

Roots in Ripon

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Brute the Intrepid

Picking up from last week's article, Brilliant Brute, it is my intention to share more of the brilliancy of this man, Victor "Brute" Krulak. Up to this point (1946), Brute has been mostly a staff officer, serving at the whim of flag grade officers (Marine generals and Navy admirals). Granted, he was often given *carte blanche* with his various ideas, but this next bit of visionary thinking was beyond brilliant. The reason for this is that no one else is on record for having the foresight Brute demonstrated. His idea was a tactical, combat, wartime game-changer.

What was this idea of Krulak's? Quite simply, it was the use of a new-fangled contraption known as a helicopter. This aerial wonder left most people gawking as it whirred and spun, often in strangely contorted ways. After all, leading authorities all agreed that the aerodynamics of the helicopter made it impossible to fly. Well, at least on paper it shouldn't be capable of sustained flight!

The first helicopters in the military had only come into use at the end of World War Two, primarily in the role of reconnaissance, observation and medical evacuation. But not as a vehicle for combat operations. Since the first helicopters were years away from becoming the massive powerhouses in lifting that we see today, there were many doubters that this weird flying machine could ever be of much use. They were regarded as a novelty, an experimental curiosity, nothing more. Brute saw things differently. In fact, author Robert Coram writes in his book "Brute", *"Before helicopter doctrine was developed and before the Marine Corps had its first helicopter squadron, [Brute] was teaching helicopter tactics at the Amphibious Warfare School."* Krulak and another Marine, Ed Dyer, had written *"the first textbook for Marine helicopters and war planners. Usually doctrine and tactics are developed after a weapon is available, but Krulak believed that doctrine should drive, not follow, the development of the helicopter."* The Army would later take this textbook, copy it practically verbatim, and put an Army cover on it!

So committed to the use of helicopters was Brute, that one of his pilots offered to give him a lift. Literally, Harnessed in a canvas sling, Brute was lifted off the ground to demonstrate its use in potentially transporting troops inland. Up to this point, the other branches of the military had little use for the Corps, viewing it as useful only in making beachhead landings, but nothing more. This attitude about the Marine Corps generated a tremendous battle within Congress over the next ten years following the war. Debate raged on as to whether or not the Corps should simply be done away with, or be absorbed into the Army, or given a place at the

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table of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This pervasive negative view of the Marine Corps was harbored by such luminaries as Army Generals Dwight D. Eisenhower and George C. Marshall, along with President Harry Truman, all "*trying to do what the Japanese empire had failed to do: destroy the United States Marine Corps.*"

The helicopter would change all of that in short order. Through Krulak's doggedness in incorporating the helicopter into Marine Corps combat tactics, the Marines were given new life by Congress. Krulak was tireless in his defense of the Corps, fearlessly going nose-to-nose with those who were attempting to disband the Marine Corps.

One of the more interesting stories of the helicopter and its introduction into the Marine Corps, had to do with the formation of the first Marine experimental helicopter squadron (HMX-1) on December 1, 1947. Pilots were selected for this squadron and assembled for duty without a single helicopter in the Marine Corps inventory! In February of 1948 the fledgling squadron received five Sikorsky helicopters, each of which could carry a pilot and two Marines.

The Marines' use of the helicopter came into use in warfare in Korea, where, once again, Vic Krulak was present. He had a pilot fly him over the battle zones right in the midst of battle, frequently setting down near a Marine command to share what he was observing of enemy troop movements. But it was Vietnam where the helicopter came into its own, securing once and for all the role of Marines and helicopter warfare.

In an ironic twist, then Lt Gen Victor "Brute" Krulak in 1967 was meeting with President Lyndon Baines Johnson in the Oval Office. Brute, never one to miss an opportunity to be perfectly frank, even with a sitting president, told Johnson exactly what he thought of the way the president was prosecuting the war in Vietnam! Johnson, in turn, unceremoniously ushered Krulak out of the office. As a former Marine and Vietnam vet, President Johnson should have paid close attention to this man!

Brute is the story of a man who was fearless in taking on the high and mighty. Though he passed from this life at age 95, he has survived as a beloved icon of the Marine Corps.

Semper Fi, Brute.