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Colder Than Hell: A Marine Rifle Company at Chosin Reservoir, by Joseph R. Owen

Steven D. Smith
University of South Carolina - Columbia, smiths@mailbox.sc.edu

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Colder Than Hell is the autobiography of 2nd Lieutenant Joseph K. Owen in the Korean War. Owen was the Mortar Officer for Company B, 1st Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division and one of only 27 of its survivors after the retreat out of the Chosin Reservoir. This book is a story of the raw heroism of the American soldier in Korea and one of the best told. With a clear, open, writing style Owen tells his story with candor and honesty. He relates this history without bravado, but it is clear that Owen was a tough, hard-boiled Marine. To have survived the Chosin Reservoir Campaign he had to be tough—and lucky.

Baker One Seven, as his company was called, was one of several collections of reservists and regular Marines thrown together to stop the invasion of South Korea in 1950. In five weeks these men went from civilian life to front-line combat, half that time spent aboard a transport ship. They knew nothing of drill and ceremony. These were Marines who learned their trade the hard way, locked in combat with the Chinese. Owen had just graduated from Marine Officers School but had had experience in the ranks during World War II. It is obvious that what held the raw recruits in line during this conflict was the combat-experienced World War II veterans spread through the ranks. The officer and noncommissioned corps knew their business, having learned it in the Pacific Theater. Without them, it would have been a different story.

As Owen notes, the American forces went to Korea “in skeletonized formations, sadly undertrained, and inadequately equipped.” What’s new? America has always relied on experienced professionals as the foundation upon which we build our armies.

Owen’s book is a quick, captivating read, much reminiscent of two other autobiographical accounts of battle; Harold P. Leinbaugh and John D. Campbell’s The Men of Company K (about a rifle company in World War II), and James Brady’s The Coldest War (about his experiences as a Lieutenant in the Korean Conflict). What makes all three of these books outstanding is their straight-forward accounts of the fluid nature of tactical combat. All of these works provide a good look at how American ground troops fought and maneuvered at the company, platoon, and squad level during that conflict. At this level the reader does not get the overall strategic picture, but rather a feeling for the day to day challenges of a soldier engaged in small unit combat. All these books excel at this level, and Owen’s is special in that its setting is the epic extraction of our forces from the Chosin Reservoir. Now it must be understood that Owen’s book was not specifically written with this in mind, but his autobiography does provide the reader with enough detail to accomplish this goal. We learn, for instance, how mortars and machine guns were deployed and used in the defense and offense in Korea, and how crucial they were. Owen’s goal was to give a no-nonsense look at the war from the eyes of the infantryman. The point is, he has done both very well. (For the strategic picture I recommend Robert Leckie’s, The March To Glory.)

his book is beautifully constructed and well written in tightly constructed sentences and paragraphs. Nothing detracts the reader from the narrative. Owen uses the first chapters to introduce the men under his command and over him, many, indeed most of whom end up either as KIA’s or WIA’s by the end of the book. He also provides a quick review of the unit’s survivors. In this way the campaign’s horror’s are made more poignant. Each chapter is a series of vignettes, critical moments in the campaign that are made vivid by Owen’s memory and research into after action reports. In this style, the book rivals S.L.A.’s classic Pork Chop Hill. And although much has been written about the Chosin Reservoir, this book is not redundant, but rather another excellent contribution.

It should be obvious by now, that I highly recommend this book. It is an excellent example of the kind of personal combat reminiscences that are highly enlightening and terribly intriguing. By the way, it was colder than Hell.

Steven D. Smith
South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology


The reader should be aware that the anthology compiled by David Monaghan is not a battle