

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

# A Classic Revisited

reviewed by COL Chris Field, Australian Army

Why, in June 2007, would Gen James T. Conway, 34th Commandant of the Marine Corps, direct every member of the United States Marine Corps (USMC), whether officer, noncommissioned officer, or Marine, to read *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps*? After all the book is now 25 years old. It was written in the post-Vietnam USMC and at the height of the Cold War. Since 1984, the year the book was first published, the characteristics of war, the enemy, and the USMC have changed a number of times; so how is *First to Fight* relevant? To understand these questions, a reader should understand both the author and the USMC.

The author was the quintessential Marine, having served in the USMC in all major American conflicts from 1941 until 1968. LtGen Victor H. Krulak, who passed away on 29 December 2008, was a 1934 U.S. Naval Academy graduate; served with 4th Marines in China in 1937–39; commanded the 2d Parachute Battalion, 1st Marine Amphibious Corps, in World War II; served as Chief of Staff, 1st Marine Division, in Korea; served as Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency Activities, Joint Chiefs of Staff, in 1962–64; and was Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, in 1964–68, which included some 54 trips to the Vietnam theater.

The USMC, as an integral part of the U.S. Navy and as a historically junior Service, in both size and funds, to the U.S. Army, is an organization that relies on a dominant narrative for or-

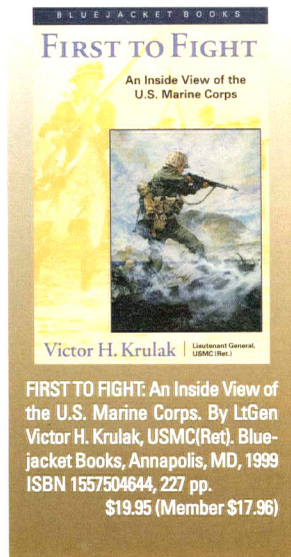
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ganizational survival—"perennially the smallest kid on the block in a hostile neighbourhood." As LtGen Krulak noted:

The Corps is in a sense like a primitive tribe where each generation has its medicine men—keepers of the tribal mythology, protectors of the tribal customs, and guardians of the tribal standards.

In directing the mandatory reading of *First to Fight*, it is perhaps fair to assume that Gen Conway, heading a Marine Corps at war for almost a decade, has sought to keep the USMC firmly focused on the twin elements of LtGen Krulak's significant service and the lessons *First to Fight's* straightforward narrative and "tribal mythology" provide for all Marines.

Interestingly and powerfully, LtGen Krulak asked Clare Booth Luce (1903–87) to write the foreword to *First to Fight*. The Honorable Ms. Clare Booth Luce was, in an accomplished life, editor of *Vanity Fair*, playwright, politician, journalist, and diplomat. She was a formidable member of the U.S. House of Representatives and a significant supporter of the U.S. military. Various Clare Booth Luce alleged that President Franklin D. Roosevelt brought the United States into World War II unprepared, consistently spoke on behalf of American troops and addressed issues concerning their eventual return to civilian life, advocated aid to



Italian war victims, warned against a growing threat of communism, and was instrumental in the creation of the Atomic Energy Commission. It seems that LtGen Krulak appreciated the strength Clare Booth Luce brought in her own service to the United States and decided to juxtapose her service with the service of the dogged and determined USMC through *First to Fight*.

Given Gen Conway's focus on *First to Fight* for the modern USMC, and the 25 years since the release of LtGen Krulak's book, perhaps the release of a silver jubilee edition of *First to Fight* may be warranted. A silver jubilee edition would also give the USMC an opportunity to provide an additional foreword to *First to Fight*. This foreword could set the scene for the current generation of Marines by articulating the Commandant of the Marine Corps' intent in having them read, study, and absorb the book.

*First to Fight* is divided into six parts, plus a conclusion. Introducing

these six parts is a series of single line quotes that are designed to focus the reader's mind on LtGen Krulak's next message supporting the USMC dominant narrative, which includes thinking, innovation, improvisation, frugality, brotherhood, and warfighting. Such pithy quotes are not easy to find, and their effective employment in *First to Fight* is testament to LtGen Krulak's intellectual abilities.

In early 2014 and mid-2015, under Joint Project 2048, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) will accept delivery of two Navantia-designed amphibious ships (LHDs), each with landing space for 6 helicopters, hangar accommodation, garaging for heavy and light vehicles, a well dock capable of taking 4 large watercraft, 1,403 personnel bunks, and a fully integrated SAAB 9LV 454 Mk3E combat management system with onboard interfaces to external operational and support elements. Joint Project 2048 will exponentially enhance the ADF's operational reach and warfighting capabilities.

*First to Fight*'s narrative of amphibious experimentation, development, success, and failure, based frequently on LtGen Krulak's own experiences, is essential reading for all ADF personnel who plan involvement with Joint Project 2048. As noted by LtGen Krulak:

Only a few, a very few, visionaries were willing to attack the formidable conceptual, tactical, and material problems associated with the modern amphibious assault landing.

*First to Fight* describes a myriad of USMC amphibious projects and ideas, including amphibious tanks and tractors, amphibian cargo trailers, the exercise of command authority during the sensitive transition period ashore, the precise utilization of naval gunfire, close air support to ground forces, the tactical employment of helicopters, the evacuation of casualties, expeditionary airfields, and all-weather bombing. These projects and ideas, when combined, created an amphibious system and, in many cases, remain critical components of 21st century USMC warfighting from the sea. Through Joint Project 2048 and associ-

ated ideas, the ADF will not replicate USMC capabilities, but as *First to Fight* demonstrates, the ADF can learn from a significant body of work and hard lessons previously experienced by the Marine Corps. For the sake of the Australian nation, this learning in support of Joint Project 2048 cannot be from only "a few, a very few, visionaries."

For a joint planner in the ADF, LtGen Krulak in *First to Fight* provides a salient lesson in having the moral courage to back one's own professional military judgment, and then make events comply with that judgment. For LtGen Krulak, one test of his own moral courage was on 30 June 1950, as the newly appointed Operations Officer, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific. On that day LtGen Krulak was asked, via cryptic message, by the Chief of Naval

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***. . . the USMC dominant narrative, which includes thinking, innovation, improvisation, frugality, brotherhood, and warfighting.***

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Operations: "How soon can you sail for combat operations in the Far East [Korea]: (a) A reinforced battalion; (b) A reinforced regiment?" To these questions, LtGen Krulak replied, "(a) 48 hours; (b) Five days, including a Marine aircraft group." The truth was that LtGen Krulak, experienced Marine that he was, did not know if Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, or indeed the entire Marine Corps, could achieve the deployments as he promised. What he did know was that the Marine Corps, which was constantly scrutinized for relevance by elements of the U.S. Government, must produce force elements when needed by the United States. In LtGen Krulak's own words, "If we can't, we're dead."

The ADF faces a similar challenge described by LtGen Krulak's statement. The ADF is an expensive and highly trained organization. Relative to other government agencies available to serve the Australian Government, the ADF is enormous. Our joint planners must always keep in mind LtGen Krulak's moral courage to back their own instincts and make a professionally informed call when government requests our force elements. To do anything less weakens the faith of our government in the ADF, takes away the initiative for ADF commanders to employ mission command and crash through readiness notices, and leads the ADF into the realm of Gen Krulak's "if we can't, we're dead" scenario.

LtGen Krulak's conclusion to *First to Fight* sums three challenges facing the USMC. Noting that he was writing in 1984, the relevance of his thinking has not diminished. His three concerns were (1) the threat to USMC standards of excellence, (2) the need for USMC austerity, and (3) the dead hand of bureaucracy. For many people serving in the ADF and the USMC, these concluding thoughts from LtGen Krulak remain true in the 21st century.

Not only was LtGen Victor Krulak a significant thinker and innovator, but also his son, Charles C. Krulak, rose to become the 31st Commandant of the Marine Corps. Many readers would know that in 1999, Gen Charles Krulak bought into the lexicon of warfighters throughout the world, the intellectual concept of *The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War*. And in 1998, Gen Charles Krulak, presciently predicted, "The threat of the early 21st Century will not be the 'son of Desert Storm'; it will be the 'stepchild of Chechnya.'"

The question remains for the ADF: what is our equivalent of reading *First to Fight*? What is our dominant narrative? And shall we seek, as amply described by LtGen Victor Krulak a "tribal mythology" for all ADF warfighters?

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