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A defining moment



Gene Dixon of Traverse City is a career military man who spent 20 years with the U.S. Marine Corps. Of all the action he saw in the Korean War, he said the Chosin Reservoir episode of 1950 stands out most.

"It was one of the toughest battles that the Marines saw in Korea," said Dixon, a communicator in a weapons company with an infantry battalion. "It was 35 to 40 below zero and we were trapped. We were surrounded by the Chinese forces and we had to fight 35 miles down a narrow road to get to freedom."

The episode started shortly after the Thanksgiving meal, when his unit was ordered to relocate west of the frozen reservoir to provide support to other units that were encountering stiff opposition.

When they arrived in the area after dark on Nov. 27, "all hell broke loose," Dixon wrote in his memoirs.

"The Chinese were coming at us from all directions. Units of our battalion had barely gotten organized before bullets started flying," he said.

The fierce fight continued through the bitterly cold night, during which the Chinese yelled and blew bugles to intimidate U.S. troops. Instead of going on the offensive, Dixon said, his unit could only hold their ground.

In early December, the unit was ordered to fight its way out through extreme weather conditions that included snow, wind and poor visibility. Troops were told to get rid of excess items —some even threw their sleeping bags on the fire —that would weigh them down. Once they

started, there would be no stopping. Supplies like ammunition, water and food —often frozen and chipped out bean by bean — would be dropped by air.

On Dec. 10, 1950, after waiting out a delay to build a new, airdropped bridge to replace one the Chinese blew up, Dixon celebrated his 21st birthday by walking out of the Chosin Reservoir alive. He believes his division of 20,000 lost about 4,000 men. Most, including Dixon, suffered from frostbite.

Though he spent 15 more years in the Marines after the Korean War, he calls the Chosin Reservoir episode a defining moment.

"I think it probably made my life more complete," said Dixon, 82, who in October received the Ambassador for Peace medal from the South Korean government. "It made me appreciate the things we have today more than I might have. It makes you really have to think about how fragile your life is because there are people out there who want to kill you.

"War is war, and the only way you know how it's lived is to live it."