

# **Staff Operations:**

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**The X Corps in Korea,  
December 1950**

# I

## THE X CORPS: INCHON TO THE YALU

The staff becomes an all-controlling bureaucracy, a paper octopus squirting ink and wriggling its tentacles into every corner. Unless pruned with an axe it will grow like a fakir's mango tree, and the more it grows the more it overshadows the general. It creates work, it creates officers, and, above all, it creates the rear-spirit.<sup>1</sup>

— J. F. C. Fuller

A mind that adheres rigidly and unalterably to original plans will never succeed in war, for success goes only to the flexible mind which can conform at the proper moment to a changing situation.<sup>2</sup>

— Hugo von Freytag-Loringhaven

The X Corps in Korea was an unusual, one of a kind, organization. All corps are uniquely configured for their missions and thus tend to break many organizational rules, but the X Corps was unusual even by usual corps standards. The corps was activated on 26 August, barely in time for the Inchon landings it was supposedly responsible for planning. Its commanding general, Major General Edward M. ("Ned") Almond, retained his position as General Douglas MacArthur's chief of staff of the Far Eastern Command (FEC). This was to lead to some ill will between the X Corps' and Eighth Army's logistics personnel. According to some sources, the X Corps used the dual-hatted position of their boss to ensure priority for supplies and personnel for the X Corps at the expense of Eighth Army.<sup>3</sup> This exacerbated Almond's already tense relationship with Lieutenant General Walton H. Walker, Eighth Army commander.<sup>4</sup> In addition, upon assumption of his new command, Almond almost instantly quarreled with Major General Oliver Smith, the commander of the 1st Marine Division which, along with the anemic 7th Infantry Division, comprised his corps. According to one contemporary observer, X Corps was a "hasty throwing together of a provisional Corps headquarters" and was "at best only a half-baked affair."<sup>5</sup> The 1st Marine Division did most of the planning for and execution of the Inchon landings since X Corps was neither fully formed nor experienced enough in amphibious operations to operate as a functional headquarters.<sup>6</sup>

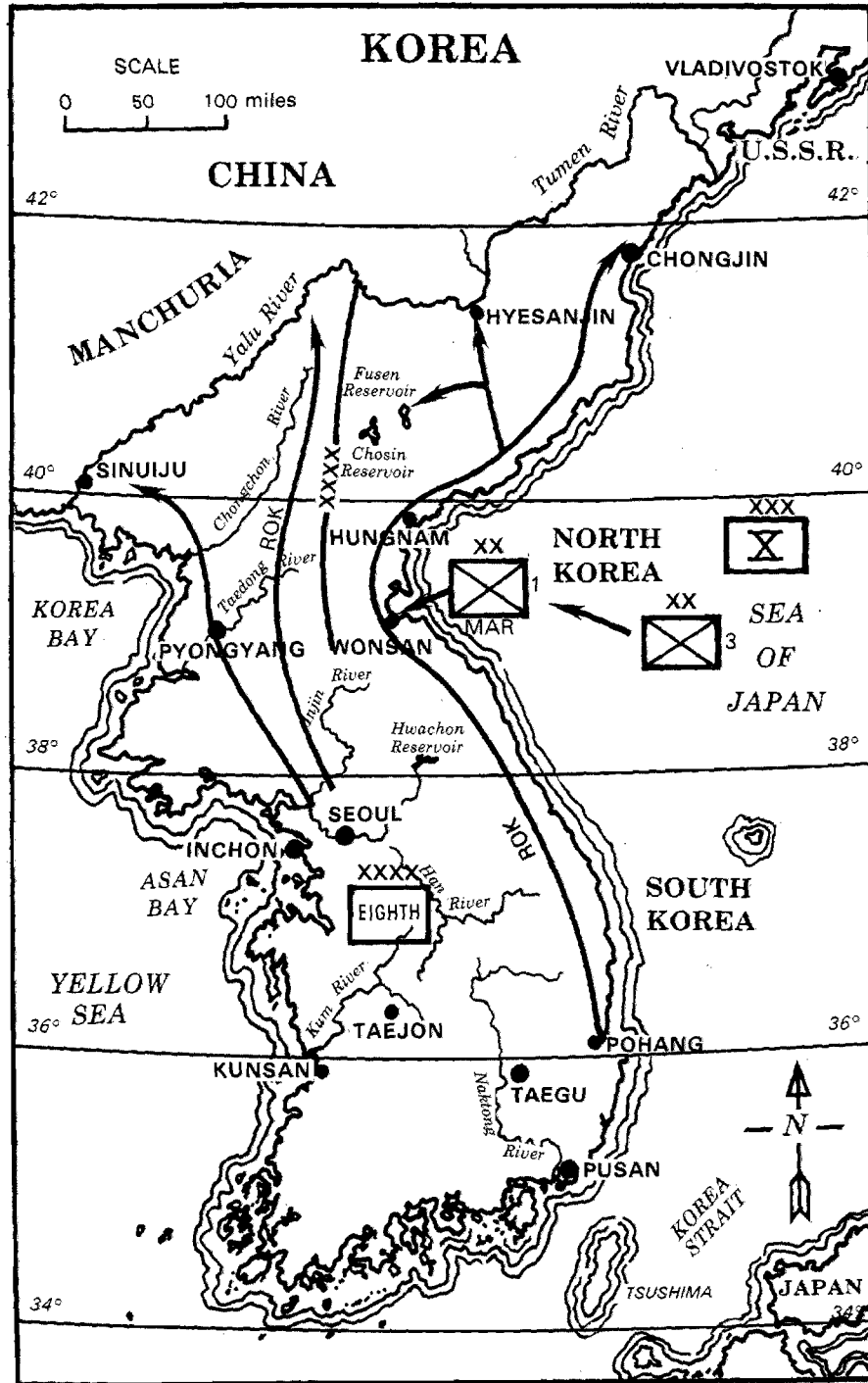
The confusion and coordination problems within X Corps lasted beyond the Inchon landings on 15 September. The capture of Seoul proceeded slowly, and Almond did not endear himself to his units with his excessive prodding for them to move faster

and his meddling that occurred down to regimental and battalion level. Only the overwhelming power of UN forces prevented serious consequences from these problems in coordination and personality at the corps level.<sup>7</sup>

After its capture of Seoul and its linkup with Eighth Army, X Corps was withdrawn through the Inchon beachhead and landed on the eastern coast of Korea at Wonsan and Iwon.<sup>8</sup> Thus, instead of being sent north with Eighth Army, the withdrawing X Corps caused massive confusion and supply bottlenecks. It did not help when advancing Republic of Korea (ROK) forces took Wonsan before the Marine spearheads of the X Corps could make it ashore through the minefields that filled the harbor.<sup>9</sup> The X Corps landings from 25 through 29 October established the U.S. and ROK forces in northeast Korea, but at the same time, the X Corps was virtually isolated from the remainder of the UN forces.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, General Almond drew supplies directly from Japan, bypassing Eighth Army, to rapidly build up his forces. The X Corps, which included the newly arrived 3d Infantry Division, was set for a "race to the Yalu" against crumbling North Korean opposition. It seemed as if the war was winding to a successful close (see map 1).

The heady optimism of October and November 1950 (the "home for Christmas" offensive) soon disappeared as the Siberian winds intruded and a massive Chinese force threw back and crippled X Corps units. The units near the Yalu hurriedly retreated, but the major Marine Corps and Army formations near the Chosin Reservoir were cut off. General Almond and his staff had blindly followed the guidance of the supremely optimistic Far Eastern Command, which seemed to ignore or discount sign after sign of a possible massive Chinese intervention. Almond directed his units to race to the Yalu without regard to their flanks or to the location of any enemy forces. Afterwards, some officers blamed Almond for this apparently reckless behavior. An equal number of officers understood that Almond was only following orders from MacArthur. Nonetheless, Almond almost certainly followed MacArthur blindly and tended to ignore or downplay the warning signs. As a commander of an independent corps, Almond should have been more vigilant and cautious.<sup>11</sup>

Almond pushed his units hard, especially the more conservative 1st Marine Division. General Smith, the Marine commander, was leery of an operation in such mountainous terrain so far from the sea and was cautious—at the cost of numerous prodding visits from Almond. Other division staffs that attempted



Map 1. The Eighth Army and X Corps' invasion of North Korea

to plan careful, conservative troop advances sometimes lost their subordinate units to the X Corps in Almond's headlong rush to be the first to reach the Yalu. As the G3 of the ill-fated 7th Infantry Division stated:

We planned an orderly concentration and movement to Chosin, by first concentrating the regiments and moving them one by one . . . [but] this plan was never carried out. Before we knew it, Almond ordered our closest battalions and smaller units to Chosin, individually, and as fast as they could get there.<sup>12</sup>

As a result, as one modern author on the Korean War has stated: "The underestimation of CCF strength and the rush to launch the X Corps offensive per schedule on November 27 had led to an ill-advised thinning out of American forces on the east side of the Chosin Reservoir."<sup>13</sup>

So sure were Almond and his staff of the enemy's weakness that they thinned forces across the entire front. The prejudicial intelligence of MacArthur's Far Eastern Command—in particular the intelligence estimates of the FEC's G2, General Willoughby—asserted that a Chinese intervention was highly unlikely but that if it occurred the Chinese would suffer massive casualties to UN air power. This optimism colored the plans and ideas of all subordinate commands. Almond himself, shortly after the start of the Chinese offensive, visited an isolated regimental combat team (Task Force [TF] MacLean) that only a few days later was to be overwhelmed and destroyed while it attempted to break out of an encirclement by a Chinese division. He told the officers of the task force: "The enemy who is delaying you for the moment is nothing more than remnants of Chinese divisions fleeing north . . . We're still attacking and we're going all the way to the Yalu. Don't let a bunch of Chinese laundrymen stop you."<sup>14</sup>

When asked about his perceptions and decisions twenty years later, General Almond stated quite clearly that he had received his marching orders from General MacArthur to determine enemy strength in the area from Hungnam to the Yalu. He was determined to perform that mission until given other orders by MacArthur. Almond stated: "I was concerned with the immediate operations and operated under the orders that were at hand."<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, this explanation overlooks a commander's responsibility to remain independent in attitude and to rely on his own perceptions of the situation and the ground under his direct observation. Obviously, this was not the creed of Ned Almond.<sup>16</sup>



National Archives

Maj. Gen. Edward M. Almond, commanding general of U.S. X Corps, studying a map in northeast Korea

At the start of the massive Chinese intervention, the X Corps staff at first tried to ignore it or downplay its effect on the corps' offensive plans. Almond himself, seeking guidance from MacArthur, flew to Tokyo and conferred with MacArthur on 28 November. Even while X Corps units were being attacked and cut off by thousands of Chinese, Almond waited until MacArthur made a decision to "readjust his front by withdrawing from the contact with the enemy until it was clearer to all concerned the extent of the invasion."<sup>17</sup>

Almond returned to Korea on the morning of 29 November and only then proceeded to direct the G3 and other staff officers to begin planning for "the discontinuance of the X Corps attack to the northwest and the withdrawal of the Corps forces as a whole to allow for our redeployment in action against the enemy to be decided later by General MacArthur." Whether that redeployment was to be south to Pusan or west to link up with

Eighth Army was not yet clear. Early on the morning of the 30th, Almond assembled his entire staff and the commanders of his divisions, explained to them the new concentration of the corps, and ordered Generals Smith and Barr to "submit a plan for the withdrawal of the 31st and the 32d Regiments from the positions east of the lake into Hagaru-ri and the evacuation of the wounded."<sup>18</sup> (Here Almond was referring to Task Force Faith, previously called Task Force MacLean until Colonel MacLean became missing in action.) However, the plans were not prepared in time, and the task force was virtually destroyed during its retreat to the Marine positions at Hagaru-ri.<sup>19</sup>

The crisis that now faced the X Corps immediately affected the staff. In response to the new guidance and in an attempt to react to the rapidly changing situation for which they had no contingency plans, the X Corps staff prepared a succession of orders, each outlining vastly different types of operations. It then proceeded to publish these orders in rapid order, changing its plans each time before the subordinate divisions could do more than begin to react to the preceding order. As at Inchon, the corps specified missions for regiments and even battalions without coordinating the changes with their respective divisions. The 65th Regimental Combat Team (RCT) of the newly arrived 3d Infantry Division reeled from the confusion emanating from X Corps headquarters. The divisional history of the 3d Division during this period adequately sums up the situation: "During the 1st of December to the 3d of December 1950 three different plans of operations were either initiated or considered and later abolished following changes in orders and missions from higher headquarters . . . [due to the] rapidly changing requirements of Corps."<sup>20</sup> The result was chaos. As another critic of the X Corps staff noted:

For several days the harassed and overburdened X Corps staff, in response to Almond's directives, had been issuing a Niagara of orders to his far-flung units. These orders came down to the divisions, and then to the regiments, in a steady stream. The recipients remembered them as a series of conflicting "march and countermarch" orders that were consistently overtaken by events and that seemed to make little sense and gave the impression that X Corps had lost all control of the situation.<sup>21</sup>

The X Corps staff was doing what corps do worst—reacting to rapidly changing tactical environments. Planning, coordination, and shaping the battlefield are not possible if a corps

staff does not anticipate and foresee battlefield developments forty-eight to seventy-two hours in advance. A corps that is trying to catch up with a bold and unexpected enemy is often a hindrance to its subordinate units. It sends out orders that are old or wrong and do not reflect the current tactical situation. The X Corps staff in Korea in late November and early December 1950 was groping in the dark for solutions to the Chinese attacks and was always too late with its prescriptions.<sup>22</sup>



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Lt. Gen. Ned Almond of X Corps and his chief of staff, Brig. Gen. John S. Guthrie