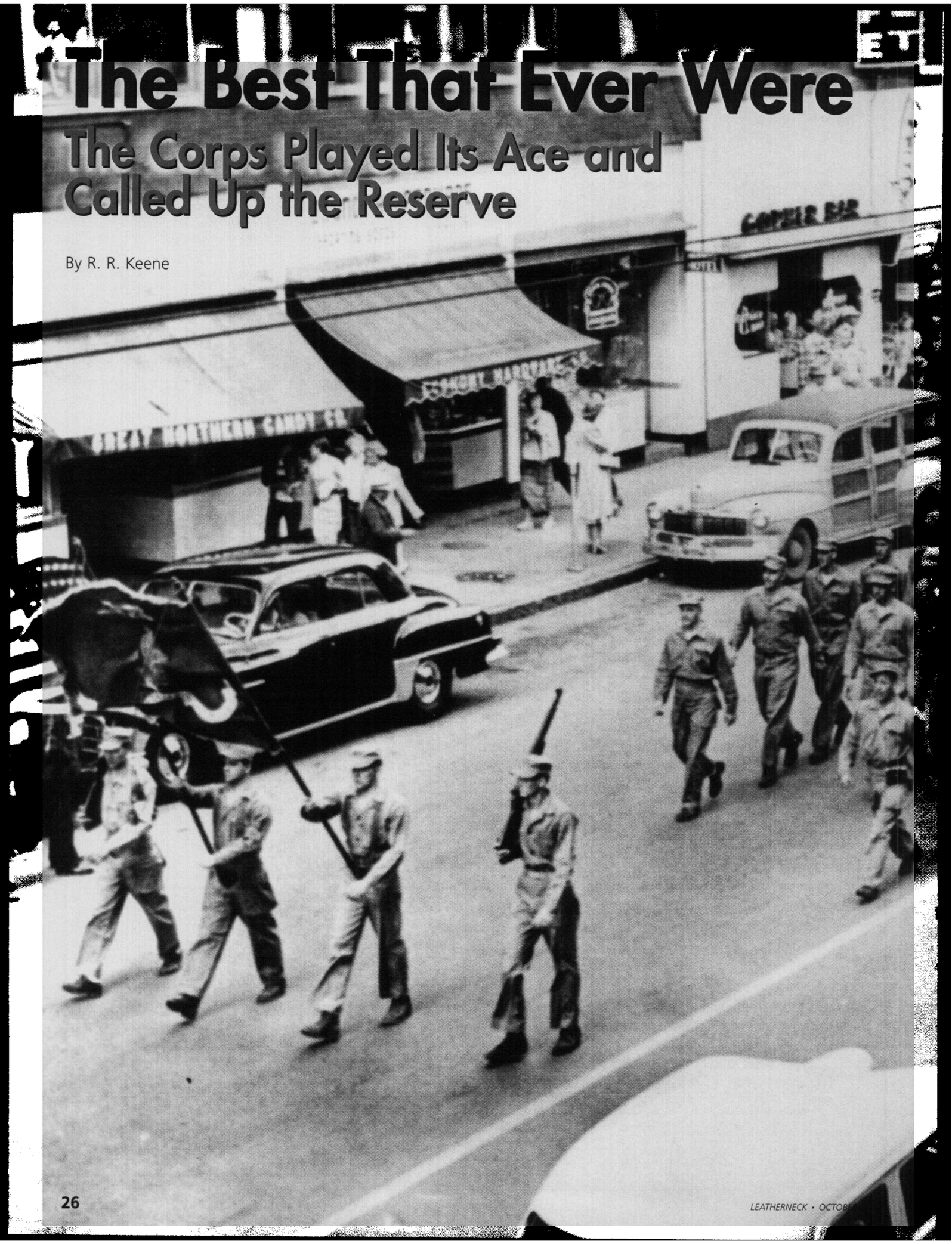
The Best That Ever Were

The Corps Played Its Ace and Called Up the Reserve

By R. R. Keene



There had never been a force of military reservists as experienced in the business of war, nor has there been any since, equal to that pool of civilian leathernecks who, in 1950, stepped forward to fight "that war" in Korea.

When 90,000 men of the North Korean People's Army crouched behind the heavy treads of Soviet-made T34 tanks and smashed across the 38th parallel and southward, there was no force on the Korean peninsula—or throughout the vast reaches of Asia for that matter—with the grit, tenacity and daring to stop them.

Nations of the world, more particularly those member states of the United Nations debating what to do about communist aggression in Korea, had only a few years earlier fought the biggest and most costly war in history. Most were still rebuilding.

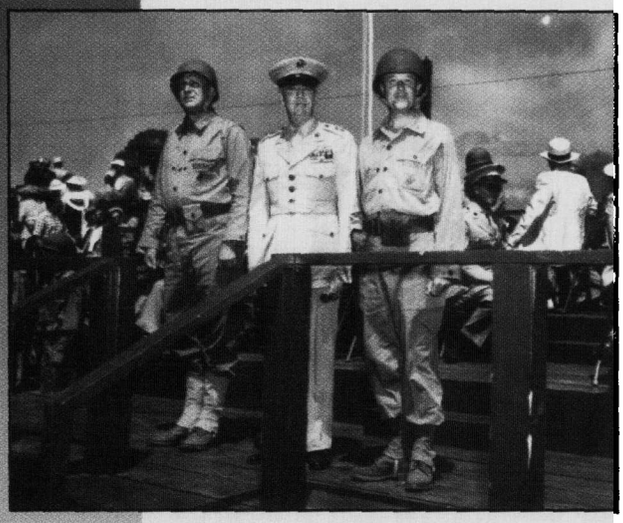
From his *Dai Ichi* Building headquarters in Tokyo, General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, Commander in Chief, United Nations Command, confident, brilliant and calculating, looked across the rim of the Pacific for the force he wanted: the First Marine Division.

In his deeply resonant, theatrical voice, MacArthur proclaimed to his astonished staff that with the 1st-MarDiv he would boldly outflank the communists.

"We shall land at Inchon, and I shall crush them!" MacArthur said.

Major General Oliver P. Smith, a tall, soft-spoken and prematurely gray Texan, had recently assumed command of the 1stMarDiv, or what was left of it. The once-powerful division had, during World War II, struck the first offensive blow for America when it landed, 7 Aug. 1942, on the South Pacific islands

On 21 Aug. 1950, in Duluth, Minn., 227 Marines from Co B, 4th Infantry Bn who had been called to active duty marched down Superior Street and off to Korea. Ten would die; half would be wounded. (Photo courtesy of Judith Mary McKeever, from the files of her father, Edward G. McKeever)



In July 1950 BGen Harry B. Liversedge, MajGen Field Harris and BGen Edward A. Craig (above, left to right) watched the 1stMarDiv pass in review and aircraft of the 1st MAW fly overhead at Camp Pendleton, Calif., (left) as the Marines mounted out for the Korean War. (USMC photos)

of Guadalcanal and Tulagi. Its shoulder patch in that war had been the Southern Cross, under which the division had fought important and bloody campaigns on New Guinea, Peleliu and Okinawa. In each, it had come ashore, often under horrific fire and with its back to the sea, executing the most difficult and dangerous of military maneuvers, the amphibious assault. MacArthur remembered the Marines' aggressive assaults and wanted them on his team.

But the 1stMarDiv in the years immediately following WW II had been reduced to one regiment: the 5th Marines. The battalions contained only two rifle companies with two platoons each for a division total of 3,386 leathernecks. The Corps, and indeed the U.S. military in general, had sent veterans of WW II back into civvies and back to school on the GI Bill. The veterans had saved the world and now expected to reap the benefits of life in America.

Meanwhile, the Corps faced not only deep cuts but potential oblivion. The Army, and to some degree the Air Force, saw the Marines, especially in a time of shrinking dollars, as redundant. They chafed and were uneasy with the Corps' record of valor in the Pacific and popularity with Americans at home.

Gen Clifton B. Cates was the Corps' 19th Commandant. He told a newspaper correspondent, "My biggest worry is to keep the Marine Corps alive. ... There are lots of people here in Washington [D.C.], who want to prevent that, who want to reduce us to the status of Navy policemen or get rid of us entirely."

MacArthur, historically no fan of the Marines, was, ironically, instrumental in saving the Corps with his dramatic use of the 1stMarDiv at Inchon. A year earlier, Army Gen Omar N. Bradley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, predicted that "large-scale amphibious operations ... will never occur again." Further, Secretary of Defense Louis A. Johnson, a lawyer and politician, did not hide his contempt for the Corps and its sister service, the Navy.

Secretary of the Army Kenneth C. Royall, when asked in Senate testimony if he were advocating that the Secretary of Defense "abolish the Marine Corps and make it part of the Army," replied, "That is exactly what I am proposing."

Finally, President Harry S. Truman stated he would have been delighted to do away with the Marines if he could get away with it. In a letter to Representative Gordon L. McDonough of California, the chief executive wrote, in part, "For your information, the Marine Corps is the Navy's police force and as long as I am President that is what it will remain. They have a propaganda machine that is almost equal to Stalin's."

Congressman McDonough placed the letter in the *Congressional Record*, and it was picked up in the newspapers. Reaction was swift, overwhelming and pro-Marine Corps. On 5 Sept. 1950, 10 days before the Inchon landing, President Truman handed Gen Cates a letter in which he wrote that he regretted his language. According to *The New York Times*, the President had written that it was not the Marines, "but their partisans [who] were propagandists; the Marine Corps was a police force only in the sense of its instant readiness in an emergency; it had a 'vital role' in national security."

Although the public outcry in support of its Corps had been voluminous, the fact remained that the entire Marine Corps, from the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli, had been depleted from 485,000 when the Japanese surrendered to less than 75,000 when war in Asia ignited once again.

MacArthur's call for the Marines to be sent to Korea had been less a godsend and more the back door maneuvering of Gen Cates. In early July 1950, through Lieutenant General Lemuel C. Shepherd Jr., Commanding General, Fleet Marine Forces, Pacific, Gen Cates let MacArthur know the Corps would, by August,

have a Marine brigade ready to land anywhere in Korea.

MacArthur took the cue. On 10 July he surprised everyone, including Gen Cates, by asking the Joint Chiefs of Staff for not only a Marine brigade but for the entire lstMarDiv with the First Marine Aircraft Wing.

JCS Chairman Gen Bradley smirked, doubting anybody, much less the Marines, would be capable of fielding a division in such a short span of time. He pushed to hold the lstMarDiv in strategic reserve. Air Force Chief of Staff Gen Hoyt Vandenberg was also a nonbeliever who feared losing control of the air war with the introduction of Navy and Marine aircraft. Air Force officials further stated that close air support (specifically, that brand the Navy and Marine Corps were noted for) was wasteful and too dangerous to friendly troops. Nobody on the JCS, however, wanted to buck MacArthur.

If the Marines had debated each point and argument presented, the lstMarDiv would never have gotten out of Camp Pendleton, Calif. Instead the Corps did what it does best. It took action.

First there was a brigade to form. The 5th Marines, nucleus of the brigade, was fleshed out by pulling leathernecks not only from other FMF units but from posts and stations throughout the States. With them came refurbished arms and equipment from armories and supply points across the country. Brigadier General Edward A. Craig, who commanded First Provisional Marine Brigade, brought it up to three rifle companies and a few howitzers short of what a brigade rated for combat. In Orange County, Calif., north of Pendleton, Marine Aircraft Group 33 with F4U Corsairs, light helicopters and observation planes made the brigade a truly integrated air-ground team and prepared to depart Marine Corps Air Station, El Toro.

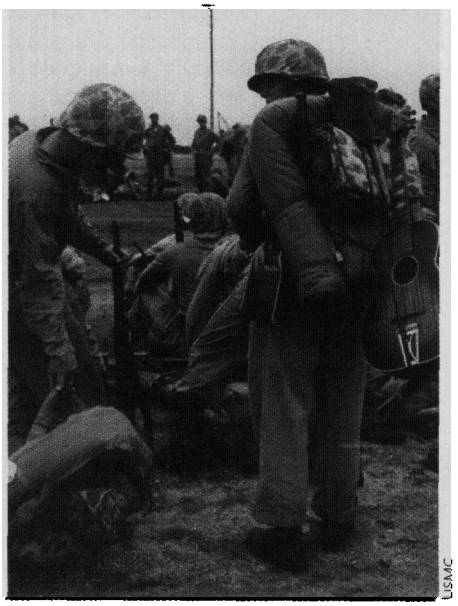
Had there been a few more days, the brigade might have made it to combat strength. It wasn't for a lack of trying. However, the U.S. Army and Republic of Korea forces, pushed back around the port city of Pusan, Korea, were facing annihilation by a massive, well-armed communist North Korean force. Consequently, those newly joined members of a Marine brigade that would become known as the "Fire Brigade" crammed important aspects of combat unit cohesion, such as refamiliarization with weapons, physical conditioning and tactics while on board ships. They were mentored by well-trained veterans of 5th Marines. Exactly one month from the date of its activation on 7 July, the lstProvMarBrig reinforced the thin lines of the Pusan Perimeter and was fighting communist forces.

If fitting and forming a brigade was a difficult task, bringing a division up to strength and mounting it out in less than eight weeks was thought by most as next to impossible. They stripped the 2dMarDiv at Camp Lejeune, N.C., which was already down to one-third of its wartime strength, and sent units packing cross-country (and, in one instance, across hemispheres). Eight hundred leathernecks of 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, on patrol in the Mediterranean, were ordered to join the lstMarDiv on its arrival off Korea. They would become part of the reactivated 7th Marines. The Corps then pulled from every security force, recruiting station, drill field, warehouse and mess hall around the world. It caused one Marine planner in the Pentagon to quip: "The only thing left between us and an emergency in Europe are the Schools Troops at Quantico [Virginia]."

Even with those Marines, there would not have been enough to form a combat-ready Marine division. Gen Cates, however, had a hole card. It was the Marine Corps Reserve which was called to active duty on 20 July.

As with much of Marine Corps history, one has to admire the wisdom and foresight of the Corps' leadership. Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps planners had, since the end of WW II, in their notorious frugality, stockpiled nearly all the material that a division and a Marine aircraft wing would need, "just in case."

More importantly, the leatherneck spirit of "once a Marine, always a Marine" meant that the Corps had never totally severed the ties with its combat veterans of the Pacific. In the summer of 1950, the Marine Corps Reserve was at an all-time high of 128,962 men and women, including 87,778 Volunteer Reserves. These VR Marines were individuals not belonging to units. What made them unique and a valued resource was that 99 percent of the officers and 75 percent of the enlisted men were professionals: veterans of Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Iwo Jima, Okinawa and countless other killing fields of the Pacific.



USMC

Many who were recalled were reluctant to go, but they went as Marines because their country and Corps needed them once again. Like those who served before, a few brought amenities—such as a guitar—for morale.

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It was to become an all-too-familiar sight during the 20th century: Marines packing out—in this case for Korea. In the summer of 1950 when Gen MacArthur requested the lstMarDiv, most of the JCS did not believe a division could be fielded in the time frame requested. The lstMarDiv achieved wartime strength in 16 days.

In 1949 the Corps began assigning black Marines by their MOS to fill vacancies in any unit. At the start of the Korean War, there were only 1,502 black Marines on active duty. Three years later, there were 14,731. (USMC photo)

On the other hand, most Organized Reserve units were well established in 38 separate units throughout 26 cities nationwide. Consequently, they quickly streamed into an overloaded Camp Pendleton, which had gone to a "lights to lights," 24-hour, seven-day work week to process everyone. During one 96-hour period in early August, approximately 6,800 Marines (regular and Reserve) and 350 Navy personnel flooded past Pendleton's busy gate guard.

The 13th Infantry Bn of Los Angeles; the 12th Amphibian Tractor Bn of San Francisco; the 12th Signal Company of Oakland, Calif.; and the 3d Engineer Co of Phoenix were the first units to check into Pendleton on 31 July. The first East Coast Reserve units to report to Camp Lejeune were members of the 5th Infantry Bn of Washington, D.C., including companies from Lynchburg and Charlottesville, Va., and Cumberland, Md.; Co B, 6th Infantry Bn of Reading, Pa.; and Battery C, 1st 105 mm Howitzer Bn of Fort Lee, Va.

MajGen Field Harris, commanding the 1st MAW, recalled watching the first contingency of air reservists arrive at MCAS, El Toro. "I will never forget the Texas squadron [Marine Fighter Squadron 111] climbing out of the transport plane, whooping and hollering and waving the Texas flag; these boys were ready."

From late July to early September, Reserve training centers throughout the nation squeaked with the sound of leather boondockers, were filled with the smell of canvas unfolding for the first time and provided the invincible feel of herringbone dungarees newly reissued.

The reservists joked about being "two-time losers" caught first in WW II and then in a war in the "land of the not so morning calm." In truth, they really had not had the time to settle into the America they fought so hard to preserve only a few years earlier.

Many of the recalled reservists had just graduated from college via the GI Bill. Many were married, had children and were only a few dollars away from a down payment on that first house. Reservists such as Albert H. Collins left Tulsa, Okla., bound for southern California. Cecil Wedworth reported in and ended up in 1st Marines. Gene H. Lease was one of the reservists who made up more than 30 percent of 7th Marines. Edward G. McKeever was one of 227 Marine reservists in "Baker" Co, 4th Infantry Bn called up from Duluth, Minn.

There were others—Archie Van Winkle and James I. Poynter. Hector A. Cafferatta Jr. was a member of the 21st Infantry Bn of Dover, N.J., and had not yet gone to boot camp. But most were veterans like John Yancey who had been a lieutenant in the last war and won the Navy Cross at the Lunga River on Guadalcanal. All were called again for a date with destiny.

And there were others who a few years earlier would not have been placed in front-line units. On 26 July 1948, President Truman signed Executive Order 9981, which banned color bias in the armed services. On 18 Nov. 1949, the Corps issued a memorandum that stated: "Individual negro Marines will be assigned in accordance with MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) to vacancies in any unit where their services can be effectively utilized."

It marked the beginning of integration in the Corps and the mustering out of Jim Crow. When the war in Korea broke out, there were only 1,502 black Marines on active duty. As manpower needs grew, so too did the number of black leathernecks. Three years into the war, there were 14,731 on active duty.

MajGen Smith later said, "[We] had no racial troubles. The men did whatever they were qualified to do. There were communicators, there were cooks, there were truck drivers, there were plain infantry—they did everything, and they did a good job because they were integrated, and they were with good people."

One of the officers with the division, Lieutenant Herbert M. Hart, also wrote: "It doesn't make any difference if you are white, red, black, green or turquoise to the men over here. No record is kept by color. When we receive a draft of men they are assigned by name and experience only. ... There's no way we can find out a man's color until we see him and by that time he's already in a foxhole, an integral part of his team."

And so, they all came as Marines answering because their country and Corps needed them once again. Harried commanders, worried about a lack of time to train, pulled their individuals into a collective unit and organized for the movement to Korea. Many who were recalled to active duty were understandably reluctant to go, but surprisingly a good many Volunteer Reserves who were not affiliated with an Organized Reserve unit badgered commanders to let them join up and go with units. At this point, regulations didn't permit this. Outside the training center at Los Angeles, however, there were so many Volunteer Reserves begging for a chance to serve that they were called the "Wailing Wall Gang."

The lstMarDiv (Reinforced), less one reinforced regiment, achieved war strength in 16 days. A month later, on 15 Sept., the division clambered over the sea wall and came under fire at Inchon. A week later, 7th Marines (Rein) was fighting its way through the ancient gates of Seoul. A month after their departure from California, Marine fighter pilots of 1st MAW were flying combat missions off the runway at Kimpo Airfield outside Seoul, which was still under fire.

In the war years that followed, the Marine Corps would actually triple its active-duty strength, and 45 percent of those leathernecks were reservists.

LtGen Shepherd, who became Commandant in 1952, would later admit, "[If] it had not been for the mobilization of the Reserve to bring the remaining units of the [First Marine] Division to full strength, I would not have been able to recommend to General MacArthur that he request the assignment of the First Division to the Far East Command for his desired employment at Inchon which turned the tide of defeat to one of victory, to the lasting glory and prestige of the U.S. Marine Corps."

BGen Craig would later write, "As Assistant Division Commander ... commencing at the Inchon landing and continuing until February 1951, I came in contact with the thousands of Reserves serving with the Division. ... They had a can do spirit, no griping, not afraid to go forward under fire and take the consequences. ... They endured hardships probably never encountered by Marines in the past and always acquitted themselves in the highest traditions of the Corps. I was proud to be serving with them."

It was not without a price. The lstMarDiv and lst MAW sailed on schedule for Korea and what followed is history. However, just 45 days after leaving Oklahoma, Private First Class Albert H. Collins won the Navy Cross posthumously, as did PFCs Cecil Wedworth and Gene H. Lease. Staff Sergeant Archie Van Winkle was the first reservist to win the Medal of Honor in Korea, less than 100 days after leaving Pendleton. Sergeant James I. Poynter was also awarded the Medal of Honor, but his was awarded posthumously. PFC Hector A. Cafferatta, in spite of having no formal infantry training, was awarded the Medal of Honor, and First Lieutenant John Yancey won a second Navy Cross almost eight years to the day after he'd won his first on Guadalcanal. Sgt Edward G. McKeever returned to Duluth, Minn., but 10 Marines in Baker Co did not. Nearly half of those who did come home wore Purple Hearts.

The Marine reservists had demonstrated professionalism and valor where it counts: in combat. The 13 Medals of Honor, 50 Navy Crosses and more than 400 Silver Stars serve as testimony to their bravery.

MajGen Smith said it best: "Without the [R]eserves, the Inchon landing on September 15 would have been impossible. ... They needed no particular refresher course to renew the amphibious skills they had learned during World War II. ... Reserves were quickly integrated into the division and they all became Marines with as splendid a Marine spirit as the regulars."