

# A Borinqueneer Christmas Carol

The Hŭngnam Evacuation, December 1950

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For Borinqueneers everywhere.



**Elements of the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment (“Borinqueneers”) withdraw from Hŭngnam. Christmas Eve 1950 (National Archives)**

*During the past seventeen months that I have commanded this regiment, I have frequently reiterated my complete and unbending confidence in the fighting ability of the men of the 65<sup>th</sup> ... That record speaks for itself ... With humble sincerity, I congratulate and thank all of you. To each of you, I extend my very best wishes for a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.*

COLONEL W. W. HARRIS  
In memorandum to regimental members  
On board the USS *General H. B. Freeman*  
December 24, 1950

## Introduction

It has been both euphemistically and derisively called an “attack in another direction” and *the* “Big Bug-Out,” and candidly described as a “miracle,” as “an exercise in improvisation,” and as “the first and only amphibious operation in reverse” in U.S. military history; but the unarguable truth is that the Hŭngnam evacuation stands alone as one of the greatest epic campaigns of the Korean War. Over the course of two weeks, the legendary and controversial X Corps would fight its way to the sea along a harrowing route through the mountains of eastern North Korea, destroying two Chinese armies along the way, before reaching the sanctuary of the Hŭngnam beachhead, where it would integrate the 105,000 U.S., U.N. and ROK military personnel, which, along with 17,500 vehicles, 350,000 tons of cargo, and 91,000 refugees, were to be evacuated in the largest sealift since World War II.

The time-honored maxim of the “first one in, last one out” has never been so aptly embodied as it was by one small outfit of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. The division’s vanguard regiment in Korea, it would also be the corps’ rearguard during the corps’ evacuation.

It went by the soubriquet “The Borinqueneers.”

## The “Home-by-Christmas” Campaign

Failure after failure had been the order of the day for the North Korean People’s Army (NKPA) following the X Corps’ successful landing at Inch’ŏn in September. Douglas MacArthur’s United Nations Command (UNC) had put the smashed remnants of the NKPA in a rout north; had captured the North Korean capital of P’yŏngyang by mid-October; and had been in hot pursuit of the communists ever since. During the Wake Island meeting with President Truman, the general had assured his commander in chief that the possibility of Chinese intervention in Korea would be minimal. The Chinese commies would not attack; the allies had won the war. The President could send a division to Europe from Korea as early as January 1951.

The “imminent” success, reasonably, inspired the Supreme Commander Allied Powers (SCAP) and Commander in Chief, United Nations Command (CINCUNC) to utter the outrageous promise to have “the boys back home by Christmas.”

Per MacArthur’s instructions, Lt. Gen. Walton H. “Johnnie” Walker, commanding general of the Eighth U.S. Army, Korea (EUSAK), and Maj. Gen. Edward M. “Ned” Almond, commanding general of the X Corps, rushed their respective “armies” in a northward race to the Yalu River. Whether they were to cross the river and carry the war into Manchuria remained to be said. Neither man foresaw – perhaps both men rather chose to overlook – the possibility that differences between the two forces, both geographical and personally speaking, could seriously cripple their collective effectiveness. Firstly, since its arrival in Korea, X Corps had been operating as an independent army rather than assuming its subordinate status

to EUSAK. Secondly, the commanders' dislike for one another exacerbated this awkward arrangement.<sup>1</sup> Parting from the premise that the communists were defeated and the boys would be home by Christmas, the armies continued their advances in a total of four parallel but dispersed columns, leaving the meridian part of Korea open to ... *anything*.

The race to the Yalu came to an abrupt halt on the night of November 25, when 200,000 Chinese Communist Forces (CCF)<sup>2</sup> troops attacked the EUSAK lines.

### Enter the Dragon: Douglas MacArthur Pays Dearly

Rumors of an increasing Chinese intervention in the war had spread like wild fire all over Korea – its flames lapping at the steps of MacArthur's General Headquarters in Tokyo, and its smoke starting to collect in Truman's office in Washington, D.C. MacArthur decided to hush the rumors, preferring to save face and live up to his assertion at Wake Island. Should *it* hit the fan, it had been his own G-2 who *first* dismissed the possibility of Chinese intervention.

Having landed in North Korea at the end of October, the 7<sup>th</sup> "Bayonet" Division's 17<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment became the first unit of X Corps to reach the Yalu unopposed.<sup>3</sup> South of the 17<sup>th</sup>, sister regimental combat team (RCT) 32<sup>nd</sup> had set up a forward command post east of the enormous Changjin (Chosin) Reservoir. A stone throw south of the 32<sup>nd</sup>, the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division sat astride the artificial reservoir while headquartered at Hagaru-ri. The 31<sup>st</sup> RCT and the Republic of Korea Army (ROKA) I Corps stretched in an arc anchoring the northeastern part of the peninsula.

During a hasty visit to the 32<sup>nd</sup> RCT the day after the CCF attack on EUSAK, Ned Almond accepted the rumors, yet emphasizing that there were not two divisions in the whole of North Korea. The Chinese they had been talking about were "nothing more than some remnants of Chinese divisions fleeing north." His X Corps was still attacking and was going all the way to the Yalu. He further spurred his commanders to continue and not to "let a bunch of Chinese laundrymen stop you."<sup>4</sup> The plan had been that once North

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<sup>1</sup> Almond was a "MacArthur man," devoted to the general to the extent of overlooking his flaws, whereas Walker, Patton's former protégé, was a more down-to-earth commander who knew his limits and was not afraid to express his reservations. Moreover, MacArthur had allowed Almond to retain his title of Chief of Staff while serving as commander of the newly activated corps in a blatant display of favoritism that seemed to have armed Almond with even fewer inhibitions around officers of senior rank.

<sup>2</sup> Also known as the Chinese People's Volunteer Army (CPV), the CCF was an ancillary of the People's Liberating Army (PLA).

<sup>3</sup> Activated specifically for the Inch'ŏn landing, X Corps was comprised of two U.S. divisions – one Army (7<sup>th</sup>), and one Marine (1<sup>st</sup>) – and one South Korean corps (I). The assignment of the 7<sup>th</sup> Division to the corps left Japan unprotected, for which the Japan assignment fell on the newly incorporated 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, which would arrive in mid-November. The 7<sup>th</sup> was in a critical state at this time as it had been stripped of at least 1,000 sergeants and corporals to fill other units in Korea, and about 8,000 green South Korean troops had been integrated into the division ranks.

<sup>4</sup> While Almond's aggressive leadership style spoke well of his personal courage, his unorthodox and often reckless actions set dangerous precedents with disastrous consequences. This would be demonstrated later in the X Corps withdrawal as well as during the "Wŏnju Shoot" in February 1951.

Korea had been cleaned up, the ROKA would take over and the UNC would pull out of Korea. His “incomprehensible” strategy now had X Corps fragmented across a huge front.

West of the unguarded EUSAK–X Corps boundary, Johnnie Walker was unable to repel the CCF onslaught. One dumbfounded Douglas MacArthur could only watch as Walker’s decimated troops pulled a “180” back to the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel. East of the boundary, rumors became reality overnight: There were not two Chinese divisions in North Korea, as Almond had said. *There were two armies!*

Before long, on MacArthur’s orders, Almond was to instruct the 7<sup>th</sup> Division forces on the Yalu to fall back on Hamhŭng, an industrial city northwest of Wŏnsan, where the general had established his Corps Headquarters. Once there, the rearguard division troops were to protect the corps’ northern and northeastern flank, establishing a strong position 20 miles north of Hamhŭng, to block roads leading south out of the area to be vacated. At the same time, the ROKA I Corps was to protect the right flank and secure the east coast road as the forces completed their movements south.

### The Tip of the Spear

The 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment had joined the war as a last-minute addition to the 3<sup>rd</sup> “Rock of the Marne” Division before departing Puerto Rico in August.<sup>5</sup> The division’s only regiment in Korea, it had been indiscriminately and temporarily attached to the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> U.S. divisions during EUSAK’s IX Corps pocket-clearing operations along the Naktong Bulge for the latter part of September and most of October. The glory it had been denied for missing out on the Inch’ŏn landing came calling when the shorthanded X Corps called for additional support in the invasion of North Korea.<sup>6</sup>

Never had the 65<sup>th</sup> Borinqueneers imagined that their disembarking on the beaches of Wŏnsan in the first week of November, hard on the heels of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division, would mark the beginning of a new kind of war with a new “enemy”: the controversial Ned Almond. Not only would they undeservedly win the prejudice and discrimination of their new corps commander, but would be at his mercy as well. No sooner had the regiment’s advance party landed than Almond fragmented it, putting it under the operational control of X Corps without notifying the regimental commander. By rushing Lt. Col. Herman W. Dammer’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion (2/65) into the mountains of nearby Yŏnghŭng, piecemeal and lacking

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<sup>5</sup> This, as a result of the assignment of the division’s “paper” 30<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment as a training and filler unit. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division was familiar with the work of the 65<sup>th</sup> after the latter’s performance during the PORTREX maneuvers on Vieques in the first quarter of 1950. Brig. Gen. W. W. Harris provides an excellent commander’s perspective on the regiment’s performance during PORTREX in his *Puerto Rico’s Fighting 65<sup>th</sup>*. Col. Gilberto Villahermosa provides an invaluable concise yet insightful objective view on the exercise in “Prelude to Inchon,” currently available at [www.valerosos.com](http://www.valerosos.com).

<sup>6</sup> While once scheduled to partake in the Inch’ŏn landing, the 65<sup>th</sup> missed D-Day for an entire week (blame typhoon *Kezia*), arriving in Japan on September 22, to be rerouted to Korea the following morning. The loss of the 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment to the Inch’ŏn landing threatened the stability of the shrinking Pusan Perimeter, reason for which MacArthur “compensated” Johnnie Walker with the unannounced assignment of the “inexperienced,” therefore *unreliable*, Puerto Rican regiment to EUSAK. Walker saw this quid pro quo with a jaundiced eye, but nevertheless employed the regiment in menial pocket-clearing operations that, in the long run, benefited the breakout from Pusan.

adequate ammunition to repel the suspected enemy force hiding there, Almond virtually delivered the outfit to the enemy on a silver platter. An opportune spotter plane would save the day by alerting the allies to the Borinqueneers' presence and by arranging an airdrop that permitted the Puerto Ricans to repel the enemy and return to Wönsan.



**Col. William W. "Bill" Harris, commander of the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment.  
Near Wönsan, November 1950 (National Archives)**

When the rest of the regiment landed at Wönsan, Almond immediately scattered it all over the place: one part to "palace-guard" his headquarters, another to bodyguard the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division elements there, and the other to prepare for a westward venture aimed to contact and assist the decimated EUSAK in Tökch'ön, near the infamous boundary. To Col. William W. Harris, commander of the 65<sup>th</sup>, the words of his 1930 West Point classmate and crony Aubrey Smith a few nights earlier ("*I wouldn't go where you are being sent unless the corps commander gave me ... at least four infantry divisions.*") cast an ominous shadow in his near future. The corps commander would *indeed* have to reinforce Bill Harris' outfit with a corps-sized force. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, about to complete its training in Japan, would not arrive until mid-November. (The need of reinforcements in Korea deemed necessary the inclusion of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division.)

### The Tale of Two Task Forces

From the moment the rest of Maj. Gen. Robert H. "Shorty" Soule's 3<sup>rd</sup> Division arrived in North Korea, it would go on to block the road coming east from Sach'ang-ni, and to protect the Wönsan–

Hüנגnam coastal strip.<sup>7</sup> Its principal mission centered on pocket-clearing the area after NKPA troops and guerrillas had either infiltrated or fallen behind when their units withdrew from the seaport. To do this, the paratrooper general created four RCTs from his three regiments (the 7<sup>th</sup>, the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 65<sup>th</sup>) and the newly-assigned ROKA 26<sup>th</sup> Regiment. The ROKA 26<sup>th</sup> had been the first X Corps unit to face – and be nearly annihilated by – the CCF in October.



**Maj. Gen. Robert H. “Shorty” Soule, CG 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, and Col. Harris.  
Wönsan, November 1950 (National Archives)**

In the eyes of many, this relatively easy job would somehow hone on skills gone dull over the postwar years. At this moment the 3<sup>rd</sup> was at an alarming state of unpreparedness – “a mess!!!” [emphasis in the original] as a Military Police sergeant assigned to the division’s 3<sup>rd</sup> Military Police Company recalls. “The 7<sup>th</sup> [Infantry] was effective from the landing, but the 15<sup>th</sup> was not an asset, and sometimes a liability.” The first night ashore, a platoon leader from the 15<sup>th</sup> Infantry was accidentally shot by one of his own as the officer checked the alertness of his men. “As to the 65<sup>th</sup>, they were well trained, well used, and could handle their own business.”<sup>8</sup> When asked how he expected to fight a war with so

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<sup>7</sup> The division’s area of responsibility (AOR) comprised four sectors. Working counterclockwise: west of the Hamhüנג–Hüנגnam “enclave,” then referred to as “Liberty City” (under the responsibility of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division), the ROKA 26<sup>th</sup> RCT, with its headquarters at Kogae-gol, sprawled westward to the EUSAK–X Corps boundary. South of the ROKA 26<sup>th</sup>, the 65<sup>th</sup> RCT, headquartered at Yönghüנג, followed the meridian along the boundary. South of the 65<sup>th</sup>, with headquarters at Togwöń, the 15<sup>th</sup> RCT guarded Wönsan, where the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division was also headquartered. Finally, north of the 15<sup>th</sup>, with headquarters at Kowöń, the 7<sup>th</sup> RCT sprawled alongside the coast, closing in on the southern outskirts of “Liberty City.”

<sup>8</sup> Part of this problem of unpreparedness might have to do with the standardized (perhaps compulsory) integration of ROKA troops into U.S. Army units. The KATUSA (Korean Augmentation to the U.S. Army) program created a serious language problem in regards to both proficiency and terminology, as the Korean language in essence lacked virtually all the “technological” terms existent in the English language. By the time his regiment landed in North Korea, Bill Harris had dealt with the problem in a very particular way: assigning just *one* KATUSA per squad and “dispatching” the surplus (over 1,000) back to ROKA units. By then, the 65<sup>th</sup>’s combat readiness was that of a fully functional unit, as opposed to the respective readiness of sister regiments, 7<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>, at 50% each.

many untrained units, Soule's emphatic answer was that "in the army you led what you had, and hoped for the best."<sup>9</sup>

As far as Bill Harris was concerned, an AOR covering approximately 900 square miles was too large to be effectively patrolled, let alone defended. His three battalions were between thirty and forty miles apart, and visiting them was likened to craving for a bullet on his part.

Heavy engagements erupted alongside the strip; nevertheless, all enemy attacks were defeated.

The fourth of December finally presented some "organization" and "direction" for the 65<sup>th</sup>, which, for the first three days of the month had been going back and forth aimlessly inside its AOR, simply reacting to the changes of orders X Corps had been producing at machine-gun speed.<sup>10</sup> The first operation order issued by 3<sup>rd</sup> Division called for the Puerto Ricans to relieve the withdrawing 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division and to protect the Changjin Reservoir road from Sudong south to Hamhŭng from fleeing NKPA forces launching diversionary attacks to draw UNC forces away from the retreating troops. Reunited at Hŭngnam for the first time since arriving in North Korea, the 65<sup>th</sup> was assigned the following missions:

- 1) Preparing defensive positions on the CHARLIE Line, near Oro-ri, eight miles northwest of Hamhŭng, from the boundary of the 7<sup>th</sup> Division (on the right) to the GEORGE Line on the Tŏngsongch'ŏn River (on the left) (1/65);
- 2) Opposing a large enemy force coming from the north;
- 3) Securing the village of Majŏn-dong, eleven miles north of the CHARLIE Line (2/65);
- 4) Clearing the seven-mile stretch of the main supply route (MSR) from Majŏn-dong to Sudong of enemy forces (3/65); and
- 5) Protecting the withdrawal of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division headquarters from Hagaru-ri.

Ned Almond's plan was for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division to send a forward covering force to Chinhŭng-ni, the halfway point of the 40-mile road between Hagaru-ri and Hŭngnam; wait for the Marines to come barreling down the mountains; and hold off the CCF while the Marines withdrew to Sudong. Troops of 2/65 and 3/65 would meet the withdrawing forces there, and would ensure their safe trucking and entraining to the Hŭngnam harbor for evacuation to Pusan. The troops on the perimeter line around "Liberty City" would then be withdrawn from CHARLIE Line through a series of lines in successive delaying actions until evacuating the 7<sup>th</sup> Division under the firing cover of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division's rearguard.

To assist the 65<sup>th</sup> in accomplishing its mission, Shorty Soule assembled a powerful force commanded by his quick-tempered assistant division commander, Brig. Gen. Armistead D. Meade. Task Force D (TF Dog) incorporated elements of 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion 7<sup>th</sup> RCT, the 92<sup>nd</sup> FAB, the 10<sup>th</sup> and 73<sup>rd</sup> Combat Engineer battalions, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Reconnaissance and 52<sup>nd</sup> Transportation companies into what was likened to a "solve the unsolvable" or "Cavalry to the rescue" enterprise.

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<sup>9</sup> Former MP Staff Sgt. Bob Wells, in letter to the Author, December 7, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> This status quo that Harris alludes to as "Operation Turnabout" in his memoirs owes much to Douglas MacArthur's taking control of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division for possible employment on the EUSAK front. Although Almond initially complied, he later appealed and obtained a rescission of that action, thus regaining the division and canceling the westward reconnaissance mission previously assigned to the 65<sup>th</sup>.

If for whatever obscure reason TF Dog's role has gone relatively unrecognized, outshined by the glamour of the heroic Marine role during the withdrawal, the role of sister task force Childs has gone virtually inexistent. In fact, so closely intertwined have been these task forces that yet many members of TF Childs still believe they had operated under TF Dog all along. Dubbed after its tactical commander, Lt. Col. George W. Childs, regimental executive officer of the 65<sup>th</sup>, this 1,850-strong task force consisted of the core of 2/65 and 3/65, powerfully supported by units of field artillery, engineer, armor and chemical. Thus, while TF Dog's mission would consist of helping the Marines fight their way southward along the withdrawal route, TF Childs' would consist of holding the highlands in front and eventually to the west of the MSR.



**A 75-mm recoilless rifle position guards the MSR.  
North of Hamhŭng, December 1950 (U.S. Army Photo)**

Another peculiarity accentuating these two forces' uniqueness has to do with their racial and ethnic composition of one-third Puerto Rican and two-thirds black.<sup>11</sup> While there seems to be no consensus in points of view regarding Ned Almond's character, almost all agree in recognizing the general's subjective attitude toward "colored" soldiers, result of the disappointing performance of his 92<sup>nd</sup> (Negro) Division from World War II. Whether racism played a major factor in the constitution of task forces Dog and Childs, the unarguable reality was that, excepting the 65<sup>th</sup>, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division troops were green to combat.

Soule was to concentrate the remainder of his division between Chigyŏng and the C-47 Airfield in Yŏnp'o, about four miles southwest of "Liberty City."

Both task forces hit the road in the wee hours of a freezing December 6, spearheaded by Herman Dammer's 2/65, which reached Majŏn-dong at 2:30 p.m. and secured its roads and railroads until TF

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<sup>11</sup> For all intents and purposes, TF Dog (Childs included) was regarded as a "black" force. Between the two forces there were four "black" battalions (2/65, 3/65, 3/7, and 3/15), not to mention the ancillary units were essentially black.



Dog's arrival. Relieved in place, part of 2/65 withdrew to Oro-ri to link up with Lt. Col. Edward Allen's 3/65, while George Company 2/65 led TF Dog's march north to Sudong. From their respective positions along one ridge paralleling the road to Hamhŭng, three companies of 3/65 controlled several miles of adjacencies.

### The Marines Advance in a Different Direction

The situation up north grew bleaker by the minute. Bill Harris' West Point classmate Allan MacLean, regimental commander of the 7<sup>th</sup> Division's 31<sup>st</sup> RCT, had been wounded and captured (and ultimately dead) by the CCF; Lt. Col. Donald C. Faith, commander of 1/32, had become a KIA; and TF MacLean–Faith had been utterly destroyed. The heroism of these men, nevertheless, had not been in vain, as it had brought the virtual destruction of one CCF division, allowing the 10,000 Marines and soldiers trapped around the Changjin Reservoir to reach the relative haven of Hagaru-ri. All along, the “Bayonet” Division would lose five senior combat commanders during this affair.

Cut off from supply lines and rapidly depleting their ammunition, Marines and soldiers continued to be exposed and succumbing to the extreme cold while being surrounded by entire divisions of better outfitted and better situated fanatic communist troops. On one side, the formidable terrain allowed the enemy to effectively isolate X Corps; on the other, the freezing gusts seemed to strip of whatever strengths and fighting spirit the withdrawing forces might have had during their initial victories around Changjin. Men collapsed and preferred not to move thereafter, proving essential for officers and sergeants to stay close to their men and to drive them to respond even when under attack. Stragglers had to be kicked and pushed. Whilst hopes of escaping the trap waned, the withdrawal plan continued as planned.

“We are just advancing in a different direction,” had been Marine Maj. Gen. Oliver Prince “O.P.” Smith's response to a war correspondent when questioned about the retreat. Firstly, the word was anathema in the Marine Corps doctrine. Secondly, there was no rear where to retreat to. A toughened version of O.P.'s candid answer entered the Marine Corps history as, “*Retreat, hell! We're just attacking in another direction!*” *New York Herald Tribune's* Marguerite Higgins, probably the most famous war correspondent in Korea, and *Life Magazine* war photographer David Douglas Duncan had flown to Hagaru-ri to cover the epic withdrawal, but Higgins had been forced to leave on grounds of her gender and the harrowing hardships yet to be faced.<sup>12</sup> It would be partly up to former Marine Duncan to make the Marines withdrawal the most famous episode of the Korean War.

The forces departed Hagaru-ri on December 6, stopping briefly at Kot'o-ri, eleven miles south, while waiting for an airdrop of bridging materials. The village of Chinhŭng, farther south, marked the first half of their withdrawal and the rendezvous point with the TF Dog elements.

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<sup>12</sup> Unlike the first time around, when Johnnie Walker barred her from Pusan and she appealed to MacArthur, Higgins abided without much protest.

During the winter of 1950, which stands as one of the coldest in recorded history, both warring factions endured the extreme cold weather's effect not only upon themselves but upon combat capability as well. Frostbite proved just as dangerous as the malfunctioning of weapons. Recent declassified documents show that while the communists had found a way to counter the malfunctioning of weapons, frostbite remained the gravest enemy by far, proving more lethal than the formidable overall superiority of the UNC.

For the majority of the warm-blooded Borinqueneers seeing snow for the first time, the challenge of coping and surviving presented but an opportunity to employ their resourcefulness. Dressing in layers compensated for the lack of right winter equipment; carrying their ration cans under their armpits kept the food warm enough for eating; and keeping their canteens under their clothing kept the water usable. Individual weapons were maintained relatively dry. The men had learned that an excess amount of grease or oil allowed to remain on weapons after they were cleaned called for a jam and failure to fire. The trick to keep mortar tubes from shrinking or cracking consisted of setting the mortar base plates on top of furnaces dug in on the ground and keeping the tubes covered with tarpaulins until ready for use. In extreme cases, crew-served weapons had to be urinated upon to be thawed for operation. This exceptional performance in subzero temperatures so impressed Harris that he would go on to publicize his men everywhere they went in Korea. Somebody had been selling the Puerto Rican soldier too low.



**TF Dog's 92<sup>nd</sup> FAB elements support the Marines' withdrawal.  
Chinhŭng-ni, December 1950 (National Archives)**

By December 10 the withdrawing column had grown up to 15,000 men. CCF hordes were already breathing down their necks when they came under the protection of the forward infantry and tank elements of TF Dog on the outskirts on Chinhŭng-ni. For those men – bearded, starving and frostbitten – “it sure was a wonderful sight to see friendly troops on the ridges.”<sup>13</sup> The sight was even more ecstatic by

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<sup>13</sup> Capt. George A. Rasula, assistant operations officer and later commander of Item/31, as quoted by Clay Blair in *The Forgotten War*.

the time they reached the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division perimeter. There, as many as possible were put on some of the 110 trucks provided for the rescue and driven back to Hŭngnam, yet many had to continue walking. For those, many of whom had not slept in days, the ordeal was *just a bit* far from over.

By the time they reached Sudong, the western highlands of the MSR for the next seven miles south had already been secured by the Borinqueneers. The two-month head start in Korea had given these the astuteness when facing an enemy who relied so much on terrain features. The tactic they employed to secure the MSR was the “mouse trap,” which consisted of faking a retreat along the level grounds of a valley in order to lure the CCF into a chase, and once the CCF were well inside, other Puerto Ricans came swarming down from the highlands, encircling and annihilating the enemy. By doing this, they had softened the Chinese pressure enough to allow the Marines and soldiers to get hold of the highlands and cover the passage of their tanks and vehicles.

### “Two *Battalions!*”

Men took advantage of every moment of calm to doze off. Some slept sitting up, back to back with their buddies; others hugged the warm hoods of the vehicles. David Duncan had a ball on account of the misery of the men, and busied himself in taking pictures of his revered “leathernecks,” almost entirely ignoring the 2,300 “doggies” in the column. In what might be taken as a paradigm of poetic justice, one of his pictures of soldiers would be immortalized in a 1985 United States Postal Service Korean War Commemorative Stamp. Misidentified in Clay Blair’s *The Forgotten War* as a medical platoon from 2/31, the squad featured in the picture was “not Marines,” but “soldiers belonging to a Reserve unit, according to what they told me, from Puerto Rico,” as Duncan himself remarked in the December 25 edition of *Life*.



**U.S. Postal Service Korean War Commemorative Stamp (1985)  
depicting soldiers of the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment (USPS)**

Despite their excellent performance, the Puerto Ricans could not guarantee every yard of the way. Later that afternoon and early evening, CCF elements cut the road, halting the column. In the ensuing battle the Chinese inflicted about twenty Marine casualties and destroyed nine trucks. Two Army

lieutenant colonels broke the CCF block; yet the withdrawal would not proceed undisturbed. TF Dog's 3/7 and George/65 would continue to hold off more CCF attacks throughout the night. The final group of Marines and soldiers had passed George/65's defense positions, the northernmost, when the company was ordered to withdraw and serve as rearguard for the main body of troops at Majõn-dong. The order to cover the company's withdrawal fell ultimately on Sgt. First Class (Sfc.) Félix G. Nieves' platoon, with Nieves' own squad to cover the withdrawal of the platoon. As the platoon was completing its withdrawal, an enemy attack in force developed. Nieves ordered his men to withdraw as he alone defended the position. In the face of heavy enemy machine gun and small arms fire, the sergeant killed at least eighteen Chinese before the remainder force became confused and fled, allowing Nieves' squad to gain the safety of the retreating column. Such display of bravado saved the lives of his fellow Borinqueneers.

While those actions took place up north, the final elements of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine and 7<sup>th</sup> divisions at Majõn-dong boarded trains and trucks in the beginning of their final leg of the trip. The Borinqueneers gave what food they could spare – mostly C ration sundries like jelly, biscuits, mustard, fruits, and so forth. For many a starving soul, a biscuit smeared with mustard likened to a banquet. The withdrawing troops could not be any more grateful for the gesture of camaraderie surpassing service branch differences. It is said that when one surprised Marine officer asked how many divisions had come and the answer was, "Two battalions from the 65<sup>th</sup>; Puerto Ricans," his reaction was, "*Two battalions!* But they fight as well as *we do!*" Clearly, despite their reversal, the Marines conserved their traditional pride.

Marines and soldiers continued south under the protection of the Puerto Ricans, all along expecting to defend the sector of "Liberty City" before their ordeal was over. Unbeknownst to them, the plan to evacuate X Corps was already in effect. Whereas the CCF did not seriously interfere with the withdrawal at this point, the prospective threat they represented called for a vigorous bombardment by naval gunfire and carrier-based Navy and Marine aircraft. Additional air cover was available from the C-47 Airfield.

Nocturnal attacks continued throughout the week along the route. At midnight of the eleventh, elements of Baker/65 faced off a 300-strong Chinese force north of CHARLIE Line. The Borinqueneers, logically, repelled the attack; but the CCF would attack again on the fifteenth, forcing Baker/65 to withdraw to higher grounds. In the process, the company commander, wounded, fell behind and refused to be evacuated from the now enemy-held territory. Disregarding his own safety, a young corporal went back to rescue his commander. No sooner had he brought the officer back into the company's position than friendly artillery and mortar fire started to fall on or near Baker. The corporal once again volunteered to cross no-man's land in order to reach a nearby friendly command post and stop further attacks.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Cpl. Cristóbal Meléndez Claudio would rise to master sergeant before Bill Harris' departure from the regiment in 1951, and would garner two Bronze Star medals for valor and for meritorious service in the fourteen months he served in Korea.



**Borinqueneers man a machine gun position south of burning Oro-ri.  
December 1950 (National Archives)**

This is but one simple example of the Borinqueneer bravado. These obscure days saw the birth of *many* a Borinqueneer hero. From the top brass – like Lt. Col. Childs, whose conspicuous bravery and tireless energy stimulated morale and contributed greatly to the victory throughout the five difficult and critical days that his task force was under hostile fire – to the lower echelons – like young Pvt. Donald Cirino Rivera, who, whilst exposing himself to intense enemy fire in order to check fields of fire and direct gun positions, fulfilled his duties of radio operator and ensured the retake of his company positions.

### The Evacuation

With the arrival of the first elements in Hŭngnam between the tenth and the eleventh, X Corps began the evacuation for Pusan. The corps' objective was to carry out an orderly evacuation of all military personnel, equipment and supplies, and certain civilian refugees. Little equipment was to be left behind, as opposed to the 1945 Okinawa evacuation. Part of the trophies included several 76-mm Russian-made guns previously captured from the NKPA. Even broken-down vehicles would be loaded and lifted out. One *Time* Magazine war correspondent described this scenario: “The G.I.s left almost nothing in wrecked Hŭngnam except a sardonic sign: ‘WE DON’T WANT THE DAMN PLACE ANYWAY.’”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> “War in Asia – The Enemy: Poor Showing,” January 8, 1951.



**Another burning village, courtesy of the Borinqueneers,  
(here using ox-carts to transport their equipment).  
Near Hŭngnam, December 1950 (National Archives)**

In the personal sense, the evacuation constituted a victory for Ned Almond, when compared with the disarray on Johnnie Walker's EUSAK after the loss of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division and most of its heavy equipment at the Kunu-ri Pass. As far as the refugees are concerned, Almond strove to live up to his word to evacuate as many as he could when the option of a ground evacuation was ruled out for safety reasons. Unfortunately, of the more than 180,000 hoping to evacuate, only 91,000 would.

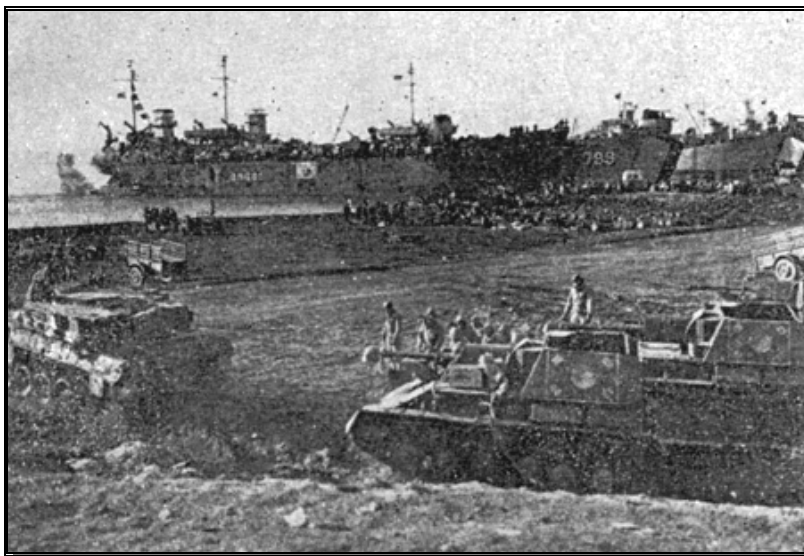
The two-star had designated that the first X Corps major unit to be sealifted would be the Marine division. Priority might have been placed on it because of the harrowing casualty rate of more than 10,500 since its arrival in Wŏnsan in October: 40 percent in battle and 60 percent non-battle. While the Marines out-loaded, Almond would deploy the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> divisions along the Hamhŭng–Hŭngnam sector, the 3<sup>rd</sup> taking the left and the 7<sup>th</sup> the right. Between December 11 and 14, the Marines would board 28 ships that, on the fifteenth, would sail for Pusan amid a blizzard of heroic publicity. The Marines would be followed by the ROKA I Corps, bound for Mukho, just below the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel.

The 7<sup>th</sup> Division, 2,100 men shorter, followed suit under the covering fire of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division and a formidable force of about 600 planes clobbering the suspected enemy positions outside the constricted perimeter. The concentration of U.S. fire laid down on the enemy around the perimeter dwarfed anything ever seen before in Korea. On the beachhead, self-propelled guns, howitzers, heavy mortars and flak wagons put out tremendous weight of metal per mile of front. Offshore, the warships of the Seventh Fleet sent in their own barrage. Overhead, swarms of Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps planes sought out and scourged the enemy with napalm, rockets, bombs, and machine guns. Marine veterans from World War II likened it to Iwo Jima; Army veterans, to an "Anzio in reverse."<sup>16</sup> In one 24-hour period, the combined

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<sup>16</sup> "War in Asia – Battle of Korea: 'Anzio in Reverse,'" *Time*, January 1, 1951.

firepower claimed over 2,600 CCF casualties. Demoralized by such losses, the CCF sent regrouped NKPA troops into the fighting, and by the end of the week it was these who bore the brunt of the battle. Prisoners said that every time the communists formed up for amassed attacks, they were dispersed by shell or air attacks. From then on, enemy efforts died down to simple probing attacks.



**Borinqueneer troops cover the withdrawal of the X Corps.  
Hŭngnam, December 1950 (*El Mundo*)**

At this point, the communists headed off to a bad ending when they muffed several excellent chances to wreck the X Corps operation. “They knew all about us,” O.P. Smith would reflect after the battle; “where we were and what we had. But I can’t understand their tactics. Instead of hitting us with everything in one place, they kept on hitting us at different places.” Whether through lack of mobility, of equipment, of tactical judgment, or a combination of these and other factors, after the Hŭngnam perimeter had been established, the enemy seemed unable to exploit their greatest asset: manpower. “The only advantage they have on God’s green earth is numbers.”<sup>17</sup> In the end, they suffered casualties at least five times that of U.S. forces.

The Hŭngnam evacuation seemed to be taking longer than expected. To Ned Almond, nonetheless, it went “the way we planned.” Whatever the reasons for the delay in wrapping up, the operation was having two satisfactory results: It was showing the CCF and the NKPA what the massed U.S. firepower looked, sounded, and felt like; and it was killing a lot of communists.

Enemy attacks renewed in the wee hours of the twenty-second as Shorty Soule’s three U.S. RCTs stood at the second phase line (DOG) covering the out-loading of the last artillery units of X Corps and the first of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division service units. The brunt of the attack fell on Howard St. Clair’s 1/65. Unlike a previous company-level attack in which communist troops wearing U.S. helmets and winter clothing had

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<sup>17</sup> “Poor Showing.”



been easily repulsed, the uncanny CCF recurred to a tactic the Borinqueneers were already familiar with: psychological warfare. That is, large numbers (approximately 2,500) and a lot of mass singing, bugling, and cymbal-clashing. The ensuing battle culminated with morning light finding about 1,000 CCF troops lying in the snow, wounded or dead. In spite of incessant air strafing, and a rain of shells from U.S. artillery and from warships offshore, the enemy maintained his pressure throughout the day. At night, star shells and flares illuminated the scene, which was the only practical way of countering the enemy's much annoying penchant for night fighting.



**Borinqueneers set demolition charges around “Liberty City.”  
December 1950 (*El Mundo*)**

The evacuation of X Corps allowed the perimeter to shrink to no more than ten miles around the Hŭngnam harbor on the twenty-third, when Soule's division stood at the last phase line in preparation for the final withdrawal. Only a small amount of enemy mortar and artillery fire struck the perimeter troops now, but that did not keep the division from carrying out the demolition duties around “Liberty City,” the C-47 Airfield, and surrounding railroads, storehouses, bridges, and wharves.

As this move took place, the 65<sup>th</sup> was drawn into a tighter perimeter defense around the harbor itself. An unexpected yet welcomed lull allowed for a small awards ceremony in which Lt. Col. Childs, as well as several Borinqueneers, received accolades from the division commander. The corps commander would be there as well to present his customary “impact” awards. Sfc. Nieves, who received the Silver Star for his actions in Sudong, received a special commendation from Shorty Soule. Almond recognized the effort of the 65<sup>th</sup> by presenting the Silver Star to its regimental commander. A teary-eyed Bill Harris accepted the Star on behalf of his Borinqueneers, lamenting he could not break it into pieces and pin one



on the chest of every one of his men and another over the graves of those who had given their lives “on behalf of victory of this cause and the cause of the democratic nations of the world.”



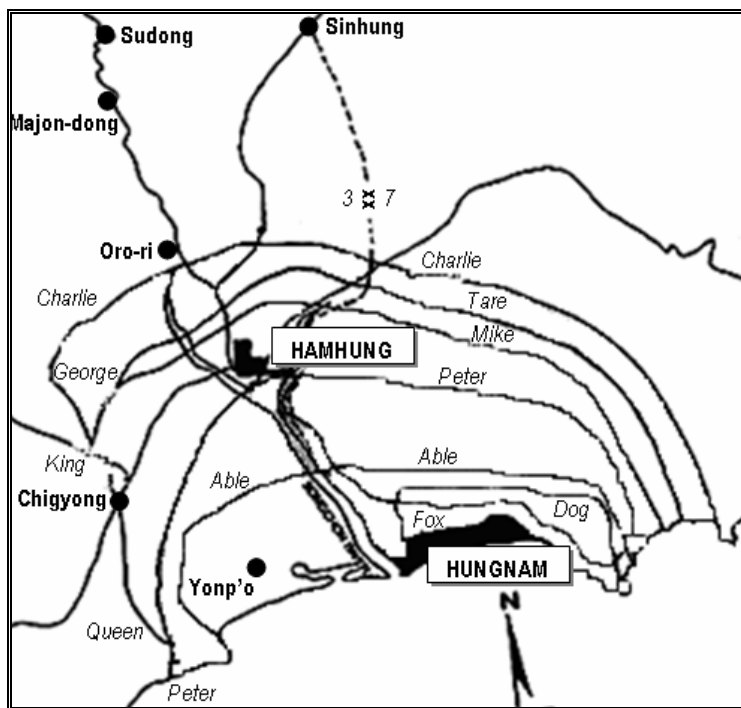
**Maj. Gen. Edward M. “Ned” Almond, CG X Corps,  
awards the Silver Star to Col. Harris.  
Hŭngnam, December 1950 (National Archives)**

The division received its orders to withdraw on the twenty-fourth. The harbor was a sitting duck at this time, its perimeters outlined by gondola cars rigged with explosives. One false move would have sent the entire “Marne” Division sky-high.

The final arrangement behind the last two phase lines, DOG and FOX, showed the 7<sup>th</sup> RCT covering the left side, the 65<sup>th</sup> the middle, and the 15<sup>th</sup> the right. The order of withdrawal once the Division Headquarters had out-loaded with all its heavy equipment and ammunition called for the 7<sup>th</sup> RCT to board tank landing craft (LCTs) at half past noon, followed by the 15<sup>th</sup> RCT minutes later, and then the 65<sup>th</sup>. Withdrawing with two neighboring units posed a tricky assignment for the 65<sup>th</sup>, given that an exposed flank presented an open door for the CCF. Accordingly, 1/65 and 3/65 retreated to Blue Beach, occupied

by 2/65, whose retreat was timed to be within minutes of the departure of the covering force from the 15<sup>th</sup> RCT.<sup>18</sup>

Their situation was a precarious one, and the CCF sought to exploit the present state of affairs by attacking with renewed strength and utter disregard for the heavy toll they were paying. The enemy on one side and the sea on the other; the situation had a romantic appeal on the cornered Borinqueneers, who resorted to bayonets, stones, fists and *boricua*-style jiu-jitsu when the Chinese – in extreme cases, carrying the fight to the water’s edge and even on *top of the ridges* – attacked with swords, maces, or *nothing* else but their own bodies, staging a bizarre scene that would have certainly put the most imaginative Hollywood screenwriter to shame. One veteran reminisces: “The only way out for us was by ship ... We opened the way so they [the division] could retreat.”<sup>19</sup>



“Liberty City” and adjacencies during November and December 1950.

Close naval fire covered the Borinqueneers’ withdrawal. This posed another tricky maneuver, for if the shells fell short of their intended targets – the hills surrounding the dockside area – the only

<sup>18</sup> The operation plan covering the withdrawal of the 65<sup>th</sup> RCT originally called for 1/65 and 3/65 to move back from CHARLIE Line to TARE Line and to hold there until 2/65 leapfrogged them and took up a position on MIKE Line. The 2/65 would, in turn, hold that position to protect the 1/65 and 3/65 movements to PETER Line, whence, once again, both battalions would hold while 2/65 reached ABLE Line, and so on. As enemy pressure grew stronger by the minute, a new revision of the plan was to direct 1/65 and 3/65 to hold on TARE while 2/65 passed through MIKE all the way back to PETER; then 1/65 and 3/65 leapfrogged to ABLE. Finally, all 65<sup>th</sup> RCT elements would move to FOX, the main line of resistance (MLR), site of the final stand.

<sup>19</sup> José F. Rodríguez, as quoted by The *San Juan Star* on April 23, 2000.

Hispanic outfit in the United States Army was as good as extinct. By 1:30 p.m., under the covering fire of 2/65, all elements had boarded landing craft. A total of four ships lifted the RCT: two for its personnel and two for its equipment. Wave after wave, LCTs ferried the drained but proud men to the awaiting ships. Many had to be pulled up the side meshes of the *Liberty* class USS *General H. B. Freeman* (TAP 143). “Even on the ship that was to take us out of there,” retired Master Sgt. Norberto Cartagena recalls, “we had to keep on firing. The Chinese and the North Koreans were already on the pier.”<sup>20</sup>

Bill Harris’ command group loaded on the last landing craft with elements of 2/65 at 2:30 p.m. “So far as I know,” Harris would write in his memoirs, “we were the last to leave the area.”<sup>21</sup>

At 2:37 p.m. the fleet turned away and steamed south.

Behind it, the Hŭngnam Harbor sank into the ocean under one sky-high pillar of smoke.



**Unidentified troops (probably Marines) “LEAVING THE BEACH AT HUNGNAM” in this David Douglas Duncan picture featured in the January 8, 1951 edition of *Time*. The celebrated photographer topped off his description of the action with a sardonic, “If the enemy had used artillery ...” to illustrate the grimness of the scenario**

<sup>20</sup> Quoted by *New York Daily News* on June 8, 2000.

<sup>21</sup> The issue of which regiment was the last to evacuate the beachhead has been harshly debated by veterans from both infantry regiments (15<sup>th</sup> and 65<sup>th</sup>). One MP in charge of a ten-man detachment assigned to protect the 65<sup>th</sup> during this period recalls the following:

I cannot state to the minute when either Regiment last embarked its GI’s, but will tell you the real tale of the 65<sup>th</sup>. It took a long time for the 65<sup>th</sup> to be loaded onto boats because they had to be so carefully channeled between the Railroad cars that were loaded with explosives to blow up the stone wharf. When the last units were on their way to the APA *Henrico* [*Freeman*], Colonel Harris and his small group climbed down into [an] LCV, and I was one of the group. When we tied up to the steep stairway of the *Henrico* it was most difficult to get me and all of my gear onto the stairs and up them to the deck. A CPO helped me over the rail, and then took me and what he could carry to a bunk below. Here is the significant part. We dropped all of my gear, and returned to the deck BECAUSE [emphasis in the original] the entire port was blown up as we watched. This was minutes after we got aboard. It was an unforgettable sight, and told us we were really safe! While we were still at the rail the Battleship *Missouri* came close to our port side as it was leaving the Bay. If anyone of the 15<sup>th</sup> left land after we did they would have to have had a speedboat to get away from that explosion. This is just an opinion. (Bob Wells, in letter to the Author, January 6, 2005)

**surrounding the X Corps' epic withdrawal.**

A Borinqueneer Christmas Carol

All the excitement and gut-tightening anticipation behind, the 65<sup>th</sup> prepared to enjoy the most unforgettable Christmas Eve many had ever had. They had proven to the toughest skeptics that the Borinqueneers were a fighting force to be reckoned with. It had earned a place of honor in Marine Corps history. It had survived the Korean winter at its worst. It had safeguarded the largest sealift since World War II.

The evacuation itself took 193 shiploads using 109 ships. Two CCF armies (37,500 men) were annihilated by X Corps and/or the weather during the withdrawal from Changjin. Over 3,600 wounded and 200 vehicles were airlifted out. Hŭngnam was destroyed. In Harris' opinion, the overall venture constituted "a logistic and strategic miracle."

On board the *Freeman*, the exhausted Puerto Ricans were treated like honored guests. Many, after enjoying their first hot showers and hot meals in months, had much to thank the Lord for. Regimental Catholic chaplain Father Ryan said a Mass, and the men sang "*Noche de Paz*" ("Silent Night") while their Continental comrades sang "Adeste Fideles." Colonel Harris commended his men on an unparalleled performance, reiterating his "complete and unbending confidence in [their] fighting ability." Christmas Day in the morning treated the warriors with a unique breakfast resembling nothing of the cold C rations the men got used to, in a preamble to the heavenly evening banquet of roast turkey.

The influx of troops in Pusan initially overwhelmed that port's capacity, but by New Year's Day the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division was on the ground again and ready to assume its duties under EUSAK's I Corps.

The Borinqueneers stood tall and ready for future triumphs in the Land of Morning Calm.

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*Inasmuch as the story told in this article draws from the sources listed below, it does not represent the official version of the Department of Defense or the United States Army. The contents of the article and the history it relates are solely the author's opinion. Furthermore, he assumes total responsibility for mistakes and/or inaccuracies incurred.*

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## About the Author

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