

Book Review

Chosin: Heroic Ordeal of the Korean War by Eric Hammel

Reviewed by¹
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In *Chosin: Heroic Ordeal of the Korean War*, Eric Hammel, a meticulous military historian and accomplished writer of over 50 books and 70 articles, revisits the Battle of Chosin based on extensive primary source material collected by the author through hundreds of personal interviews with survivors. This book, originally published in 1981 and one of Hammel's early works, contributes significantly to Korean War scholarship, while also taking a look into the limits of human capacity, leadership, and motivation in the face of unfathomable hardship.

In 1950, as the outlook for US Forces in the Korean War deteriorated rapidly, General Douglas MacArthur's perfectly planned Inchon landing recaptured the initiative and sent the North Korean Army fleeing north across the 38th parallel. Seeking to capitalize on this drastic reversal of momentum, United Nations (UN) forces pressed forward to invade North Korea, racing towards the Yalu River, the border with China. Unable to relinquish critical North Korean hydroelectric power and fearing the presence of a Western army at its frontier, China infiltrated hundreds of thousands of soldiers into North Korea, traveling by night, and vanishing into the hinterlands undetected. Intelligence failures, judgement lapses, and hubris led UN forces to continue deploying widely and thinly across North Korea, presaging the troubles to follow.

As the story unfolds deep in North Korean territory, Eric Hammel masterfully details the heroic exploits of Marines, Soldiers, and Sailors who snatched survival out of the jaws of death in what could be the most punishing battle in modern warfare. Surrounded and outnumbered four to one, the 1st Marine Division and Army 31st Regimental Combat Team advanced to the Chosin Reservoir, held, then "attacked in a different direction" against a Chinese force of 120,000 in minus 20°F temperatures.

In a fast-flowing narrative, Hammel manages to recount dozens of personal stories of heroism, fortune, and tragedy, stitched together with small-unit action, and anchored by polarizing tactical leaders making life-or-death decisions under the worst of circumstances. The complexity and large number of moving pieces within the story favor a reading of the book within just a few days. Fortunately, the boots-on-the-ground perspective, paired with a style and vocabulary reminiscent of a different time, provide an immersive reading experience that makes putting the

¹ The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official policy or position of Joint Forces Staff College, National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

book down difficult. In this journey, the reader will get to know many of the 13 Medal of Honor recipients and 78 Service Cross recipients, as well as witness countless routine acts of courage and sacrifice made to save one another during the break-out from the Chosin Reservoir.

Fought within the shadow of nuclear warfare, the Korean War shed American blood to halt the spread of communism and protect the freedom of an ally. The Battle of Chosin Reservoir was pivotal because the disproportional losses inflicted upon the Chinese Army by the “Chosin Few” arguably eliminated the viability of a subsequent Chinese and North Korean invasion of South Korea. While this book does not delve into strategy, it specifically chronicles the intimate stories of those heroes who made that stand, so that we can remember the innumerable tactical actions and decisions that enabled a strategic legacy that endures to this day.

Lastly, Hammel exposes the plight of the troops on the front lines... our Marines, Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen that are sent into harm’s way every day, and the consequences the leaders cast upon them with every decision they make. The higher the echelon, the greater the impact of assumptions, preconception, hubris, and ultimately failure. We must always do right by them... So this book is also for all leaders of men and women, lest we forget.

Book Information:

Chosin: Heroic Ordeal of the Korean War, Second Edition

by Eric Hammel

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