MajGen O.P. Smith

His legacy and integrity

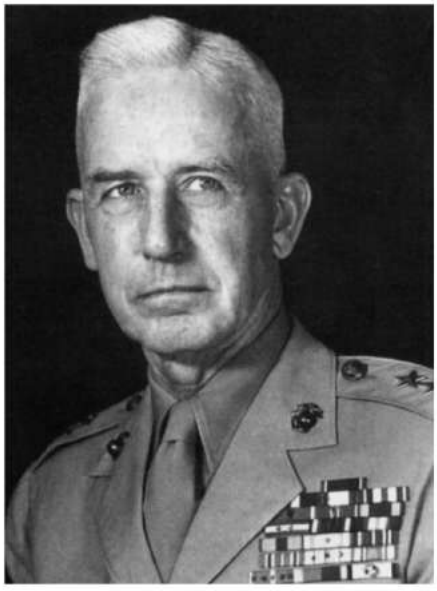
by Maj Ralph Stoney Bates, Sr.

He stood alone, literally and figuratively, on the frozen ground of North Korea, surrounded by dead, dying, exhausted, freezing, and fighting Marines. His immediate commander, Army Xth Corps Commander, MG Edward M. Almond, USA, who also happened to be GEN Douglas MacArthur's Chief of Staff at the same time, had ordered him to rush his division pell-mell past the Chosin (actual Korean name: Changlin) Reservoir and on toward the Yalu River, overextending his supplies and the cohesiveness as a division in combat. His Marines now stretched almost 60 miles up a narrow, winding, dirt and gravel snow-covered road. Marine MajGen Oliver Prince Smith knew he was entering a new dimension in respect to the enemy situation. His regimental commanders told him that they were now fighting what they considered to be healthy, newly-arrived, and well-equipped Chinese soldiers. His men had been killing and capturing them for days. He had reported these facts to Almond. Clouding the picture, however, was GEN MacArthur's public assurance to President Harry S. Truman on Wake Island that the Chinese would not enter the war. Almond apparently wanted to "paint that picture," calling the new enemy "a bunch of Chinese laundrymen." MacArthur had also assured his forces, and the ever present news correspondents, that the war would be over before Christmas, that his forces could be "home for Christmas." Almond supported MacArthur completely. Also, on several occasions, Almond had a tendency to project a flair for aggressiveness, often resulting in demonstrating himself to be an obvious novice in military tactics. He kept making mistake after mistake in tactical decisions.

Reputation is given to a person by others, whereas integrity comes from within that person.

—Author

>Maj Bates was on active duty for 26 years as enlisted, warrant, and commissioned officer. He was an Aviation Specialist Instructor, Drill Instructor, and Military Policeman as an NCO, and served as a Brig, Criminal Investigations, Military Police, and Infantry Officer during his warrant and commissioned years before retiring in 1981. He is the author of three books—Short Rations For Marines, A Marine Called Gabe, and An American Shame—along with two Marine Corps Gazette articles.



MajGen Oliver P. "O.P." Smith. *(DOD photo (USMC) A88898.)*

Oliver Smith didn't like the situation. Simply put, he didn't trust Almond, his commander. It was foolish for MacArthur to divide the combat forces in Korea into two commands, the 8th Army on the west side of Korea and the Xth Corps on the east, an entire mountain range splitting the two forces. Further complicating things were Almond's orders to extend a Marine division and other UN forces beyond mutual support of its internal infantry regiments, organic artillery regiment, and engineer support battalion. Additionally, Smith's left flank of the division revealed only snow covered mountains, devoid of friendly military units. His supply lines were over extended. He was now at a critical juncture of complying with Almond's orders with blind obedience, knowing that he was marching his scattered division on a path that could lead to heavy casualties and possibly its destruction as an effective, cohesive fighting force.

Almost in desperation, Smith had even gone over Almonds head, not to MacArthur—he knew the answer there—but to his own fellow Marine, the commander of the Fleet Marine Force in the Pacific, LtGen Lemuel Shepherd. The discussion between Smith and Shepherd during Shepherd's visit to Korea solidified Smith's belief that the Commander, FMF Pacific, was an admirer and friend of fellow VMI (Virginia Military Institute) classmate Edward Almond. None-the-less, he made a direct appeal to Shepherd, asking for guidance, assistance, and support. And, only somewhat surprising, his FMF Pacific commander sided with Almond. Garnering no support from his conversation with Shepherd, he made his last desperate appeal in the form

of a quickly drafted letter addressed to the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen Clifton B. Cates. After all, Cates had selected him for his Assistant Commandant, and placed him in command of the 1st MarDiv. He received no reply. He was on his own. He was alone, against all odds.

Now, he reached deep within his personal resolve and his ingrained determination honed across many times and places in his life. Drawing from some innate sense of loyalty to the Marines he had commanded through the build-up at Camp Pendleton, the amphibious landing at Inchon, the capture of Seoul, and across the waters to the east coast of North Korea for the march north, he relied on his sheer gut instinct and his personal knowledge of the friendly and enemy situation and the terrain. He had to accept total personal responsibility and follow a tactical plan rather than relying on some foolhardy concept of a fixed calendar schedule to fight a war. He would rely on textbook methods of estimating enemy strength and intentions, the situation and disposition of friendly and enemy forces, the terrain, and the morale and capability of the Marines under his command. Other than his subordinate commanders, he would have no support or consultation from anyone. He made a fateful decision that will live forever in the annals of military tactics and history.

"His is a life that deserves to be examined," a man who "never abandoned his principles." So wrote Gail B. Shisler, his granddaughter, in her book *For Country and Corps*.[1] From the pages of that book, we learn that Oliver Prince Smith was born 26 October 1893 in Menard, TX. His father, John Alexandra Smith III, died suddenly when Oliver was six-years-old. His mother, Anna Marie Obervetter Smith, took young Oliver along with his brother and sister to Santa Cruz, CA. There she became a seamstress to support her family. He assisted in augmenting the family's meager income working after school at many odd jobs, including several summers at a lumberjack camp in the Santa Cruz Mountains. In 1912, he headed off to attend the University of California at Berkeley. It was vastly different from the Berkeley of today. He worked his way through college, continuing work at the logging camp. Throughout his tenure at Berkeley, he constantly sent money to his mother. He also entered the ROTC while a student at Berkeley.

Later in life, he wrote about leaving home for college. "I had a suitcase holding my belongings and very little money. I, of course, did not retain all my summer savings." His granddaughter further writes, "It is the 'of course' that stands out almost a century later."[2] He never forgot those he left behind. He never forgot his obligation to those he loved, and he loved his Marines. Even in his retirement years, his love for his Marines was revealed in letters and personal conversations with those he commanded in Korea, but most telling is the following quote from Shisler's book:

> Smith was never much for unit reunions or birthday balls, and would turn down most of the many invitations he received. However, he faithfully went to the Oakland military hospital across San Francisco Bay from his retirement home in Los Altos, to visit the wounded from Vietnam for the

MajGen O.P. Smith and RADM James H. Doyle. *(DOD (USN) photo 80-G-423190.)*

Nothing stops the Marines as they march south from Koto-ri, fighting their way through Chinese Communist hordes in sub-zero weather of mountains. Despite their ordeal, these men hold their heads high. *(Photo by Sgt F.C. Kerr, Hdqtrs No. A-4851.)*

> many years his country was involved in that conflict. Dressed carefully in a coat and tie, his tall, now slightly stooped frame topped with a full head of white hair, he would move from bed to bed caring for those who had paid the price for our conflicts abroad.

After graduating, he worked briefly with the Standard Oil Company until he was offered a commission in the United States Marine Corps at the outbreak of The Great War (WWI). Thus began a 39-year odyssey capped off in the freezing, wind-swept mountains of Korea as the Commanding General, 1st MarDiv. He had always been a good Marine, a competent officer, and a confident leader. Now, on the battleground of Korea and in the annals of military history, he embarked on a rendezvous with destiny to become a legendary general, a legendary Marine.

This somewhat withdrawn Marine had a reputation of being more akin to a college professor instead of a stereotypical brash and aggressive fighter. Indeed, many of his peers and seniors referred to him as "the professor." But, on the snow covered soil of North Korea, he made a decision that he was going to do what was right and tactically sound rather than to blindly charge thousands of men into a frozen wasteland just because GEN MacArthur declared a fixed calendar deadline to end the war before Christmas. He would fight, and advance, when it was tactically wise to do so. He would slow down his forward movement, readjust the disposition of his regiments and support units, establish logistical stores at specific locations along his route of advance, and build an airfield or two along the way. His Marines depended upon him to lead them in combat wisely and with sound judgment. He had proven himself again and again through the years. Through New Britain, Peliliu, Okinawa, and most recently, at Inchon, he had acquired the experience and its concomitant knowledge that comes to a wise man from that experience.

Before departing for Japan and Korea, he had put together a division of Marines from reaches within the far corners of the Marine Corps, stripping schools, recruiting stations, Reserve organizations, and dozens of other places containing Marines by the ones and twos, brought them together at Camp Pendleton, stripped the Barstow supply dump of its left-over World War II equipment and, after dispatching one regiment to assist the Pusan defenders, embarked to execute a hastily-planned amphibious assault at Inchon, Korea, near Seoul. Veterans of this 1st MarDiv would soon add another marquee to its World War II Guadalcanal shoulder patch. Its title—"The Chosen Few." These men would become part of the Marine Corps legends, ranking with Veterans of Belleau Wood, Guadalcanal, Tarawa, and Iwo Jima.

During his march up to the Chosin Reservoir, he selected and stocked several supply dumps along his route of advance with critical equipment, shortening his supply lines. Not knowing then that he would need those supplies going in the opposite direction, he wisely included tents, heaters, fuel, sleeping bags, ammunition, food, and medical supplies. He had his engineers construct runways for cargo or light aircraft. He used helicopters for transportation and reconnaissance. All the while, as he was being ordered to move faster, he ignored those orders and moved as fast as tactical concerns would allow. Still, he was uneasy. His division was still too scattered, too separated to offer mutual support.

It was about this time that Chinese Communist Forces entered combat in Korea. The 8th Army, in western Korea, was attacked in force by overwhelming enemy forces. ROK (Republic of Korea) soldiers on the east of the line of march north encountered massive numbers of attacking Chinese. Soon, all of Xth Corps, including the Marines, were engaged by Chinese forces. In the east, the 8th Army began a full withdrawal that would eventually become an accelerated race back toward the 38th Parallel dividing North and South Korea. The degradation of America's military arsenal of men and equipment following World War II began to reveal itself. U.S. and ROK units on the west side of Korea were ordered by MacArthur through Almond to withdraw. Some commanders, including Smith, were ordered to abandon their equipment and begin to retreat. Smith refused.

He never forgot his obligation to those he loved, and he loved his Marines.

The attack in another direction of the 1st MarDiv from Yudam-ni, Hagaru, Koto-ri, and on to Hamhung and Hungnam is legendary. Frozen men, frozen weapons, frozen food, frozen morphine and blood plasma, and eight Chinese Communist divisions could not stop the advance of the Marines. As they moved forward, they would pick up some stragglers from some other units, mostly Army. Assisted by an Army Bridge Company and U.S. Air Force cargo air drops, Marine engineers would span a blown out bridge preventing the Marine advance to the sea. Where possible, warming tents were erected, allowing men to warm themselves periodically and refreshing the body and the morale of the Marines. Wounded were loaded on vehicles along with the dead. Marines would rotate from walking on the road to walking the ridgelines on each flank of the advancing column of men and machines, protecting the flanks. Corpsmen carried containers of morphine in their mouths to keep it from freezing. Marine infantry, engineers, cooks, bakers, clerks, and supply personnel would fight their way through the Chinese forces, totally destroying two Chinese divisions. They brought with them almost all their equipment of tanks, trucks, tractors, wounded men, and as many of their dead as they could carry. Some exhausted Marine units actually marched into the port of Hungnam singing the *Marines' Hymn*. They had accomplished the impossible, against all odds, because their thoughtful, tough, brave, and confident "college professor" was their commanding general. When it was most critical, when it was most needed, he stood by his principles and saved his division and several Army units from destruction by a vastly numerically superior enemy force. Much later, other commanders, many of them Army commanders, wrote that it was Smith who saved the entire Xth Corps.

After Oliver Smith returned from Korea, he was placed in command of Camp Pendleton in California. At that time, he did not receive the usual credit or the recognition for his unique contribution to the annals of Marine Corps history. Tragically, his granddaughter writes in her book,

> Smith had fought the North Koreans, he had fought the Chinese, and he had fought the Army high command. He had done this with no support from anyone, except those in his division, who by the time they arrived in Hamhung would have done anything for him.[3]

It is only by looking back that we recognize the greatness of the feat and the wisdom and remarkable integrity of this man, "one of the great, quiet heroes of the Korean War," and one of our greatest Marines.

Notes

1. Gail B. Shisler, *For Country and Corps*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2009).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

USMC