

The Commandant's Perspective

A Force-in-Readiness

by Gen Charles C. Krulak

Readiness is the legacy left us by Marines of the Korean War era and readiness will be our hallmark in the 21st century.

As we dedicated the memorial to the veterans of the Korean War on 27 July, we were all reminded of how unprepared our country was when the North Koreans first attacked the fledgling Republic of Korea in 1950. Yet when the Nation called, the 1st Marine Division marched to the sound of the guns with an unmatched determination to do whatever it would take. That mindset was critical because it was the belief of many people that the task at hand simply could not be done.

Many considered it impossible to throw together a combat force in the span of two weeks and rapidly embark it on ships to deploy halfway around the world. Experts said that no force could reasonably be expected to rush into a theater teetering on the brink of collapse, engage a numerically superior enemy, and stop his advance. Authorities on military operations advised that it would be suicide to try and conduct a relief in place while in contact and re-embark those battle-weary forces to conduct an amphibious assault—an assault targeted at an area with the second greatest tidal change in the world. Naysayers declared it was hopeless to attempt any operation where reservists just called to active duty comprised over half the strength of some units. They all said it couldn't be done, that it was impossible.

What they didn't realize was that the impossible is what Marines do!

The 1st Marine Division did it with units fielded by sweeping every spare body and weapon from stations around the world. They did it through the fierce house-to-house fighting in Seoul. They did it in the most brutal conditions, across the roughest terrain, and in the harshest weather on earth. They did it despite the efforts of three Chinese armies to encircle and destroy the division. Their courage—displayed from Pusan, to Inchon, to Chosin—was much more than just bravery in the face of the enemy and the elements. It was also bravery in the face of the “impossible.” The tremendous odds against them, the extreme hardships they endured, and the enormity of their missions would have stopped anyone less resilient or less versatile than United States Marines.

For Marines, all things are “possible.” The institutional lesson we have learned from the Korean experience is never to listen to those that say it *can't* be done—for such commentary has been proved wrong time and time again.

The Marines of Korea left us a legacy of flexibility, of tenacity, and of courage—a legacy that will endure forever. But most important for the future, they left us a viable institution, one recognized in public law.

At a time when defense experts and others seemed prepared to merge us out of existence, Congress acknowledged the need for such a force. The accomplishments of the Marines in Korea compelled our national leaders to carve

into stone our role as a force-in-readiness, a force that is most ready when the Nation is least ready, that is to be always at a high state of readiness to hold aggression at bay—no matter the clime, no matter the place, no matter the foe. This core strategic concept, so dramatically demonstrated by the quick response of the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade and its brilliant success as the “fire brigade” in the Pusan Perimeter over four decades ago, endures and is relevant even today.

This month marks the 45th anniversary of Inchon, and it is important that we remember that this operation was the first demonstration of what we now refer to as “Operational Maneuver From the Sea.” Previous landings generally had two distinct phases: securing a beachhead or “lodgment” ashore, followed by a separate operational maneuver against the enemy. Merging these two phases into one seamless strike was considered “impossible,” but the bold stroke at Inchon did just that with great success. Today we are actively building on that lesson. Korea has thus left us a doctrinal legacy as well as an institutional one.

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As we embark on the broad effort I have outlined in the CMC Planning Guidance, we must keep in mind that the core legacy of Korea—being a force-in-readiness that accomplishes the task at hand, no matter how “impossible” it may seem—remains fully alive today. We cannot afford the luxury of assuming away possibilities or of optimizing ourselves for a particular theater. Above all, we must not allow ourselves to dismiss a particular type of scenario as far fetched. We must always be thinking about its implications for us as a Corps and as contributors to a unified combatant commander’s warfighting solution. The Korean War is both a study in the consequences of a closed-minded, narrow doctrinal focus and a lesson in the virtues of flexibility and readiness.

Today, this Nation remains ever thankful for the Corps preserved by our service in Korea. Recall the faces of the American students in Granada; their gratitude and relief echoed in their simple statement: “Thank God for the Marines.” Sentiments echoed around the world, as this same Corps of Marines led the way in feeding starving Somali children, helped give a homeland back to the people of Kuwait, helped restore democracy to the people of Haiti, and

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served at the cutting edge of a daring dawn rescue of an Air Force captain by the name of Scott O’Grady. America’s Corps of Marines carries the legacy of the Marines of Korea—ready to answer any call—no matter the mission, no matter the odds, no matter what others may say. The tradition of readiness began long before the struggles on the razor-back hills of Korea, but it was validated forever in that far off war. Since then it has been felt around the globe, by friends and enemies alike, wherever Marines have answered the call. We cannot know exactly where or when our next call will come, but must always stand ready to answer when it does—ready to do “the impossible.”

Semper Fidelis.

