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Chapter 9

Task Force Crombez

While the 23d Regimental Combat Team, surrounded by Chinese Communists at Chipyeong-ni, braced itself for the second night of the siege, a regiment of the 1st Cavalry Division set out on a sort of rescue mission: to drive through enemy lines, join the encircled unit and give it all possible assistance. Specifically, it was to open the road for supply vehicles and ambulances.¹

On 14 February 1951, the 5th Cavalry Regiment was in corps reserve when the commanding general of U.S. IX Corps (Maj.Gen. Bryant E. Moore) alerted it for possible action. It was midafternoon when he first telephoned the regimental commander (Col. Marcel G. Crombez) warning him to make plans for an attack along the road running from Yaju to Koksuri and then northeast into Chipyeong-ni a road distance of fifteen miles.² Another force, attacking along the better and more direct road to Chipyeong-ni, had been unable to make fast enough progress because of heavily entrenched enemy forces along its route.

Immediately relaying the warning order to subordinate units, Colonel Crombez organized a task force.³

In addition to the three organic infantry battalions of the 5th Cavalry, he included a medical company, a company of combat engineers, two battalions of field artillery of which one was equipped with self-propelled howitzers, two platoons of medium tanks, and an attached company of medium tanks.⁴ The last named

¹ 5th Cavalry Regiment: S-3 report, 15 February 1951.

² The narrative of this action is based upon a series of interviews made and recorded in March 1951 by Capt. Martin Blumenson with officers and men of Task Force Crombez. They were submitted as part of Eighth Army: command report, section V (After Action Interviews: Task Force Crombez). In this narrative, reference to the interviews will be made by referring to separate interviews as statements by the person under interview.

³ Statement of Col. Marcel G. Crombez.

⁴ 5th Cavalry Regiment: command report, 14 February 1951.

Company D, 6th Tank Battalion was not a part of the 1st Cavalry Division, but happened to be located closer than any other available tank company. General Moore attached Company D to the 5th Cavalry and ordered it to get under way within thirty minutes to join that unit. Company D was on the road twenty-eight minutes later. At 1700 that afternoon, the corps commander again called:⁵

"You'll have to move out tonight," he told Colonel Crombez, "and I know you'll do it."⁶

In the darkness, trucks and vehicles formed a column along the narrow, rutted road, snow covered and patched with ice. Moving under black-out conditions and in enemy territory, all units except the two artillery battalions crossed the Han River and advanced approximately half of the distance to Chipyong-ni. About midnight the regimental column halted at a destroyed bridge where units formed defensive perimeters while combat engineers rebuilt the structure.⁷

At daylight on 15 February, the 1st Battalion jumped off again this time on foot. Its mission was to seize a terrain feature on the right which dominated the road for several miles to the north. When the battalion was engaged after moving a hundred or two hundred yards, Colonel Crombez sent the 2d Battalion to attack north on the left side of the road. Within an hour or two a full-scale regimental attack was in progress. Two artillery battalions supported the action, lifting their fire only for air strikes. Chinese resistance was firm. Observers in airplanes reported large enemy forces north of the attacking battalions.⁸

The advance lagged throughout the morning. Sensing that the enemy offered too much opposition for the infantry battalions to be able to reach Chipyong-ni by evening, Colonel Crombez decided that only an armored task force would be able to penetrate the enemy-held territory.⁹ With corps and division headquarters pressing for progress, Colonel Crombez separated the tanks a total of twenty-three from his regimental column, and organized an armored task force. The tanks came from Company D, 6th Tank Battalion, and Company A, 70th Tank Battalion. He also ordered a company of infantrymen to accompany the tanks in order to protect them from fanatic enemy troops who might attempt to knock out the tanks at close range. This task fell to Company L, 5th Cavalry

⁵ Statement of Lt.Col. George B. Pickett.

⁶ Crombez, op. cit.

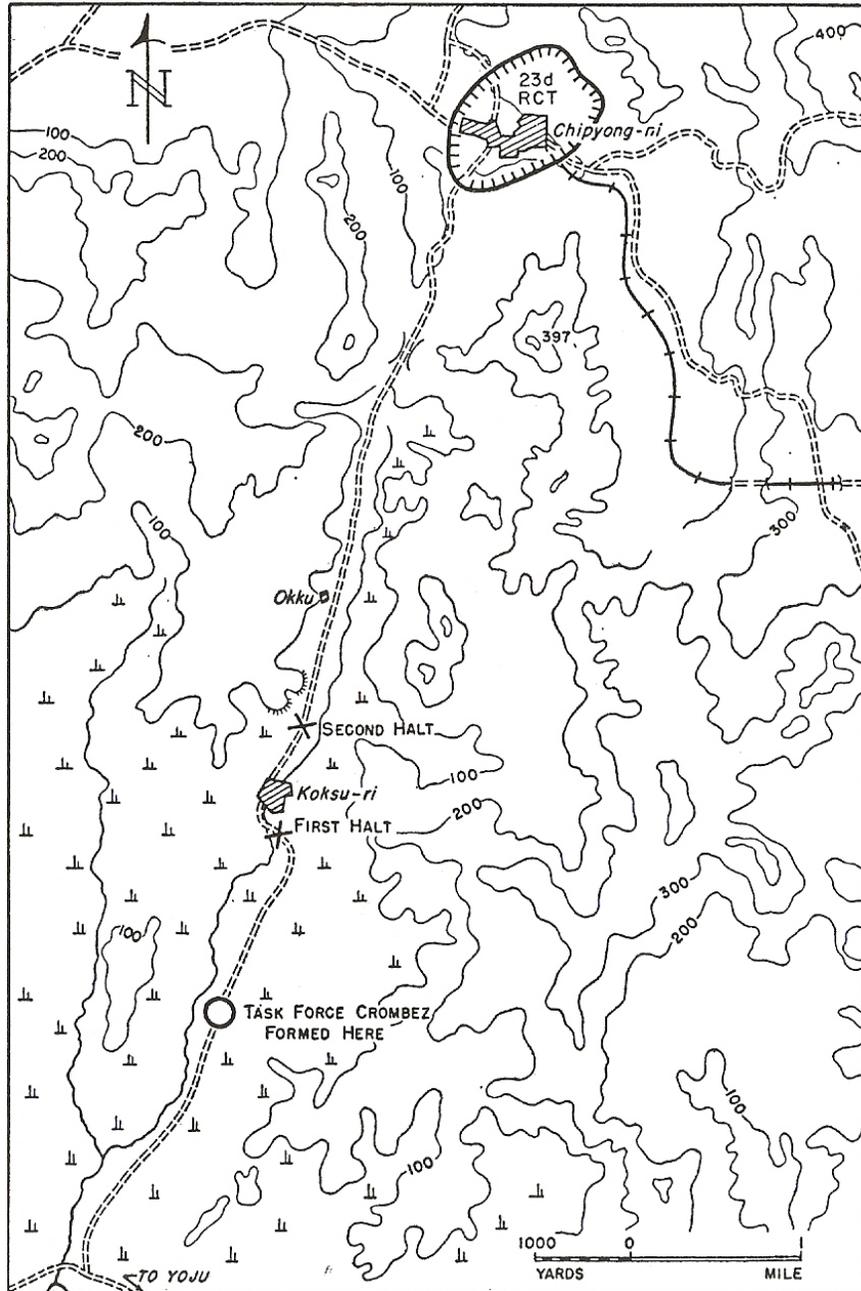
⁷ Statement of Major Robert A. Humphrey.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Crombez, op. cit.

Regiment.¹⁰ In addition, four combat engineer soldiers were ordered to go along to lift any antitank mines that might be discovered. The engineers and the infantrymen were to ride on top of the tanks.¹¹

While the tanks maneuvered into position, Colonel Crombez reconnoitered the road to Chipyeong-ni by helicopter. It was a secondary road even by Korean



¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

standards: narrow, with mountain slopes on the left side and flat rice paddies on the right, except at a deep roadcut a mile south of Chipyong-ni where, for a short distance, steep cliffs walled both sides of the road.

Meanwhile, the Company L commander (Capt. John C. Barrett) and the commander of Company D, 6th Tank Battalion (Capt. Johnnie M. Hiers), worked out the plans at company level. The two officers agreed that when the tanks stopped, the troopers would dismount, deploy on both sides of the road, and protect the tanks and the engineers who might be lifting mines. When the tank column was ready to proceed, Captain Hiers would inform the tankers by radio; the tankers, in turn, would signal the troopers to remount.¹²

The M46 tanks of the 6th Tank Battalion were placed to lead the 70th Tank Battalion's M4A3 tanks because the M46s mounted 90-mm guns, could turn completely around in place (an important consideration in the mountainous terrain traversed by a single and narrow road), and had better armor protection than the M4A3 tanks, which mounted only 76-mm guns.¹³

Original plans called for a separate column of supply trucks and ambulances to follow the tanks. Colonel Crombez, however, doubted if such a column could get through. He decided to proceed with only the armored vehicles. When the road was clear and suitable for wheeled traffic, he would radio instructions to the supply vehicles and ambulances. By radio he informed the commanding officer of the 23d RCT that he was coming, but without the supply trains.

"Come on," the commander of the encircled force answered; "trains or no trains."¹⁴

Just before the task force left, the commander of the 3d Battalion, 5th Cavalry (Lt.Col. Edgar J. Treacy, Jr.) arranged for a 2 1/2-ton truck to follow the rear of the tank column and pick up any wounded men from Company L. The Company L commander (Captain Barrett) issued instructions that any troopers who became separated from the tank column were to make their way back to friendly lines if possible, or wait near the road, utilizing the best available defensive positions, until the tanks returned from Chipyong-ni later in the day.¹⁵

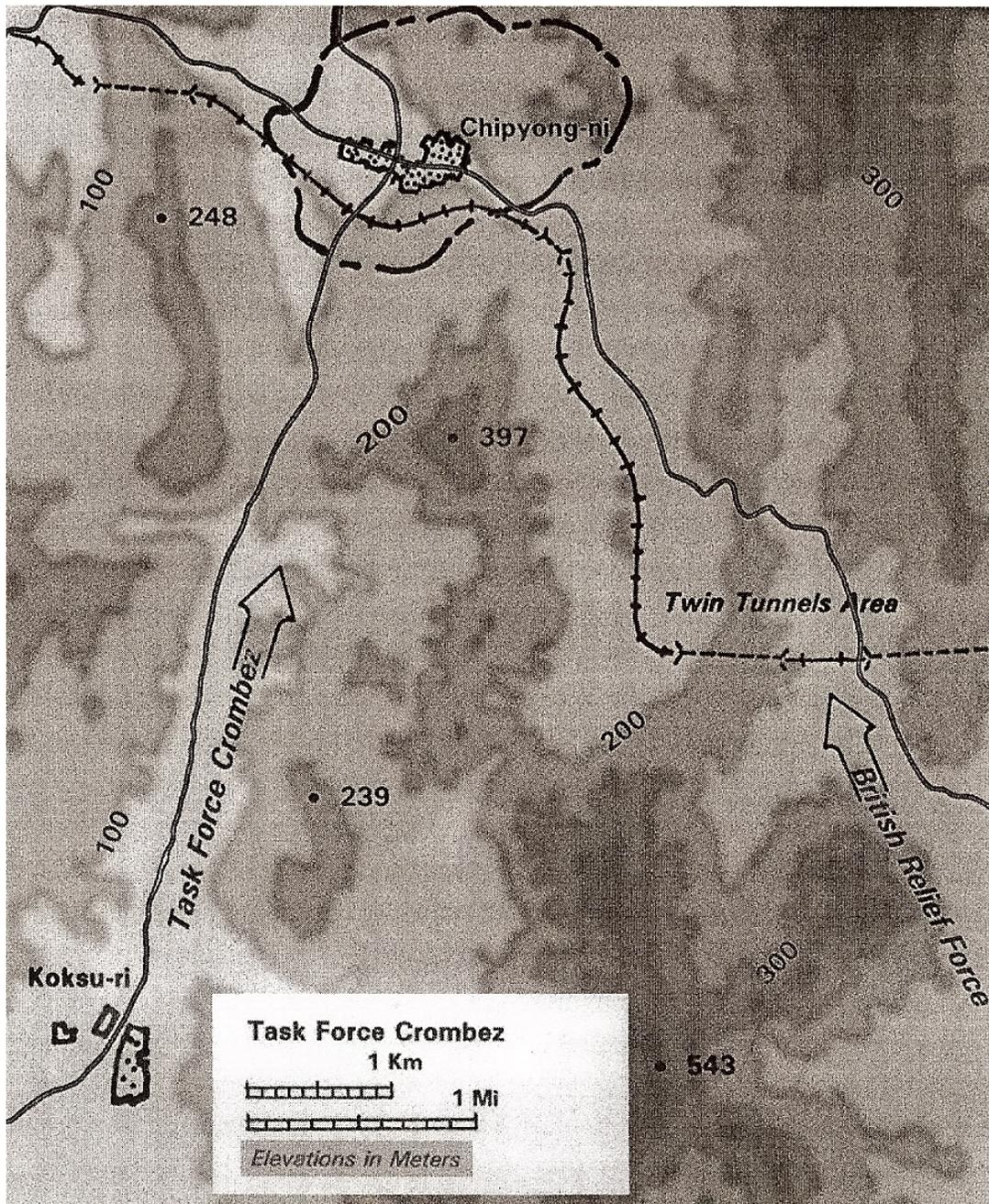
About 1500 Captain Barrett mounted his company on the tanks in the center of the column, leaving four tanks at each end of the column bare. The four engineer

¹² Statement of Capt. John C. Barrett; statement of Major Charles J. Parziale.

¹³ Crombez, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Barrett, *op. cit.*



soldiers rode on the second tank in the column. Thus, 15 tanks carried 160 Company L infantrymen.¹⁶ The infantry platoon leaders selected one man on each tank to fire the caliber .50 machine gun mounted on its deck. Captain

¹⁶ Statement of CWO C. L. Umberger, who was unit administrative officer of Company L, 5th Cavalry.

Barrett rode on the sixth tank in line, along with ten enlisted men and Colonel Treacy who, at the last minute, decided to accompany the task force.¹⁷

Planes strafed and bombed enemy positions along the route of march before the armored column took off. The two infantry battalions maintained strong pressure to keep the Chinese occupied and to prevent them from drawing off any strength to throw against the task force. With Colonel Crombez riding in the fifth tank, the mile-long column got under way at 1545 on 15 February.¹⁸ Liaison planes circled overhead, maintaining contact with the advancing tanks.¹⁹

The task force, with fifty-yard intervals between tanks, proceeded about two miles until the lead tank approached the village of Koksuri. All of a sudden, enemy mortar shells began exploding near the tanks, and enemy riflemen and machine gunners opened fire on the troopers exposed on the decks. Just then the lead tank stopped at a bridge bypass on the south edge of Koksuri, and the entire column came to a halt.²⁰ The tankers turned their guns toward Chinese whom they could see clearly on nearby hills and opened fire with their machine guns and cannons. Several troopers, wounded by the first bursts of enemy fire, fell or were knocked from the tanks. Others left the tanks, not so much to protect them as to take cover themselves.²¹ Colonel Crombez directed the tank fire.

"We're killing hundreds of them!" he shouted over the intertank communications.

After a few minutes, however, feeling that the success of the task force depended upon the ability of the tanks to keep moving, Colonel Crombez directed them to continue.²²

Without warning, the tanks moved forward. The troopers raced after the moving tanks but, in the scramble, thirty or more men, including two officers of Company L, were left behind. The truck following the tanks picked up three wounded men who had been left lying near the road. This truck, however, was drawing so much enemy fire that other wounded men preferred to stay where they were. After both officers in the group were wounded by mortar fire, MSgt. Lloyd L. Jones organized the stranded men and led them back toward their own lines.²³

¹⁷ Barrett, op. cit.

¹⁸ Parziale, op. cit.

¹⁹ Crombez, op. cit.

²⁰ Statement of MSgt. Jessie O. Giddens.

²¹ Statement of MSgt. Lloyd L. Jones. Page 136

²² Crombez, op. cit.

²³ Jones, op. cit.; statement of SFC George W. Miller.

There was another halt just after the column passed through Koksuri, and again the infantrymen deployed. Against the intense enemy fire the tankers and infantrymen fired furiously to hold the enemy soldiers at some distance. For the second time, the tanks began moving without notifying the infantrymen, and again many Company L men were unable to remount. Some troopers were deployed 50 or 75 yards from the road and the tanks were going too fast to remount by the time the men got back to the road.²⁴ Less than seventy men were left on the tanks when Task Force Crombez moved out after the second halt.²⁵ Another large group of men was left to seek cover or to attempt to rejoin friendly units south of Koksuri. Several men from this group, including the commander of the 3d Battalion (Colonel Treacy) are known to have become prisoners of the Chinese.²⁶

Captain Barrett was unable to remount the tank upon which he had been riding, but he did manage to climb on the fifth or sixth tank behind it.

During the next three or three and a half miles there were several brief halts and almost continuous enemy fire directed against the column whether it was halted or moving. Several times, in the face of heavy enemy fire, tank commanders inquired if they should slow down or stop long enough to shell and silence the Chinese guns. Although enemy fire was causing many casualties among the troopers who remained on the tanks, Colonel Crombez, speaking in a calm and cool voice over the radio network, each time directed the column to continue forward.²⁷

Task Force Crombez, in turn, maintained a volume of rifle, machinegun, and cannon fire that, throughout the six-mile attack, could be heard by members of the infantry battalions still in position at the task force point of departure. Much of this fire was directed only against the bordering hills, but there were also definite targets at which to aim enemy machine guns, bazooka teams, and individual Chinese carrying pole or satchel charges. Even though it was difficult to aim from moving tanks, the remaining troopers kept firing at Chinese soldiers who several times were within fifty yards of the road. On one occasion Captain Barrett shot and killed three enemy soldiers who, trotting across a rice field toward the tanks, were carrying a bangalore torpedo.²⁸

²⁴ Barrett, op. cit.

²⁵ This estimate is based upon Barrett, op. cit., which appears to be the most accurate in this instance.

²⁶ 5th Cavalry Regiment: command report (comments by regimental commander), 15 February 1951.

²⁷ Humphrey, op. cit.

²⁸ Barrett, op. cit.

Because of the intense enemy fire on the road, Colonel Crombez decided that wheeled traffic would be unable to get through. When he had gone about two thirds of the way to Chipyeong-ni, he radioed back instructions to hold up the supply trucks and ambulances and await further orders.²⁹

The Chinese made an all-out effort to halt Task Force Crombez when the leading tanks entered the deep roadcut south of Chipyeong-ni. For a distance of about 150 yards the road passed between steep embankments that were between 30 and so feet high. And on each side of the road at that point were dominating hills, the one on the right (east) side of the road being Hill 397 from which the Chinese had launched several of their attacks against the Chipyeong-ni perimeter. There was a sudden flare-up of enemy fire as the point tank (commanded by Lt. Lawrence L. DeSchweinitz) approached the cut. Mortar rounds exploded on and near the road. SFC James Maxwell (in the second tank) spotted an enemy soldier carrying a bazooka along the top of the embankment at the roadcut. He immediately radioed a warning to Lieutenant DeSchweinitz, but before he got the call through a bazooka round struck the point tank, hitting the top of the turret and wounding DeSchweinitz, the gunner (Cpl. Donald P. Harrell), and the loader (Pvt. Joseph Galard). The tank continued but without communication since the explosion also destroyed its radio.³⁰

The four members of the engineer mine-detector team rode on the next tank in line (Sergeant Maxwell's). They clung to the tank as it entered the zone of intense enemy fire. An antitank rocket or pole charge exploded on each side of Maxwell's tank as it entered the pass and one of the engineers was shot from the deck, but the vehicle continued, as did the next tank in the column.³¹

Captain Hiers (tank company commander) rode in the fourth tank that entered the road cut. Striking the turret, a bazooka round penetrated the armor and exploded the ammunition in the ready racks inside. The tank started to burn. The men in the fighting compartment, including Captain Hiers, were killed. Although severely burned, the driver of the tank (Cpl. John A. Calhoun) gunned the engine and drove through the cut and off the road, thus permitting the remainder of the column to advance.³² It was later learned that this tank was destroyed by an American 3.5inch bazooka which had fallen into enemy hands.³³

²⁹ Crombez, op. cit.

³⁰ Statement of SFC James Maxwell.

³¹ Crombez, op. cit.

³² Ibid.; statement of Lt. William R. Bierwirth.

³³ Pickett, op. cit.

With the enemy located at the top of the cliffs directly overlooking the task force column and throwing satchel charges and firing rockets down at the tanks, close teamwork among the tankers became particularly necessary for mutual protection. As each of the remaining tanks rammed through the cut, crews from the tanks that followed and those already beyond the danger area fired a heavy blast at the embankments on both sides of the road. This cut down enemy activity during the minute or less required for each tank to run the cut. The enemy fire did, however, thin out the infantrymen riding on the tanks and, at the tail of the task force, flattened a tire on the 2 1/2-ton truck that had been gathering up the wounded infantrymen who had either fallen or been knocked from the tanks. The driver had been hit near Koksuri as he was putting a wounded infantryman on the truck. Another wounded man (SFC George A. Krizan) drove after that and, although he was wounded a second time, continued driving until the truck was disabled at the roadcut. A few of the wounded men managed to get to one of the last tanks in the column, which carried them on into Chipyong-ni. The others, surrounded by the enemy, became missing in action.³⁴

Meanwhile, within the perimeter of the 23d RCT at Chipyong-ni, the 2d Battalion was fighting off stubborn and persistent enemy attempts to overrun the sector shared by Company G, 23d Infantry, and Battery A, 503d Field Artillery Battalion, on the south rim of the perimeter. Late in the afternoon of 15 February, after twenty hours of uninterrupted fighting, the battalion commander managed to send four tanks a short distance down the road leading south beyond the regimental defense perimeter with the mission of getting behind the Chinese and firing into their exposed flank and rear. Ten or fifteen minutes of firing by the four tanks appeared to have suddenly disrupted the Chinese organization. Enemy soldiers began running.

Just at that moment, tanks of Task Force Crombez appeared from the south. Sergeant Maxwell, in the second tank, saw the four tanks on the road ahead and was just about to open fire when he recognized them as friendly. The leading tanks stopped. For about a minute everyone waited, then Sergeant Maxwell dismounted and walked forward to make contact with the 23d Infantry's tanks. He asked them to withdraw and allow Task Force Crombez to get through.³⁵

By this time the Chinese were in the process of abandoning their positions south of Chipyong-ni and many were attempting to escape. Enemy opposition dwindled. With enemy soldiers moving in the open, targets were plentiful for a short time and Colonel Crombez halted his force long enough to take the Chinese under fire.³⁶

³⁴ Crombez, op. cit.; statement of Cpl. Wayne O. Kemp.

³⁵ Maxwell, op. cit.

³⁶ Crombez, op. cit.

At 1700 Task Force Crombez entered the Chipyong-ni perimeter. It had required an hour and fifteen minutes for the tanks to break through a little more than six miles of enemy territory. Even though there were neither supply trucks nor ambulances with the column, and although the task force itself was low on ammunition, infantrymen were cheered by the sight of reinforcements.

Of 160 Company L infantrymen plus the 4 engineers who had started out riding the tank decks, only 23 remained. Of these, 13 were wounded, of whom 1 died of wounds that evening. Some members of that company already had returned to join the remainder of the 3d Battalion near the point of departure; a few wounded men lay scattered along the road between Koksuri and Chipyong-ni. While crossing the six miles of drab and barren country between those two villages, Company L lost about 70 men nearly half of its strength. Twelve men were dead, 19 were missing in action, and about 40 were wounded.³⁷

With only an hour of daylight remaining, Colonel Crombez had to choose between returning at once to his regiment, or spending the night at Chipyong-ni. Any enemy opposition encountered on a return trip that evening would probably delay into darkness the contact with friendly forces, and unprotected tanks operating in the darkness, he reasoned, could be ambushed easily by enemy groups.³⁸

On the other hand, the 23d RCT was dangerously low on small-caliber ammunition, airdrops that day having contained only artillery shells.³⁹ Task Force Crombez had fired most of its ammunition during the action. Officers inside the perimeter wondered if there were enough small-arms ammunition to beat off another Chinese attack.

There was another reason for returning. Seriously wounded infantrymen within the perimeter urgently needed to be evacuated. It was also probable that men from Company L who had been wounded or stranded during the attack by Task Force Crombez were waiting near the road, according to their instructions, hoping to be picked up again as the tanks made the return trip. However, weighing the two risks, Colonel Crombez chose to stay. He arranged to station his tanks around the perimeter to strengthen the defense, but no attack came. Except for a few flares that appeared over enemy territory, the night passed quietly. Toward morning it began to snow.

³⁷ Ibid.; Barrett, op. cit. See Company L, 5th Cavalry: morning reports, 13 to 25 February 1951.

³⁸ Crombez, op. cit.

³⁹ X Corps: command report (enclosures: 23d RCT Defense, Chipyong-ni).

At 0900, 16 February, the scheduled time for return to the regiment, Colonel Crombez informed his assembled force that the return trip would be postponed because the snow, reducing visibility at times to less than a hundred yards, prevented air cover. It was 1100 before the weather cleared and the task force was reassembled. This time Colonel Crombez stated that only volunteers from the infantrymen and the engineer minedetecting crew would ride on the tanks. None volunteered. Instead, an artillery liaison plane hovered over the column as it moved south. The observer in the plane had instructions to adjust proximity-fuzed shells directly on the column if the enemy attempted to destroy any of the tanks. On the return trip not a single enemy was seen, nor a shot fired.⁴⁰

Immediately upon his return Colonel Crombez ordered the assembled supply train to proceed to Chipyeong-ni. Escorted by tanks, twenty-eight 2 1/2-ton trucks and nineteen ambulances pulled out in the middle of the afternoon. For his part, Captain Barrett (the Company L commander), having returned with the task force because he wanted to find out what had happened to the rest of his company, set out in a jeep to retrace the route and search for wounded men who might still be lying along the road. He found four whom he turned over to the evacuation train at Chipyeong-ni. The ambulances and seven 2 1/2-ton trucks, all loaded with wounded men from the 23d Regimental Combat Team, left Chipyeong-ni that evening. The siege was ended.⁴¹

DISCUSSION

The few details in the narrative concerning the situation before the departure of Task Force Crombez do not permit sound criticism. However, it does appear that either the enemy was underestimated or friendly capabilities for attacking were overestimated. It hardly seems likely that foot soldiers fighting a determined enemy in the rough terrain of Korea could be expected to advance fifteen miles to Chipyeong-ni in one day.

Simplicity is a virtue applied to military operations. It means that units and individuals have but a limited number of clearly defined moves to make or jobs to do. It is not confined to brevity in orders; sometimes the simplest maneuver is simple only when detailed orders are issued to all participants. Simplicity of execution usually results from comprehensive and careful planning, which is frequently time-consuming and not simple. But the complexities of planning are relatively unimportant. It is for simplicity of execution that commanders must strive. The mission assigned Task Force Crombez was simple to state but difficult to execute. Task Force Crombez accomplished its mission but it paid an

⁴⁰ Crombez, op. cit.

⁴¹ Barrett, op. cit.; statement of Capt. Keith M. Stewart.

extremely high price. The cost can be attributed to inadequate planning and a subsequent lack of coordination.

Plans must be based on intelligence of the enemy, an evaluation of the terrain, and knowledge of one's own capabilities. Hindsight clearly indicates that in this instance not one soldier should have ridden on top of the tanks. Friendly artillery and the tanks with their own machine guns could have provided adequate close-in protection for the armored column. No engineers were necessary to remove mines.

Coordination is neither accidental nor automatic. It comes with training, experience, and planning. When trained and experienced troops fail to coordinate their efforts, the failure must be attributed to a lack of planning. Complete lack of artillery support contributed to the difficulties of Task Force Crombez. Coordination between the artillery commanders supporting the 5th Cavalry and the 23d Infantry could have provided artillery support over the entire distance from the point of departure to Chipyeong-ni. The absence of coordination between the tanks and their riders is outstanding. Communication failures on two different occasions further point up deficiency in planning and coordination.