



FACT SHEET



Aircraft airdrop supplies inside the Chip'yong-ni perimeter February 1951.

Battle of Chip'yong-ni

February 1951

This mid-February 1951 perimeter defense engagement involved the 23d Infantry Regimental Combat Team (RCT) of the 2d Infantry Division and the Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) in and around the small village of Chip'yong-ni about 50 miles east of Seoul. The engagement, together with another at Wonju to the east, is described by some writers as the "Gettysburg," or high water mark, for the CCF in Korea. The battle was a major turning point in the Korean War in that it marked the end of the CCF holding the initiative.

Prelude: The Chinese Enter the War

In the weeks after the late November 1950 massive entrance of Chinese forces into the fighting, there was considerable uncertainty over CCF capabilities and intentions. United Nations forces had pulled back below the 38th parallel and given up the South Korean capital of Seoul. Large stocks of supplies had been destroyed to prevent their capture, and the U.N. command even had prepared plans for the total evacuation of the peninsula.

Chip'yong-ni: Milestone for both sides; changes in tactics

Fighting at Chip'yong-ni by the 23d RCT and at Wonju by the 2d Division's other two regiments — the 9th and 38th — settled the question of whether United States and United Nations forces could prevail

against the CCF. Completely surrounded and cut off from friendly forces during Feb. 13–15 in almost constant fighting from a perimeter defense formation, the 23d RCT held off a numerically superior enemy force and inflicted staggering casualties on it while incurring relatively light casualties in its own companies — except in the counterattacking reserve company.

The Chip'yong-ni fighting also signaled a change in U.S. battlefield tactics in Korea. Before it and the Wonju engagements, United Nations Command (UNC) forces had followed the practice of “rolling with the punch” when attacked. Instead of “standing and fighting,” units would withdraw to avoid anticipated encirclement.

Stand and Fight

Commanded by Colonel Paul L. Freeman, the 23d RCT included the regiment's three infantry battalions, the French Infantry Battalion, a Ranger Company and attached artillery, tank and engineer elements. In early February the 23d RCT was in position in and around the transportation hub village of Chip'yong-ni, the juncture of several roads and crossed by a railroad line. On Feb. 11–12 two Chinese armies and a North Korean People's Army (NKPA) struck the central U.N. front, scattered three Republic of Korea Army (ROKA) divisions, and forced other U.N. troops in the sector to withdraw southward. The communists aimed their attack at the communication centers of Wonju and Chip'yong-ni. Freeman soon received word of the withdrawal of friendly units on his flanks and noted the ominous build up of several divisions of enemy forces to his front.



A typical horde of displaced civilians (sometimes intermingled with enemy troops) just below the 38th parallel.

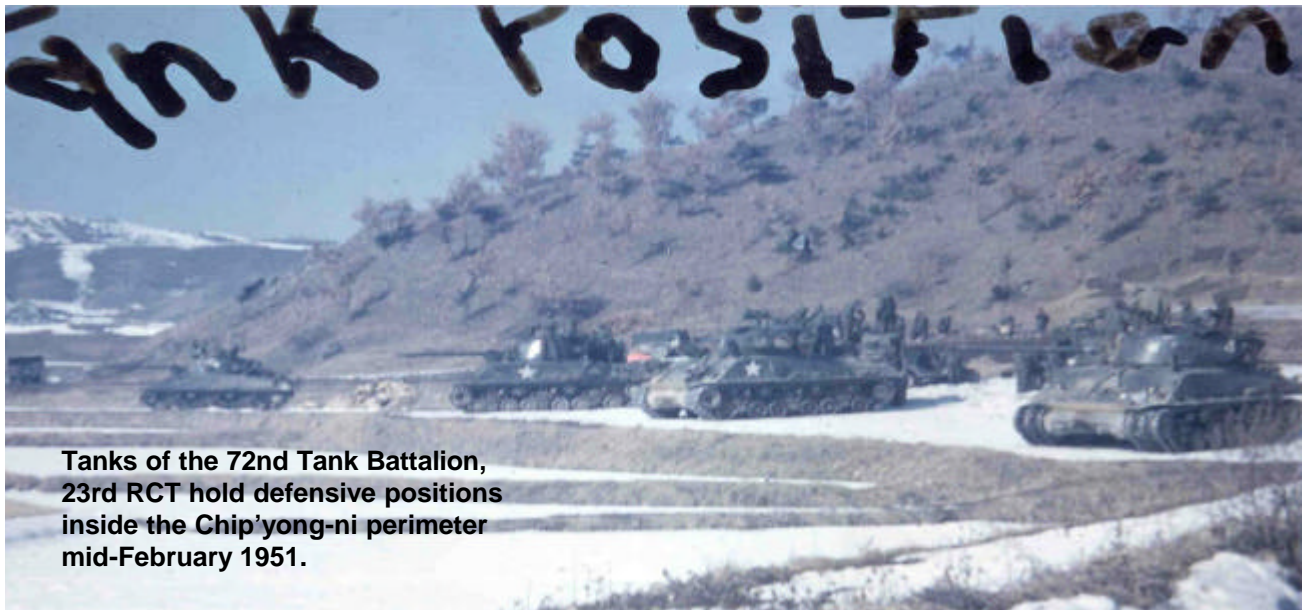
2 Knowing that he was greatly outnumbered, he asked 2d Division commander Major General Nick Ruffner when he, too, could begin a withdrawal. To Freeman's surprise, Ruffner refused permission. Instead, he informed Freeman that new Eighth Army commander Lieutenant General Matthew B. Ridgway wanted a test of strengths: Chip'yong-ni and Wonju were to be defended and held. Freeman was ordered to form a tight perimeter defense pocket, dig in deeply, and lay in supplies of food, ammunition and other items. He was told if he were attacked and surrounded, he would be resupplied by air drops and a relief column by the 5th Cavalry Regiment of the 1st Cavalry Division driving up from Yoju to the south.

Freeman promptly complied with those instructions, while at the same time vigorously patrolling for up to three miles in front of all forward positions. His battalions were displaced as follows: 1st Battalion to the north sector of the perimeter, 2d to the south, 3d to the east and the French Battalion to the south and southwest. Freeman held his B Company and the Ranger Company in reserve in the center of the perimeter near his regimental command post (CP).

Enemy Attack

Shortly after dusk on Feb. 13, communist forces began to shell the perimeter center and some forward positions with artillery and mortar fire. Whistles, bugles and other noise-making devices could be heard in the darkness in front of most perimeter positions. Around midnight, companies of the 1st Battalion came under attack. This spread until by daylight the entire perimeter was under assault, which continued unabated for most of the next three days. Freeman's forward companies held

off the Chinese efforts to overrun the town and killed thousands of the attackers. Freeman himself was lightly wounded in the leg by a shell fragment but refused evacuation while fighting continued. Around 3:15 a.m. Feb. 14, a large number of communist troops forced most of F and G Companies of the 2d Battalion from their positions on the southern rim of the perimeter and occupied high ground



Tanks of the 72nd Tank Battalion, 23rd RCT hold defensive positions inside the Chip'yong-ni perimeter mid-February 1951.

there. This was a serious threat to the very existence of the perimeter. It exposed the flank of the remainder of the 2d Battalion to the east and the French Battalion to the west, and gave communist forces full and unobstructed observation of — and allowed direct fire on — the entire center of the perimeter. The CCF also held a pathway through which forces could be channeled into the perimeter.

U.N. Counterattack

Freeman recognized that the gap in his perimeter must be closed at all costs if his command was to survive. He immediately ordered a counterattack by the Ranger Company and surviving elements of F and G Companies. The counterattack began at daylight Feb. 14 but was repulsed. Freeman's men took heavy losses.

Freeman then ordered B Company, his regimental reserve, to retake the ground lost and restore the integrity of the perimeter. B Company launched its attack around noon Feb. 15. Though most attacks occurred under cover of darkness, this happened across open ground on a sunny day, in full view of the communist forces. The company advanced under intense enemy fire. Mortar and machine-gun fire rained on the attacking troops and men fell on all sides. By 4 p.m., with help from a U.N. napalm air strike and communist forces apparently aware that an armored relief column was approaching from the south, B Company finally drove off the enemy and closed the breach in the perimeter. The fighting ended when the perimeter was secured. In its attack, B Company suffered more than 50 percent casualties. All of its platoon sergeants had been killed or wounded. These casualties were in sharp

3 contrast with the half dozen or so incurred by other on-line companies of the regiment, which had the advantage of being in skillfully prepared, well-protected, deeply-dug, textbook-designed and -constructed positions.

By late afternoon Feb. 15, elements of the 5th Cavalry Regiment could be seen to the south approaching the perimeter. By dusk, its leading elements entered the perimeter through the road from Yaju that passed between and marked the boundaries of the 2d and French Battalion's positions.

Air support at Chip'yong-ni

Specifically, the three-day battle at Chip'yong-ni was especially tenuous since the 23d Infantry Regiment and the French battalion had been surrounded and cut off by the enemy. Eighth Army commander, Lieutenant General Matthew B. Ridgway, gave the 2d Division the highest priority for air support. Each day between Feb. 14-16, 10 flights of Air Force control aircraft directed numerous fighter planes. It appears the support was effective.

The 2d Division commander, Major General Clark Ruffner, reported that following one napalm strike on the surrounded unit's perimeter, he saw more enemy dead than he had seen before. Air Force C-119s from the 314th Troop Carrier Group dropped 87 loads of ammunition, gas and rations. The 3rd Air Rescue Squadron flew H-5 helicopters into Chip'yong-ni to deliver blood plasma and medicine and evacuated at least 52 wounded. Marine Corps fighters worked closely with the Air Force during this period making many attacks on the enemy at Chip'yong-ni.

Marine Corps historian Lynn Montross said of Chip'yong-ni, "Driving southeast from the IX Corps area to the X Corps front, the Chinese cut off and surrounded the 23d Infantry of the 2d Infantry Division, USA. Colonel Paul Freeman and his men put up a fight that is one of the classics of the war. Supported by Marine and Air Force planes, they gave more fire than they received and held out until rescued by a tank column."

Casualties

U.N. casualties in the fighting at Chip'yong-ni were 51 killed, 250 wounded and 42 missing. Communist casualties came to about 2,000 killed and 3,000 wounded, although their actual losses were assumed to be much higher. The fighting at Chip'yong-ni established that U.N. and U.S. forces could withstand just about anything and everything the communists could throw at them. The CCF never again held the clear strategic initiative during the war.

—Sherman W. Pratt

Special thanks to ABC-CLIO Publishing
Photos courtesy of Sherman W. Pratt

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Troops of the French Battalion, commanded by Lt. Col. Ralph Montclair, a Foreign Legion veteran, and attached to the U.S. 23rd Infantry Regiment at the battle of Chip'yong-ni.