

Counterstroke

MacArthur, the veteran commander of numerous littoral operations in the southwest Pacific during World War II, was quick to see the strategic possibilities offered by the Korean peninsula. Less than one week after Kim Il Sung's Communist legions poured across the 38th parallel into the Republic of Korea, CIN-CUNC began to consider how he could defeat his landbound adversary. MacArthur's visit to the Korean battlefield on 29 June convinced him that the NKPA would push the underequipped, battered and demoralized ROK army, even

if bolstered by U.S. reinforcements, far to the south of Seoul. MacArthur felt that his forces could turn the tables on the enemy by exploiting one key advantage over them—strategic mobility. He decided that a decisive stroke, an amphibious assault somewhere behind NKPA lines, could liberate South Korea.

MacArthur concluded that his enemy was most vulnerable to a landing on Korea's west coast at Inchon. Capture of this sizeable port and the nearby air base at Kimpo would enable the UN to mount a major attack on Seoul, not

only the capital of South Korea but the key road and rail link in the NKPA's line of communications. A north-westward UN offensive from the Pusan Perimeter would then push across the peninsula, trapping most of the enemy army in the south. The U.S. divisions from the perimeter would also link up with the units at Inchon. The isolated NKPA formations would be forced to surrender or be crushed between the UN forces. Success at Inchon could lead to a glorious, one-stroke UN victory in the war, a prospect the gifted but vain MacArthur could only relish.

MacArthur Sells Inchon

MacArthur selected the small Joint Strategic Plans and Operations Group (JSPOG) of his Far East Command (FECOM) staff to bring his concept to fruition. The general's advocacy of an amphibious operation sometime before October and selection of Inchon as the site were, according to Admiral Struble, the general's "earliest and most important" decisions.

Planners were free to concentrate on overcoming the Inchon site's difficulties, and they were serious, indeed. In the words of Lieutenant Commander Arlie G. Capps, Admiral Doyle's gunnery officer, "We drew up a list of every natural and geographic

handicap—and Inchon had 'em all." The approaches from the Yellow Sea were two restricted passages, Flying Fish and Eastern channels, and they joined at Palmi Do island. Palmi Do stood at the end of the narrow Salee River, 10 miles downstream from Inchon. Both channels and the Salee could be easily blocked by mines. In addition, the normal harbor current at Inchon was a dangerously quick two to three knots and sometimes even eight knots. The anchorage was small, there were few docks and piers and no landing beaches—in the usual meaning of that term—only sea walls, piers, salt pans and "rocks with patches of

sand." Just offshore, a triangular-shaped island, Wolmi Do, and an islet, Sowolmi Do, separated the city from the Salee River.

Several heights dominated the landing area. The 315-foot-high Radio Hill on Wolmi Do completely commanded the harbor. Presenting a sheer cliff to the harbor side and rising to 102 feet, Cemetery Hill guarded the 800-yard-long causeway that led to Wolmi Do. Observatory Hill, 238 feet high, and the smaller British Consulate Hill overlooked the city itself.

Perhaps the most critical factor was Inchon's extreme tidal range of 32 feet, which limited a daylight landing to three or four days each



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General of the Army Douglas A. MacArthur grasps the arms of Army Chief of Staff General J. Lawton Collins (left) and Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Forrest P. Sherman on their arrival at Tokyo airfield on 21 August 1950. Two days later, MacArthur turned in a masterful performance to persuade his guests that the proposed amphibious assault at Inchon would succeed.

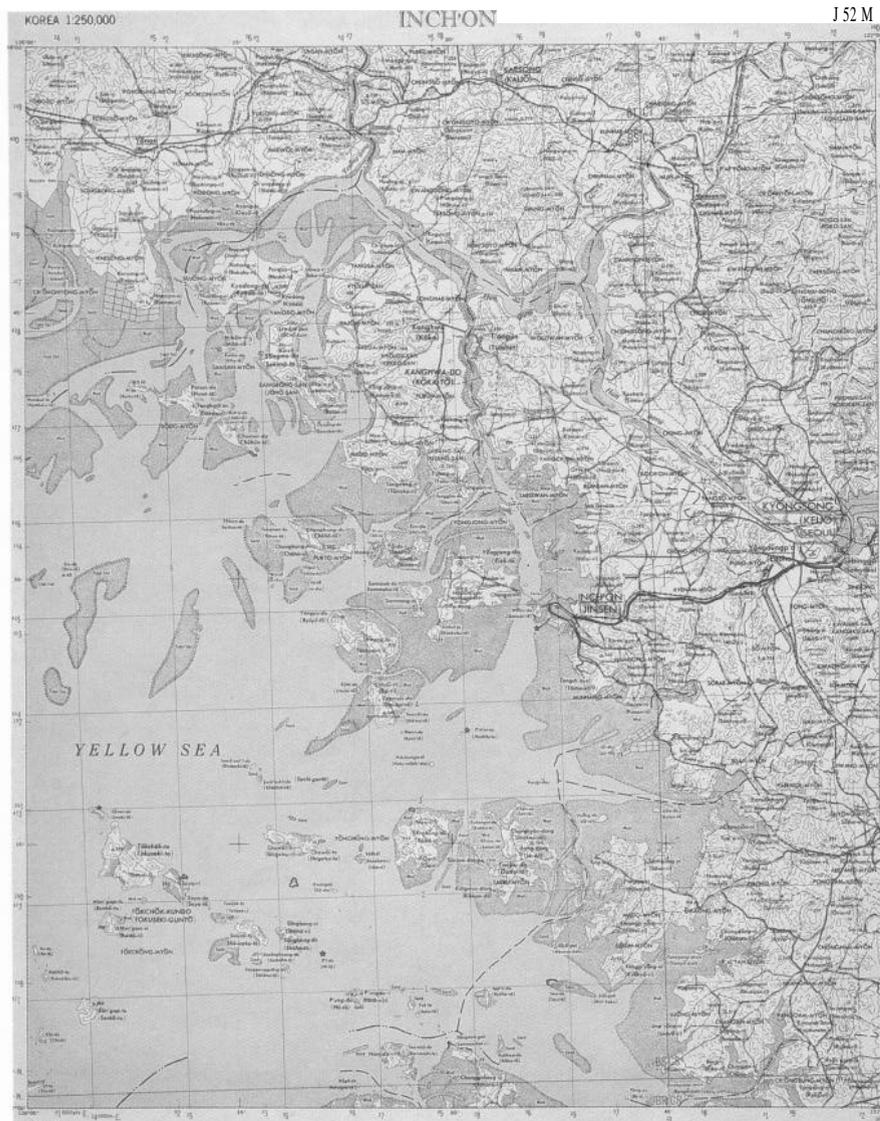
month. Tidal waters had to be high enough to cover the wide mud flats that fronted the city. Since the highest tides in September occurred in mid-month, the JSPOG selected 15 September as D day. FECOM had less than two months to plan an assault that normally took three to five months of work. Nonetheless, MacArthur's headquarters issued Operation Plan 100-B, code-named "Chromite," with Inchon as the objective.

Doyle and many of the officers on the staff were concerned that Inchon might be too risky, so they investigated alternative sites. Doyle dispatched *Horace A. Bass* and her UDT/Marine team to scout Kunsan, which they found to be better suited to an amphibious assault. The JSPOG prepared a plan for a Kunsan operation, just in case MacArthur changed his mind on the attack site.

Although commanders in the Far East understood the difficulties of the proposed assault, the JCS was "somewhat in the dark." On 20 August, Admiral Forrest P. Sherman, the CNO; General J. Lawton Collins, the Army Chief of Staff; and other high-ranking officers flew from Washington to MacArthur's Tokyo headquarters for a briefing on the planned amphibious operation in Korea.

Admiral Doyle's staff sum-

This detailed map of the Inchon area, prepared in 1950, clearly shows the narrow passages and numerous mud and tidal flats in the approaches to the harbor.



marized the details of the assault: weather, hydrography, landing craft, beaches, naval gunfire and air support. Intelligence on the enemy forces at **Inchon** suggested that only a few weak units operated there and that the harbor's defenses were not completed. Doyle, a veteran of Guadalcanal and other World War II landings, ended the briefing with the statement that "the best I can say is that **Inchon** is not impossible." This reinforced the misgivings already felt by some of the assembled offi-

cers, so they asked probing questions about alternative landing sites such as Kunsan.

MacArthur, at that time revered by many Americans as a military genius and legendary hero, slowly rose to address the assembled officers. In his well-known theatrical style and sonorous voice, the general spent the next 45 minutes delivering an oration that awed his audience. MacArthur never swayed from his choice of **Inchon** as the landing site. He observed that because the conditions at **Inchon**

were so difficult, the enemy would not expect a landing there. Success at **Inchon** could end the war, while a seizure of Kunsan or another alternative site would be indecisive and lead to a brutal winter campaign. Looking at Admiral Sherman, the general spoke with conviction: "The Navy has never let me down in the past and it will not let me down this time." Concluding this masterful performance, MacArthur quietly but forcefully stated that "we shall land at **Inchon** and I shall crush them!"

Preparing for Operation Chromite

When Sherman and Collins returned to Washington, the JCS formally approved MacArthur's intention to assault **Inchon** on 15 September, and this spurred **FECOM's** preparation effort. MacArthur's greatest concern was the availability and readiness of ground troops for Chromite. Many of the forces that he hoped to hold in reserve for the amphibious assault at **Inchon** had been thrown into battle on the Naktong or would arrive in the theater late. The 5th Marine RCT of his primary assault force, the 1st Marine Division, spent much of August and early September fending off NKPA thrusts into the Pusan Perimeter.

The unit had only eight days to rest from combat, prepare for the amphibious operation and embark for the passage to **Inchon**. The division's third regiment would not arrive in the Far East until two days after the landing. When MacArthur ordered the 2nd Infantry Division, his first choice for the Army component, to the front in Korea, he had to replace it with Major General David G. Barr's half-strength 7th Infantry Division based in Japan. The Army channeled to Barr's division all arriving replacement personnel, including experienced non-commissioned officers from the schools at Fort Benning, Georgia, and Fort Sill, Oklahoma. This was still not enough, so MacArthur

authorized the division to incorporate over 8,000 Korean troops, called **KATUSA's** (Korean Augmentation to the U.S. Army). Finally, for lack of alternatives, the American planners were compelled to use the understrength, ill-equipped-but enthusiastic—1st Korean Marine Corps (**KMC**) Regiment as the reserve contingent and **Inchon** mop-up unit.

Doyle's staff focused their efforts on the operational aspects of Chromite. They decided that amphibious ships and craft would approach **Inchon** by way of Flying Fish Channel, which was a rougher seaway than Eastern Channel but less subject to enemy artillery fire. Two days prior to the landing, cruisers and de-

stroyers would steam into the harbor to shell Wolmi Do and check the waters for mines.

Even though the Japanese and American tide tables did not agree, planners estimated that high tides would occur shortly after sunrise and then just after sunset on 15 September. Since most of the amphibious ships would need daylight to navigate the narrow, swift waters of Flying Fish Channel and the Salee River, the planners decided that the smaller initial landing would take place on the morning tide. A reinforced Marine battalion would storm ashore at Green Beach on Wolmi Do and seize this island that dominated the harbor. With close air and naval gunfire support, the unit was expected to hold off any North Korean counterattacks during the day. The main assault would occur as the tide rose in the evening. Two Marine battalions would land at Red Beach, just north of the causeway from Wolmi Do, and seize the three hills in town. An entire Marine regiment would land at Blue Beach, three miles to the south of Red Beach.

Both "beaches" were in actuality built-up industrial areas largely bounded by sea walls. Vehicle and personnel landing craft (LCVP) and medium landing craft (LCM) were responsible for deploying the leathernecks to shore at Red Beach. Tracked landing vehicles (LVT), also known as amtracs, would transport the Marines

in the first waves at Blue Beach, because the approach crossed two miles of mud flats covered by shallow water. LCVPs would bring in the rest of the regiment in later waves. Navy and Marine planners concluded that both beachheads were defensible, even though separated by the built-up section of *Inchon*.

The planners paid special attention to logistics support, which would be vital to the success of not only the initial assault on *Inchon* but the breakout to Seoul. They knew that the existing port facilities were rudimentary and even those would probably be destroyed in combat. Initially, all material would have to be moved across the beach. In addition, the narrow approaches from the sea would allow only a few ships at a time to operate off *Inchon*.

The Navy's LSTs, which were designed to operate in shallow water and unload cargo directly onto the beach, were key to success at *Inchon*. Doyle assembled 17 U.S. Navy LSTs and 30 Japanese-manned SCAJAP vessels. The admiral, understanding the importance of keeping the Marines supplied with ammunition and equipment in the early, critical stage of the landing, planned to leave some of his LSTs aground as the evening tide receded. They would be replaced by other ships with the following morning's tide. Hence, the LSTs, which in World War II were often referred

to by their crews as "large, slow targets," would in this instance be "large, stationary targets."

The planners knew that accurate intelligence was critical to the success of an operation as complex as an amphibious assault. Consequently, in late August, the FECOM acted to gather more information about the waterways leading to *Inchon*. On 19 August, the Canadian destroyer HMCS *Athabaskan* (DDE 219) escorted a ROK navy vessel to Yonghung Do, an island only 14 miles from *Inchon*. Lieutenant Commander Ham Myong Su led a small team ashore where they found the inhabitants sympathetic to the South Korean cause. Armed with this information, on 1 September FECOM dispatched to the island Navy Lieutenant Eugene F. Clark, a former LST skipper. Under the noses of nearby NKPA island garrisons, Clark's team gathered information on surrounding waterways. The lieutenant informed Tokyo that the Japanese tide tables were accurate, the area's mud flats would support no weight, sea walls were higher than estimated and Wolmi Do was heavily fortified and bristled with numerous artillery pieces. Clark reported that even though the Canadians had disabled *Palmi* Do lighthouse, it was easily repairable. Tokyo told the intrepid officer to relight the beacon just after midnight on 15 September.