


# SEA



## Chronicles of the Corps

By Allen Mainard

*A Marine who made the landing at Inchon, Korea, in 1950, poses a question: Did nuclear weapons end the traditional Marine specialty of "hitting a beach"? (Reprinted from Leatherneck, September 1957.)*



**W**HEN our boats grounded at the sea wall at Inchon, we may have written the last chapter in the history of the epic amphibious assault. The first short paragraphs were scribbled by the Marines who worked out the amphibious doctrine on the steamy islands of the Caribbean during the Twenties and Thirties. Great chapters were written on the beaches at Guadalcanal, Peleliu, Tarawa and Iwo.

Inchon wasn't the actual ending to the era. That began at Alamogordo, New Mexico, in 1945, when the first atomic device was exploded. Probably never again will the classic formation of warships, transports and landing craft, covered by its umbrella of aircraft, breach an enemy defense. Now we go by helicopter; mobility is the keynote. But the old ways will be missed.

There was never anything like the confusion, both organized and otherwise, that preceded Inchon. Locally

# WALL

**The atom bomb may have ended the traditional method of hitting a beach. A Marine who landed in Korea marks the passing of an era**



the Navy had been pounding three areas on the West Coast of Korea while the 1st Div was staging in Japan—between typhoons. The enemy could not be sure where the landing would take place; Inchon—the open secret—wasn't taken too seriously.

In a way it was a signal honor to be in the assault waves that day. Looking back over the hectic day and night and the fighting that followed at Ascom City, Sosa-ri, Yongdongpo and Seoul, the landings tend to become obscured. Many Marines have commented since that if the enemy had had just one atomic bomb . . .

But they didn't. And Inchon became a classic in more ways than one.

Without a doubt it had every possible situation that could arise during an amphibious landing and taxed the skill and ingenuity of every Marine and sailor in the force. The events were tragic, humorous and at times, nearly disastrous. But that is common in all landings. So are blunders and the great courage that always makes itself known in such events.

The experts didn't give us much chance of success.

Intelligence was scanty and faulty since there had been so little time to prepare. There had been no time for a practice landing or even a Command Post Exercise. The division had been hurriedly filled out and shipped overseas and each unit had Reservists and men who had been in barracks or aboard ship just days before.

Time for the landings was strictly limited. Inchon has one of the greatest tidal variations in the world—a fall of 27 feet. When it goes out it leaves acres of mud flats exposed—mud flats that could turn the landing into another Tarawa if the troops were forced to cross them. But we were fortunate; our timing was good enough to get us ashore while there was still enough water to float the boats.

When the first ship steamed up Flying Fish Channel toward Inchon in the morning darkness of September 15th, it was greeted by the blinking eye of the lighthouse on Palmi-do.

A blanket-wrapped figure perched atop the lighthouse and solemnly reviewed the fleet as it steamed past. The unseen figure was one of the best friends the Marines had at Inchon. A Navy mustang, Lt Gene Clark, had landed on Yonghung-do

Island in the harbor two weeks before and had recruited a private army of 150 small boys. These he dubbed the "Young Men's Christian Association" and sent them into Inchon to scout the enemy defenses. Their reports were extremely accurate. When there was nothing else to do, he took out a motor-powered junk and captured Communist policemen for questioning.

At exactly midnight before the landing he lit the Palmi-do light as a navigation guide for the incoming assault force.

Wolmi-do, the small island off Inchon, and the city proper had been taking the usual pasting for two days before the landings. Three destroyers were hit by enemy batteries but only one sailor was killed. As the first waves moved toward the island, three LSMRs (Landing Ships Medium, Rocket), squat little ships loaded with rockets, laid down ripple after ripple. Their fire was devastating and in one instance, too accurate. They plastered the Asahi Brewery, the only one in Inchon. We had to take Yongdongpo before we were able to liberate any appreciable quantity of beer.

The opening assault was made by veterans of the brigade and Pusan perimeter action. The 3d Bn, 5th Marines, under LtCol Robert D. Taplett, grounded on Green Beach at 0633. Wreckage along the beach restricted the landing zone to 50 yards and the waves had to squeeze in like an accordion. Twenty-two minutes after the first wave hit, Sgt Alvin E. Smith, the guide for the 3d Plat, Company G, planted the flag on a shell-torn tree on the crest of Radio Hill. Gen MacArthur had been viewing the operation from the flag deck of the U.S.S. *Mount McKinley*. He rose from his chair when the flag came into view and said, "That's it. Let's go get a cup of coffee." The 3d Bn had the island secured at 0807 and spent the rest of the day picking out enemy emplacements and delivering what fire they could.

The first few hours of good daylight were like a training film or Hollywood thriller. The guns from the cruisers and destroyers banged away at the now blazing city and a continuous procession of aircraft flew in formation across the town, their wakes marked in smoke and death from bombs, rockets, and napalm. The troops of the 5th and 1st Marines who were scheduled to make the evening landing lined the rail and watched the activities. But watching the city die from a distance of a mile or two was an objective thing; a dull, set pattern. Interest

would revive as the waves moved in later that day, for then war became personal and dangerous.

To quote one lad from the 5th Marines, as they went in over the sea wall, "The damn fools are shooting at us!"

The battalion command group of the 3d Bn., 1st Marines almost didn't get to Inchon. Our ship, the LST (Landing Ship, Tank) 802, had been reclaimed from the Japanese coastal trade only two weeks before, and the only two sailors aboard with previous sea duty were the skipper and engineer officer. The old bucket stank of fish, and cockroach platoons hunted down the cat-sized rats. There hadn't been time to fumigate the ship. Typhoon number two, which had some unpronounceable Nipponese name, hit us off the South Korean coast and one of the ancient Diesels gave up the ghost only to be coaxed back into life again and again by a Navy engineer whose name has been lost to posterity.

Because of its tail-dragging attitude, plans were made to shift the command from the tired old tub, but somehow, it managed to carry its cargo into the assault. The weather-deck was crowded with the standard heavy equipment and as usual, some of it broke loose under the pounding. Deck hatches had to be battened after a half-foot of water in the troops' quarters began washing mattresses off the lower bunks. This made the already miserable space unlivable. The troops amused themselves by dumping coffee over the side and watching it turn a sickly green. The coffee was lousy, too.

In violent contrast to the rough voyage from Japan, the mirror-like calm of the passage into Inchon Harbor did a great deal to soothe the nerves of the sea-beat Marines. Native boats, crammed with fleeing Koreans and their few pitiful possessions sailed in a sad procession away from the towering smoke pall that marked their city. One mother stood up in a tiny junk and raised her child. Her words were unintelligible but her meaning was plain.

Attacking a fortified position is always risky but attacking a big city just at dusk was probably the most dangerous assignment ever handed the Corps. It would have been another Iwo or Tarawa if the enemy had met us in strength and we had been forced to wade across the mud flats left exposed by the tide drop. Luckily there was plenty of water, and the enemy was too dazed from the pounding to put up any dangerous resistance.

The combination always of tide, smoke and rain helped add to the confusion always riding your shoulder during such a deal. Of our beaches, Blue One and Two, nothing could be seen. The smoke lay like a blanket over the entire area and we had to go in by guess and by gosh on lensatic compass bearings.

Originally we were scheduled for the fifth wave but by the time we got to our beach through the confusion and smoke we were as far down the line as the third wave. LtCol T. L. Ridge, C.O. of the 3d Bn., 1st Marines, opened Blue Beach Three when he ordered his amtrac around the end of the sea wall on the right flank. The majority of the vehicles used this since the tide had already dropped from the foot of the wall and was racing out. Col Lewis "Chesty" Puller, who was commanding the 1st Marines, came in the third wave, ostensibly to check the

Cemetery and Observatory Hills. Heavy machine gun fire was cutting into the ranks of Company A; 2dLt Baldemero Lopez took on a bunker with grenades. Wounded, he fell on a live grenade to save his men. Two flamethrower men moved in to burn out the emplacement and were cut down. The 5th Marines lost eight killed and 28 wounded in the first few minutes of fighting but they went through the opposition with the skill of a gardener pruning a hedge.

In order that the assaulting force should have enough ammo and other supplies when the tide went out, seven LST's were ordered to stand in and beach on the heels of the 5th Marines. This use of the thin-skinned little ships was an unprecedented thing in amphibious warfare. It was dangerous in more ways than one; most of them carried drums of gasoline and ammo on their weather decks. None got in without damage

Nevertheless, they fitted themselves out with M-1's, bandoleers of ammo, some grenades and much talk and set out to do battle.

They returned a short time later, sans weapons, mud-stained and shaken and informed all hands that some misguided soul had been using them for target practice.

But even in the climax of any assault, Marines are always able to recall something with humor. In this instance it was the reserve ammo brought off one of the LST's. No one could figure out who or what they were to shoot with the .22 caliber cartridges that tumbled out of one case! Fortunately there was enough M-1 ammo around so that none of the enemy would feel neglected.

While the fighting was still in progress, the unloading of the LST's began. The ships had to be unloaded and ready to float free when the tide came in. It was an all night job for



area and make sure there was no congestion. It was apparent, however, that the crusty leader was also looking for interference of another type.

The assault companies had already moved clear of the landing area and all that remained for the following waves were scattered snipers and intermittent mortar rounds. Not all were ineffective. A machine gun cut down a private in George Company and two communications men were badly mangled by a round of mortar.

Resistance was "light" on Blue Beach. It is never light when Marines are being wounded or killed but the official communiques use the term when the attacking troops are making good time. The 1st Marines were.

Things were a little "heavy" in the 5th Marines' zone at the foot of

and one sailor was killed by enemy fire. It was a miracle that none of the ships caught fire. Gasoline drums were punctured on several.

One of the LST's was equipped to handle casualties. The jury-rigged little hospital was filled with scrounged material. The medical officer had been forced to cut an operating table and other necessary equipment loose with a cutting torch and transport it to his ship in order to equip it properly.

MSgt Robert Tallent, then a *Leatherneck Magazine* staff correspondent, was on Red Beach with the 5th Marines. He still tells of two young sailors who felt the urge to do a bit of Communist hunting on their own. He tried to dissuade the would-be warriors but they could not be convinced that such expeditions, especially at night, were dangerous.

the 1st Shore Party Bn. and they rigged lights to aid in their work and calmly disregarded the intermittent sniper fire.

Inchon cost 20 killed, 1 died of wounds, and 174 wounded. Only 1 man was listed as missing in action. There were also 14 non-battle casualties. Compared to the toll of Pacific landings the casualties were almost negligible—even though no casualty ever is. A Marine is a Marine, and losing a buddy still hurts even when resistance is "light."

True, we may never go in the same way again, but if new weapons and new doctrines put us into the 'copters, the same breed of Marines will again be squaring off with the enemy.

