

Roots in Ripon

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Chuck Roots

20 March 2017

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Brilliant Brute

If you are frequent reader of my column, then you know I love to read. In general, I love history. Further, I am a big fan of military history. And in particular, I enjoy anything about the Marine Corps.

Recently, my friend, Eddie Erdilatz, suggested I read a book he had recently finished. It's entitled, *Brute: The Life of Victor Krulak, U.S. Marine*. This is my kind of book! History and the Marine Corps. Can't get enough of it. The moniker "Brute" was obtained on the day he arrived at the Naval Academy. A rather imposing midshipman took one look at the diminutive five-foot five Krulak, and said, "Well, Brute!"

So, who is this guy Victor "Brute" Krulak, anyway? You may be asking yourself, "Why haven't I heard of him before?" That would be a good question.

Make no mistake, Vic Krulak was a warrior. But he was also exceptionally cerebral. His mind was always pushing against what is, and instead, asking the question, What if? From the time Krulak was a 2nd Lieutenant he was pushing the envelope when it came to what the Marine Corps could be, and what it ought to be. He loved the Corps and always did what he believed to be in the best interests of the Corps. In so doing, it would translate into what was best for the country.

Young Lieutenant Krulak caught the eye of certain Marine generals who took him under their wing. They recognized his brilliance and wanted to protect this young, cock-sure Marine officer. Many other flag officers, both Marine generals and Navy admirals, were less than enamored with this protégé who hobnobbed with three and four star generals both professionally and socially. His defenders recognized his acumen, and took every opportunity to seek his council, as unorthodox as that was in the Marine Corps of the 1930s and '40s.

In 1936 Lt Krulak was sent to Shanghai, China to serve with the legendary "China Marines." The China Marines were U.S. Marines serving a special post in the city of Shanghai, a city of no small reputation internationally. While there, Krulak was aware of the growing threat of the Imperial Japanese military, particularly, their navy. The Japanese were constantly threatening and harassing the Chinese. Finally, in 1937, a flotilla of Japanese war ships anchored off Shanghai, showing every intention of landing troops on Chinese soil. Krulak watched daily from the American sector of Shanghai, waiting to see what might transpire. One morning the Japanese navy began heavy shelling in preparation for troops landing in an assault

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on the city. Krulak commandeered a tugboat from the U.S. Navy command and sailed out to meet the invading force with a large American flag flapping in the breeze. The United States and Japan were not at war yet, so this was not perceived by the Japanese as a threatening move on Krulak's part. Instead, he wanted to study the amphibious landing craft the Japanese Marines were using to get from ship-to-shore. One humorous incident occurred while Japanese warships were firing their naval guns on Shanghai. "As the tug approached one of the larger Japanese warships, there was a flurry on deck, and Japanese sailors rushed to the rail. The shooting stopped. The sailors saluted. Other sailors dipped the Japanese ensign (small flag), and a (ship's) horn sounded. Then Krulak, who was in the wheelhouse of the tugboat, came to attention, saluted, and gave a blast on the horn." You can't make this stuff up!

Once the naval courtesies were over, Krulak had the tug come right alongside of a Japanese landing craft. He took pictures and made sketches of the craft, along with copious notes. Later he formalized his observations and sent a package to the Navy Department for them to see how the Japanese used these amphibious craft. In the years leading up to the Second World War, the Marine Corps had not fully established a fully functional policy for implementing amphibious warfare. Lt Krulak was certain his information would revolutionize, as well as solidify, the Marine Corps' policies regarding amphibious warfare. He would be sorely disappointed in a few years when he discovered the Navy had no interest in his desire to create amphibious landing craft.

Just prior to the war, Krulak would be serving at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia, known as "the Crossroads of the Marine Corps," where, under the protective hand of General Holland "Howlin' Mad" Smith, he was allowed to pursue his interest in developing the much-needed craft used to transport Marines to the beach. "Big Navy" continued to stiff-arm him, believing opposing large fleets would be the naval battles in the future. This was true as well for the army, using large army forces to clash with an enemy force. Krulak was undaunted, showing brilliance of foresight by pressing the need for such landing craft. So, he connected with a private boat builder by the name of Andrew Jackson Higgins.

This union of Krulak and Higgins would be fortuitous for both men, Higgins Industries, Krulak's military career, the Marine Corps, and the United States. The amphibious boat, known as Higgins Boats, which Higgins built with Krulak's oversight, revolutionized amphibious warfare. These craft were contracted to be built by Higgins Industries in the thousands. They were instrumental in both the D-Day Invasion of June 6, 1944, and throughout the Pacific island campaigns by the Marines, not the least of which was Iwo Jima, February 19, 1945.

I have more fascinating information about this brilliant man, but that will have to wait till next week.

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In closing, this quote from General Dwight D. Eisenhower sums it up rather nicely. “[The Higgins’ Boats] won the war for us.”