

Planning for Chromite: Tides and Weather

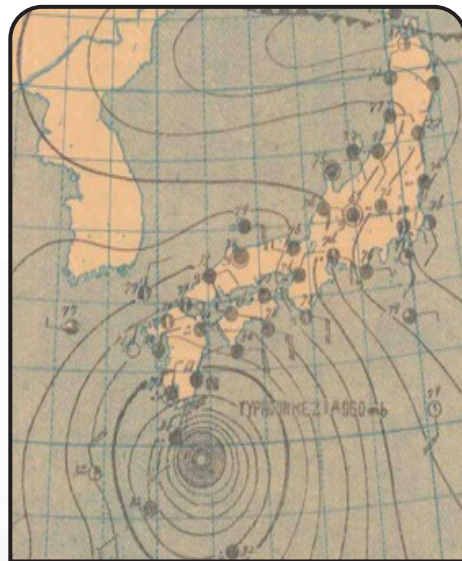
General of the Army Douglas MacArthur believed that a successful landing could take place at a location where the North Korean Communist forces least expected it: Inchon, a lightly defended port. Due to oceanographic and weather issues, U.S. Navy leadership remained hesitant to endorse MacArthur's decision. Rear Admiral James Doyle, the operation's chief planner and veteran of many amphibious campaigns, gave a lukewarm endorsement by pointing out that landing at Inchon presented many unknown variables.

Doyle was reluctant because Inchon's natural harbor was tricky to navigate. The tide pattern of the port was complex. During the month of September, the difference between low tide and high tide was over 30 feet. Furthermore, the highest flood tide during the month allowed a short time frame of only three days, and it did not stay at that stage for long. The mud flats were another hazard. Even at flood stage, the islands that surrounded the harbor had very shallow depths, with mud flats extending far out into the channel.

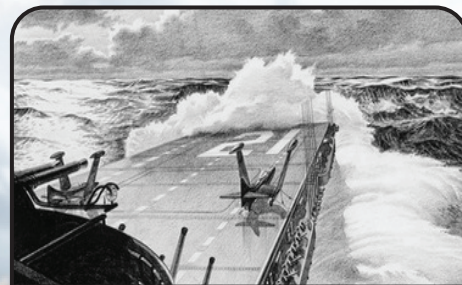
The complex tide patterns and mud flats forced American ships to navigate a narrow channel for 34 miles before reaching the shore. North Korean forces could have placed several coastal defense guns on the islands and easily mined the channel. To complicate the assault teams' landing, providing follow-up supplies and reinforcements had to be done in a limited amount of space and on a strict schedule.

Along with oceanography challenges, planners faced another threat: the weather. While tides and mud flats were tricky, they were constant and could be handled with proper planning. Weather events were somewhat predictable, but never constant. September is a prime month for tropical storms in the South Pacific and two Category 3 typhoons formed there in September 1950. Typhoon Jane developed as an intense storm on September 3 and Typhoon Kezia organized on September 12. U.S. Navy weather planes and forecasters gave the Inchon landing force three days' notice, warning that both storms were headed for southern Japan, where the task force assembled.

Sailors picked up their pace of loading out their ships and left Japan as soon as they could. Nonetheless, the task force had to plow through the storms, often facing wind speeds in excess of 90-knots. Doyle later remarked these were the roughest seas he had ever faced in his 35 year career in the Navy. The storms battered the ships, particularly the smaller ones, but all made it to Inchon unharmed.



Among the many variables to be calculated by Operation Chromite planners were typhoons. This is a weather map showing Typhoon Kezia, a Category 3 tropical storm, approaching Japan three days before the Inchon landings. The storm hit the landing force ships hard with 90-knot winds while they were en route to Inchon.



Due to the emergency caused by North Korea's invasion of South Korea and a shortage of U.S. Navy aircraft carriers, USS Boxer (CV-21) made three herculean trips across the Pacific from San Diego to South Korea between June and September 1950. During the third voyage, the carrier fought its way through rough seas caused by passing tropical storms.

In a prime example of Inchon's tidal range, LST QO-18 and a smaller landing craft sit high and dry on the shores of Inchon five days after the first landings. The harbor had a tidal range of over 30 feet, which gave U.S. Navy leadership a landing window of only a few days.

