

IdeaFest: Interdisciplinary Journal of Creative Works and Research from Humboldt State University

Volume 5

Article 8

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Recommended Citation

Pazeian, Michael () "Ray Cesaretti: Chosin Reservoir, Korean War," *IdeaFest: Interdisciplinary Journal of Creative Works and Research from Humboldt State University*. Vol. 5 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/ideafest/vol5/iss1/8>

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Ray Cesaretti: Chosin Reservoir Korean War

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(with assistance from Marilyn Cesaretti)



Figure 1.

I was born 10/27/29, soon I will be 90 years old. I was living in Wildwood/Rio Del in northern California at the time of Pearl harbor. I didn't know much. But I got my BB gun, put up some tin cans and shot at them. Each time I hit a can I said that's for you—you Japanese. That is the way we felt. It was a sneak attack. We were somewhat isolated up here, so I didn't keep up with World War II. There were

coast patrols and an occasional black out. And there was some rationing of food.

I graduated from high school in 1947 at the age of 17. I went to work for Pacific Lumber Company. But there was a deal that if you went into the reserves for 10 years you would do your service. WWII just finished, so I thought I would be safe to join the reserves. I joined the Marine Reserves. It was 1949. I did my basic training at Camp Pendleton.

The rifle, drilling, bayonet practice, I remember—and the marching. It was springtime and the rattlesnakes had just come out. One I saw, its head was bigger than my fist. Our corpsman got bite by this snake. He survived; he had the anti-toxin. He did get very sick. I became a browning automatic rifleman. I also shot a bazooka. I went through demolition school, explosives. It got hot there before we finished.

I went back to school at Humboldt State. In 1950 the Korean War started, and I was called in. It was September. I went to Treasure Island and waited for our company to become full. We played sports while we waited. It took a week for all the guys to show up. We took a bus to Camp Pendleton. One of the guys was a buddy from Eureka. Doug Curtis would later become a police officer in Eureka. Another guy was from Scotia, Garth Jaehing was also with me in the same unit. We all trained at Pendleton. More training. We found out how to do without sleep and food. And we learned to ration our water. We did a lot of climbing. There was one hill we called Nelle's tit. We had to carry a heavy machine gun on our back and duck walk up the hill. They were going to get our baby fat off and get us in shape in a hurry. We were there two weeks.

We were on a bus to San Diego. On board ship, a troop ship, a liberty ship. Lots of soldiers on it. If you wanted to eat twice in one day you had to stay in the chow line. Bad food. We went to Japan. Most of us didn't go down to the sleeping area. Many were seasick. The bunks were 3 high and the guy on the bottom got all the vomit. The bunks were very closely stacked, you could not roll over. I was on the top bunk. Garth was a radio repairman. There were other ships with us, a destroyer and another ship. At Otsu, Japan there was a band waiting for us, playing as we got off the ship. They played, "If we knew you were coming, we would have baked a cake," which was a popular song by the Fontane Sisters at the time.

We got time to go into the town and drink and visit with girls. Most of us went to the "Slop Shoot," the local beer hall. We were there maybe two weeks then on a ship to Korea. We did physical training and fired our weapons. I fired my browning automatic. It was a 30-calibur machine gun. I had a guy with me as my ammo carrier. Early in combat, I wanted to kill him because he dumped all the extra magazines of ammo. Instead, he was carrying cans of food. I was really mad, the top sergeant stopped me from doing something to him and had him replaced. We arrived at Wonsan, North Korea on the northeast coast.

Our company left Wonsan and walked to Hamhung, approximately 100 miles. We arrived just before dark and found a place to bed down. I was part of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marine Division, Charlie Company. We carried everything we needed on our backs. I had a parka for the cold weather. I spent my 21st birthday, Oct. 27th, in Hamhung. British and Turkish allies were with us. We were there a short time. We were pushing the enemy north. The North Koreans were retreating towards their northern border, the Yalu River. Many North Koreans are surrendering without firing a shot. It was difficult to guard them all.

We pushed north for about a week. As we moved north, resistance got stronger. At times we were firing our weapons, at times in a heavy fire fight. We knew the Chinese were gathering ahead of us. (The Chinese entered the war in late October 1950. Major General Oliver P. Smith, commander of the US 1st Marine Division slowed our northern movement because of the possibility of many Chinese in front of the Americans.) Some of the bodies and prisoners we took in were Chinese. We moved through rock canyons northward. We came out on the plain and see the reservoir. It is very cold—well below zero. In the morning, I would get out of my sleeping bag, and my boots were frozen on my feet. Everyone was suffering from frostbite. I still suffer from it today.

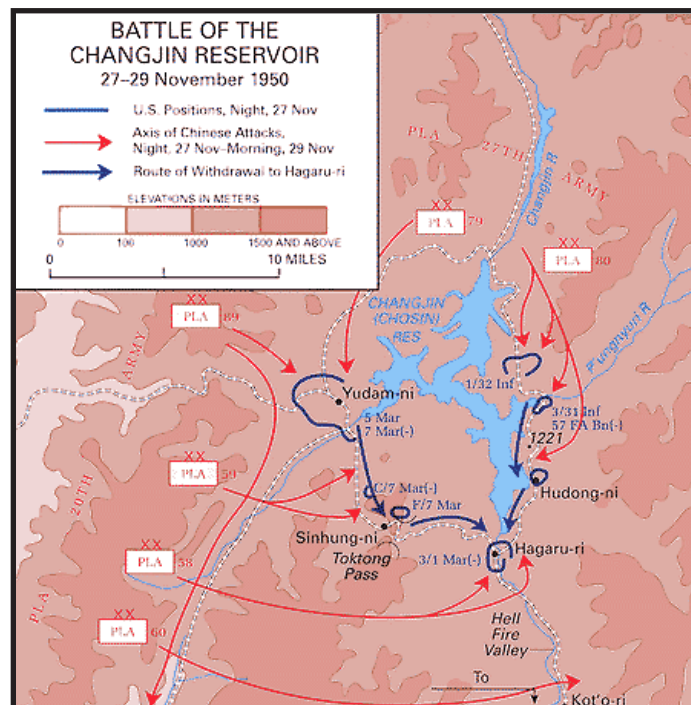


Figure 2.

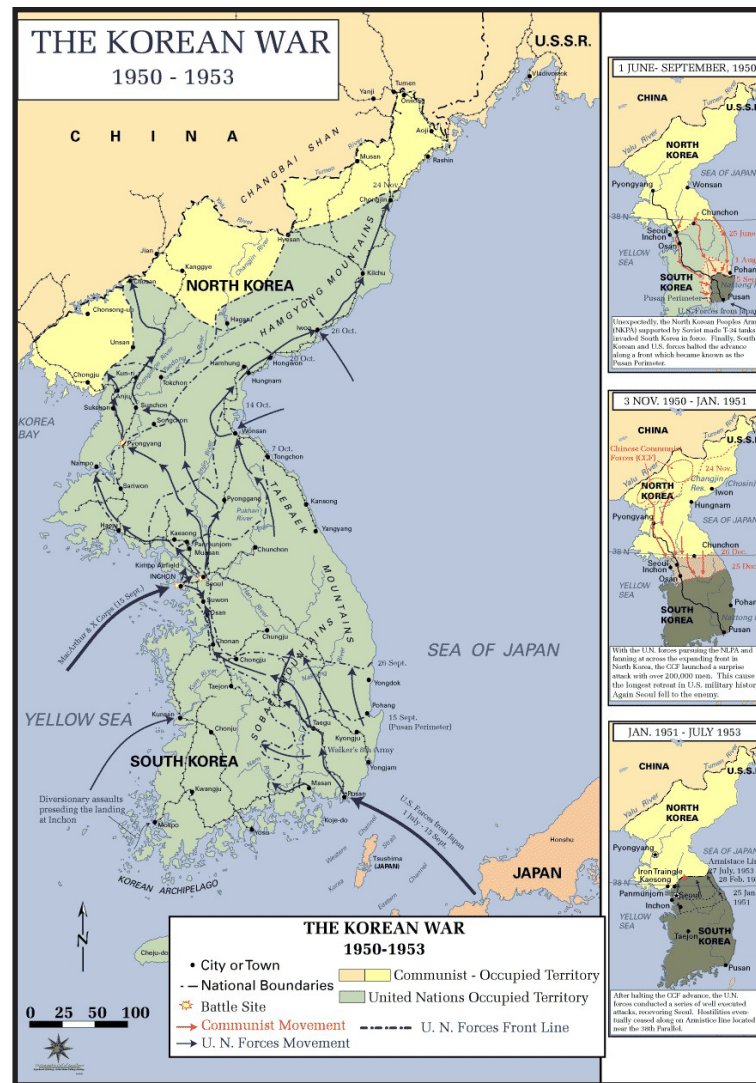


Figure 3. On the night of November 27, the Chinese attacked the American positions all around the Chosin Reservoir. The 7th Marines were dug in on the ridges surrounding Yudam-ni. The Marines were able to hold their positions. On November 30th the Division Commanders ordered to break out from Yudam-ni to Hagaru-ri, a strategic withdrawal.

It is late November 1950. We were surrounded. Charlie Company was surrounded. They broke through our perimeter. I was shooting a lot. A bullet hit me in the chest. But it went through my clothes and bruised my breastbone, and that was all it did. The cold weather, the cold air may have slowed the bullet. I was part of the perimeter. They wanted our food and clothes. There was lots of fighting. The Chinese lost a lot of people. I kept firing my weapon. They did get to our supplies. Most of their attacks were at night. Night after night we were fighting. We learned to sleep during the

day. This went on for several days. My weapon is a lot cleaner than I am. I threw away my washcloth, a bar of soap and a soap dish to carry more ammo. I loaded my jacket and parka with magazines for my Browning automatic rifle.

After a few days, we were ordered to retreat, a strategic withdraw. Major General Oliver P. Smith remarked: "Retreat, hell! We're not retreating, we're just advancing in a different direction." We charged in a different direction towards Hagaru-ri. During the daylight we moved. At nighttime we would fight. The attacks from the Chinese are still

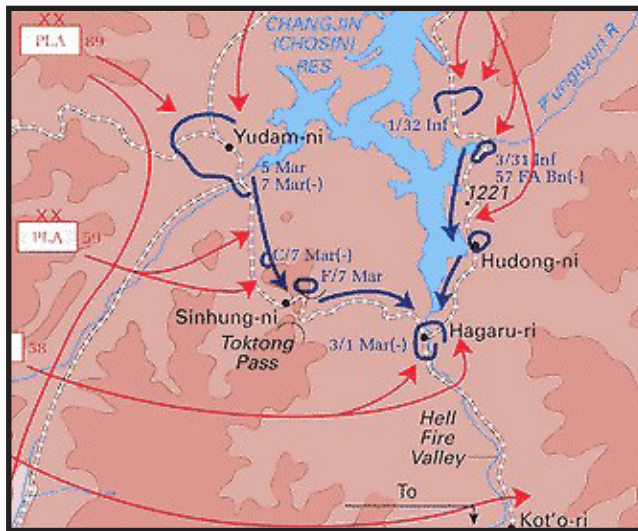


Figure 4.

coming at night while we moved south. Our objective was to get to Fox company who was holding Toktong Pass. The pass was very important for our withdrawal.

No one should have survived. The Chinese had us. Years later, while at a meeting of the Chosin Reservoir survivors in Las Vegas, a former US envoy to China asked me how we survived. He said he had been approached by a Chinese General who wanted to know how the Marines had escaped. He said, “we had them in the palm of our hands.” I told him we had exceptional leadership, intelligence, and Marine training.

Fox Company was holding Toktong Pass. I was carrying as much ammo as I could uphill. I had 50 pounds of ammo. It was in the snow and uphill to get to them. The snow stuck to the bottom of our boots. The snow would cling to us, adding to the weight we were carrying. It was very cold, well below zero. My right boot had worn through the sole. My right foot was against the snow. It stills hurts today.

It took us more than two hours to go up the hill to get to Fox Company. The entire platoon going up the hill was maybe 30 guys. It was in the morning when we started. Because of the weather conditions we were in single file about 10 yds apart. A guy from Fox came up to me and told me to give him the ammo and just keep moving. They were out and relieved to see us. At first our officers led us in the wrong direction. Hypothermia effected the feet, the hands, and the brain. We were redirected. I am not sure how many of Fox was left when we got there. We were under fire the

whole way up the hill, mostly small arms fire and some mortars. One of the mortars exploded near me and knocked me down. I am shooting my BAR. After we got through the pass the firing stopped for us. But there were others behind us still coming through the pass.

By night fall, about 5 o'clock, it is getting dark and we got to Hagaru-ri. That was our objective. I couldn't walk anymore. I had very bad frostbite and a shrapnel wound. A truck drove by, and I was told to get on it. Had I not, maybe I would not have made it out. They took me to the medic tent, and the medics looked at me. The medics directed me to the plane. I reported to my officer for duty. He told me to get on the plane and get out. He didn't really know how bad my feet were or that I had a shrapnel wound. I also had a concussion from mortars landing near me. One landed so close the explosion threw me a few feet. All of this occurred as I was moving up the hill. It was divine guidance that I made it. And I was flown out from there. Out of my company there was only four of us left. I had bullet holes through my parka. At the mess tent, there was no food left, but I got coffee. I was the second to last to get on the plane. It was a DC-4, I was right by the door. The plane was full and

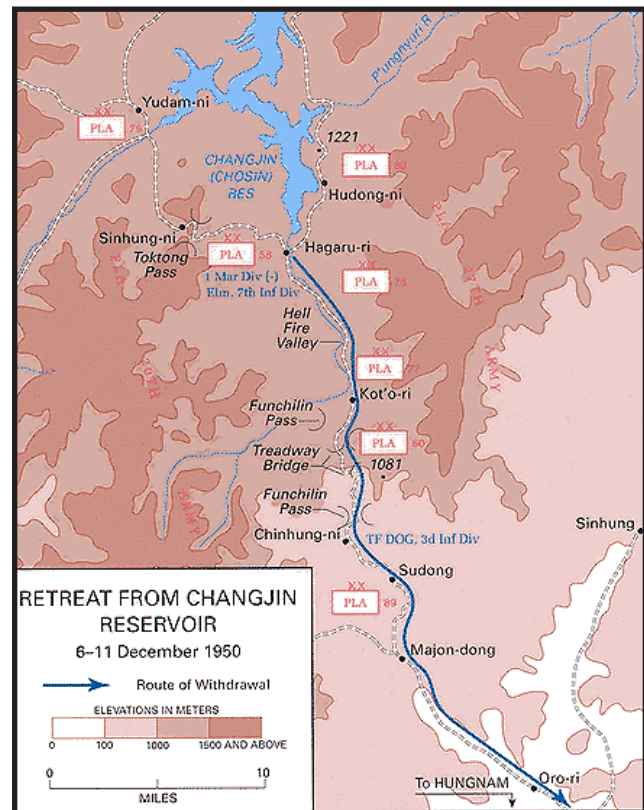


Figure 5.

most were wounded. The plane took us to the US Air Force base at Fukuoka, Japan. Just after we landed, I was put on a stretcher. A nurse gave me a candy bar. I was told to eat it all. I don't remember anything else happening to me there.

I was put on a train and transferred to the US Naval Hospital in Yokosuka, Japan. I was uncomfortable. The seats were hard wood. Many other guys were on the train. It took over 14 hours to get there. First, I was placed on the floor. Then my stretcher was taken into the chapel and placed across the pews. Later I was placed in a ward. They had us strip naked. I remember the nurse carefully picking up our dirty clothes with just her thumb and finger. She added mine to a pile while holding her nose. We had urinated and defecated in our clothes. I got to shower and was given pajamas. We got something to eat and got to sleep. When I got into the bed I started to cry, because my buddy was gone. The guy in the next bunk yelled at me to stop crying. It was my buddy Don Avelar from San Jose. I had been with him since Camp Pendleton. We had lost contact with each other during the battle. Divine guidance again.

A short time later I was sent to Hawaii. I was there a year, mostly guard duty while I was healing. I had a very high classification, so I could be of use around secret stuff. I was at Pearl Harbor Naval Base. I was walking the perimeter of the area where secret stuff was kept. That is what I was told.

On one occasion I placed my rifle up against this building. I was curious about the padlock on a door. I found a piece of wire and I was messing with the lock. A voice said, "what are you doing there trooper?" At the same moment, the lock popped open. I got in trouble. Not too bad. I was only 21 years of age. I went into town on occasion. There was a dance one night. A girl at the dance was from Fortuna, close to where I lived. Her family had moved to Hawaii. She and I spent lots of time together. We went to some Hawaiian festivals together. One time I was at a Hawaiian gathering with her, I was eating some delicious white meat, I was offered more, then I was told it was puppy.

I was transferred to the San Diego Naval Base Stockade as a guard. I was locked in with 64 inmates. Many of the guys were doing hard time. Some awaiting trial. There was a riot inside the prison. I help stopped the riot. Some of the prisoners were put on trial for the riot. I was a witness. Two of the bigger prisoners warned me, "Watch what you say." There was heavy wire and bars over the windows. One of the prisoners had a horned toad. I was wondering how he got it. I took it from him and gave it to my superior. When I went back to this guy, he had a little car, he was playing

with it. I let him have it. I may have been there about a month. The threats from those two prisoners got back to my commanding officer. Knowing these two had friends, my commander told me I should transfer.

I didn't know anything about China Lake, but it sounded good. I didn't know it was out in the middle of the desert. I was walking guard duty in the snow. I was there just a few months.

My time was up, and I was discharged. I went home.

I went to work for Pacific Lumber Company. For a time, I was still recuperating from my Korean War wounds; concussion, and frostbite on my feet. I went to the hiring office in Scotia. Doc Nevell was interrogating all of us looking for work. I listened to his questioning. Doc knew me from the day I was born. He asked me, while seeming to look right through me, what do you want to do? I said, "I want the hardest job you have." He said why? I said it pays the best. He asked when can you go to work? I said, yesterday. I started the next day.

Marilyn came into my life when I was 15 in high school. When I got back from my service in Korea, I thought she was probably married. I went to see her. She was as happy to see me as I was to see her. At her parents' Fortuna house, we had our first kiss. She had a fraternity pin on a chain around her neck. I asked her to go with me for a ride. We went out to Centerville. I told Marilyn, "you can't marry this guy." She responded, "Why can't I?" I said, because I love you." I asked her to marry me. She said, "I won't marry a man who hasn't graduated from college." So, I left the Lumber Company.

A friend of mine asked me to go him to Santa Rosa Junior College. I was there for one semester. I had a lot of health issues. The concussion caused terrible headaches. The frostbite on my feet. And I had flashbacks (PTSD). I was very angry, almost anything could get me to fight. I was a hand grenade ready to explode. I did at times. I would rather not talk about it—made me seem like a monster.

A buddy of mine and I hitchhiked to Santa Rosa to go to the junior college there. I had no money. I was starving to death. I met a guy who had been on the football team. He had hurt his shoulder. I was a hunter and had a lot of deer meat. He said to me, "if you do the cooking, I will feed you." I got by. Prior to that all I had was a small hot plate, bread and cheese. I made toasted cheese sandwiches for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I slept in my car some nights.

At Santa Rosa JC, I had history, English, hygiene, and PE/football classes. I played right offensive and defensive

end for the football team. I had great hands. I was only there for the fall semester. I transferred to Humboldt State. I was closer to home. Its 1948. I was thinking about being a coach. I was a good athlete. My best sport was baseball. I had been scouted by the Yankees. I was not consistent enough in my hitting. I was going to teach as well. I wanted to teach art. I like to paint and use charcoal and pottery. My grandkids have all of my old works.

I transferred to Humboldt State and graduated in 1956. My degree was in Education. I became a teacher. Superintendent Oden Hansen of the Arcata Schools said he would hire me as soon as I wanted to go to work. I started teaching in the fall of 1956.

Marilyn was not aware of my anger issues. I never was angry in front of her. She was a calming influence on me. She helped me get through what I was going on inside me.

I was assigned to Sunny Brae. I was teaching 5th grade. About 30 kids in my class. I was there for a year. Then I went to Bloomfield School. I was teaching a special ed class. These kids had problems. They were hoods! Two of the kids were just mean kids. They challenged me to a fight. I had not been long out of the marine Corp. I was a young man. I told them, OK, and started to take off my jacket. I turned my back and they jumped me. I said, wait one second, and faced both of them. They just looked. I said we will put down a pad to protect your head when it hits the floor. Very shortly, I had both of them giving up. Another teacher watched the whole thing. About 10 kids in total. I was there for a year. The next year I was at the Stewart School and had a self-contained 7th grade class. I was there for 8 years.

Our first child Lance was born in 1960. Our second Kirk was born in 1962. We have seven grandkids, one of whom is a teacher.

During the beginning of the 1964-65 school year my headaches became more severe. This was the results of my wounds from the Korean War. Specifically, my concussions cause more problems. I was also having difficulty sleeping. I went to a doctor, then had my eyes checked. Then I was sent to Sacramento to see an eye specialist. He sent me to UC Berkeley. The exam there found a brain tumor on my optic nerve. They did the surgery. During my recovery, the VA got involved. After the surgery I had no vision in my left eye and about 30% vision in my right eye. My surgery was in December of 1964. I was back home in January. Marilyn went back to work in early 1965. I went back to teach in March of 1965.

During the summer of 1965 I transferred to the Eu-

reka schools. Eureka was where we lived. I started to teach history and art at the High School. Art was my major. But my vision started to fail, so they gave me math classes and an aide to help me. I taught there for 20 years with very limited eyesight. The last ten years I could not have done it without my aide, Diane.

One time I was at the blackboard with my back to the class. There was a commotion. My aide was not in the classroom at that moment. I called out, "Harry, knock-it-off." Never turned around. Harry said how do you know it's me. "I have eyes in the back of my head!" At the end of class, Harry came up to me and very politely asked, "Mr. C can I see those eyes in the back of your head?"

One time I was teaching division of fractions. You had to invert the divisor and then multiply. You have to learn the language. Invert means to turn it over. One young man didn't understand. I told him to come forward and had him sit on the floor. I picked him up by the ankles and held him upside down. And I told the class this means invert!

Oden Hansen saw me do this. I got a lot of good help from a lot of good people.

A total of 34 years as a teacher. Unfortunately, Ray passed away on Memorial Day 2020.