WILLIAM EARL BARBER: A KENTUCKY HERO AT THE CHOSIN RESERVOIR

H. LEW WALLACE AND JAMES C. CLAYPOOL

The Korean hillside was deeply frozen and snow-covered, but by nightfall of 27 November 1950, Marine Captain William E. Barber and his men of Company F were dug in and set up. They were in place just in time. The Chinese moved in and attacked at 0230. Aggressive attackers, armed with machine guns, rifles, and grenades, a Chinese force of battalion numbers began a savage, seven-hour attack on Company F. Though Barber and his men repulsed thrust after thrust, they could do no more than hold their ground. At the end of the seven-hour conflict, Company F was surrounded. Barber radioed position — and situation — back to headquarters. He received orders to fight his way back to a large relieving force that had been sent out to restore contact with separated units.[1] Barber faced a dilemma; he resolved it in a way which was to lead to five days of unremitting combat with ever larger Chinese forces, to his being awarded the Medal of Honor, and to a new way of interpreting the conditions under which future Medals of Honor would be awarded.

William Earl Barber was born 30 November 1919, in Dehart, Kentucky, the eighth of ten children. His father George W. Barber, a farmer, carpenter, and builder, had been a modestly successful man until the Depression; then he shared the country's hard times. Yet in spite of the difficult years, he was able to send all of his children through high school (in nearby West Liberty) and most of them to college. William Barber attended

---

H. LEW WALLACE, PH. D., teaches history at Northern Kentucky University in Highland Heights. JAMES C. CLAYPOOL, PH.D., is University Archivist and Curator at Northern Kentucky University.

1 Andrew Geer, *The New Breed: The Story of the U.S. Marines in Korea* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952), 295-97; R. C. McCarthy, "Fox Hill," *Marine Corps Gazette* (March 1953): 16-18.

Morehead State Teacher's College in Morehead (now Morehead University) for two years from 1937 to 1939.

In early 1940 he enlisted in the Marine Corps. Although war had come to Europe and though there was an obvious emphasis for every U.S. service to start planning and preparation, the Marine Corps was still a very small force of just over 18,000 when Barber joined. Men of particular abilities stood out. Barber proved exceptionally adept with weapons during training at Parris Island, South Carolina, and, after boot camp, he was kept there as a marksmanship instructor. Feeling confined by the regimen of Parris Island and wanting to see something of the large world (one of the reasons he had joined the Marines), Barber applied for the Marine Corps parachute program at Lakehurst, New Jersey, in late summer, 1941. He finished the rigorous program and was assigned to the school as an instructor.[2] He was there in December 1941 when the European war became an American war as well.

After Pearl Harbor, the pace of life and the expansion of the Marine Corps quickened equally. The Corps opened two new parachute training schools in San Diego, California, and in New River, North Carolina. Barber served at both areas, was promoted to sergeant in 1942, entered Officer Candidates School in Quantico, Virginia, and was commissioned a second lieutenant 11 August 1943.

He returned to the parachute school in San Diego, but by 1944, for a variety of reasons, the Corps disbanded its parachute divisions. Barber was made a rifle platoon leader in the 5th Marine Division and assigned to the Pacific theater. On 19 February 1945, he landed with his company at Iwo Jima. The Iwo campaign was the only combat experience Barber had in World War II, but it was quite an experience for the twenty-five-year-old marine. The fighting was fierce and concentrated.

---

2 Taped interview with Colonel William Earl Barber (USMC, Ret.), conducted by H. Lew Wallace, Professor of History and James C. Claypool, Professor of History and University Archivist, Northern Kentucky University, 28-29 September 1982.

Barber led his platoon through several days of what he later, in typical understatement, described as "some pretty intense combat."[3] Barber was awarded the Silver Star for gallantry during prolonged combat, specifically for rescuing two of his wounded comrades. Barber himself was later wounded, evacuated to a field hospital, then returned to his unit. The casualties among officers had been particularly high. By normal combat attrition, Barber became company commander, serving on through the remainder of the campaign and in Japan during the occupation.[4]

He returned to the United States as a first lieutenant in 1946, and from 1946 to 1950 performed recruiting duty, served again as a rifle company commander, and acted as inspector-instructor for a reserve unit, achieving the rank of captain. In October he received orders for Korea.[5]

America's remembrances of Korea have mellowed through the years. The bitterness and frustrations of the long war in Vietnam have intervened, and Korea in retrospect seems to have been a conventional war of clearly defined objectives. In 1945 Korea had been divided into two zones of occupation, Soviet and American, separated by the 38th parallel. In the post-1945 years, antagonism between the United States and the Soviet Union mounted, although Korea itself was not considered by the U.S. to be a point of crucial encounter with Soviet power.[6] There were vague hopes that Korea would become a united country, and the U.S. sponsored some feeble attempts for such an arrangement. In September 1947, the United States told the Soviet Union that it was referring the problem of the reunion and independence of Korea to the United Nations. Early the next year the Soviets denied a U.N. Commission entry into North Korea. The result was the formation of two governments in Korea, the Soviet-sponsored People's Republic in the North and an Ameri-

---

3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Robert H. Ferrell, *American Diplomacy: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 766.

William Earl Barber

Northern Kentucky University Archives

William Earl Barber

Northern Kentucky University Archives

can-sponsored government under President Syngman Rhee in the South.[7]

That the affairs of Korea were a minor concern of American military and political policy was readily apparent. In general and in spite of East-West tensions, American military preparedness had disintegrated after World War II. And in Korea, U.S. forces had been rapidly withdrawn. Political actions also seemed to diminish Korean importance. In a speech in January 1950 Secretary of State Dean Acheson stated that South Korea was outside the "containment" perimeter of the United States.[8] Similar sentiments were expressed by government and military leaders, including General Douglas MacArthur, who offered the thought that only a lunatic would fight on the mainland of Asia. These statements would later spawn widespread criticism that the U.S. had virtually invited a communist invasion of South Korea. In truth, of course, the U.S. had no intention of implying that Korea could be taken without resistence.[9] There were many compelling reasons to believe that Korea was as much a "back-burner" issue for the Soviets as it was for the United States. After 1950, historians and military strategists had to scurry to find reasons for the Korean War. There have been various explanations. The Soviets were testing containment, feeling out soft spots in American defenses. They were trying to divert attention from the establishment of Japanese democracy and to prevent a similar success in South Korea. They were seeking to demonstrate American weakness and their own strength through their North Korean surrogates. Implicit in all this was the idea that the strings were pulled by the Soviet Union, though it is possible to speculate that the North Koreans

---

7 Ibid.

8 Dorris Clayton James, *The Years of MacArthur: Triumph and Disaster: 1945-1964* (8 vols.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), III, 401-402; Ferrell, *American Diplomacy*, 766-67.

9 Ferrell, *American Diplomacy*, 766-67.

acted knowing the Soviets would have little choice but to support them.[10]

Whatever the validity of any of these hypotheses, what was absolutely clear was that on 25 June 1950, the North Koreans attacked South Korea. Outmanned and surprised by the attack from the north, South Korean forces were unable to repel, or even hold, the 90,000 heavily-armed soldiers of Inmin Gun, the North Korean People's Army. Only a sixth of the South Korean army was at the border when the attack came. Reinforcements hurried north but were simply swept aside by North Korean troops. By the time the capitol city of Seoul was overrun three days later, three-fourths of the Republic of Korea (ROK) Army had been lost. The first American ground forces rushed to Korea from Japan could give but little support to their South Korean allies. In a short time, American troops found themselves fighting on a peninsula in places they had never heard of.[11]

William Barber's Korean War began in late October 1950 when he assumed command of Company F of the 7th Marine Regiment, 1st Division. By the time Barber reached Korea, several factors had shifted the advantage from the North Koreans to the United Nations (although largely American) forces in Korea. By a good stroke of fortune, the Soviets were boycotting the U.N. Security Council and thus could not stop a U.S. request for U.N. action. This eventually gave the U.S. diplomatic advantages, and some, though smaller, military ones. But the greatest military advantage came through the brilliance of General MacArthur, the supreme commander.

Shortly after the North Koreans attacked, MacArthur visited Korea. There, amid the chaos, confusion, and disarray, he conceived of an amphibious landing at Inchon Harbor. Against every piece of conventional advice, against such formidable

---

10 Ibid.

11 Frazier Hunt, *The Untold Story of Douglas MacArthur* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1954), 451; Charles A. Willoughby and John Chamberlain, *MacArthur: 1941-1951* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1954), 357-60.

barriers as high tides, an urban landing site, and against all the odds, MacArthur succeeded. The Inchon landing caught the North Koreans (and everyone else) by surprise. North Korean forces had swept through South Korea and were concentrated in the southeast sector near Pusan. At Pusan was General William Walker's Eighth Army, an army that had hastily been assembled in Japan and sent to stem the North Korean forces.[12]

The Eighth Army had been more stemmed than stemming. It was soon bottled up. The North Koreans had been expecting MacArthur to reinforce Walker (the conventional tactic) then try to push northward. Instead the North Koreans found themselves with a large army behind them. The pressure exerted by MacArthur at Inchon caused the North Koreans to waver in the southeast area, and Walker was able to break out of the Pusan bridgehead. In a matter of fifteen days MacArthur was able to force the North Korean forces back across the 38th parallel.[13]

The next step, which completely changed the nature of the Korean campaign, was crossing the 38th parallel. Once U.N. forces took this step, the purpose and scope of the war became uncertain. Most of that confusion must be attributed to General MacArthur. He made the major decisions about the war until the massive intervention by the Chinese in the Yalu region. Because of his brilliant successes in the south and because U.S. officials tacitly acquiesced with his assessments, MacArthur had his way. His purpose was to drive to the Yalu to achieve victory and the reunification of Korea. He did not permit possible Chinese intervention to deter him. His firm resolve overrode the concerns and hesitations of Washington and the U.N. He put forth his views to President Truman in mid October at Wake Island. MacArthur summed up his analysis with three

---

12 Ferrell, *American Diplomacy*, 768; Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 345-52; William Manchester, *American Caesar: Douglas MacArthur: 1880-1964* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1983), 559-61.

13 Courtney Whitney, *MacArthur: His Rendezvous With History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), 362-64.

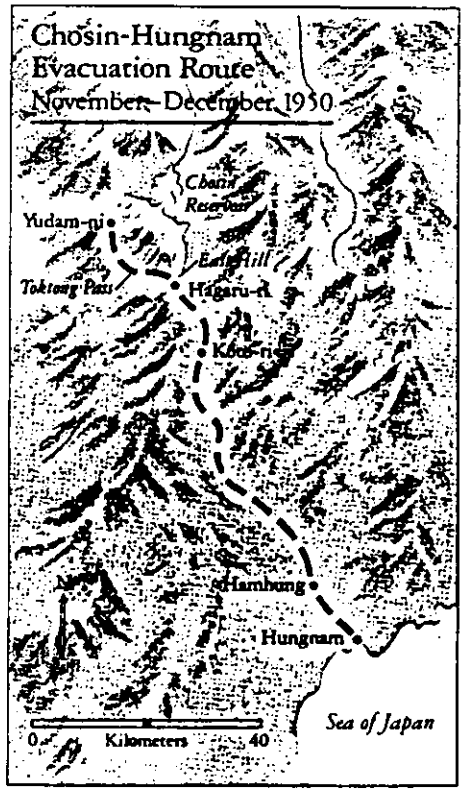
assurances: the war was already won; the Chinese would not attack; but if they did, they would readily be defeated. MacArthur's stance thus was to bear out the dictum that in one's greatest successes are often borne the seeds for one's greatest failures. Even as Truman and MacArthur met, the Chinese were preparing to intervene with a vast army. There were subtle signals from China about intervention, but they were ignored. Having captured the North Korean capital of Pyongyang in October, MacArthur confidently launched a new offensive in late November. Seldom had geopolitical-military strategy on so great a scale been so tightly wrapped around the ego of one man.[14]

Meantime, Barber had joined his unit outside Wonson on the east coast of Korea. His stage was much smaller than the grand geopolitical-military strategy evolving around him, but it was a stage beset with potential problems in set design. He was a replacement commander; he had no combat tenure in Korea; he was faced with the immediate problem of sizing up a situation that was evolving even as he was measuring it; he was the new and untested commander. But at least there were no immediate challenges to his leadership, although they would emerge fairly soon.[15] The American Marine forces began advancing in gradual but well-coordinated moves on 2 November. Advancing for more than three weeks they encountered some Chinese troops, though only occasionally and in small numbers, giving the impression that they may have entered only with small, volunteer units. By late November the 1st, 5th, and 7th Marine regiments were deployed around the area of the Chosin Reservoir. The 5th and 7th were concentrated at Yudam-ni while the 1st guarded the main supply route at Koto-ri; Barber's Fox Company, the most advanced unit of the 7th Marines, was assigned to hold a "three-mile mountain pass along the division's main supply route and

---

14 Manchester, *American Caesar*, 583; Edwin P. Hoyt, *The Bloody Road to Panmunjom* (New York: Stein and Day, 1985), 53-64.

15 Barber, Wallace-Claypool interview, 28-29 September 1982.

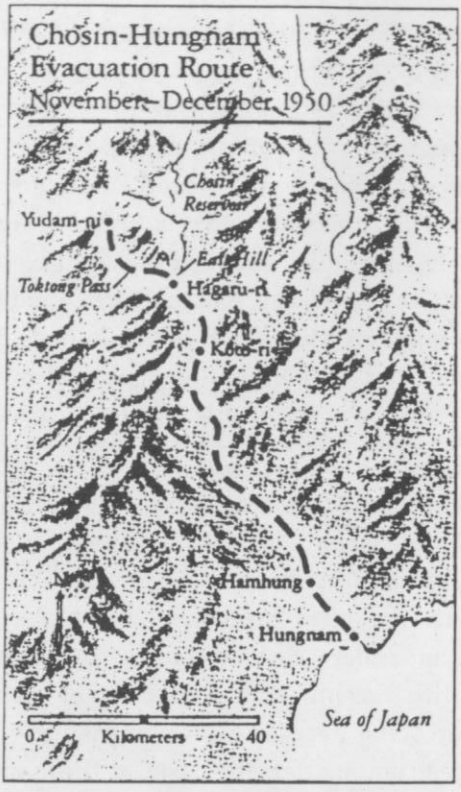


Vicinity of the Chosin Reservoir
Marine Corps Gazette

commanding the only route of approach" from Yudam-ni to Hagaru-ri.[16] Barber moved his men from the perimeter of Hagaru-ri to the Toktong Pass. He received his orders at 1130. The going was rough, cold, and exhausting, but by nightfall Fox Company was in position.

Barber had gone ahead of the company to make a reconnaissance of the area and to select a defensive position, "Fox Hill," following a time-honored maxim of commanding the high ground. The hill overlooked the road that ran through Toktong Pass. He arranged his platoons in the form of an inverted U, with rocket, mortar, and rifle units located in strategic and

16 McCarthy, "Fox Hill," 16; Joseph C. Goulden, *Korea: The Untold Story of the War* (New York: Times Books, 1982), 355-57.



Vicinity of the Chosin Reservoir
Marine Corps Gazette

commanding the only route of approach" from Yudam-ni to Hagaru-ri.[16] Barber moved his men from the perimeter of Hagaru-ri to the Toktong Pass. He received his orders at 1130. The going was rough, cold, and exhausting, but by nightfall Fox Company was in position.

Barber had gone ahead of the company to make a reconnaissance of the area and to select a defensive position, "Fox Hill," following a time-honored maxim of commanding the high ground. The hill overlooked the road that ran through Toktong Pass. He arranged his platoons in the form of an inverted U, with rocket, mortar, and rifle units located in strategic and

16 McCarthy, "Fox Hill," 16; Joseph C. Goulden, *Korea: The Untold Story of the War* (New York: Times Books, 1982), 355-57.

mutually supporting positions around the loops and base of the configuration.[17]

Barber ordered his men to dig foxholes before putting up tents. This was a safer task, though it was laborious and bone-numbing. The cold was bitter — in the range of 20° below zero; and it was dark before all positions were dug in, too late to erect warming tents. Barber made his final inspection in the dark; he ordered half the unit to stand alert. The remaining half crawled into cold sleeping bags to rest.[18]

Things quieted down along the lines, but just when they became most quiet the Chinese launched a battalion-strength attack at around 0230.[19] The Chinese had intervened on a massive scale. In retrospect, one wonders why they did not intervene earlier as the American forces edged closer to the Yalu River. China had made it clear that it would not tolerate American forces on its border with Korea and to support its position had undertaken a massive buildup of troops along the Yalu. Still, the hope — or illusion — that China would not intervene was maintained until the day after Thanksgiving.[20] Whatever speculation or suspicion that the front-line troops had about Chinese intervention, the event itself was stunning. In the face of shock, the men of Fox Company reacted quickly. Fifteen men were killed and nine wounded out of thirty-five in the foremost line. But the Marines inflicted heavy casualties among the attackers and retreated in order when forced back to secondary positions, thus allowing the entire company time to prepare for the fight. For Barber, the moment of supreme challenge to his leadership had arrived. By all accounts he performed magnificently, moving from one critical area to another when necessary, holding others steadfast against heavy odds.[21]

---

17 Barber, Wallace-Claypool interview, 28-29 September 1982.
18 Ibid.
19 McCarthy, "Fox Hill," 18; Goulden, *Korea*, 355-57.
20 Ferrell, *American Diplomacy*, 770.
21 Geer, *The New Breed*, 296-98.

Daybreak revealed the price paid by both sides. Twenty Marines were killed and fifty-four wounded; four hundred and fifty Chinese were killed plus an unknown number of wounded. Shortly after daybreak Barber ordered his men to retake the hilltop lost the night before. The Marines regained the high ground. Against long odds, Barber's men had held off a murderous, surprise attack with overpowering firepower. But there was a price. Fox Company faced a shortage of ammunition. Barber asked for an air strike and an airdrop. The air strike came first. Barber did not have the radio equipment necessary to direct the pilots directly but was able to relay messages through Hagaru-ri.

P-41's, flown by Australians, made the strike. The Australians dropped bombs, fired rockets at ridges, and then strafed the pass. Except for isolated shots, enemy fire stopped. The Marines cheered the Australians. The air strike was the first thing they had had to cheer about since the attack began. Though still short of supplies, it gave Barber and his men their first opportunity to care for the wounded. Corpsmen set up two tents and did the best they could with limited supplies. The cold took its toll on supplies as well as men. Blood plasma froze. Morphine syrettes had to be warmed in the mouths of corpsmen before they could be used. There were, depending on one's view, too little tent space or too many wounded. The corpsmen improvised. Holes were dug in the snow and wounded were placed there in sleeping bags and rotated from hole to tent. The rotation system beat the cold. None of the wounded froze to death.[22]

In early afternoon transport planes dropped ammunition and supplies. Before the drop the Marines had added weapons and ammunition to diminished caches by collection among the enemy dead, but the drop was nonetheless anxiously awaited. It was successful; the supplies were recovered quickly though at a price. A sniper shot wounded the first Marine to reach the

22 Ibid., 299-301; McCarthy, "Fox Hill," 19.

parachutes. His would-be rescuer was also wounded. The Marines killed the sniper, and a hastily formed detail dragged the supplies from the open area into a sheltering tree line.[23]

Sporadic firing continued during the day then trailed off at dark. But around 0200 the Chinese made several light probes then attacked in force. Barber, whose quarters were at the bottom of "Fox Hill," hurried up to the point of heaviest contact. He and another officer were hit in the legs. Barber had his wounds attended but remained in action.[24] The second night of battle cost Barber twenty-six more casualties, twenty-one wounded, five dead. By dint of sheer firepower, the Marines kept the Chinese at bay, killing over three hundred and wounding two to three times that number. The Chinese were unable to rescue many of the wounded, so amid the firing and the cold, wounded Chinese screamed in pain until one by one they froze to death.[25]

Morning saw the company again low on supplies. Barber requested more airdrops, and he had men circle an open section of the hill with colored parachutes from the first drop. Transports made a morning and an afternoon drop. The morning drop was right on target, but the afternoon drop was a disaster, with most of the chutes landing several hundred yards outside the defense perimeter in areas exposed to enemy fire.[26]

The Chinese were ready. A recovery detail went outside the lines. But the Chinese waited for the men to reach the chutes, then opened with heavy firing. The men of the detail, running, zig-zagging, made their way back to the lines one-by-one.[27] Barber decided to wait until dark before making another attempt to get the essential supplies. Sometime in the morning Barber had heard from division headquarters at Hagaru-ri that reinforcements for his men were on their way. Then in the afternoon he

---

23 McCarthy, "Fox Hill," 19-20.
24 Barber, Wallace-Claypool interview, 28-29 September 1982.
25 Geer, *The New Breed,* 302.
26 Barber, Wallace-Claypool interview, 28-29 September 1982.
27 Geer, *The New Breed,* 301.

received bad news. Two rescue attempts had been driven back by ferocious attacks by the Chinese. Barber's situation was painfully obvious. His men were surrounded. He was told that another relieving force was going to leave Hagaru-ri. Barber's men desperately needed medical supplies and ammunition and were burdened with the wounded. He was told that another relieving force was about to leave Hagaru-ri and would move north. Barber was ordered to fight his way out of his present position and move south, where he would meet the relief force. The two units would then return to Hagaru-ri.[28]

But Barber was deeply troubled by his orders. He knew that if he retreated he would have to destroy everything but what his men could carry. He also realized that he would have to leave the dead and possibly the severely wounded Marines behind. He also knew that abandoning the pass would be in a sense abandoning the 5th and 7th Marine regiments, approximately 8,000 men, which were farther north fighting their way south to the place Barber was holding.[29] So Barber decided to stay. His decision was questioned, but he prevailed, although headquarters decided, knowing he was wounded, to evacuate him from further danger. Barber refused.

The war is far away now. Life changes, and the meaning of life changes. To some of later generations, Barber's actions and words might have the ring of melodrama. But not then, in a contest of real life and real death. Staff Sergeant Nick R. Rodriquez, who was with Barber, said of him later: "Captain Barber was literally crawling from position to position, encouraging his men. He didn't have to do this [or stay] but his example was the greatest inspiration we could have had."[30]

Barber tried to inspire his men, but he made no attempt to spare them knowledge of their situation. "He kept no secrets,"

---

28 Barber, Wallace-Claypool interview, 28-29, September 1982.

29 *Above and Beyond: A History of the Medal of Honor from the Civil War to Vietnam* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1985), 260.

30 *Licking Valley Courier* [West Liberty, Kentucky], 14 August 1952.

recalled Rodriquez.[31] Fox Company was short on medicine, short on food, short on ammunition but long on enemy forces. Barber told his men that it was crucial to recover the supplies from the second air drop. After dark, he sent ten men out. He told them that they were to carry no rifles, no arms of any kind, not even knives except his own which he gave them to cut the boxes of ammunition from the chutes. They were to stay close to each other and observe absolute silence.

Carrying no weapons meant they would be able to carry more supplies. Barber then ordered mortar and artillery bombardments on Chinese positions, giving the recovery unit covering fire. The supplies were recovered.[32]

If there had ever been any questions about his leadership, Barber was answering them. Actually there had been a few. Sergeant Rodriguez recalled that one of Barber's first orders when joining the company had been for all the men to shave — and this while on the march and in the cold. And on the way to Toktong Pass, he had ordered his men to set up an improvised firing range and test-fire all weapons. This action offended some of the men, including Rodriguez, who prided themselves on their expertise with weapons.[33] But whatever doubts and resentments there might have been were dissipated in the ongoing Chinese assault.

First Lieutenant Joseph R. Owen of Baker Company, the company trying to relieve Fox Company, recalled his own experiences at Chosin: ". . . I [had to] order, cajole, intimidate, encourage, promise and threaten the exhausted men into performance of duty."[34] Though there is no evidence of Barber threatening his men, the other words pretty well capture Barber's own approach to leadership. He could be tough, but he could also be tactful and aware of the fragility of the human condition.

---

31 Ibid.

32 Barber, Wallace-Claypool interview, 28-29 September 1982.

33 *Licking Valley Courier*, 14 August 1952.

34 Joseph R. Owens, "Chosin Reservoir Remembered," *Marine Corps Gazette* (December 1980): 54.

Though as a whole Marines in Korea maintained their overall morale and discipline, there were exceptions. Once while making his rounds, Barber ran into two men running through the snow, parkas flapping, boots off, and in their stocking feet. Barber asked where they were going. They said, as Barber recalled, something to the effect of "Well, we're getting to hell out of here." There were, of course, any number of things Barber could have done, the very least of which would have been to use his weapon to force-march them back to the line. Instead, he said, "We can talk about this," adding "You're not going anywhere, and we won't haggle about that. But there are other things we can talk about if you want to." And so they talked, three men in the ghostly snow and bitter cold of Korean mountains. In the end Barber told them he was going to deliver them to their platoon leader. "I will make sure he talks to you about this in the morning. But I will make a deal with you. In the morning maybe you can come up with a plan that is better than mine, and if so I will listen." The men returned to their unit, and Barber did not pursue the matter.[35] (They did not come up with another plan, one might add.) And that was that, one small rather astonishing moment not covered in Marine manuals on leadership.

The wound worried Barber. Doctors discovered later that a bullet had gone into his hip, shattering bone, and sending infection down his leg. But what bothered him most was the effect it might have on his mind. He had morphine but "I wasn't getting very much sleep and very much rest and so I told a couple of people close to me [his executive officer and his first sergeant]: 'I want you to analyze every decision I make, everything I say, and if you find me befuddled or irrational, I want you to tell me, and if you think I can't understand . . . do whatever you think is necessary.' "[36] No one ever had to tell Barber. He held

35 Barber, Wallace-Claypool interview, 28-29 September 1982.
36 Ibid.

up all the way. But that he considered the possibility and planned for it was another indication of his quality of leadership.

His mind stayed clear, but the wound got worse, stiffing under the cold and the infection. Barber had trouble getting up and down, though once up he could hobble with help of a cane or an occasional helping hand. But when he sat down or got up, he had to be helped.[37] Crawling in and out of a sleeping bag was another form of torture. The least painful times were the attacks, when the wound had to be forgotten temporarily.

The Chinese attacks continued to ebb and flow. During odd moments of inaction Barber kept his men busy, forcing them away from the natural reaction to let down and go slack after intense battle. He kept the area within the defense perimeter clean and orderly; the men picked up and buried trash and discarded ration cans, arranged the dead and covered them with ponchos and added their weapons and supplies to the company's caches. Barber kept air strikes and airdrops coming in.[38] The days and nights passed. The Marines held on but so did the Chinese, who were deeply dug in on the ridge opposite the hill and across the pass. They were able to withstand almost constant air-artillery-mortar fire. There was an air of standoff, but it was a standoff that the Marines could not long endure. The odds were with the Chinese.

But the standoff ended abruptly. On the night of 1-2 December Barber heard that a relief force, the 1st Battalion of 7th Marine Regiment, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Raymond G. Davis, was approaching, having made an epic, overland, battle-scarred march from Yudam-ni. Barber sent a patrol to divert the enemy on a section of the ridgeline south and east of Fox Hill which the Chinese held with force. The patrol engaged the Chinese, diverting them long enough for the 1st Battalion to move in and drive them out.[39]

---

37 McCarthy, "Fox Hill," 22; *Licking Valley Courier*, 14 August 1952.

38 Geer, *The New Breed*, 306.

39 Barber, Wallace-Claypool interview, 28-29 September 1982; *Marine Corps Gazette* (March 1953) : 23.

By 1630 on 2 December, the dramatic linkup on Fox Hill between Barber's Company and Davis's relief force had occurred. No one had time to celebrate. Davis set up his headquarters, moved into defensive positions for the night, and, under supervision of the battalion doctor, treated the wounded. There were no further casualties on 2 December, for the Chinese were strangely quiet throughout the night.

The quiet continued for a time on 3 December, as the 1st Battalion prepared to accomplish its assigned mission of clearing the left side of the road back to Hagaru-ri. Then just as the doctor was giving last instructions to Fox Company corpsmen a sniper opened fire, killing the doctor and a corpsman and wounding another. And there was to be one more threat to the area. A helicopter, bringing medical supplies to Fox Hill, was hit by Chinese ground fire, and crashed, killing the pilot, in the center of the Fox Hill defense area. Barber oversaw the final details of the evacuation of Fox Hill. All excess equipment was burned. All dead and wounded, including those of the 1st Battalion, were brought on the march but were turned over to Fox Company and loaded on trucks. His final act of command was to turn the company over to Lieutenant George Peterson who, though wounded twice, was the only officer left capable of supervising the retreat back to Hagaru-ri. The 5th and 7th Marine regiments retreated through the cold and snow, fighting their way down the road. For Fox Company, the trek from Fox Hill to Hagaru-ri was a rugged march, but fortunately without a major engagement with the Chinese.

Fox Company had left Hagaru-ri on 27 November with 240 Marines. When it arrived in Hagaru-ri on 4 December the company had only 122 men still capable of fighting. Three were missing (and never found), eighty-nine were wounded, and twenty-six were dead. Six of its seven officers had been wounded. But the company had given much more than it had gotten; and it was still a fighting unit.[40]

---

40 Geer, *The New Breed*, 307; *Marine Corps Gazette* (March 1953): 22-23; Hoyt, *Bloody Road to Panmunjom*, 125-27.

It is possible to overstate what Fox Company did. One can — and it is a tempting parallel — compare the six-day stand to the battle of Thermopylae, where a small army of Spartans defended the pass to the last man against the Persians. But the parallel does not quite hold up. The stand at Thermopylae changed a much larger course of world history among other and obvious differences. And there were, as Barber always maintained, other Marine and Army units that withstood stiff probes and tough, sustained firefights. But it is equally possible to understate the saga of Fox Company. Probably no unit was as isolated, farther from friendly forces, with fewer options, and with a more strategic position to hold. And if the actions of Barber and his men did not alter the broad sweep of history, they did alter the margin between a potential rout and the controlled withdrawal that actually occurred, between moderate and unacceptable losses, indeed between life and death for 8,000 Marines. Although the five days at Chosin became an event in military lore, what is surprising is that it did not become better known, longer remembered in popular annals. That it did not is probably a comment on the effect on the American public of the unsettling, anticlimactic end to the war in Korea.

Barber's war in Korea ended at Fox Hill. He was evacuated to Japan. His leg was infected and his wounds were painful. The infection had to be treated before doctors could remove the bullet that had gone straight into his hip. For a time the doctors were concerned that they would not be able to remove the bullet. But in early January 1951, they operated successfully and Barber, who made an excellent recovery, returned to the United States in March.[41]

It was quite a long time before Barber heard that he was going to be awarded the Medal of Honor. That he deserved a high order of decoration was never in doubt. That he deserved the highest order was not particularly a matter of dispute. But the basis for the citation was. Traditionally, the Medal of Honor

41 Barber, Wallace-Claypool interview, 28-29 September 1982.

had been awarded for a single, dramatic incident that met the criteria for the award. But Barber had not fallen on a hand grenade, nor taken out a machine gun nest, nor charged an enemy single-handed. Barber recalled that his citation (and the citation for Colonel Davis, who commanded the battalion that fought its way to Barber's position and who shared the distinction of altering the award criteria) was "regardless of how you slice it, essentially for acts of leadership."[42] But these acts added up — for Marine high command, the Naval Awards Board, and the Secretary of Defense — to heroism of the highest order. Barber and Colonel Davis were awarded the Medal of Honor, thereby establishing a new precedent for the award. In August 1952, President Harry S. Truman presented Barber his Medal of Honor, reading from the citation:

> For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty.... Aware that leaving [his] position would sever contact with the 8,000 Marines trapped at Yudamni and jeopardize their chances of joining the 3,000 more awaiting their arrival in Hagaru-ri for the continued drive to the sea, he chose to risk the loss of his command rather than sacrifice more men if the enemy seized control and forced a renewed battle to regain the position or abandon his many wounded who were unable to walk.... His profound faith and courage, great personal valor and unwavering fortitude were decisive factors in successful withdrawal of the division from the death trap in the Chosin Reservoir....[43]

Barber retired from active duty 30 April 1970 with the rank of colonel. After Korea, he served in numerous posts in the United States. He also served overseas in Thailand, Okinawa, and Vietnam. In 1963 on a one-year leave, he finished his degree at Morehead University, some twenty-three years after he had left to join the Marines to "see the world." Colonel Barber now lives in California, but he frequently returns "home" to Kentucky.

With the award of the Medal of Honor, William Earl Barber has become a nationally known military hero. Marine Corps

---

42 Ibid.

43 Copy of Medal of Honor citation from the private papers of Colonel Barber.

Commandant General R. H. Barrow said of Barber in a letter written in October 1981:

> I regard your performance as Commander of Fox Company at Toktong Pass from 27 November 1950 to 2 December 1950 as the single most distinguished act of personal courage and extraordinary leadership I have witnessed or about which I have read.
>
> Your courageous leadership inspired many to endure incredible odds and emerge victorious in battle. It stands as the premier example of the character that has distinguished Marines since 1775.[44]

Kentucky has produced a long list of military heroes. William Earl Barber of West Liberty certainly stands high among those on that list.

---

44 Barrow to Barber, October 1981 on the occasion of Northern Kentucky University's program honoring Barber and Kentucky's 192nd Tank Corps from the Philippine Campaign of World War II, organized by James C. Claypool, 6 May 1988.