

The Professor in Korea

MajGen Oliver P. Smith & the 1st Marine Division

by 2ndLt Rykar B. Lewis

Every war needs a hero. The Korean War saw many brave men serve with outstanding distinction; however, few equaled the accomplishments of MajGen Oliver P. Smith. Gen Smith was assigned to command the 1st Marine Division as it prepared to deploy to Korea in July 1950. His leadership skills were instrumental in preparing his division for the landing at Inchon and ensuring the successful conduct of the operation. During the remainder of his time in Korea, Gen Smith led the 1st Marine Division in the successful recapture of Seoul and guaranteed the division's survival in the onslaught of Chinese forces at the Changjin Reservoir. Gen Smith's calculated military maneuvers, foresight, leadership skills, and personal ethics earned him a place as one of the greatest heroes of the Korean War.

Gen Smith was not the stereotypical Marine; nevertheless, his leadership abilities earned him the respect of the Marines under his command throughout the Korean War. He was well known for taking care of his men and was determined never to waste a life if he could help it. Tall, thin, mild-mannered, and gray-haired, Gen Smith looked more like a professor than a Marine general. Even members of his command dubbed him "the Professor" because of his love for studying military history. He was also known to stand up for what he believed to be right; his feuds with MG Edward "Ned" Almond, USA, are ingrained in Marine Corps history.¹ There was arguably not a better man to lead the Marine Corps in Korea than Gen Smith.

Gen Smith was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Marines in 1917, soon after the United States en-

>2ndLt Lewis is an Air Traffic Control Crew Officer, Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron, MCAS Iwakuni, Japan.

tered World War I. But the war passed without Smith seeing combat. Nevertheless, Smith was still in the Corps during the outbreak of World War II. He saw combat at Cape Gloucester, Peleliu, and Okinawa, earning multiple awards for combat heroism. It was no shock that, as a major general, he was summoned to command the 1st Marine Division in July 1950, shortly after North Korean forces invaded South Korea. Gen Smith retained this position until May 1951.² He led the division during the roughest fighting of the war and proved again to be a highly capable leader.



MajGen O.P. Smith. (DOD photo (USMC) A88898.)

Smith's first challenge of the war was to see that the 1st Marine Division was ready for action in GEN Douglas MacArthur's planned amphibious landing at Inchon. This was no small task. The division had less than 3,500 men filling the ranks in July 1950. The Marine Corps overcame this manpower shortage by mobilizing the Reserves across the Nation. Gen Smith saw to it that another 13,000 Marines were added to the division within a month. By the first week of August, the 1st Marine Division possessed 17,000 Marines ready for action at Inchon.³ Gen Smith successfully overcame the manpower shortage, but there were many more obstacles to face in Korea.

Under Gen Smith's command, the division executed a flawless amphibious landing at Inchon. But even then, Smith began butting heads with MG Almond, the Commander of X Corps, of which the 1st Marine Division was part of. Smith's tactics, mannerisms, and leadership skills were in stark opposition to Almond. No sooner had the Marines landed at Inchon before Almond began pressuring Smith to move quickly to recapture Seoul. Yet Smith moved with caution, knowing his two-regiment division would be fighting in an unknown urban area. He kept his men in good condition and his units in close proximity to one another.⁴ This action infuriated Almond, who placed speed of maneuver above all else.

Regardless, Smith's caution was well founded. Enemy resistance across the Han River was intense and increased as the Marines moved closer to Seoul. The North Koreans soon

switched from delaying tactics to defending to the last man. But Smith utilized close air support from two Marine F4U Corsair squadrons that arrived at the newly captured Kimpo Airfield to help dislodge the North Koreans.⁵ In spite of this support, the Marines had to fight fiercely just to make it to the streets of Seoul.

After the 1st Marine Division and elements of the Army's 7th Division recaptured Seoul, Gen Smith was still wary of bringing in the South Korean government officials so soon after the battle. Even as GEN MacArthur brought President Syngman Rhee and his entourage back into Seoul, Gen Smith took safety precautions. He positioned two Marine battalions along the route the dignitaries would take and around the palace, although out of sight.⁶ Thankfully, the Marine units were not called upon to defend against an attack on the dignitaries. Yet, Gen Smith made sure his units were ready, just in case. The caution and well-calculated moves of Gen Smith were a constant annoyance to Almond. Regardless, Smith's actions saved the 1st Marine Division time and time again.

Perhaps no other instance demonstrated this fact more than the incident at the Changjin Reservoir. As the X Corps moved from Seoul and raced toward the Yalu River, the 1st Marine Division was assigned to spearhead the advance. Almond wanted to advance as quickly as possible, but Gen Smith did not agree with the strategy. He advanced with caution, wary of being ambushed while his units were spread out. He kept them in close contact with each other and proceeded, observing all the military principles of advance. This, of course, simply frustrated Almond. But Smith was unsure of what lay ahead. Even after Chinese units destroyed part of the Army's 7th Division, Almond pressured the Marines to advance faster.⁷ It appeared that the X Corps' commander was turning a blind eye to the fact that the Chinese were entering the war. The only thing that seemed to matter to Almond was reaching the Yalu River.



MajGen Smith presented Col Edward W. Snedecker the Legion of Merit (2nd Award) in January 1951. (National Archives photo (USMC) 127-N-A5897.)

Gen Smith, however, did not share this mindset. His division moved northwest from Hungnam toward the Changjin Reservoir, an area of land known for its harsh terrain and weather. The Marines encountered small numbers of Chinese all along the way. Thus, Smith did not want his men to be strung out in such dangerous terrain while it was unknown whether larger Chinese units were ahead.⁸ His caution was justified. On 27 November, lead elements of the 5th and 7th Marine Regiments encountered substantial Chinese units. Gen Smith pulled his division together and formed a defensive position around Yudam-ni, east of the reservoir. Soon, six Chinese divisions slammed into the 1st Marine Division, launching unremitting attacks for days.⁹ The Marines were not the only ones attacked. All across the front, Chinese units were surrounding and destroying American and United Nations units.

On 1 December, Almond ordered the general withdrawal of X Corps. It would be a fighting withdrawal the entire way. Gen Smith moved his division

out of Yudam-ni the same day, bringing the division's equipment and wounded along. The Marines were heavily supported by squadrons of the 1st MAW stationed on carriers in the Sea of Japan. By 4 December, the 1st Marine Division reached Hagaru-ri with 1,500 casualties.¹⁰ However, the division was still in good shape as the Marines remained in proper formation the entire way, concentrating in regimental or battalion strength wherever possible. The Marines had much experience fighting Asian armies in the Pacific and knew to keep their perimeters tight during nighttime.¹¹ Such tactics ultimately preserved the division.

It was at Hagaru-ri where Gen Smith made a remark to correspondents that would go down in history: "Gentlemen we are not retreating. We are merely attacking in another direction." In reality, the 1st Marine Division was attacking, and it took the Marines two days to travel the twelve miles to reach Koto-ri, arriving on 7 December. Even so, Smith chose to fight his way out of Koto-ri rather than be evacuated by Air Force squadrons. He was unwill-

ing to abandon his vehicles and equipment to the Chinese. It was a bold decision. Nevertheless, Gen Smith at last led his division to Hungnam after thirteen days of isolation. All the division's equipment and wounded were brought along, and the Marines—though tired—were still in good fighting shape.¹² Such unit cohesion in the face of disaster was remarkable. Gen Smith deserves great credit for the successful withdrawal of the 1st Marine Division.

Gen Smith's foresight and successful leadership during the Changjin Reservoir Campaign earned him a place in Marine Corps legend. For fighting over half-a-dozen Chinese divisions while marching his Marines 70 miles in 13 days from the Changjin Reservoir to Hungnam, Gen Smith earned the Army Distinguished Service Cross. Before the war was over, Smith continued to lead the 1st Marine Division in the first U.N. counteroffensive and defend against the Chinese Communist Spring Offensive of 1951. For his heroism and exceptional service in Korea, Gen Smith earned the Navy and Army Distinguished Service Medals as well as the Silver Star.¹³ After the

war's end on 1 September 1955, he retired from the Marine Corps as a lieutenant general. In recognition of his numerous combat awards, LtGen Smith was promoted to the rank of four-star general,¹⁴ an honor that was well deserved.

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Gen O.P. Smith was one of the greatest heroes of the Korean War. In July 1950, he successfully brought the 1st Marine Division to full strength so it could execute the Inchon Landing on 15 September. His actions in the Inchon-Seoul Campaign created strife with the X Corps' commander, yet his caution and foresight earned him the respect and loyalty of his Marines. Gen Smith's leadership skills at the Changjin Reservoir brought the 1st Marine Division out of the disastrous situation intact and ready to continue fighting for the remainder of the war.

Without a doubt, "the Professor" proved to be among the greatest Marines in all of history. Gen Smith's outstanding leadership of the 1st Marine Division in Korea should be remembered for the rest of time.

Notes

1. BGen Edwin H. Simmons, *Over the Seawall: U.S. Marines at Inchon*, (Washington, DC: Marine Corps Historical Center, 2000).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Col Joseph H. Alexander, *Battle of the Barricades: U.S. Marines in the Recapture of Seoul*, (Washington, DC: Marine Corps Historical Center, 2000).
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. James Stokesbury, *A Short History of the Korean War*, (New York, NY: William Morrow and Company, 1988).
8. Theodore Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War: The Classic Korean War History*, (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2008).
9. *A Short History of the Korean War*.
10. Ibid.
11. *This Kind of War*.
12. *A Short History of the Korean War*.
13. Staff, "General Oliver P. Smith, USMC," United States Marine Corps History Division, available at <https://www.usmcu.edu>.
14. *Over the Seawall*.



MG Edward M. Almond (center) briefs LtGen Lemuel C. Shepherd, 31 October 1950. MajGen Smith is standing behind them. (DOD photo by Cpl Jack Nash, National Archives photo (USA) 111:SC351740.)

