"His Valorous Conduct": The Story of a Hoosier Hero in the Korean War

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Among the many episodes of the Korean War stands the nearly forgotten tale of one of the United States' most bitter military blunders: the defeat of elements of the U.S. Army's 7th Infantry Division by Chinese forces in the winter of 1950.[1] "It would be hard," notes historian Roy Appleman, "to find a more nearly hopeless or tragic story in American military history."[2] The swift and overwhelming nature of the defeat left little time for detailed official records, causing many of the specifics of the event to be forever lost. Luckily a few survivors took notes immediately after the action. These fragmented testimonies give vivid proof of the ferocity of the struggle and show that during this defeat came acts of extraordinary heroism.[3] Among these is the story of a low-ranking assistant motor pool sergeant and high school dropout from southwest Indiana named Charles Garrigus, Jr. Why Garrigus stayed and fought with a doomed convoy of wounded GIs while so many of his comrades ran to the safety of the nearby Marine Corps lines can perhaps be best understood by looking at the Hoosier environment that shaped this gallant and humble soldier.

At the height of the depression in 1937, the Garrigus clan journeyed southward from Yeddo, near Terre Haute, to Francisco, Indiana, where Charles Garrigus, Sr., worked in the nearby King's coal mine. The Garrigus sons were also expected to work and soon were hired by local farmers, who paid them as often in produce as in money.

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[1]For a comprehensive treatment of the Korean War see Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War: America in Korea, 1950–1953* (New York, 1987).

[2]Roy E. Appleman, *East of Chosin: Entrapment and Breakout in Korea, 1950* (College Station, Tex., 1987), xii. Appleman's work is an excellent and detailed account of the struggle that occurred on the eastern side of the Chosin Reservoir.

[3]*Ibid.*, xiii-xv. Appleman discovered several short narratives written a day or two after survivors had escaped the Chinese trap. The most important of these narratives was a four-page typed report by Major Robert E. Jones. The actions of the subject of this work, Charles Garrigus, Jr., are also detailed in a manuscript written by Major Cosby Miller.

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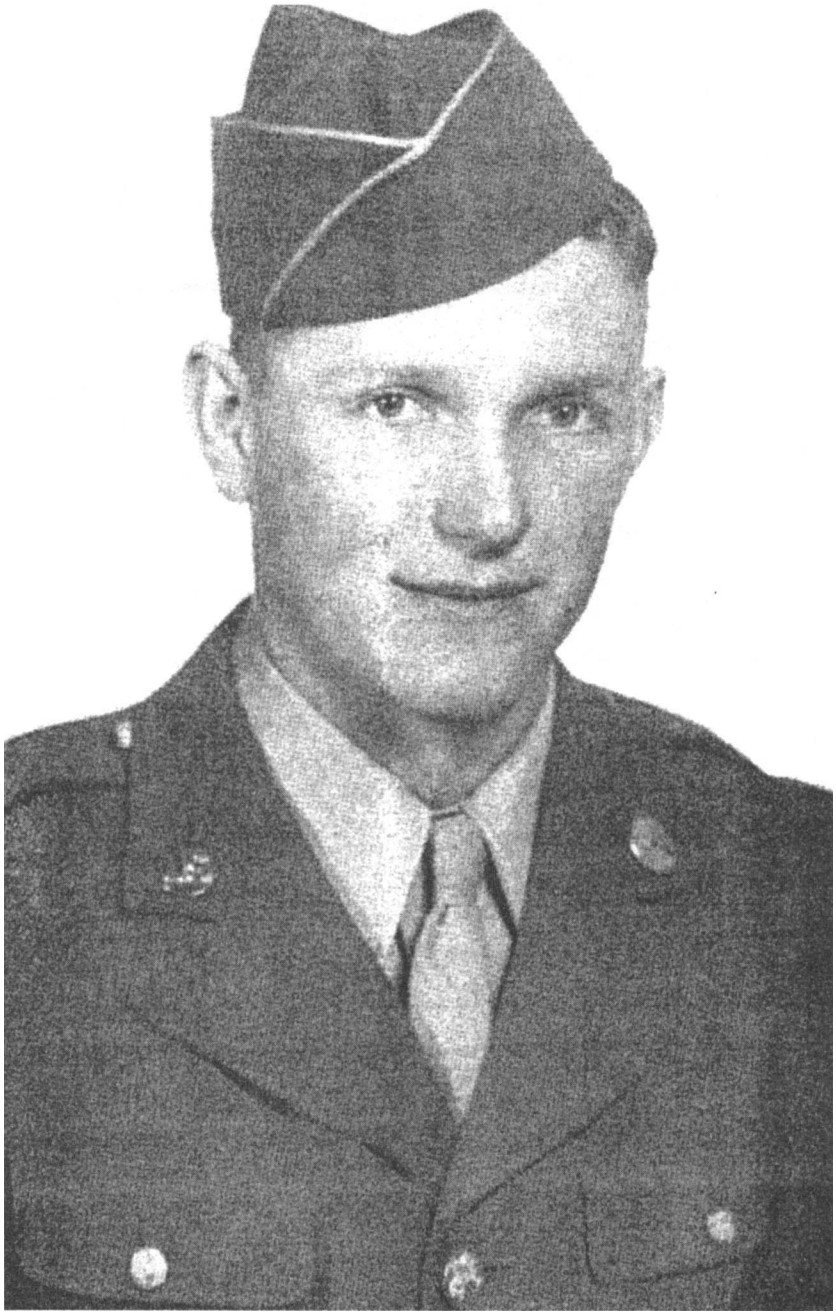

CHARLES GARRIGUS, JR.

Photo courtesy of Delores Garrigus Beeson

Gladys Garrigus and her daughters cooked, cleaned, and washed daily for the large family.

Just eleven years old when his family moved to rural Gibson County, Garrigus did discover some pleasures in spite of the hard times. The boy, whom his sisters teasingly called June Bug, possessed a shy smile and loved to spend his free time tinkering with engines or driving farm vehicles down the dusty lanes that crisscrossed the Hoosier countryside. School work often got in the way of Garrigus's desire to work with engines, and, like many young males of his day, Garrigus dropped out of school before receiving a high school diploma, content to work with farm vehicles. The onset of World War II, however, changed Garrigus's life forever.

Serving in the military brought many young men who grew up in the harsh poverty of depression a stability they had not known before. When Garrigus was honorably discharged in November of 1946 "by reason of demobilization," the twenty-two-year-old Hoosier traveled to Gary, Indiana, where he tried his hand as a heavy equipment operator. Civilian life, however, lacked the predictability he had come to know in the army, and like many others he soon reenlisted.[4] The strapping six-footer looked forward to having a career in the army, where he would be able to work with and drive trucks and heavy equipment. When North Korea launched an unexpected attack on South Korea on June 25, 1950, Garrigus was serving as an assistant motor pool sergeant in Japan. Again he found his life shaped by world events far beyond his control. The surprise invasion fell, said *Newsweek*, "like lightening from a clear sky."[5] Although Garrigus had been scheduled to return home on June 26, he was quickly sent into Korea with the first American troops.

Throughout July and August of 1950, meagerly armed and mostly unprepared American fighting men held a small and vulnerable perimeter around the southern Korean seaport of Pusan. Primarily clerks and truck drivers like Garrigus, many of these initial troops had hardly handled a rifle.[6] By the end of July when the military situation had deteriorated to the point of desperation, Americans began to fear the worst. One national magazine demanded to know "Why. . . U.S. Troops [are] being pushed around in a place called Korea?"[7] But the circumstances changed dramatically in mid-September when U.S. Army and Marine units landed at the western seaport of Inchon and quickly threatened to cut off the North Korean Army pressing in on the Pusan lines. Sensing that the American, South Korean, and other United Nations (UN) forces would soon be

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[4]Statement of Military Service of Charles Garrigus, Department of the Army, July 5, 1954, in possession of Delores Garrigus Beeson.

[5]"U.S. Throws forces into Korean War," *Newsweek,* July 3, 1950, 11.

[6]Blair, *Forgotten War,* 48-50.

[7]*Ibid.*, 14.

closing in, the North Koreans retreated northward.[8] UN troops quickly followed.

The crossing of the thirty-eighth parallel by UN forces did not go unnoticed by North Korea's neighbors.[9] Gen. Douglas MacArthur, however, guaranteed that neither Russia nor China would come into the war now that North Korea was obviously defeated. Because of his past successes, MacArthur's pronouncements carried significant weight. *Time* declared that one of the primary reasons for the "final victory" in Korea was "Douglas MacArthur's vast superiority over the enemy generals in strategic planning."[10] By early October, folks back home like the Garrigus family heard wonderful news from the press about the war's glorious finish. *U.S. News and World Report* bragged in a sudden burst of hubris that the United States, by "winning" in Korea, "was again top dog in the world."[11] *Newsweek* expressed a similar view, observing happily that "everybody loves a winner." In an eerily prophetic vein, however, that same issue noted the surprise shift in fortune "seemed almost too good to be true."[12]

MacArthur's plan for ending the war called for the Eighth Army, under Lt. Gen. Walton Walker, to move northwest from Seoul and capture the North Korean capital. X Corps, under Lt. Gen. Edward Almond, would land on the eastern side of North Korea at the seaports of Wonson and Iwon and move northward and eastward to link up with the Eighth Army before both moved to the Yalu River and the Manchurian frontier.[13] Garrigus's unit was the Seventh Army Division, 32nd Regiment. Originally a part of the Eighth Army, the 7th Task Force, made up of about 3,000 men, was sent from the western to the eastern side of Korea to join X Corps after North Korea's capital fell so quickly. Garrigus's outfit was to protect X Corps's flank in the closing campaign in the war. Because of the success of the campaign MacArthur told an assistant that "the boys. . .will be home by Christmas."

Strung out along a single precarious mountain road, X Corps was particularly vulnerable to entrapment and possible annihilation. The Marine Corps component of X Corps under Maj. Gen. O. P. Smith had wisely established several bases of supplies and men along the single narrow supply route, with the primary bases located at Koto-

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[8]The vast bulk of troops, equipment, and financial support for the UN effort in Korea came from the United States.

[9]The thirty-eighth parallel was arbitrarily chosen to divide Korea in 1945 as part of the conditions for the Soviet Union to enter World War II against Japan. In the late 1940s, both Soviet troops in the North and U.S. troops in the South withdrew.

[10]*Time,* October 9, 1950, 26.

[11]*U.S. News and World Report,* October 6, 1950, 5.

[12]"Victory Looms—so does 38th parallel," *Newsweek,* October 2, 1950, 13.

[13]For an important critical interpretation of this portion of the war see Joseph C. Goulden, *Korea: The Untold Story of the War* (New York, 1982).

ri and Hagaru near the southern end of the sprawling Chosin Reservoir. Highly organized and trained to fight under the most severe of conditions, marine units also stayed in contact with one another. The fragments of the 7th Division, however, lacked the organization of Smith and his marines.

Back in Indiana, Gladys Garrigus read the uplifting news of the war's sure end but still harbored great fears concerning her son's safety. She wrote Charles and pleaded with him to send any information he could regarding what he was doing in Korea. Garrigus sent his mother a letter in response to her request. Enclosed was a snapshot of himself standing beside two three-quarter-ton trucks mired in heavy mud. It was typical, he explained, of the conditions he had to work with in Korea.[14]

On Thanksgiving Day 1950, marines of the 5th Division enjoyed a hot meal while occupying the eastern side of the Chosin Reservoir. The next day they received orders to leave their positions, proceed south to Hagaru, and then head west to Yudam-ni on the opposite side of the Chosin where a larger group of marines waited. MacArthur's plan eventually called for the marines at Yudam-ni to wheel west and hook up with the Eighth Army. To protect the marines' flank from possible attack, the army group of about 3,000 men, led by Col. Alan MacLean, arrived on the eastern side of the Chosin. The colonel and his 31st Regiment team were to link up with Garrigus's unit of the 32nd Regiment, commanded by thirty-two-year-old Lt. Col. Donald Faith of Washington, Indiana. From their Chosin base, these two 7th Division army units were to protect the flank of the UN forces' main thrust up the western side of the peninsula.[15] Hidden in the mountains that surrounded the Chosin, however, waited tens of thousands of Chinese troops.

Had the Chinese not come into the war, it is likely that members of X Corps would still have remembered the terrible conditions of that winter. By late November, temperatures dropped to minus 35 degrees, without factoring wind chill. Inactive soldiers often froze to death in their fox holes. Truck drivers like Garrigus found themselves struggling to carry out their jobs in the most difficult of circumstances, for the roads in the Chosin campaign "were among the poorest and most precarious of any used in war by American forces." No American armies, notes Appleman, "before or since have fought in as harsh or hostile environment."[16]

The Chinese sprang their trap in late November. As the temperature dropped dramatically and heavy snow fell, X Corps, including the

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[14]Delores Beeson, telephone interview with author, April 4, 1998.

[15]The 7th Division was not completely together on the eastern side of the Chosin. Task Force MacLean was made up of the 1st Battalion of the 32nd Regiment, the 3rd Battalion of the 31st Regiment, and the 57th Field Artillery minus C Battery.

[16]Appleman, *East of Chosin*, 12.

3,000 members of Task Force MacLean, found themselves surrounded by at least 120,000 battle-tested Chinese soldiers. To the west the Eighth Army confronted an equally large number of Chinese and quickly fled southward in what would become the longest military retreat in United States history. The American leadership was stunned by the staggering change in events. "The Chinese," MacArthur wired President Harry Truman, "have come in with both feet." Truman quickly called a meeting of his staff and reported that "we've got a terrific situation on our hands."[17] For Americans like the Garrigus family who had loved ones fighting in Korea, the abrupt and shocking information delivered by newspaper accounts could not have painted a grimmer picture. The New York *Times*, for example, spoke of "hordes of Chinese Reds" sweeping down upon vastly outnumbered U.S. troops.[18] The primary paper for the region in which the Garrigus family lived, the Evansville *Courier*, also offered a gloomy assessment of the situation in northeast Korea. One headline noted that Garrigus's group was now "trapped" by perhaps as many as 300,000 Chinese.[19] The next day the same paper announced that the 31st and 32nd Regiments were surrounded and their only supply route had been cut.[20] Because communication from this front had virtually ceased, Garrigus and the other members of MacLean's group seemed to have disappeared. A telegram informed the Garrigus family that their son was listed as missing in action as of November 27. In fact, their son was just beginning a cruel five-day struggle for survival.

On November 27 the Chinese struck in below-zero weather, blowing horns, bugles, and shooting flares. Because of the lack of communication, the scattered elements of Task Force MacLean "fought separate and desperate actions."[21] On the 32nd's perimeter the fighting was fierce as well. On the days of the first attack, MacLean held a position at an inlet of the Chosin while Faith's 32nd Regiment had established a perimeter a mile or so away.

Fearing air strikes, the Chinese pulled back the next morning, and the scattered groups of GIs reformed their perimeters. Oddly, the commander of X Corps, Lieutenant General Almond, did not seem greatly concerned about the initial Chinese attack. From Hagaru, Almond helicoptered into Faith's perimeter on November 28 and talked over the situation with Faith and others, while nearby Garrigus tended his trucks. Almond had come to confer with and encourage the leaders of the beleaguered task force, by disparaging the enemy as "nothing more than the remnant of Chinese divisions fleeing north. . . .don't let a bunch of Chinese laundrymen stop you."[22]

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[17]David McCullough, "Truman Fires MacArthur," *MHQ: Quarterly Journal of Military History,* VII (Autumn 1992), 13.

[18]New York *Times,* November 28, 1950.

[19]Evansville *Courier*, November 30, 1950.

[20]*Ibid.*, December 1, 1950.

[21]Appleman, *East of Chosin*, 460.

[22]*Ibid.*, 462.

The struggle that took place on the evening of the 28th proved to be even more brutal and intense than the first night's action, as MacLean's camp was almost overrun. The situation was so serious that many units did not "take time to carry rations to the front line. When the food did reach the soldiers after dark, it was frozen and the men had no way to thaw it except by holding it against their bodies."[23] Faith's group, which included Garrigus, fared little better than MacLean's. The next day MacLean decided it would be best for Faith's regiment to consolidate with his group. In carrying out the request to move, Faith ordered several trucks to be unloaded so that the rapidly mounting number of wounded could be carried out in three-quarter-ton trucks. At dawn on November 29, about sixty vehicles began the dash through heavy enemy fire. As the column crossed a final bridge to arrive in MacLean's perimeter, Chinese fire increased, and two American trucks carrying ammunition and rations were hastily left behind by nervous truck drivers. Later that same day Garrigus gazed across the bridge and saw enemy soldiers approaching the abandoned supply trucks. "On his own initiative," the first sergeant decided to return for the trucks. Unarmed and dashing "across. . .300 yards of open snow covered ice," Garrigus brought the first truck across the bridge to safety; then he ran back to get the second truck. His second trip drew the unwanted attention of even more Chinese. As he maneuvered the lumbering truck over the frozen ground, bullets whizzed by and smacked into the truck's body. Somehow the truck made it into the safety of the American lines, stalling as it rolled into the perimeter. Here the sound of the dying engine gave way to the hurrahs of GIs. These soldiers had taken some hard hits from the Chinese, and the sergeant's surprising stunt greatly lifted their morale. "Through Garrigus' quick thinking actions. . .the supplies were taken from the very grasp of the enemy."[24]

That same morning MacLean was either killed or captured by Chinese whom he had mistakenly identified as Americans. Now Faith found himself in charge of the Task Force.[25] On November 30, General David Barr, commander of the 7th Infantry Division, came by helicopter to Faith's headquarters, where he learned of MacLean's disappearance. Although their conversation was not recorded, Faith probably told Barr of his plans to break out of the trap by dashing several miles over a narrow mountain road to the more secure marine

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[23]Russell A. Gugeler, *Combat Actions in Korea: Infantry, Artillery, Armor* (Washington, D.C., 1954), 70.

[24]General Headquarters, Far East Command, General Orders No. 201, August 7, 1951, Distinguished Service Cross award for Charles Garrigus, in possession of Delores Garrigus Beeson (hereafter cited as Distinguished Service Cross).

[25]Edward F. Murphy, *Korean War Heroes* (Novato, Calif., 1992), 109-114. Donald Carlos Faith, born in Washington, Indiana, on August 26, 1918, grew up in a military family, his father retiring as a brigadier general. For his actions in the battle east of the Chosin, Faith would receive the Congressional Medal of Honor posthumously.

base at Hagaru.[26] Faith further planned to load the five hundred or so wounded in trucks and jeeps and bring them out as well. Given the horrible conditions of the road, the bitterly cold and snowy weather, and the thousands of Chinese who occupied the hills, the breakout plan seemed an impossible task. Yet more shocking news came to Faith at this time. The beleaguered marines would not be able to send any men to help Faith's party move southward. Other than daily air support from a handful of planes, Task Force Faith, as it was now unofficially dubbed, would be on its own.

The night before the attempted breakout was brutal. Shortly after midnight the Chinese attack built a greater intensity than all other previous attacks. "All through the night," recalled one survivor, "we heard the cries from our friendly wounded within the perimeter who were suffering from the cold."[27] Desperately needed medical supplies were completely exhausted by the next morning. Thus the condition of Faith's group on the morning of the attempted breakout was especially poor. A surviving officer described the hellish scene: "By dawn on December 1 members of the Task Force had been under attack for 80 hours in sub-zero weather. None had slept much. None had washed or shaved, none had eaten more than a bare minimum." To make things worse, most of the men were wounded or crippled by the bitter cold. "Everyone seemed to be wounded in one fashion or another. . .frozen feet and hands were common."[28] Just as discouraging on that bleak dawn was the rapidly deteriorating weather.

Garrigus was probably given much authority over the trucks in the convoy, most of which were heavily loaded with the wounded. Vehicles typically carried fifteen to twenty injured men, though some had as many as fifty on board. Just as the convoy began to take off, Chinese troops overran several key defensive machine gun positions at the edge of the perimeter and used those weapons to rake the American lines. Rallying "a group of soldiers," Garrigus led "a daring charge, regained the machine guns. . ." and immediately turned the weapons "on the enemy, killing 60 or so and wounding many others."[29] Chinese firing died down, and the perimeter was safe once more because of Garrigus's bold actions. The convoy could continue.

Given the lack of communication and the loss of leadership, it is not surprising that the moving column soon became a disorganized fight for survival. One major noted that once started, the troops "flooded down the road like a great mob and tactical control broke down almost immediately. Officers tried frantically to re-establish control and to order men up on the high ground where they could protect the truck

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[26]Appleman, *East of Chosin*, 176.
[27]*Ibid.*, 187.
[28]*Ibid.*
[29]Distinguished Service Cross.

column."[30] Soon many able-bodied men began to wander off from the wounded men in the trucks and toward the southern end of the frozen reservoir and the safety of marine lines. Meanwhile, Chinese firing waxed and waned as the strung-out caravan snaked through the barren hills. Often groups of GIs with the convoy would charge a particular hill or roadblock to drive the enemy away and then head overland for Hagaru.

At about 3 p.m. the convoy came to an unexpected roadblock—a blown bridge. The trucks were forced to go down into a muddy stream bed in order to bypass the blockage. The Chinese brought down especially heavy fire as the vulnerable trucks struggled to churn through the mud below the destroyed span. Many of the men operating the trucks were inexperienced with such deplorable driving conditions and soon were mired in the mud. This circumstance threatened to stop the column in its tracks. Once more Garrigus rose to the occasion. The resourceful motor pool sergeant was able to put his long hours of driving vehicles through muddy Indiana farm fields to good use. "Under intense enemy fire," he brought "several trucks across and out of a deep mud hole in the bed of the stream."[31] Pvt. Alan Cork recalled examining the trucks after they had passed the blown bridge and found that it was impossible to place his hand anywhere upon any of the vehicles without touching a bullet hole.[32] Unfortunately for the convoy, it took several hours of precious time to get all the trucks of wounded GIs to the other side of the destroyed bridge. It was dangerously dark, and marine air support could no longer protect the men and trucks who struggled down the icy Korean dirt track. About the time dusk fell at 5 p.m. only twenty-five of the original thirty-five vehicles remained in the column. Garrigus, perhaps because of his actions back at the blown bridge, drove the lead truck of the vulnerable convoy. As the vehicles inched forward in low gear, more able-bodied men continued to leave the column, but not Garrigus.

Around midnight the convoy approached its final destination, five short miles from the marine lines at Hagaru. Enemy fire and mechanical breakdown had knocked out most of the trucks during that long afternoon. Only fifteen bullet-ridden vehicles remained, packed with wounded men. Faith had already died from wounds, and his body sat frozen in the cab of one of the trucks. Maj. Crosby Miller, who had barely been able to cling to the hood of a jeep, recalled what happened next. When the column paused to regroup, the silence was suddenly broken "by two mortar rounds burst[ing] to the right of the road opposite the truck column about 100 yards away." Miller doubted whether the convoy would be able to continue. Before the

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[30]Appleman, *East of Chosin*, 269-70.
[31]Distinguished Service Cross.
[32]Alan Cork, telephone interview with author, July 6, 1998.

first mortar rounds came, Garrigus had left the cab of the lead truck and "moved a 100 yards [ahead] and had not seen or heard any movement." When Garrigus returned to the trucks, he offered to lead the convoy in a last-ditch effort to get the trucks and wounded to Hagaru. Upon Miller's instructions to "move out," word was passed back to prepare for a final run.[33]

Two hundred yards down the road "a terrific blast of. . .machine gun fire hit" the lead truck, causing it to pile into a ditch and effectively block escape for the rest of the convoy.[34] Garrigus died at the wheel of his vehicle. The Chinese fell on the remaining trucks and their helpless human cargo. For all purposes, Task Force Faith ended here. "At the end," notes Appleman, "each man had his own adventure, and some lived to tell them."[35] Garrigus and the others of Task Force MacLean-Faith would not suffer or die in vain. Their efforts kept a large number of Chinese tied down for five crucial days, allowing the marines at Yudam-ni to fight their way down to Hagaru where marines and surviving elements of the Seventh Army Infantry Division were then able to carry out their now famous retreat. During this advance to the rear, U.S. forces inflicted tremendous losses upon the Chinese with concentrated artillery fire and air strikes before evacuating the northeast Korean coast at Hungnam. By April of 1951, the Chinese drive had been halted, and by June the war became a grinding, static struggle along the thirty-eighth parallel. By the time the war ended in July 1953, over fifty-four thousand American troops had died.

For several months Gladys and Charles Garrigus, Sr., were told that their son was missing in action, but by early April 1951, the army had pieced together enough fragmented information from the accounts of survivors to be certain that Charles Garrigus, Jr., had indeed died while leading the final breakout attempt. In a letter that April, addressed to Gladys Garrigus, General MacArthur wrote that he hoped Gladys could find "some measure of comfort" knowing that her son died "in the service of his country and in the defense of a peace loving people."[36] The fragmented accounts concerning the five-day struggle east of the Chosin also shed light on Charles Garrigus's heroic efforts, and on August 7, 1951, the young Francisco, Indiana, man posthumously received the Distinguished Service Cross, America's second highest military honor, "for his valorous conduct."[37] No other Gibson County soldier has received so prestigious an award. Garrigus's body, like so many who died in northeast Korea that bitterly cold winter, was never returned to the United States.

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[33]Appleman, *East of Chosin*, 269-70.

[34]*Ibid.*; Distinguished Service Cross.

[35]Appleman, *East of Chosin*, 274.

[36]Letter from Douglas MacArthur to Gladys Garrigus, April 3, 1951, in possession of Delores Garrigus Beeson.

[37]Distinguished Service Cross.