leader, Co A, 1st Bn, 5th Marines, scales the seawall at Inchon's Red Beach on 15 Sept. 1950. Shortly after this photograph was taken, Lopez sacrificed his life for his men, earning the Medal of Honor.

Opposite: Marine tank crewmen prepare tank ammunition on board ship en route to the Inchon assault. (Photo by Sgt Frank C. Kerr)

plan was operationally brilliant and audacious, a masterstroke that would destroy the North Korean invasion force. Thanks to a highly secret intelligence operation, MacArthur's concept for a landing at Inchon would find the landing force opposed by only a feeble handful of North Korean units once ashore.

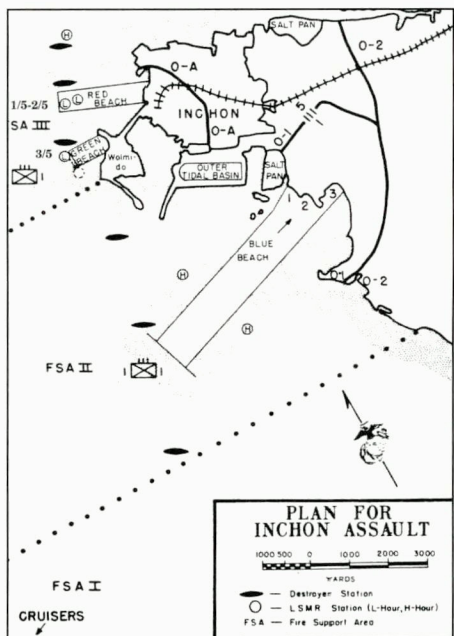
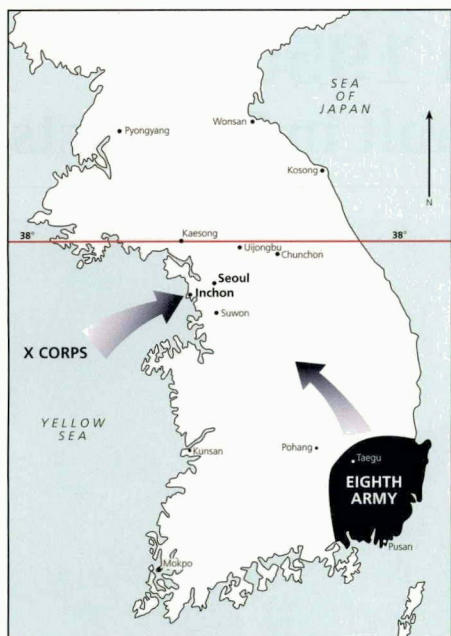
Hydrographically, though, Inchon was an amphibious task force commander's nightmare that could threaten the entire operation. The sole approach to the objective area itself was by way of a narrow, winding channel, a natural bottleneck. A single ship sunk in that channel would bring the entire operation to a crashing halt. Any elements of the task force below that obstacle would have no choice other than to withdraw. Ships above the blockage would be trapped, little more than large floating targets.

An equally daunting obstacle was Inchon's infamous tidal range. The difference between high tide and low tide could be as much as 35 feet. An inner harbor that could support LSTs (landing ships, tank)

at high tide could shrink to a narrow dredged channel a scant 13 feet deep. What was deep water at high tide became a swampy mud flat that couldn't float a rowboat at low tide. Vehicles attempting to cross that mud flat would sink out of sight.

Complicating the situation even more was the small island of Wolmi-do, connected to the mainland by a causeway. Enemy forces on Wolmi-do could pour flanking fire into the landing waves long before they reached the beach, which wasn't really a beach at all. Rather than land on a sandy beach, the assault waves would touch down directly into a populated city. One landing beach, designated Red Beach, actually terminated abruptly at a high seawall. Marines would have to debark from their landing craft on scaling ladders to find themselves in the middle of downtown Inchon.

Rear Admiral James H. Doyle, USN, who would command the amphibious task force, was an old hand at putting troops ashore. From Guadalcanal and Tulagi in



1942 until the Japanese surrender in 1945, Doyle had taken part in some of the toughest campaigns in the Pacific. The Navy's best amphibious commander, he knew Incheon would be the greatest challenge the Navy-Marine team had ever faced. The word "impossible" was not in RADM Doyle's vocabulary, but Incheon was going to be hairy.

Major General Oliver P. Smith, USMC, whose First Marine Division would constitute the landing force, was just as wary of Incheon as RADM Doyle was. One of MajGen Smith's regiments, Lieutenant Colonel Ray Murray's 5th Marines, still was engaged heavily at the Pusan Perimeter. They would have only a few days to break contact, become combat loaded, embark and transit to the objective area.

Colonel Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller's 1st Marines, which had existed only on paper two months earlier, still was arriving in the theater of operations. Filled largely by reservists recalled to active duty, the regiment wouldn't have the opportunity for so much as a command post exercise before being committed to combat.

Still too far away to take part in the operation at all was Col Homer Litzenberg's 7th Marines. Like Puller's 1st Marines, Litzenberg's regiment had been nothing more than a paper ghost when the war

began in June. Formed largely by stripping the 2dMarDiv in far-off Camp Lejeune, N.C., much of the regiment was still half a world away. The regiment's 3d Battalion had originally been 3d Bn, 6th Marines, afloat in the Mediterranean when the war began. Redesignated as 3d Bn, 7th Marines, the battalion was still hundreds of sea miles away.

The meaning of all this for MajGen Smith was huge. He would have to undertake a division-size operation with only two of his regiments available. The Army's 7th Infantry Division was on hand, but it was not organized, trained or equipped for amphibious operations. The 7th Infantry Div would do for a follow-on force, but the main thrust ashore would fall to the 1stMarDiv.

While the Incheon operation was overflowing with built-in hazards, RADM Doyle and MajGen Smith had an ace in the hole. Lieutenant Eugene F. Clark, USN, a 39-year-old "Mustang," was described by his contemporaries as having "the nerves of a burglar and the flair of a Barbary Coast pirate." Serving on GEN MacArthur's G-2 (Intelligence) staff in Tokyo, LT Clark, a fluent Japanese and Korean linguist who had performed covert intelligence operations on the Chinese mainland, unhesitatingly accepted a

dangerous mission under the very noses of the North Korean invaders occupying Incheon.

With two South Korean officers and a few courageous South Korean civilians, some as young as 14, LT Clark established an operating base on Yonghung-do Island, actually inside the entrance to Flying Fish Channel that led to the port of Incheon. From there he provided daily intelligence reports on hydrographic and geographic features of the area. Posing as fishermen, some of LT Clark's agents took depth soundings and current readings in the channel itself, while others took accurate measurements of the seawall that would serve as Red Beach. Daily sorties of "fishing boats" performed constant sweeps of the channel to detect the presence of mines.

Risking immediate execution if they were detected, Clark's agents infiltrated Wolmi-do Island and plotted every defensive position. Others made their way into Incheon itself to provide detailed intelligence of the identity and location of North Korean forces in and around the city. In fact, some of Clark's agents were apprehended and shot out of hand. Other South Korean patriots stepped forward to take their places. Before the first shots were fired at Incheon, the naval gunfire support ships had detailed target lists that

were accurate to within 10 yards, while the assault elements of the 1stMarDiv had equally accurate locations of every enemy unit ashore.

The intelligence provided by Clark's intrepid band confirmed what had been considered as almost inevitable: The Inchon operation would have to be conducted in two phases. Before the main landing could be undertaken, Wolmi-do would have to be cleared of enemy forces and held against any counterattack. Wolmi-do was too great a threat to do otherwise. If Wolmi-do were to be assaulted at morning high tide as it had to be, there was no other choice; the main landings could not go forward until the next high tide at dusk. It would be a long, lonely day for the Marines who took Wolmi-do.

Something else quickly became apparent. There would be few choices in the selection of D-day. Only one day, 15 Sept., offered anything like promising tidal conditions. Those conditions would not be good, merely the least bad of nothing but bad choices.

The business of making the best of bad choices began on 10 Sept. as Chance-Vought F4U Corsairs from Marine Fighter Squadron (VMF) 214 and VMF-323 began the process of incinerating Wolmi-do with napalm. The island was ablaze from end to end by noon. The aerial bombardment, which continued for the next two days, was joined on the 13th by RADM John M. Higgins' Gunfire Support Group.

For two more days the cruisers USS *Toledo* (CA-133) and USS *Rochester* (CA-124), HMS *Kenya* and HMS *Jamaica* and the six ships of the destroyer element plastered Wolmi-do with a downpour of more than 3,500 5-inch, 6-inch and 8-inch high-explosive shells.

More of the same was in store for the thoroughly punch-drunk defenders of Wolmi-do as the curtain rose on D-day. At 0520 on 15 Sept., as the assault waves of LtCol Robert "Bob" Taplett's 3/5 boarded the landing craft that would take them ashore, the Corsairs of VMF-214 and VMF-323 were back, pasting the already blackened island with more bombs, rockets and napalm. Firing point-blank, destroyers USS *Southerland* (DDR-743), USS *Gurke* (DD-783), USS *Henderson* (DD-785), USS *Mansfield* (DD-728), USS *DeHaven* (DD-727) and USS *Swenson* (DD-729) flailed the island with 1,700 5-inch high-explosive projectiles.

From farther downstream, *Rochester*, *Toledo*, *Kenya* and *Jamaica* added their voices to the thunderstorm enveloping Wolmi-do. If life for the Wolmi-do garrison wasn't interesting enough already, the three rocket-firing LSMRs (landing ships



Above: Prior to landing at Inchon, one of the keys to success there was securing Wolmi-do Island, which guarded the entrance to Inchon. That mission fell to "Dark Horse Six"—LtCol Robert D. Taplett and his 3/5 leathernecks. (USMC photo)

Below: This 3/5 leatherneck uses his flamethrower to burn out the enemy on Wolmi-do. (Photo by Sgt Frank C. Kerr)



medium, rocket) of Commander Clarence T. Doss' Fire Support Unit 4 blanketed the island with 3,000 5-inch rockets.

The battle for Wolmi-do was over almost before it began. The curtain of fire continued without letup until the ramps of the LCVPs (landing crafts, vehicle and personnel) carrying the assault companies of 3/5 touched down. Any North Korean opposition that was encountered was overcome quickly as First Lieutenant Bob "Dewey" Bohn's "George" Company and Captain Pat Wildman's "How" Co swept over the thoroughly dazed and demoralized defenders.

Smashing any enemy resistance in its path, George Co cut its way to seize the island's dominant terrain, a 350-foot height known as "Radio Hill." Detaching two squads to secure the north end of the island, Capt Wildman threw the bulk of Co H in a steamroller attack to take control of the far side of the island and the causeway connecting to the mainland. Combat engineers attached to the company wasted no time in emplacing an antitank minefield to halt any attempted counterattack from the city.

By 0650 Capt Bob McMullen's Item Co, in battalion reserve, was ashore, bringing with it a platoon of M26 tanks. The tankers greeted a badly misguided North Korean armored-car commander who picked that moment to venture his vehicle out onto the causeway. One 90 mm HEAT (high explosive, antitank) round from

Staff Sergeant Cecil Fullerton's tank turned the armored car into scrap metal.

From that point on, Wolmi-do was a mop-up operation. Those North Koreans who still had the stomach for a fight were overcome quickly by the machine-like efficiency of tank-infantry teams or sealed up in caves that became their tombs. The majority of Wolmi-do's defenders were shocked and dazed. Men stumbled into captivity with glazed eyes, blood dribbling from their ears and noses, not entirely sure of where they were or even who they were. The air and naval gunfire support had been that effective.

The message "Wolmi-do secured at 0800" was transmitted to RADM Doyle's flagship, USS *Mount McKinley* (AGC-7), as the last of the prisoners were herded away. The entire operation had taken less than three hours. Marine casualties were none killed, 17 wounded.

The surprise that GEN MacArthur sought by landing at Inchon had been complete, but next there would be a wait of 12 hours before the main landings could go in with the next high tide at 1730. Could the North Koreans react and reinforce the objective area before then?

Preventing that was the job of RADM Edward C. Ewen's Task Force 77. Throughout the day carrier-based Navy Corsairs and Douglas AD-1 Skyraiders interdicted everything that moved within a 25-mile radius of Inchon, laying down a curtain of bombs, rockets, napalm and gunfire. There

would be no reinforcement of Inchon. The few North Korean units that tried were shredded. They were too little and too late.

At 1430 the big guns of the cruisers joined in, punnelling targets in the city's eastern and northern outskirts. Their fires soon were joined by the destroyers, laying close-in fires on the landing beaches.

Red Beach, with its ominous seawall, would be the mission of LtCol George R. Newton's 1/5, with LtCol Hal Roise's 2/5 alongside. To their right, on Blue Beach, Chesty Puller's assault battalions, LtCol Allan Sutter's 2/1 and LtCol Tom Ridge's 3/1, would be landing on a narrow beach with restricted exits, a beach no commander would choose, if there were anything better.

There wasn't. The Marines of 2/1 and 3/1 would have to make do with the only beach available, fighting their way quickly inland to secure the main approach to the city and open the door for an advance upon Yongdong-po and Seoul.

At 1725, the assault waves for Red and Blue beaches were in the water.

One of the Marines heading for that menacing seawall at Red Beach was Sergeant Irvin R. "Dick" Stone, an assault section leader in Weapons/1/5. Six years before that very day, 15 Sept. 1944, he had been approaching another beach at Peleliu, a campaign where every infantry regiment of the 1stMarDiv suffered 50 percent casualties. Even as he hoped this day wouldn't be as bad as that day in 1944, his thoughts were drowned out by the roar of 2,000 5-inch rockets loosed at Red Beach by LSMR-403. Then the nose of Stone's LCPV nudged up against the seawall.

All along Red Beach the scaling ladders were in place, and Marines were scrambling up and over. First Lieutenant Baldomero Lopez, a platoon leader in A/1/5, died there. A former Navy enlisted man, who had served in the Pacific and had been a standout boxer at the U.S. Naval Academy, he was grievously wounded as he was about to throw a grenade. With his last remaining strength, he pulled himself to the armed missile and smothered it with his body, absorbing the full force of the explosion.

For his selfless actions atop the Red Beach seawall, Lopez posthumously was awarded America's highest recognition for military valor: the Medal of Honor.

There were too many other Marines cut in 1stLt Lopez's pattern for the North Koreans to stand before them. With 1/5 and 2/5 advancing side by side, the North Korean 226th Regiment was overwhelmed by the men who had become known as the "yellow legs." The tide was irresistible.

PFC Samuel J. Fulmar (left) and PFC Douglas C. Farley, with rifles and bayonets at the ready, ensure this North Korean bunker is clear on 16 Sept. 1950. D + 1.



SSgt Walter W. Frank

Getting tanks into the action early at Inchon, and letting the tank-infantry team lead the way, helped ensure rapid progress against the enemy strongpoints. (USMC photo)



It swept up and over the initial objective, Cemetery Hill, and swamped the dazed defenders of the day's final objective, Radio Hill. By 1815, less than an hour after the 5th Marines crossed the line of departure, all of the regiment's objectives had been seized.

To the right, on Blue Beach, the North Koreans had no more luck in opposing the assault of the 1st Marines. Like Murray's 5th Marines, the 1st Marines landed with two battalions abreast, 2/1 on the left and 3/1 to its right. The leading waves were preceded by a deluge of fire from cruisers *Kenya* and *Jamaica*, American destroyers *Gurke* and *Henderson*, and a terrifying barrage of rockets from LSMR-401 and LSMR-404.

The North Koreans who tried to fight were no match for what was thrown at them. It was fully dark by then, but neither the darkness nor the North Koreans stopped the 1st Marines onslaught. By 0200 on 16 Sept., Murray's 5th Marines

and Puller's 1st Marines had linked up. There was no further resistance. Inchon was firmly in Marine hands, and MacArthur's idea was a reality. RADM Doyle, who had refused to accept the impossibility of Inchon, was pouring follow-on units ashore, eventually more than 13,000 troops in all.

Faced with hydrographic difficulties greater than any ever encountered, except perhaps for the reef at Tarawa, with a division that existed mostly on paper three months earlier, the Navy-Marine team had carried out a flawless operation. Only a few short weeks after the landing at Inchon, the North Korean invaders, who had known nothing but success, had been routed completely, reduced to little more than bands of fugitives fleeing northward. Some of them made it. More didn't.

MajGen Oliver P. Smith, one of the giants of the Marine Corps, summed it up: "The reason Inchon looked simple was that professionals did it."

Author's note: For his invaluable actions at Inchon, LT Eugene F. Clark, USN, the "ace in the hole," was awarded the Silver Star. In that autumn of 1950 he would earn a second Silver Star for a covert mission far behind communist lines that took him into the Yalu River. In 1951, he would be awarded the Navy Cross for yet another covert mission that saw him infiltrate into the very heart of enemy-occupied Wonsan, deep in North Korea. CDR Eugene F. Clark, USN (Ret) died in 1998.

Editor's note: Al Bevilacqua, a former gunnery sergeant and a retired Marine major whose stories so often appear in Leatherneck, also has written the book, "The Way It Was: A Seabag Full of Marine Humor." His book is available from MCA bookstores. Order online at www.marineshop.net, or call toll-free (888) 237-7683.

