

General Charles C. Krulak

A Marine Corps Great—the Rest of the Story

By SgtMaj Daniel N. Heider, USMC

Editor's note: The following article is the first-place winner of the 2021 Leatherneck Writing Contest. Major Richard A. "Rick" Stewart, USMC (Ret) sponsored the contest, which is open to enlisted Marines through the Marine Corps Association. Upcoming issues of Leatherneck will feature the second- and third-place winners and honorable mention entries.

The Marine Corps has established itself as a highly disciplined and effective fighting force. This legacy of excellence was developed through a perpetual generational commitment to uphold the underlying principles of honor, courage, and commitment.

The Marine Corps, throughout its extraordinary history, could achieve this by engendering the belief that the Marine Corps can triumph over any adversary. This unshakable commitment to winning battles is encapsulated in the warrior ethos that guides each Marine. Throughout Marine Corps history, many individuals contributed to the advancement of the Marine Corps' warfighting adeptness; however, one individual in particular stands apart as a bold leader who galvanized innovation. General Charles C. Krulak, the 31st Commandant of the Marine Corps, heroically led Marines in combat, established an innovative spirit that fundamentally changed the institution, and cemented a legacy of excellence that led to generations of Marines fighting and winning battles.

Overcoming Adversity and Leading in Battle

As a young Marine, I was directed by my leadership to report to the base theater to hear the 31st Commandant of the Marine Corps speak. Upon arrival,

I was astonished by the excitement that buzzed throughout the room and the overall exuberance of the crowd. At that point, I was still trying to find my way and was fascinated by the history and mysticism of the Marine Corps. After everyone was called to attention, an animated general burst into the room. His energy was boundless, and



Gen Charles C. Krulak
31st Commandant of the Marine Corps

the crowd's exhilaration grew in his presence. To us, he was a larger-than-life figure who captivated the audience, and his inspiring words fostered a sense of pride and belonging. His unique background and ability to inspire were rooted in his battle-tested and servant leadership style, which propelled him to the Marine Corps' highest post.

Gen Charles Krulak was born into the Marine Corps family. His father was the great Lieutenant General Victor H. "Brute" Krulak, one of the most distinguishable change-agents in the history of the Corps. Gen Charles Krulak's upbringing and exposure to

the Marine Corps culture destined him for a dedicated career in the Marine Corps.

Early in his career, he proved his courage and steadfast leadership in the face of certain death. As a company commander, he earned his place in Marine Corps history by distinguishing himself in battle and was awarded the

Silver Star. According to his Silver Star citation, despite being wounded, he courageously led his Marines to safety under heavy fire by maneuvering across fire-swept terrain. He bravely led his Marines out of a harrowing ordeal, a feat that allowed them to fight another day. Gen Krulak's experiences in combat helped to shape his perception of the importance of enlisted leadership.

Gen Krulak's servant leadership style coupled with his early experiences with enlisted Marines contributed to the emphasis he placed on the significance of enlisted small unit leadership. In a speech given at the U.S. Naval Academy in the early 1990s, he told the story of his radio operator and his company's first sergeant. Then-Captain Krulak received orders for his second tour of duty in Vietnam. Upon reporting for his flight, he met and formed a friendly relationship with a young enlisted Marine who ended up becoming his radio operator. In Vietnam, Capt Krulak was leading his company when they came under heavy fire. His radio operator was wounded, and Capt Krulak's initial reaction was to provide first aid and comfort to his friend. However, his first sergeant struck him in the helmet, telling him that he had a company of Marines fighting and needed to be up there with them. After the firefight, the first sergeant apologized for his actions, and Capt Krulak responded by thanking him for having the moral courage to hold him accountable. He acknowledged

Gen Charles C. Krulak greets Sgt Gary L. Hill before presenting him with the Silver Star at the Tuscaloosa Veterans Affairs Medical Center June 7, 2013. Hill received the nation's third highest award for heroism for actions as a fire team leader while deployed to Vietnam in 1967. (Photo by Sgt Raymond Lott, USMC)

that he needed to be up front with his men, leading them; according to Capt Krulak, it “drove into my soul the concept of accountability.”

This story exemplifies his humble nature, willingness to receive constructive criticism, and dedication to the servant leadership style. The Marine Corps prides itself on the reliance and capabilities of small unit leaders and has a culture of servant leadership. Gen Krulak's early experience would come to significantly impact some of his key initiatives later in his career.

Bold Actions and Institutional Change

Gen Krulak recognized the importance of developing leaders who can effectively operate in a dispersed and complex environment. Leaders must possess the confidence to make sound decisions during any type of scenario. Furthermore, he sought to cultivate an unbreakable bond among Marines, which would be forged by infusing Marines into the Corps' heritage.

To achieve enhanced leadership, he followed the bold action of reorganizing enlisted recruit training and instituted the Crucible; the Battle of Belleau Wood served as the foundation of this idea. In an article in *Marine Corps Gazette*, he



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said: “While walking in the wheat fields through which the Marines attacked on the 6th of June 1918, it dawned on me that the battle of Belleau Wood was won before it was even joined. On the eve of their trial by fire, the Marines of the 4th Brigade were supremely confident in their personal abilities to carry the day, and more importantly, they felt an incredible allegiance to their unit and to their fellow Marines. It was these attributes that enabled them to prevail in the crucible of Belleau Wood.”

The Marine Corps already had a steep



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The 31st CMC, Gen Charles “Chuck” Krulak, grew up with an appreciation for and an understanding of Marine Corps culture and traditions. His father was LtGen Victor H. Krulak. In the images above, 1stLt Charles Krulak shares a few lighter moments with his famous father.



Gen Charles C. Krulak, 31st Commandant of the Marine Corps, and his fellow members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in the Pentagon on Dec. 18, 1997. From left to right: Gen Joseph W. Ralston, USAF, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; GEN Henry H. Shelton, USA, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; GEN Dennis J. Reimer, U.S. Army Chief of Staff; Gen Charles C. Krulak, Commandant of the Marine Corps; ADM Jay L. Johnson, Chief of Naval Operations; and Gen Michael E. Ryan, Chief of Staff of the Air Force.

tradition in bravery, valor, and prowess on the battlefield, but Gen Krulak recognized the need to create a program that would cement the transformation. The Crucible would plant a seed of decentralized effectiveness and the concept of living up to the Marine Corps' legacy of winning battles.

Part of what makes Marines fierce warriors is their dedication to the Marines who served before them and upholding the legacy that those Marines established. Gen Krulak recognized the need to institutionalize this mindset into recruit training. He predicted that the battle Marines would face in the future would be violent, chaotic and lethal; as a result, he believed it imperative that the Marines be developed to endure such challenges. He made the point, "They, like their forefathers at Belleau Wood, must have complete confidence in their individual abilities and in those of their unit.

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**—Gen Charles C. Krulak
31st Commandant of the
Marine Corps**

The Strategic Corporal

The Marine Corps is unique in the sense that leadership begins at the lowest level and that Marines of all ranks are expected to both be leaders and followers when necessary. The core values of Honor, Courage, and Commitment are critical components of forging the foundation of leadership. They serve as a beacon that all Marines

should follow when chaotic situations present themselves. This is likewise the case in complex peacetime matters, which, in some cases, can prove to be much more difficult for a young Marine to deal with. Gen Krulak recognized the need to establish an institutional commitment to professional development, which would begin in Recruit Training and be a continuous process throughout a Marine's career.

The development of the Strategic Corporal is the lifeline of the Marine Corps' future success. Throughout the Marine Corps' history, a high standard of leadership was formed. Gen Krulak recognized the significance of developing the Corps' leaders to meet this challenge. To exemplify this, Gen Krulak stated: "For 223 years, on battlefields strewn across the globe, Marines have set the highest standard of combat leadership. We are inspired by their example and confident that today's

Marines and those of tomorrow will rise to the same great heights. The clear lesson of our past is that success in combat, and in the barracks for that matter, rest with our most junior leaders.” Gen Krulak’s innovative acumen and ability to clearly visualize the needs of the Corps were instrumental in developing a generation of Marines that would gallantly serve on battlefields such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Legacy of the Marine Corps

Gen Charles C. Krulak’s time as the 31st Commandant of the Marine Corps proved to be profound and impacted the trajectory of the Marine Corps. His initiatives and ideals influenced a generation of warfighters that would proceed to win the nation’s battles. His experiences throughout his career molded him into the ultimate servant leader who greatly impacted countless Marines. He recognized the need to create an institutional focus on the core values of Honor, Courage and Commitment. As such, Gen Krulak focused the entire Marine Corps on a core values system, which would serve as a signal fire for all Marines.

One of Gen Krulak’s most significant initiatives was the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory. This organization adopts the responsibility of evaluating change, assessing the impact of innovative technologies, and accelerating the launching of new capabilities into the operating forces. This program has resulted in a constant institutional focus on innovation and improved lethality. In particular, the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab leads wargame and experimental efforts that “comprehensively explore solutions and inform the combat development process.” The establishment of this program provides a mechanism of enduring innovation and process improvement.

Gen Krulak’s own combat history forged his opinion on the necessity of strong, educated, and capable enlisted leaders. This experience led him down a path of unrelenting focus on enlisted development and education. He identified the notion that training is for preparing for the expected, while education is for preparing for the unexpected. His ability to energize focus on enlisted



SgtMaj Heider was promoted to his current rank in 2018. He said Gen Krulak’s emphasis on core values, legacy and servant leadership have served as guiding principles throughout his career. (Photos courtesy of SgtMaj Daniel N. Heider, USMC)

leader development created a foundation for the Corps’ future success.

The legacy of the Marine Corps continues to endure, and the foundation that Gen Krulak helped to lay ensured that the institution can meet the nation’s challenge. Gen Krulak captured the importance of the Marine Corps in the following quote: “The Marine Corps has always had a global outlook that transcended any scenario or threat. Instead, we have steadfastly focused on our statutory role to quell disturbances, and first to help, both in the United States and abroad. Our expectation has taught us that the only common denominator for the types of missions

expected of a force-in-readiness is an immutable commitment to be ready for worldwide commitment 365 days a year. Anything less is inconsistent with our ethos, our core capabilities, and the expectations of the American people. The Marine Corps has not failed them in the past and it will not fail them in the future. The United States Marine Corps is, and will remain, our nation’s premier force-in-readiness.”

Author’s bio: SgtMaj Daniel N. Heider, originally from Johnstown, Pa., enlisted in 1996. He is currently stationed in Okinawa, Japan, and serves as the squadron sergeant major for MTACS-18, MACG-18, 1st MAW.

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