



# "THE BRUTE"

**He ensured that the Marine Corps exists today, and from the 1930s to the 1970s, Victor Krulak had his thumbprint on absolutely everything.**

Compiled by R. R. Keene

**T**he death of Lieutenant General Victor H. "The Brute" Krulak, 95, on Dec. 29, 2008, marked the passing into history of the old guard, better known to Marines as the "old Corps."

It was the leathernecks of the old Corps, jealous guardians of their heritage, who gave future Marines the legacy of valor and discipline still inculcated at recruit depots and steeled on battlefields around the world. But it was The Brute who was, in no small part, responsible for ensuring that the Marine Corps exists today.

He was in every way, but height, a big man, a visionary with a no-nonsense, blunt and direct approach to just about anything that concerned the Corps. "The Brute," a moniker from his midshipman years at the United States Naval Academy, Class of 1934, was given in jest, because of his approximate size of 5 feet 5 inches, which required him to petition for dispensation from the Academy's minimum height standards.

According to many, he was a demanding and hard officer. But no one ever doubted the brilliance of his bayonet-sharp intellect, his vast reservoir of courage and his pugnacious ability as a fighter not only in war, but in protecting the Corps he served.

He was a master strategist, but he also was as old Corps as the '03 rifle, canvas leggings and "blancoed" barracks hats, and he was seasoned. He earned his salt in the old Corps' institutions governed by "Rocks and Shoals." Sea duty with the Marine Detachment and standing watch in the tripod masts of USS *Arizona* (BB-39) over rolling seas cemented his understanding of the Corps' relationship with the Navy. He was a "China Marine," an old Asia hand holding guard mounts and ceremonial parades down Bubbling Well Road in step with the Fourth Marine Regiment in Shanghai from 1937 to 1939.

In China, First Lieutenant Krulak also was an intelligence officer. He watched with keen interest and covertly photographed a Japanese amphibious operation against the Chinese. He especially took note of the shallow-draft landing craft used by the Japanese to bring men and equipment onto the beach. According to Mackubin Thomas Owens, professor of national security affairs at the Naval War College in Newport, R.I., [the young Krulak] "forwarded a copy of his report to the Navy Department in Washington, where it was first dismissed as the 'work of some nut in China.'"

The report nonetheless impressed Marine Major General Holland M. "Howlin' Mad" Smith, who would become known as the "father of modern U.S. amphibious

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Throughout his career, Krulak (second from left), then a lieutenant colonel as G-3 for 6thMarDiv, was part of strategy sessions. This time it was in 1945 on Okinawa with MajGen Lemuel C. Shepherd Jr. (left), CG, 6thMarDiv, who later became the 20th CMC; BGen William T. Clement, Assistant Division Commander; and Col John C. McQueen (far right), chief of staff, who proposed an ambitious amphibious end run that would place a Marine division behind the Japanese main defense. Unfortunately, their commander, Army LTG Simon B. Buckner Jr., did not support the operation. (Photo by SSgt John B. Birch)

warfare." The result was the Navy eventually helped to acquire and use Higgins boats to deliver Marines across the beachheads of Pacific islands. The boats were patterned after the landing craft Krulak had photographed. Gen Smith, who at the outbreak of World War II would com-

mand the Amphibious Corps, Atlantic Fleet, also would ensure that Krulak, then a captain, would serve as his aide. Smith later said of Krulak: He was "the most brilliant officer I've known."

Although the old Corps adhered to shining "bright work" in garrison, engaging an enemy under fire was its profession. Krulak commanded the 2d Parachute Battalion, I Marine Amphibious Corps at Vella Lavella in the Pacific. In 1943, Lieutenant Colonel Krulak won the Navy Cross and was awarded the Purple Heart on Choiseul Island where his Marines pulled off a dangerous, but clever and classic diversionary raid to cover the Bougainville invasion.

Wounded, he refused to relinquish his command and be evacuated until he was sure the raid had succeeded. As he was evacuated, he promised the patrol torpedo boat "skipper" a bottle of whiskey if he also evacuated some of his men. The boat's hull number was 109, commanded by a young Navy lieutenant named Jack Kennedy.

Krulak returned to the war at Okinawa with the Sixth Marine Division and then returned to China for the surrender of the Japanese.



He was a 32-year-old lieutenant colonel in 1945, serving as assistant chief of staff for operations (G-3), 6thMarDiv in the Pacific, and, even then, considered by some to be one of the Corps' "most brilliant" officers.

## The Chowder Society's actions not only saved the Corps from extinction, but also paved the way to its current roles in the Department of Defense.



Col Krulak (right) was the 1stMarDiv chief of staff in Korea during August 1951. He was fortunate to have good mentors and made it his policy to learn from them. In this case, his mentors were MajGen Gerald C. Thomas (center) and BGen William J. Whaling (left).

At war's end, there was a vicious scramble among the services for roles and missions. President Harry S. Truman wanted to abolish the Corps. The U.S. Army, according to LtGen Krulak in his 1984 book "First to Fight," "was resolved to eliminate forever its deficiencies in amphibious matters and its dependency on Marines for amphibious expertise."

"Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall ... presented to the Joint Chiefs of Staff his concept of a unified Defense Department where a single chief of staff and an armed forces general staff would manage all the nation's military affairs." There was no mention of a Marine Corps.

Army plans, wrote LtGen Krulak, envisioned the Corps "as a subordinate included element of the U.S. Navy. Such an arrangement would insulate the Marines from the secretary of the navy in all departmental matters."

Owens writes, "Because many Marines naively believed that their war record would ensure the survival of the Corps, the day-to-day struggle for its future was waged by a small group that came to be known as the 'Little Men's Chowder and Marching Society.' Krulak was an integral part of that effort."

The cabal of Marine officers, wrote LtGen Krulak, "provided only limited knowledge [to then-Commandant of the Marine Corps Alexander A.] Vandegrift ...

[and] grew up a small group of activists who, each in his own way and often at some personal sacrifice, poured his efforts into the battle."

The Chowder Society worked on alternative proposals and sought help from anyone with any influence who would lis-



Although LtGen Krulak often said it was his wife, Amy, who chiefly raised their three sons, when their son William served in Vietnam as a Marine first Lieutenant with 3d Bn, 3d Marines at Chu Lai, the elder Krulak took time to receive a briefing and pass on the news from home.

ten. However, the Corps, although aware of the Chowder Society's actions, could provide no public or overt support. If things went awry, the members were essentially on their own.

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It is said in the Corps that nobody rides on their laurels. The Corps is a "What are you going to do for me today?" mistress. It's a statement one suspects LtGen Krulak would have been comfortable making. He certainly lived it. Marine historian Gary Solis recently told reporters, "From the late 1930s to the 1970s, Victor Krulak had his thumbprint on absolutely everything."

He was chief of staff of the First Marine Division in 1950, and according to Brigadier General Michael I. Neil, USMCR (Ret), "He brilliantly orchestrated the First Marine Brigade to save the day at the Pusan Perimeter" in Korea.

In the 1950s, he worked on the evolution of helicopters as an integral element of Marine amphibious operations and was an architect of the Corps' modernization as a force in readiness.

By 1963, the commander of that PT boat off Choiseul, John F. Kennedy, was now President of the United States. He dispatched then-Major General Krulak, who had become a student of counterinsurgency warfare, to the Republic of Vietnam. The President also sent the State Department's Joseph Mendenhall to assess the situation.

On Sept. 10 they both briefed the President. Krulak concluded the war was going well. Mendenhall predicted the South Vietnamese government would either fall or break into civil war. The conflicting conclusions caused the President to respond: "The two of you did visit the same country, didn't you?"

Nonetheless, according to Owens, "President Kennedy directed the services to emphasize counterinsurgency training, and Krulak played a central role in implementing the President's directive." His counterinsurgency "ink blot" formula called for small groups of Marines to go into villages and work with like-minded locals to defend against guerrilla forces. It was considered another brilliant Krulak idea, but it also was considered too little, too late. His plan, however, was dusted off and used with success in Iraq.

By 1964, The Brute was the commanding general for the more than 100,000 leathernecks of the Fleet Marine Force in the Pacific. His primary concern was for those Marines in Vietnam, and he made 54 trips to see those Marines in country.

In 1965, the Marines landed and set up



His views on the government's handling of the Vietnam War may have cost him his selection as Commandant of the Marine Corps. His views were formed not only by his experience as a warrior, but from his 54 trips to Vietnam. During this one, in 1966, he visited Combined Action Companies composed of Vietnamese and Marines. Such units were part of LtGen Krulak's counterinsurgency formula. This photograph was shot by GySgt Brian G. Highland, who was KIA less than a year later.

a base of operations 56 miles south of Da Nang on Dung Quat Bay, Vietnam. LtGen Krulak, looking at a map, was told the sand extending more than two miles from the beach had no name. The former China Marine decided to call it "Chu Lai," reportedly the Mandarin abbreviation of his surname. The name remains to this day.

Military historian Robert Coram said, "The Brute never lacked confidence, especially when he was right—and he was always right. His candor to his superiors bordered on impertinence." He had gambled when military planners said it would take a minimum of 11 months to build an airfield at Chu Lai. The Marines had developed the ability to deploy an expeditionary runway: an aircraft carrier floating on a sea of sand.

Krulak told Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara it could be done in 25 days. Nobody but The Brute, and the Marines and Seabees who would build it, thought it was possible, but Marine A-4C Skyhawks were launching combat missions off the 4,000-foot runway by the 25th day.

According to Coram, LtGen Krulak "always did the right thing no matter what

the cost." Doing what he considered the right thing probably cost him selection as the Commandant of the Marine Corps. In a 1995 interview with the *San Diego Union Tribune*, LtGen Krulak stated he told President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1967 the wrong targets were being hit. The general had become a critic of the government's handling of the Vietnam War and advocated destruction of the North Vietnamese port of Haiphong.

"[Johnson] got to his feet and propelled me to the door, politely. That's the last I ever saw of him," he said. LtGen Krulak retired from active duty in 1968 to become a vice president at Copley Newspaper Corporation and president of its news service. His book "First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps" is required reading for Marines.

He and his late wife, Amy, were known for the Fish House Punch parties celebrated on Krulak's Jan. 7 birthday. They raised three sons: The Rev. Victor Krulak of San Diego and the Rev. William Krulak of Baltimore. The third son, General Charles C. Krulak, USMC (Ret), of Wilmington, Del., who served as the 31st

Commandant of the Marine Corps, said his father "was proud of just being a Marine. He never forgot that at the end of the day, everything he did was in support of them."

Back in the old Corps:

The 21st CMC, Gen Randolph McCall Pate, once asked: "Brute, why does the U.S. need a Marine Corps?"

The Brute responded: "The United States does not *need* a Marine Corps. The United States *wants* a Marine Corps. ... The reasons are strong: [the Marines] are honest, they are deep rooted, and they are above question or criticism. ... Should the people ever lose that conviction—as a result of our failure to meet their high—almost spiritual—standards, the Marine Corps will then quickly disappear."

*Editor's note: This story was compiled from media and Marine Corps reports.*

*Robert Coram, who wrote "Boyd: The Fighter Pilot Who Changed the Art of War" and "American Patriot: The Life and Wars of Colonel Bud Day," is writing a biography on LtGen Victor Krulak.*