



Marines making first strike at Inchon on Wolmi Island.

U.S. Army (Herbert Netter)

Operation Chromite Counterattack at Inchon

By JOHN R. BALLARD

The planning and execution of Operation Chromite by General Douglas MacArthur in 1950 established the operational art that guides U.S. joint operations today. The Inchon invasion was one of the best operational-level case studies in the recent past.

The rapid response to the North Korean attack of June 1950 was both bold and brilliant. Though notoriously self-centered, MacArthur was not a micromanager and he had a good sense of his role in developing a response.

He delegated authority to subordinates to meet wartime needs while focusing on defeating the enemy. Moreover, as Commander in Chief, Far East (CINCFE), he realized that his headquarters was ill-suited to the demands of war and formed subordinate staffs for such responsibilities. This decentralization in a crisis added to the responsiveness of Far East Command (FECOM) component forces.

MacArthur properly concentrated on strategic issues, mainly keeping South Korea in the fight. He also dealt with coalition issues, addressing command and control as well as readiness concerns. Moreover, he led the concept development process for Chromite.

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Desperate Measures

A believer in reconnaissance, MacArthur embarked key members of his staff on June 29 in his aircraft, *Bataan*, and flew to Suwon, 20 miles south of Seoul, where Ambassador John Muccio had fled with remnants of the U.S. mission. He then travelled by jeep to the Han River to observe South Korean forces in retreat and North Korean forces in action. He found that morale was not sufficient to the challenge. He mourned "I've seen many retreating Korean soldiers during this trip, all with guns and ammunition at their side and all smiling and I've not seen a single wounded man.



Radford and MacArthur in Tokyo, August 1950.

Nobody is fighting."¹ He also knew that U.S. forces in Japan were not prepared and commented that his first decision was to "rely upon strategic maneuver to overcome the great odds against me. It would be desperate, but it was my only chance."²

MacArthur formulated a strategic estimate. At its core was the Bluehearts plan, an indirect approach designed to shatter enemy cohesion. This concept remained the driving force in developing and executing Operation Chromite. It sought to counter the strong communist attack indirectly with limited U.S. capabilities as a lever at a decisive point. MacArthur cabled Washington to ensure that decisionmakers grasped that "the alternative is a frontal attack which can only result in a protracted and expensive campaign."³

Map 1. Landings at Inchon (September 15, 1950)



Source: John Toland, *In Mortal Combat: Korea, 1950-1953* (New York: William Morrow, 1991), p. 194.

One task was ensuring support at home for the forces which MacArthur thought necessary. Operational sponsorship of the FECOM theater had been given only recently to the Chief of Staff, U.S. Army. General J. Lawton Collins had to supply forces and argue for naval and air assets. As MacArthur told Collins, "Unless provision is made for the full utilization of our Army-Navy-Air Force team in this shattered area, our mission will be costly in life, money, and prestige. At worst it might be doomed."⁴

The concepts and judgment required for operational level decisions

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were central to the role that MacArthur played in Chromite. In particular, his grasp of ideas such as depth and timing was crucial to his counterstroke, but his knowledge of other operational areas also warrants attention. For example, there can be no doubt that he applied his version of the center of gravity. Seoul was the hub of all movement in

the South and became the most critical node in the supply line of the communist attack. Moreover, MacArthur knew that the city had immense symbolic value and retaking it would inflict a "devastating psychological setback."⁵ He focused on this point.

MacArthur had encountered supply shortages during World War II and learned the value of operational reach. He understood enemy vulnerabilities. Despite tactical accomplishments, as the communists moved southward their lines of communication grew increasingly exposed. CINCFE also appreciated that he must gain time by deploying troops to lure the North Koreans into a conventional battleline. This would extend enemy road networks in depth and breadth while opposing forces hardened and entrenched forward lines. Value would also accrue as the communist forces shifted tactically from movement operations to close assaults against the allied defensive line around Pusan. All this increased enemy dependence on supply lines and magnified the surprise effect of a deep counterassault.



Source: John Toland, *In Mortal Combat: Korea, 1950–1953* (New York: William Morrow, 1991), p. 194.

Because of this commitment to an indirect attack on a key vulnerability, MacArthur drove planning in ways that most regarded as extreme, especially those who did not share his operational vision. His plan was also disconcerting because it was not primarily oriented on the enemy. In his first call to Washington for reinforcements on July 7, the benefits of Chromite were not immediately obvious to the Pentagon. Collins denied the request because he, like others in Washington, feared a global conflict. Fortunately, World War II had made MacArthur confident in the capabilities of the Marine Corps. Thus when Lieutenant General Lemuel Shephard, USMC, offered a division, CINCFE jumped at the chance to acquire amphibious units. The Marines could maximize naval striking power and execute deep penetration with special units, a plus over the concept of using 1st Cavalry Division as the heart of the counterattack.

As the North Koreans continued to press the attack against Eighth Army around Pusan, FECOM oriented logistic support on reinforcing General Walton Walker, USA. By August 23, numerical parity between the two combatant forces north of Pusan was surpassed and Walker soon had 150,000 soldiers and marines with 500 tanks. More important for the long term, his

supply lines moved 1,000 tons each day. The enemy had reached a culminating point while Eighth Army was growing stronger.

Eighth Army was not the only tool available to CINCFE. Simultaneity requires that, once vulnerable, an enemy should be hit across the range of operations and in every combat dimension for maximum effect. Both Lieutenant General George Stratemeyer, USAF, and Admiral Turner Joy, USN, had been striking targets since the invasion began, engendering an increasing need for lateral coordination. By July 15, the need for cohesive air operations was such that a new form of authority known as *coordination control* was instituted by MacArthur to breach service impasses, deconflict operations, and improve effectiveness. During the same week, pilots under Stratemeyer started large-scale bombing within the theater of operations but outside normal control of Walker's advanced ground elements. From then on the full capability of FECOM air forces was brought to bear on the enemy, from strategic marshalling areas down to tactical employment by B-29s for ground forces. This included land-based Marine air in support of the Pusan Perimeter.

Transitioning from withdrawal and stabilizing defenses at Pusan to shaping the battlespace for the Incheon assault occurred in August. Balance among three subordinate efforts became a task of the FECOM staff as transport, support, and prioritizing combat power became more complex. Freedom of action for component commanders and synchronization of effort by MacArthur's staff should have been the watchword at the Dai Ichi Building in Tokyo. But staff expertise was not abundant and components were often left to fend for themselves.

The counterattack plan, however, featured the element of surprise to make up for execution inefficiencies, something that MacArthur considered the most vital element of war. Unfortunately, it is difficult to either predict or measure. CINCFE provided an estimate of the effects of surprise on the operational level to the Joint Chiefs of Staff: "The very arguments you have made as to the impracticabilities involved will tend to ensure for me the element of surprise. For the enemy commander will reason that no one would be so brash as to make such an attempt."

On August 23, after detailed course of action development by a joint planning group and staff estimates by service component staffs, MacArthur conducted an estimate to select a course of action for the counterattack. The staff made recommendations after an analysis of potential options and reactions. Rear Admiral James Doyle, Commander of Amphibious Group 1, led the course of action assessment to ensure that CINCFE understood the risks identified with Incheon. Among the commanders attending was Admiral Arthur Radford, Pacific Fleet; Admiral Joy, Naval Forces Far East; and General Shephard, Fleet Marine Forces Pacific. General Collins, together with Admiral Forrest Sherman, Chief of Naval Operations, and Lieutenant General Idwal Edwards, operations deputy on the Air Staff, represented the Joint Chiefs.

Doyle was the most experienced amphibious officer in the Far East. He had studied Incheon and alternative sites and, with others, attempted to dissuade MacArthur from executing Bluehearts. But CINCFE would not abandon

Transporting personnel at Inchon.



AP/Wide World Photos

the plan even when faced with opposition supported by Collins. An alternative, attacking Kunsan, was seen as ineffective and indecisive. After assessing Kunsan, MacArthur commented “it would be a short envelopment which would not envelop. It would not sever

the Joint Chiefs continued to be concerned over the risks while MacArthur remained firm in his decision

or destroy the enemy’s supply lines or his distribution center and would therefore serve little purpose.”⁶ Thus he concluded: “We shall land at Inchon and I shall crush them.” On August 29, after anxious debate, the Joint Chiefs formally concurred, although they continued to be concerned over the risks while MacArthur remained firm.

Calm Before the Fall

MacArthur understood that timing for the assault at Inchon and the breakout from the Pusan Perimeter by Eighth Army would be crucial. His cable to Washington on July 23 had

said that the “operation planned mid-September is amphibious landing of a two-division corps in rear of enemy lines for purpose of enveloping and destroying enemy forces in conjunction with attack from the south by Eighth Army.”⁷ Mid-September was critical because ferocious tides made landing viable only at mid-month, and by October the weather would be too poor for the rapid result MacArthur desired.

The nature of the defenses around Pusan in late August also pushed for early action.

MacArthur had to ensure that North Korean cohesion was crippled prior to a breakout from Pusan—otherwise Walker would have difficulty generating the offensive combat power needed to link up with X Corps under Major General Edward Almond, USA, south of Seoul. This problem had greatly concerned Collins, particularly because it required withdrawing

1st Marine Brigade and its tactical airpower from Pusan before the assault. Collins felt that a weakened Eighth Army might not be able to break out or would suffer crippling fights along the 180 miles to the link-up point.

Timing among these various efforts would be orchestrated specifically by MacArthur based on conditions at the moment. The plan had to be flexible, but it clearly relied on the Inchon landing shocking and demoralizing the enemy immediately prior to the attack by Walker. CINCFE planned to accompany the landing force to assess its effectiveness and set the timing for Walker’s breakout. The only reserve kept to counter the friction of war was an airborne regimental combat team—in all likelihood only useful to soften an impending defeat.

Both MacArthur and Almond embarked aboard *USS Mount McKinley* on September 13. In keeping with doctrine, the initial phase of the operation was run by Admirals Arthur Struble and Doyle. After pre-assault bombardment and advanced force operations, X Corps captured Inchon on September 15 and advanced toward Seoul. Rapidly retaking the capital was key to creating the effect that MacArthur needed. Within a week 1st Marine Division took Kimpo airfield in Suwon and reached the outskirts of Seoul. CINCFE remained embarked until control shifted from the commander of the amphibious task force (Doyle) to the landing force (notionally Almond, but in reality General Oliver Smith of 1st Marine Division) on September 20.

Walker had already started his breakout on September 16. But in the first five days Eighth Army had little success. The effects of the Inchon attack did not appear until September 20. MacArthur knew the tide of battle had turned. He remembered determining the hour for best effect on the enemy with apparent calm saying, “Kimpo was captured and signs of weakness began to be evident in front of Walker. I directed him to attack.”⁸ But in reality he had an anxious two days, even considering another amphibious assault before the impact of the fall of Seoul was clear. Soon there was complete disintegration and Eighth Army was chasing a fleeing mob.



Unloading men
and equipment.

Naval Historical Center

Breakout

MacArthur established command and control for Operation Chromite to ensure appropriate warfighting headquarters on the operational level (the equivalent of a component command today). Stratemeyer took on the operational air command function from the initial U.S. response and, by the end of June, Walker had organized a command post at Taegu to manage land forces, which left a naval headquarters under Joy, who delegated the operations at Inchon to Seventh Fleet, his warfighting component, commanded by Struble. Thereby Joy and his staff could remain focused on the big picture and continue to support the FECOM staff as its naval component.

Based around Seventh Fleet, and augmented by the Marine Corps, CINCFE created JTF-7. Liaison officers were exchanged among headquarters and their numbers increased as planning continued. When MacArthur and his staff boarded *USS Mount McKinley* in Sasebo on September 12, the invasion rested in Struble's capable hands. JTF-7 had even been allocated an amphibious operations area to deconflict support operations with ongoing efforts by Far East Air Forces (FEAF) but otherwise had flexibility to execute the plan as required.

By then, joint force coordination was being accomplished on several levels and by several joint groups. The FECOM staff had actively used joint targeting approval and operations planning since August. FEAF and

Eighth Army had worked through a series of issues to develop a joint operations cell, with an air operations center for support in Korea. Stratemeyer and Joy had hammered out an airspace control plan that integrated the JTF-7 amphibious operation area in the FEAF attack plan, including both strategic and tactical targets. Although MacArthur retained command of the U.N. effort, the execution of the counterattack was decentralized.

CINCFE and his staff were aboard the flagship of Seventh Fleet during the landing but had little effect on the operation. That was just as well because MacArthur was not in a position to take an active role in what was a largely tactical event. Thus the operational commander gave authority to his subordinates and watched for exceptions, prepared to intervene.



Marines liberating Seoul
in September 1950.

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Back to the Future

In many respects Operation Chromite foreshadowed the command and control structures of current joint operations. This was not regarded as novel in 1950, as the lessons of World War II had proven time and again. But it is surprising that such practices fell into disuse after the Korean armistice and were nearly forgotten during Vietnam. Fortunately, they returned during the AirLand Battle era of the 1980s and 1990s. The Armed Forces readopted many of these tools because they were particularly appropriate for warfare on the operational level.

Some of MacArthur's contributions to Operation Chromite seem applicable for the kit bag of today. The first is the recognition that operations on the strategic, operational, and tactical levels are related but not cohesive. Success on one level cannot balance deficiencies on the others over the long term. The operational brilliance of MacArthur turned the tide against the North Koreans despite tactical deficiencies and lack of strong regional policy, but without strategic context it soon led to overconfidence, his relief by Truman, and stalemate in theater. Operational brilliance cannot overcome tactical defeats or strategic shortsightedness.

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Effectively balancing centralized planning and decentralized execution—a maxim of current joint operations—was a practice of MacArthur. Although he dominated concept development, he established supported commanders in their areas of operation—Walker within the Pusan Perimeter, Stratemeyer in overall air support operations, and Struble in the amphibious objective—and trusted them to conduct their specialties. He intervened to minimize conflicts but not to micromanage.

MacArthur's dominance provided a vision for staff and component action that reinforced the aim. Through long bleak weeks he almost single-handedly kept efforts focused on the desired operational outcome. He knew command relations and ensured unity of effort. He was hampered more than commanders today by service rivalries that distorted achievements and used the media as a weapon to undermine

the joint team. Still he worked with subordinates, particularly Stratemeyer, to resolve conflicts or mitigate them. CINCFE organized and supported joint groups to facilitate cooperation. He also extended the same type of activities to multinational partners.

Even superb commanders make mistakes. MacArthur misjudged the size and implications of the communist attack. Still he was an inspirational leader, even in the eyes of his critics, and one who orchestrated all the elements of the U.N. force into a single instrument in the right place at the right time for maximum effect.

Douglas MacArthur understood operational art. After decades in uniform he valued service core competencies, sensed the critical elements of battle, grasped crucial vulnerabilities, maintained good timing for large-scale operations, and knew where to focus.

An asymmetrical attack on the enemy rear was his response to the reality that he could not wage attrition war and win. He could not adequately describe the effect required because few commanders had his operational expertise. They doubted that the cohesion of an enemy force could be shattered by such a risky maneuver; but they recognized it when the enemy disintegrated in late September. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Interview with Edward Almond (1975), Part IV, U.S. Army Military History Institute, pp. 13–14, <http://carlisle-www.army.mil/cgi-bin/usamhi/DL/showdoc.pl?docnum=82>.

² Douglas A. MacArthur, *Reminiscences* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), p. 333.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 346.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 334.

⁵ Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War: America in Korea 1950–1953* (New York: Times Books, 1987), p. 232.

⁶ MacArthur, *Reminiscences*, p. 350.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 346.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 354.