

"Brute" Krulak

A "Haunted," "Driven," Brilliant Visionary

By R. R. Keene

"Victor Krulak's story and accomplishments teach us a good deal: about learning from the experiences and setbacks of the past; about being open to take ideas and inspiration from wherever they come; and about overcoming conventional wisdom and bureaucratic obstacles thrown in one's path."

—Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates
July 18, 2007

Twice nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, author Robert Coram has done what is quite an accomplishment for someone outside the Marine Corps: Not only did he extensively interview Lieutenant General Victor H. "Brute" Krulak shortly before the 95-year-old general's death in December 2008, but Coram worked his way into the inner circle of one of the Corps' most famous families and has given us a frank, candid and excellent biography, "BRUTE: The Life of Victor Krulak, U.S. Marine."

Victor Krulak was an enigmatic figure not only to his fellow Marines, but also to his closest family members. Yet, in a Corps heavily populated with warriors of almost mythic lore, Krulak, a visionary, was the stuff of legends. He was a demanding and doggedly determined officer. No one 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 also in protecting the Corps and the nation he served.

He was prone to exaggeration, almost with metronomic regularity. He entered the United States Naval Academy under less than honest pretenses. He fabricated a background contrary to his parents' culture and religion. In later years, he perpetuated a persona that often was feared by those who worked for him and alienated some of those who loved him most: his family.

"Throughout his career," writes Coram, "Brute was teased about his height. Thus

it is easy to fall back on the 'Napoleon complex' theory—the idea that because Brute was a small man, he was driven to overcompensate in every way. His insistence on being called Brute shows the image he wanted to portray. He was also running from his Jewish heritage and from a secret marriage. Put all these together, and the result is a haunted and driven man possessed of a psyche filled with spiders and snakes."

The Corps of Victor Krulak's time and the Corps of Marines serving today share a common truth: They are Marines, not saints. Some high-minded senior leaders who remember the Brute may point to Krulak's early service as indications of a man with questionable integrity on a path to military perdition.

Many senior enlisted Marines, however, as a rule, don't give Krulak's youthful indiscretions much thought. They've known Marines who lied about their age to enlist. Any number of them came into the Corps one step ahead of the law. They've stood at attention while being harangued for "crimes" and "sins" colorfully spelled out in reports or charge sheets.

Coram writes, "Granted, Brute's deceptions were harmless, but they were in stark contrast to the overall ethical code of the Marine Corps, and he knew he was transgressing."

However, Marines also know that in the Corps few care what you did or who you were before. What matters is what you do while bearing the title of United States Marine. If nothing else, Krulak epitomized that philosophy. Retired Marine judge advocate and historian Dr. Gary Solis said, "From the late 1930s to the 1970s, Victor Krulak had his thumbprint on absolutely everything [in the Corps]."

It does take a book such as Coram's to list Krulak's accomplishments for the Corps. A few are: He covertly photographed Japanese landing craft in China and helped to design and develop the Higgins boats that would carry Marines across the beaches in the Pacific during

World War II. He was fascinated by the idea of helicopters for military use and in the 1950s worked on the evolution of Marine amphibious operations. He was an architect of the Corps' modernization as a force in readiness.

In combat he won the Navy Cross in 1943 on Choiseul Island where he and the 2d Parachute Battalion pulled off a dangerous, but clever and classic, diversionary raid to cover the Bougainville invasion. By all accounts and actions, he was possibly the Corps' greatest operational planner during WW II, Korea and Vietnam.

Most importantly (and it should never be forgotten and should always serve to remind Marines to be ever vigilant), Krulak saved the Corps from extinction, and some say he protected the Constitution from a U.S. Army-led 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 and relegate the Marine Corps to near obscurity.

Coram writes, "The shooting war was over, but the battles ... were as important as Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa, and these battles were even more chilling because they were then and remain today generally unknown to the public. These clashes took place in the halls of Congress when a cabal (there is no other word for it) of military officers—respected and revered men who were aided and abetted by the president—attempted to restructure the American military in a way that would have been prejudicial to America's national interests. And they almost prevailed."

The "Little Men's Chowder and Marching Society," a handful of Marines, not only saved the Corps from obscurity, but also paved the way to its current roles in the Defense Department. "Brute Krulak was a pivotal person in both saving the Marine Corps and ensuring that one of America's core beliefs was preserved. ...

"Brute was a man few wanted to confront; ... he had influence out of proportion with his rank, and there was growing jealousy, even animosity, toward him among his peers. He was so smart, so assertive, and so *right* that he made people angry."

Coram adroitly explains Krulak's rise to prominence in the Marine Corps where combat skills are worshiped, but knowledge of the inner workings of the Corps and its unique culture are a requirement of command in the highest echelons.

"Krulak was a rare 'deep selection' for general—that is, the selection board passed over dozens of colonels who were senior to Krulak to choose him. At age forty-two,



Robert Coram

COURTESY OF ROBERT CORAM

he was one of the youngest generals in the history of the Marine Corps and the first member of his Annapolis class to reach flag rank. Only a few graduates of each class at any of the service academies ever become generals or admirals, and among those few, it is a mark of great distinction to be first. Given that Krulak had been commissioned only because of a most serendipitous chain of events, the fact that he was first in his class to wear a star was not without irony."

He achieved his status during troubling and dangerous times. In 1964, as a lieutenant general, he was Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force Pacific. His primary concern was for those Marines—two of whom were his sons—in Vietnam, and he made 54 trips in country to see the Marines.

Coram writes of one trip to Khe Sanh: "Krulak landed ... jumped out of a moving aircraft. ... Then he moved about, talking to his Marines, standing close to each one so he could be heard over the noise of the rockets and artillery, gripping their arms, and questioning them closely about what they needed to win. When they looked at him, their thoughts were in their eyes: *What is a three-star general doing on this goddamn hill?* ... As Krulak walked away from a six-foot-five gunnery sergeant, the gunny looked after him in awe and said to [Brute's aide], 'That is the biggest little man I have ever seen.'"

It was 1968 and the Vietnam War was going badly. Krulak was still CG, FMFPac, and a logical choice to be the 24th Commandant of the Marine Corps. He had become a critic of the U.S. government's handling of the Vietnam War and told President Lyndon B. Johnson as much.

Coram writes: "Krulak, as far as can be determined, was the only senior general who confronted LBJ. Other generals may be quick to point out that Krulak was pushed aside and may ask what is the point of doing the right thing if you are no longer in a leadership role. But that is the response of a careerist. Krulak knew he still would pay a price, and he still did the right thing. At a time when he had everything to lose, he was the only general in the American military whose sense of duty and love of country were greater than his careerism."

Gen Leonard F. Chapman Jr. became Commandant, and Krulak retired. How-



COURTESY OF THE WHITE HOUSE

Above: The body language says it all in this 1967 photograph of Brute lecturing President Lyndon B. Johnson on the conduct of the Vietnam War. The President listened, stood up and escorted LtGen Krulak out the door and on the short road to retirement.

Below: LtGen Krulak believed in the military future of the helicopter. In this 1946 flight at Quantico, Va., he suspended himself from the "bird" to demonstrate potential uses for the aircraft.



ever, one of Krulak's sons, Charles C. "Chuck" Krulak, became the 31st Commandant of the Marine Corps in 1995.

"Chuck [Krulak] is, of course, sensitive to how history views his four years in office," explains Coram. "But the only assessment of those years that really matters to him is that of his father, who wrote to him, 'The greatest contribution you have made, the best and the most valuable by far is not even visible. Call it what you will—honesty, truthfulness, character, morality, reliability, integrity, dependability. Any one will do. In each and every case, it creates respect, and not just for you, but for the entire Marine Corps. That is one hell of a legacy to leave.'"

Still the Brute in many ways remains an enigmatic figure: brilliant, aloof and, because he was only a man, flawed. Coram's book is not the usual biography of a Marine. It is a very honest account of a truly remarkable man.

Editor's note: See the March 2009 Leatherneck for "The Brute," another article on LtGen Victor H. Krulak by R. R. Keene.



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