

The Frozen Hours

reviewed by Col Eric L. Chase, USMCR(Ret)

Introducing his 15th and latest historical novel, Jeff Shaara declares that his “responsibility is, first and foremost, to tell ... a good story.” His first venture into the Korean War, *The Frozen Hours*, more than delivers on that commitment and illustrates again Shaara’s mastery of a genre that can shed light on the realities of war and combat in ways that transcend nonfiction. This creative ability to blend a compelling “story” with the actual historical particulars and complexities of warfare makes Shaara’s end product accessible and comprehensible to all audiences.

His previous works, all best-selling historical novels, span the American Revolution, the Civil War, and both World Wars. Fiction affords the author latitude to depict, within a real-world framework, intimate detail: dialogue; the confusing violence and chaos of combat, courage, sacrifice, longing for home and family; plans gone awry; cowardice; fear; pain; hunger; self-doubt; and the camaraderie of men at war. *The Frozen Hours* captures all these qualities in three participants Shaara portrays as narrators, placing the reader in the midst of it all.

Yet Shaara is meticulously faithful to well-known and documented historical events and players, and they set the stage on which his characters perform. He puts the paradoxical challenge of accuracy in fiction this way:

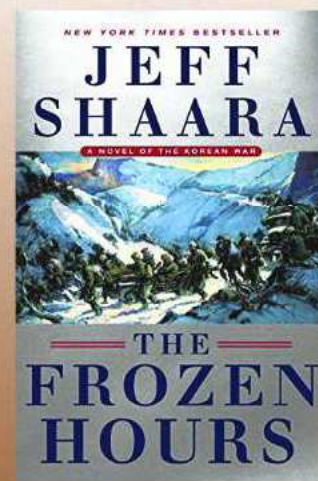
In every story I do, the events are real, the history is as accurate as I can make it. This is a novel by definition because there is dialogue, and you are seeing the events through the eyes of the characters themselves.

Shaara continues a stellar literary legacy, following his father’s (Michael

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Shaara) Gettysburg historical novel masterpiece, *The Killer Angels* (Pulitzer Prize winner for fiction in 1975). Despite a few quibbles over minor mistakes, Shaara’s contribution to an understanding of the Marines’ valiant actions in the Korean War against a determined enemy with vastly superior numbers and horrific sub-zero weather is an enduring one. In *The Frozen Hours*, Shaara tells a gripping story to engross any student of military history, one that should join *The Killer Angels* on the Commandant’s Professional Reading List.

The Frozen Hours transpires over September to December 1950, four strategically-crucial months of the Korean War. As in his previous novels, Shaara presents multiple points of view, this time from the perspectives of three historical combatants in the Chosin Reservoir Campaign, including two Marines: MajGen O.P. Smith, CG, 1stMarDiv, at the top of the Marine chain, and PFC Pete Riley, a grunt on Fox Hill who epitomized the heroics of Marine infantrymen in close combat. The Chinese narrative voice—the enemy’s perspective—is Gen Sung Shi-Lun, Mao’s top field commander in Korea. Portrayed as contemplative, experienced, and competent, he is resentful of the annoying Soviet officer, Maj Dmitri



THE FROZEN HOURS: A Novel of the Korean War. By Jeff Shaara
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Orlov, sent ostensibly to observe and report back to Moscow. (The Afterword discloses that Orlov’s rank of major was a subterfuge—he was, in fact, a major general and an influential Kremlin operative worthy of Gen Sung’s obvious distrust.)

The Frozen Hours focuses on the embattled Marines, who had advanced rapidly from the aftermath of the remarkably successful amphibious operation at Inchon well into North Korea. When U.N. forces (mostly U.S. units) overwhelmed the North Korean Army, the initial drive into North Korea was a walk over. The end of a successful and short campaign seemed near. “Home by Christmas” was the troops’ rallying cry. It was not to be, however, as the invasion of the Chinese army changed everything.

The historical backdrop for *The Frozen Hours* remains controversial, and Shaara confronts the withering criticism of both Army leadership and the battle misconduct and disgrace of engaged Army units head-on. GEN Douglas

MacArthur, with his aggressive grand strategy and notorious ego-driven bravado, stubbornly resisted the possibility and reality of a massive Chinese intervention. Thus, by the time the Chinese were closing in on North Korean territory—conquered by dangerously-dispersed American units—the Marines were exposed, well into North Korea, and on their way to the Yalu River bordering China.

The vulnerability of the Marines (and adjacent Army units) stemmed from the enormous errors in judgment of GEN MacArthur and others who dared not disagree with him. He inspired respect, awe, and fear from ranking Army subordinates who prized their own personal fealty to their boss over all else, even above a commander's responsibility to honestly weigh mission viability against potentially overwhelming forces whose very existence MacArthur denied. MacArthur's triumph in the spectacularly successful landing at Inchon, carried out against conventional wisdom and the advice of senior military advisors, had conferred upon him for a time a virtual immunity from criticism, even when he ignored or disobeyed instructions from Washington. It was after the period covered by the novel that President Harry S. Truman relieved MacArthur for his insubordination.

MacArthur's key man in Korea, Army MG Edward "Ned" Almond, commander of the Tenth Corps, stubbornly insisted on the continuation of the Marines' ill-fated mission, despite an avalanche of intelligence confirming the certainty that the Chinese had entered the conflict in force. Consistent with historical events, the U.S. Army, from the top down, fares badly in Shaara's telling while the vastly-outnumbered Marines overcame every daunting challenge to make it possible to "advance in a different direction," eluding the certainty of annihilation in the Chosin Reservoir Campaign.

As narrated by PFC Riley, the novel's heart is Fox Company's five-day stand in record cold at the end

of November into December on the strategic high ground at Toktong Pass. Overlooking the sole escape route for O.P.'s beleaguered Marine division, now cut off north of the Pass at Haguru-Ri by the arrival and deployment of Chinese Communist divisions, Fox Company's defensive miracle emerged as a Corps legend led by Capt William E. Barber, who was awarded the Medal of Honor.

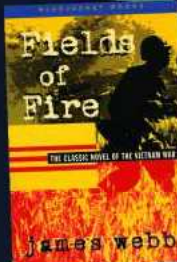
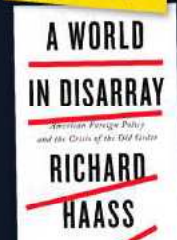
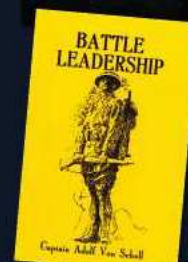
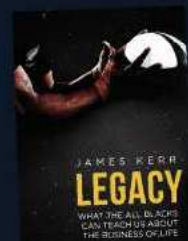
In Shaara's depiction of the Fox Hill battle (through PFC Riley) and the struggles at highest levels (through Smith and Sung), he is at his best. The dialogue and battle scenes open the curtain to personify combat in the worst of conditions: one small unit of Marine grunts mightily fighting surges of fanatical attackers in regimental strength, in arctic cold, with low rations that in any event, frozen solid. The perimeter diminished as Fox Company suffered irreplaceable casualties each night. Ammunition was in ever-short supply, and air supply was a savior, along with timely bombing runs and artillery fire from afar. Of the company's 240 effectives at the outset, only 80 remained unscathed to walk off the Hill.

When the Fox Hill stand ended in triumph with its relief by a battalion led by LtCol (later General) Ray Davis, who was awarded the Medal of Honor for his "ridge-running" leadership in harrowing whiteout combat conditions, the 1stMarDiv was able to survive as it fought its way south from the crossroad at Toktong Pass. In escaping the Chinese juggernaut, the Corps' combat movement of men, vehicles, and equipment was a remarkably successful strategic retreat. O.P. Smith memorably labeled his success this way: "Retreat, hell! We are not retreating, we are just advancing in a different direction." Shaara's story ends with this withdrawal complete, and the division saved.

Shaara suggests that *The Frozen Hours* may be the first of a "trilogy of stories set in Korea." Readers will hope so. This is fiction and history at their blended best.



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