Past in Review

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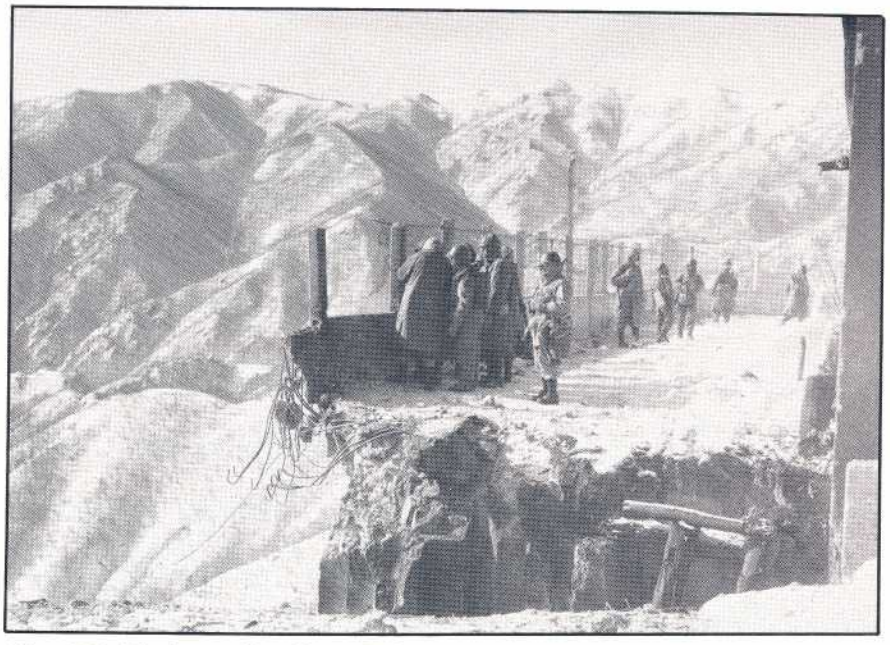

The 58th Engineer Treadway Bridge Company experimented with airdrop techniques to span this 22-foot gap during the retreat from the Chosin Reservoir, December, 1950. Photo: U.S. Marine Corps

Engineers in the Korean War: The Bridge at Koto-ri

When the North Korean army attacked South Korea in late June 1950, it quickly pushed the surprised South Korean and American forces into the southern tip of the Korean peninsula around Pusan. The Inchon Landing behind North Korean lines in September launched a United Nations counteroffensive which drove North Korean forces toward the Yalu River, the border with Communist China.

As part of this counteroffensive, American troops landed on the eastern coast of North Korea in October and moved north to the 4,000-foot plateau around the Chosin Reservoir. In late November, Chinese troops launched a massive counterattack which forced United Nations units to withdraw from the frozen, rugged terrain of North Korea. U.S. Army engineers played an important part in this withdrawal.

Surrounded by Chinese troops, the 1st Marine Division and elements of the 7th Infantry Division fought their way south from the Chosin Reservoir to the village of Koto-ri. Fourteen thousand troops, including 2,000 from the Army, had to withdraw over a narrow road which dropped over 3,000 feet through a treacherous pass.

About three miles from Koto-ri, the road ran along the side of a steep cliff and crossed a bridge next to a gatehouse. The gatehouse covered four steel pipes which carried water from the reservoir to the turbines of a power plant in the valley below. Because the gatehouse had no floor, the bridge was the only means for crossing the steel pipes.

Recognizing the importance of the bridge, Chinese troops had destroyed the original bridge and two replacements built by Army engineers, leaving a gap of 22 feet. Withdrawal of American vehicles, tanks and guns required spanning this gap.

Marine and Army engineers concluded that bypassing was impossible and that the small assembly and launching space, in addition to enemy fire, ruled out the use of a Bailey bridge. Although they had never tried the technique before, Army engineers decided to experiment with parachuting sections of a treadway bridge from the air.

The 58th Engineer Treadway Bridge Company was in Koto-ri, and two of its bridge trucks were operational. Only two days were available for experimenting with the airdrop techniques. On the first day, the tests failed when the bridge sections crashed to the earth. An Air Force expert on airdrops had larger parachutes flown in from Japan during the night, and the airdrops on the second day were successful.

On December 7, Air Force C-119s released eight treadway sections—twice as many as needed—over Koto-ri. Only one section was damaged when its parachute failed to open. Engineers loaded the sections onto the 58th Bridge Company's trucks and on December 9, rebuilt the abutments and laid the treadways in three hours. Throughout the night, a steady stream of troops and vehicles crossed the span, headed for the port of Hungnam and evacuation to the south.

Rumors about the bridge near Koto-ri brought American journalists to the site, and their dramatic reports made the span, according to the Marine Corps account of the campaign, "the world's most famous bridge for the moment." Some stories were fanciful, implying that the treadways had parachuted into position on the abutments. Yet the reality was still impressive. Engineers devised an innovative solution to a tactical problem, tested it in a short period of time, and applied it under difficult circumstances. The bridge at Koto-ri played an important part in the legendary Marine withdrawal from the Chosin Reservoir.

Suggestions for further reading:

E. L. Rowny, "Engineers in the Hungnam Evacuation," *The Military Engineer* 43 (Sept.-Oct. 1951): 315-19.

Lynn Montross and Nicholas A. Canzona, *The Chosin Reservoir Campaign, U.S. Marine Operations in Korea, 1950-1953* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1957).