"LISTEN UP"

NEWSLETTER OF THE LCPL SQUIRE "SKIP" WELLS DETACHMENT 647

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SPECIAL INFORMATIVE ISSUE — ONE NATION, UNDER GOD — SPRING 2025

The Marines' Vietnam Commitment

Fifty years ago, Leathernecks led the deluge of American ground-combat troops into South Vietnam and what would prove to be a strange, frustrating war.

By John Prados
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When the U.S. Marines waded ashore at My Khe beach, near Da Nang, South Vietnam, they had no idea of the ordeal that was to follow. The date was 8 March 1965, and the men, members of Brigadier General Frederick J. Karch's 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade, were the first American ground-combat troops committed to the Vietnam War—one of the Marine Corps' most costly conflicts and its longest.

On the beach, the bewildered men of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines were met by local military officials, curious onlookers, and pretty girls handing out flower leis—not enemy soldiers. Later in the day, the lead elements of the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines would arrive by air. Together their mission was to create a secure perimeter around Da Nang Air Base, where U.S. warplanes were now operating.

Marine combat units would be in South Vietnam until 1971. Some Marines, who were advising the South Vietnamese Marine Corps or guarding the U.S. Embassy, would remain in country through the spring of 1975. Measured by the length of time during which Marines served as advisers, starting in 1954, the Vietnam conflict is longer than the U.S. military engagements in Iraq or Afghanistan.

The Marines who landed that day were part of what the Corps termed a special landing force (SLF), equivalent to the Marine amphibious unit of later days and the recent Marine expeditionary unit. SLFs had been waiting off the Vietnamese coast for several years, as Saigon politics roiled and South Vietnamese security remained unsettled. In 1960, at the time of a coup attempt against President Ngo Dinh Diem, and again in the summer of 1963, when the Kennedy administration considered withdrawing all Americans from the country in the course of a dispute with Diem, Washington had contemplated sending in its SLFs. Marines had actually been sent into Thailand—in 1961 with a special helicopter unit, and a larger contingent in 1962 as a show of force during negotiations to form a coalition government in neighboring Laos.

Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 362 was committed in April 1962 to Operation Shufly in South Vietnam, transporting, resupplying, and supporting Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) troops. Marine choppers would be the first constituted U.S. Marine formations to enter the war. Several companies rotated through South Vietnam sharing the duty. After deploying initially to the Mekong Delta, they traded places with an Army helicopter company that had been stationed at Da Nang. The next Marine unit to arrive was a HAWK antiaircraft-missile battalion at the very beginning of 1965. Nevertheless, Karch's Marines are usually celebrated as the "first" American combat troops in the burgeoning conflict.

Landing at Da Nang was primarily about protecting U.S. Air Force planes. Put another way, force protection was the first Marine mission in country once combat troops were committed. General William C. Westmoreland, commander-in-chief of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) had asked for the Marines in late February. Air Force planes and personnel had been operating from South Vietnamese bases for several years already, in a covert fashion, but in late 1964 they had been targeted.

Members of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, the pesky, obdurate communist insurgents (Viet Cong) striving for power, began a series of guerrilla "spectaculars"—major bombings or raids. One had been against Americans at Bien Hoa Air Base. Meanwhile, MACV had also become concerned over the possibility of a conventional air raid from North Vietnam against American-manned bases in the south. That triggered General Westmoreland's request, shortly after Christmas, for dispatch of the Marine HAWK battalion. But what happened next were more spectaculars—guerrilla bombings of U.S. air bases at Pleiku and Qui Nhon. The United States retaliated with air attacks against targets in North Vietnam. A couple of weeks after those strikes, his concerns redoubled, Westmoreland asked for the Marines.

Da Nang only marked the beginning. After the first two battalions, Westmoreland wanted another pair. He put in for Army paratroopers as well. Liberation Front troops were on the march; some feared the Pleiku attack formed part of an effort to cut South Vietnam in two before capturing it altogether. Westmoreland got approval, and before long he asked President Lyndon B. Johnson for 34, then 44 battalions. The

(Vietnam; continued on page 2)

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(Vietnam; continued from page 1)
president agreed, and while ramping up direct U.S. involvement, he began searching for foreign allies to provide some of the needed forces.

Marines had been a major component of that mix as far back as 1959, when the Pentagon first drafted OPLAN 32, its contingency program for a Vietnam intervention. The Corps actually had the largest deployable force in the western Pacific, based on Okinawa. The Army had a couple of infantry divisions in South Korea and a division in Hawaii, but the former were tied to the peninsula and the latter would need to be prepared. The 3d Marine Division on Okinawa was closer to the scene and with its SLF experience was better prepared to deploy on short notice. In OPLAN 32 Marines were supposed to account for about half the force a month after the initiation of movement. As the Vietnam deployment actually happened, Marines accounted for two-thirds of the earliest force. Though they were soon outstripped by the more numerous Army troops, the utility and mobility of the Marines had stood them in good stead.

Another Marine battalion had reached Da Nang in early April 1965, right after the arrival of the first fixed-wing Marine air unit, a squadron of F-4 Phantom fighter-bombers. More Leathernecks were airlifted into Phu Bai, where a radio-intelligence station had been located. Next, Marines picked a suitable location on a map, named it Chu Lai, and landed there to open another airfield. The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing arrived in May, as did the 4th Marine Infantry Regiment along with 3d Division headquarters. They were the last to reach South Vietnam as part of a "Marine expeditionary brigade." The MACV staff, worried at how the word "expeditionary" evoked colonialism (because the French army in Indochina had been called an "expeditionary corps"), dropped the word.

The headquarters in charge of all in-country Marines would be known as the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF). After being led briefly by 3d Division commander Major General William R. Collins, Lieutenant General Lewis W. "Lew" Walt took charge of III MAF. The last important element of the division, the 7th Marines, reached South Vietnam in July 1965. Lew Walt presided over the essential expansion of the Marine Corps effort in South Vietnam. When he arrived in June 1965 the III Marine Amphibious Force amounted to a collection of battalions posted to a few key points in I Corps, the tactical zone composed of South Vietnam's five northernmost provinces. When Walt left, replaced by Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman Jr. in June 1967, III MAF was a full corps with two Marine divisions, one Army division, and a reinforced air wing fielding more than 500 aircraft and helicopters. General Walt's forces were engaged everywhere from the coastal zone below the Central Highlands to a stretch of Route 1 the

French had named "the Street Without Joy" to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) separating the two Vietnams.

It did not start out that way. General Walt, whose combat experiences traced to World War II and Korea, liked to say he was in a strange war that required strange strategy. When the Marines first landed, their mission had been defensive—to protect the air bases. Marines were not even supposed to engage in offensive patrols beyond their perimeters. Everything was about "enclaves." Anything beyond the enclave became grist for ARVN troops. That kind of forced inaction grated on Marines, and Corps Commandant General Wallace L. Greene pressed for the authority to engage in offensive operations. The Corps had 18,100 men in country in June 1965, some 38,200 by December, and 56,500 by September 1966. The burgeoning Marine force had powerful capabilities.

Lew Walt wanted active operations too, but he also had another perspective. Walt liked to say that 130,000 Vietnamese lived within mortar range of Da Nang airfield. What he really meant was that security could not result merely from patrols or operations. Rather, interaction with the Vietnamese people would be a primary contributing factor.

Walt christened what became known as the Combined Action Program (CAP) to go beyond standard liaisons between Marines and ARVN soldiers, or small patrols outside U.S. bases. Under CAP, Marine rifle squads were assigned to South Vietnamese militia platoons. Each pair formed a combined action company. The Marines lived with villagers and trained with their militia counterparts. Together they carried out all manner of security and intelligence-gathering tasks. The Corps had a modicum of experience at "small wars" in Central America, particularly Nicaragua, and the Caribbean. In Vietnam they built their counterinsurgency expertise to a new level. (While there have been critiques of CAP in the recent past, in my view the Marines' commitment to living in the hamlets and 24/7 comradeship with Vietnamese villagers made this program a natural for pacification success.)

Another aspect that made Vietnam a strange war was the Marine Corps' relationship with ARVN, which began awkwardly, though by General Cushman's time had settled down. The northern provinces, the land of I Corps, was a major center for Vietnamese Buddhist activism. The 1963 political upheaval that ended with the overthrow and murder of Diem had begun in I Corps, at Hue. How the Saigon government related to the Buddhists remained a central issue for several years. The ARVN commanders of South Vietnam's four military regions operated as virtual warlords, and the I Corps commander, Major General Nguyen Chanh Thi, made a play for Buddhist support.

Meanwhile, Buddhist pacifists were pushing "third force" (non-communist, non-foreign-intervention) politics and seeking to end the Liberation Front insurgency. Add to the mix that Liberation Front cadres returned the favor by trying to use the Buddhists as cover for their own proselytizing activities. As if all that were not enough of a headache, Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, the commander of the South Vietnamese air force, had gained the ascendency as prime minister and viewed Thi as a threat. In military terms, Ky's forces controlled the air bases and Thi's troops the land in I Corps. This unrest and posturing involved U.S. Marines because their missions included protecting and using Ky's air bases as well as extending a security umbrella over Thi's lands.

Tensions increased until March 1966, when Air Marshal Ky attempted a power play, convincing the top echelon of South Vietnam's generals to relieve Thi of his command. After initially accepting the decision, Nguyen Chanh Thi reversed course and prepared to fight back. News of his ouster meanwhile sparked demonstrations in northern cities, where anti-Ky coalitions that included soldiers and Buddhists were formed, general strikes broke out, and opposition forces occupied government buildings and facilities. The unrest continued through April, impeding III MAF operations and logistics.

Ky eventually determined to send loyal troops from Saigon to take control at Da Nang and Hue, and prevailed on the U.S. Embassy to order MACV to provide transport for the Vietnamese troops. For the Marines, the climax came on 18 May with General Walt standing on a Da Nang bridge wired with explosives arguing with one of General Thi's officers, who threatened to blow them both up if Walt did not order his Marines to stop interfering with the Buddhist-aligned troops. This is the stuff of CIA field operations, not generals and high commands. You can understand why Lew Walt found Vietnam to be a strange war.

Five days latter, the insurrection in Da Nang collapsed, and shortly thereafter Saigon finally forced the ouster of Nguyen Chanh Thi. ARVN's eventual commander of I Corps was Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, a much more conventional sort. With Lam, III MAF had the opposite problem than what it had with the dynamic Thi; Lam's operations were largely conventional and lethargic. American Marines suffered casualties because General Lam's ARVN did not keep up the pressure on the Vietnam People's Army, Hanoi's regular forces, who were constantly poised along the DMZ.

Lew Walt's other problem was William C. Westmoreland, both because the MACV commander lacked confidence in the Marines and because of "Westy's" obsession with the DMZ and the I Corps region. For all his pronouncements regarding pacification, Westmoreland's real interest lay in regular troops and the conventional threat. There could be no bigger conventional threat than a People's Army attack across the Demilitarized Zone.

When President Johnson halted the bombing of North Vietnam for 37 days after Christmas 1965, U.S. radio monitoring and photographic reconnaissance soon showed the North Vietnamese taking measures to infiltrate troops and supplies across the DMZ. There would be other bombing halts as the war continued, and North Vietnamese pushes at the Demilitarized Zone became a constant theme. The People's Army stationed several divisions of troops in the DMZ region, enough for the North Vietnamese military to designate the area a "front," its term for a higher level command.

About 14 miles south of the DMZ near the Laos border, ARVN troops had garrisoned Khe Sanh (the village had other names but has become known by this one) early in the war. When the South Vietnamese troops departed, MACV had U.S. Green Berets establish a camp there. The Special Forces camp recruited local Bru tribesmen and

(Vietnam; continued on page 4)

(Vietnam; continued from page 3)
was the westernmost Saigon outpost below the DMZ. Khe Sanh became a base for special operations forays across the border into Laos as well as the home of a covert U.S. Air Force unit, "Tiger Hound," that pioneered forward air-controller functions in aerial attacks around the DMZ that soon became the prototype for actions along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Once the Marines came to I Corps, patrols by the 3rd Force Reconnaissance Company added to the activity.

Initially, the North Vietnamese left Khe Sanh alone. But the Green Berets became enough of an irritant that some People's Army units, instead of infiltrating farther into South Vietnam, began to remain in the area. On 3 January 1966, the enemy mortared the Special Forces camp. MACV soon evinced even more concern; its estimates for North Vietnamese infiltration across the DMZ and from Laos were running at three times III MAF's assessments.

General Walt, who was not about to ignore the DMZ, ordered more Marine operations just below it in northern Quang Tri province. A significant issue was that Khe Sanh lay along Route 9, the single road that connected Vietnam's coastal plain with the Mekong River Valley in Laos. Paralleling the DMZ, the route had not been a practical link for months. At the instigation of Westmoreland, who feared North Vietnamese troops were massing around Khe Sanh as well as slipping through the DMZ, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines conducted Operation Virginia. The unit was airlifted in and probed northwest of the base before making a grueling march eastward along Route 9 to Cam Lo, the Marines clearing the way as they went. During the entire operation, only one shot was fired at the Americans.

That fall Westmoreland, still concerned, ordered III MAF to wargame a People's Army offensive along the DMZ. In the game, General Walt's planners pulled outlying garrisons to the Rockpile, a position in the foothills about a dozen miles northeast of Khe Sanh. When the MACV commander asked why they chose not to defend Khe Sanh, Marine staffers cited the vulnerability of the position. Westmoreland demanded reconsideration, and III MAF finally agreed to post a full rifle battalion to the base. Meanwhile MACV ordered the airfield there reconditioned so it could be used in any type of weather.

This moment marked the beginning of a more explicit Marine mission of defense along the DMZ. For nearly two years, starting with the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines in the fall of 1966, there would be a constant Marine presence at Khe Sanh. At some point they were joined by MACV's special operations entity, the Studies and Observation Group, or SOG, which made Khe Sanh a forward operating base. Soon afterward the vaunted Green Beret strategic patrol unit, Task Force Delta, arrived for a sweep of the hinterland. At the end of 1966 General Walt was still telling associates he thought too much emphasis was being put on the dangers of infiltration versus those of the Liberation Front guerrillas.

At Khe Sanh the initial battalion would be reduced to a company and then reinforced. In the spring of 1967 a multi-battalion sweep produced the "Hill Fights," a pitched battle for peaks that overlooked Khe Sanh combat base. Those and other hilltop positions then became Marine strongpoints, widening the combat base complex. Route 9 acquired greater importance, and Marine engineers began to restore the road at least as far as the combat base. Heavily armed "Rough Rider" convoys periodically ran supplies out to Khe Sanh via Route 9. The first one made the eerie two-hour drive on 27 March 1967. MACV also took steps to improve defenses at the Special Forces camp, moving it west to Lang Vei, a hamlet near the Laotian border. There the Green Berets were attacked in May 1967.

Holding Khe Sanh required a broader presence below the DMZ, and the larger story of 1967 would be the creation of a defensive system, or "barrier," there. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara took the lead, and the system would be dubbed the "McNamara Line." Khe Sanh became the western anchor. Beyond it strings of electronic sensors were emplaced to detect Vietnam People's Army movements and help targeting along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. From the Rockpile down to the coast there were more numerous strongpoints and base areas garrisoned both by Marines and ARVN troops.

The North Vietnamese reacted by virtually besieging one of the barrier positions, the strongpoint at Con Thien. The longest sustained Marine battle of the Vietnam War, the fighting there stretched from May to September 1967, ultimately involving several Marine battalions, some ARVN, and a rotating division of North Vietnamese. The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines acquired its nickname the "Walking Dead" after it was ambushed two miles northwest of Con Thien on 2 July. Eighty-four riflemen were killed, the Marines' bloodiest day in the Vietnam War. At Con Thien itself, thanks to Marine tanks, employed in shock attacks then as mobile pillboxes on the perimeter, and to plentiful air power, the North Vietnamese were ejected from captured positions and were never able to regain them. Casualties in the campaign came to 340 Marines killed and 3,086 wounded.

Much of the air power benefiting Con Thien's defenders came from the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (1st MAW), the Marines' own air force. For the men on the ground, it was a great advantage to receive tactical air support from airmen with whom they worked and were familiar. Major General Keith B. McCutcheon, whose aviation accomplishments dated back to World War II's Bougainville campaign, led the air wing during the most formative period. When Lew Walt briefly returned to the States in early 1966, McCutcheon held temporary command of III MAF. Marine air tormented the insurgents so much that in October 1965 enemy sappers tried simultaneous commando raids on Marine air bases at Chu Lai and Marble Mountain (Da Nang).

In 1967 the air wing flew 52,825 combat air-support sorties inside South Vietnam. That amounted to nearly 20 percent more flights than the 1st MAW had logged for all attack missions the previous year. In fact, with more than 64,000 attack sorties, Marine aviation outperformed Navy air in 1967. Crimped by the tragic munitions accident and fire on board the carrier *Forrestal* (CVA-59), the 7th Fleet managed only about 49,500 attack sorties in all of Southeast Asia that year (during 1966 the Navy had matched the Marines' tallies). In 1967 Task Force 77 focused the weight of its effort on the Rolling Thunder

air campaign aimed at North Vietnam. But the 1st MAW made at least a contribution there as well, with 8,672 attack sorties against the North. Indeed, in 1967 Navy and Marines together tallied Rolling Thunder sortie levels of just a few thousand less than those of the U.S. Air Force.

Land operations reached new levels in 1967. Lew Walt's command of III MAF gave way to that of Lieutenant General Cushman. Amphibious operations, occasionally by SLFs but also by regular Marines, picked up along the coast and then landed, took place under the codename Deckhouse. The 1st Marine Division, most of whose elements had arrived in country between August 1965 and March 1966, mounted a series of sweeps in Quang Nam and Quang Tin provinces. Along the DMZ the 3d Marine Division kept up the pressure. With names such as Union, Hickory, Beau Charger, Prairie, Cimarron, Buffalo, Kingfisher, and Kentucky, their operations swirled around the Con Thien siege.

All the activity did not seem to impress General Westmoreland, who sent a dispatch in January 1968 that impugned the professionalism of Marine officers and demanded improvements in performance. This came on the eve of the Marines' biggest Vietnam battles. MACV intelligence received word the North Vietnamese were moving in on Khe Sanh. General Cushman repeatedly reinforced the combat base, to the point that the entire 26th Marines plus the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines were there, along with an ARVN Ranger battalion, SOG elements, and other minor units.

On 20 January, a Marine patrol north of the combat base first encountered the enemy in force. The next day, a strong North Vietnamese artillery bombardment kicked off the siege of Khe Sanh, igniting a major fire in the Marines' main munitions storage area. North Vietnamese ground attacks initially focused on clearing the approaches—the combined action company of Marines in Khe Sanh village and the Laotian army battalion just across the border at Ban Houei Sane—and not the combat base or its key outposts.

With Westmoreland's attention on Khe Sanh, where heavy, sustained fighting had erupted, suddenly People's Army and Liberation Front troops attacked all over South Vietnam in the Tet offensive. Phu Bai, Chu Lai, Quang Tri, and points throughout I Corps were threatened. The old imperial capital of Hue actually fell to enemy attack on 31 January. The South Vietnamese asked General Cushman to take the lead in recapturing the city, though ARVN accomplished the final assault on the Citadel. Fighting there continued through 23 February, the longest sustained Marine offensive combat of the Vietnam War. Marines lost 142 killed and 857 seriously wounded, the equivalent of a full rifle battalion.

Meanwhile a tight siege at Khe Sanh continued through late March, 77 days in all and exceeding Con Thien in severity if not duration. Eerily, the Walking Dead battalion participated in both campaigns. Khe Sanh would be relieved by an overland offensive, Operation Pegasus, that involved Marines and the Army's 1st Air Cavalry Division. Official Marine casualty figures of 205 killed and 1,667 wounded were undercounted. A toll that includes American losses in Pegasus and the fall of Lang Vei Special Forces camp and Khe Sanh village would increase casualty figures on the order of 730 battle deaths, 2,642 wounded, and 7 missing in action.

Important in saving Khe Sanh was a huge, dedicated air campaign dubbed Operation Niagara. This effort pulled the Navy back into tactical air support in South Vietnam, where it provided a significant number of sorties (5,427). But Marine air shone again, with more attack sorties in South Vietnam in 1968 (64,933) than its entire list the previous year—in fact nearly half as many as flown by the Air Force (134,890). Concern at the critical military situation partly explains the increase, but Marine aviation commanders also tried to have their crews fly twice a day while Air Force pilots typically flew just one mission per day. The Khe Sanh campaign brought to a head an ongoing interservice skirmish over who controlled fixed-wing air missions, which Marines had always insisted belonged to the service owning the aircraft. The Marines lost this fight, and a joint targeting staff began to control mission orders.

Much as MACV tactics shifted when General Creighton V. Abrams replaced Westmoreland in June 1968, Marine tactics in III MAF/I Corps also changed. Major General Raymond G. Davis, who had assumed command of the 3d Marine Division on 21 May, believed that attempts to hold fixed defenses had resulted in increased losses, and General Cushman ordered mobile operations. On assuming command of MACV, General Abrams quickly directed that Khe Sanh be abandoned, and the last Marine pulled out on 6 July.

Khe Sanh, Tet, and Hue marked the peak of Marine operations in Vietnam. There were 298,498 active-duty Marines in 1968—and 81,249 of them were in Vietnam. The deployment included 21 of 36 battalions, 14 of 33 fixed-wing air squadrons, and 13 out of 24 helicopter squadrons. The commitment was unquestionably massive that pivotal year; afterward it would be steadily reduced. The Johnson administration began and the Nixon administration popularized and completed a withdrawal program christened "Vietnamization."

Restructuring affected every aspect of Marine operations. The McNamara Line now terminated in the foothills, at Firebase Vandegrift. In 1969 the 3d Marine Division pulled back from the DMZ altogether (they would return to the States that November), and Army units assumed the watch there. Beginning in September, the level of air activity dropped radically, with 40 percent of Marine aircraft being repatriated, though the Marines and Navy together still managed a joint total of more than 64,000 sorties in 1969. The 1st Marine Division and 1st MAW left South Vietnam in April 1971.

By 1972, when the North Vietnamese began their Easter offensive, the Marine presence in South Vietnam was a shadow of what it had been. The 3d Marine Amphibious Brigade, the last combat formation, had recently departed Da Nang. Including the 150 U.S. Embassy guards, fewer than 600 Marines were left in country. Marines' main activity in 1972 lay in their advisory function, in which they assisted the South Vietnamese Marine Division, more or less fell into the senior advisory job for the ARVN command below the DMZ, and played a crucial role in demolishing a key bridge at Dong Ha. The inability of North Vietnamese tanks to cross the Cua Viet River slowed Hanoi's offensive for weeks. An SLF—now retitled a Battalion Landing Team—was kept within 120 hours of commitment in the I Corps region. The offensive brought a buildup of contingency ca-

(Vietnam; continued on page 6)

Vietnam; continued from page 5)
pabilities to a peak of more than 6,000 Marines in May. Marine aviation contributed a couple of thousand sorties in close-air support over I Corps and more than 500 to Operation Linebacker, the May–October air-interdiction campaign against North Vietnam. The only Marine air scores of the war came in August and September 1972, when Marine F-4s flamed two North Vietnamese MiG-21 interceptors.

The Vietnam War ended—at least in terms of active U.S. military involvement—with the January 1973 Paris Peace Accords. In April 1975, when Saigon was overrun and remaining Americans and some Vietnamese were evacuated in Operation Frequent Wind, Marine Master Sergeant Juan Valdez carried the U.S. flag from the Embassy.

For Marines it had been a long and especially costly war. About 450,000 Leathernecks, mostly volunteers, served in Vietnam (42,600 were draftees). Some 13,000 were killed and 88,000 wounded (51,392 badly enough to be hospitalized). Those figures suggest a very substantial casualty rate—more than 20 percent of Marines lightly wounded or worse. Differences in data sets and an inability to reconstruct precisely how many Air Force personnel served within the borders of South Vietnam during the war make comparisons with other services difficult, but a ballpark calculation suggests the percentage of Army casualties may have been half that of the Marines. How to account for this disparity is a significant question still before us.

Marine aviation performed superbly. Over the entire 1965–68 period its tally compares very favorably with that of the Navy. Task Force 77 put up a total of 208,368 attack sorties during the period before the end of Rolling Thunder. The 1st Marine Air Wing logged 197,561—a lot of support for U.S. Marines on the ground.

Curiously, high command in Vietnam was not a pathway to leadership of the Marine Corps. Over the main period of Marine involvement in the war, 23 men held the top commands in country (III MAF, 1st MAW, 1st Division, 3d Division). There was also General Victor H. Krulak, apostle of counterinsurgency, who commanded Fleet Marine Force, Pacific. Of all those officers only Robert E. Cushman ever served as commandant of the Corps—and one has to ask whether his work a decade earlier as then–Vice President Richard M. Nixon's national security adviser was not the determining factor in his 1972 appointment. Nevertheless, the post–Vietnam era Corps would be led by commandants who had served as tactical leaders in the Southeast Asian conflict.

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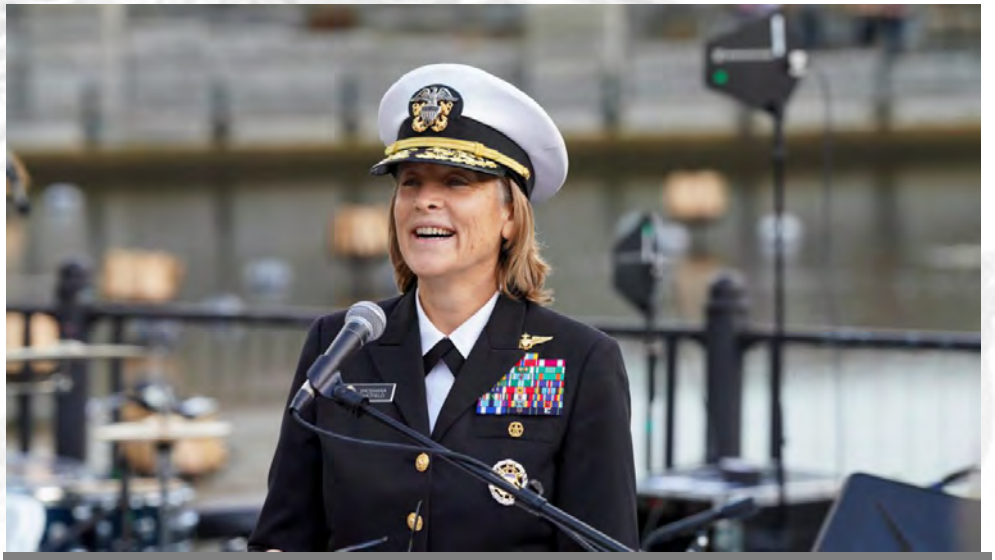
APRIL 15, 2025



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There is a cancer in America's military ranks, and it must be expunged before it's too late. That cancer lies in uniformed service members' widespread rejection of the uniquely American concept of civilian control of the military and disregard for the absolute necessity that America's military officers remain apolitical in the face of the constitutional will of the electorate.

Recent events reveal this cancer, and they include the relief for cause of Navy Vice Adm. Shoshana Chatfield after she reportedly refused to hang photos of President Donald Trump and Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth on her headquarters' customary "Chain of Command" board and reportedly told her subordinates in a town hall that she would "wait [the Trump administration] out" the next four years. They also include the relief for cause of Col. Sussanah Meyers, commander of the U.S. Space Force's base in Greenland, after she openly questioned (to all of her subordinates via email) Vice President J.D. Vance's official pronouncements regarding the United States, Greenland, and Denmark.

Since Trump's inauguration, numerous other senior generals and admirals have been relieved by President Trump for various publicly unspecified reasons, including the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Air Force Gen. Charles "CQ" Brown; Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Lisa Franchetti; Adm. Linda Lee Fagan, the commandant of the Coast Guard; and Air Force Gen. Timothy D. Haugh, director of the National Security Agency and commander of U.S. Cyber Command. Each of these four-star firings is publicly shrouded in a certain degree of mystery, but rumors abound that so-called diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) played a part in one way or another.

Admittedly, a president firing his senior generals is not a new thing. Barack Obama fired his senior general in Afghanistan, Army Gen. Stan McChrystal, after a Rolling Stone article revealed derisive comments by McChrystal and his staff regarding Obama's leadership. Harry S. Truman fired one of America's most famous and revered military leaders, Army Gen. Douglas MacArthur, after MacArthur repeatedly disobeyed Truman's orders regarding the Korean War. And Abraham Lincoln famously had no problem firing his senior Army generals in the heat of the Civil War.

What made these firings so noteworthy, however, is that they were rare exceptions that proved the rule of America's senior generals and admirals wholly respecting civilian control of the military.

What we see now is not Obama and McChrystal, Truman and MacArthur, or Lincoln and his failed generals. The widespread nature of the current problem looks and feels like something Washington, D.C. Nowcompletely new in the American experience and appears to be pervasive across the force.

I am a retired U.S. Army colonel. My service record runs a typical gamut for an old colonel, with tours in tactical units (including service in Afghanistan and Iraq) interspersed with service at high-level military headquarters in and

(Military Resentment; continued on page 8)

Military Resentment; continued from page 7)
around adays, I run an account on X with a little more than 200,000 followers. I offer commentary on political and social issues, with a particular emphasis on the military. As a result, I have many military followers, including some still on active duty. I offer active-duty service members a conduit to anonymously share disturbing military trends.

Since Trump's inauguration, I have been flooded with reports of insubordination in the ranks toward Trump and Hegseth. Those reports range from fairly senior officers in the Pentagon showing open disrespect around the E-Ring coffee maker, all the way down to junior enlisted disrespecting their president and secretary of defense in the ship's galley or the chow hall.

As one active-duty Army officer recently described to me regarding the experiences of a female Army officer colleague:

*Women across the unit are coming to [her] asking about what happens to them. It's in their minds that SECDEF is going to pull them from combat arms and reclass them. Zero evidence of that but doesn't stop the rumor mill anyway. Those rumors are playing the telephone game across all soldiers, men and women alike. So they are all on this "f*** Trump f*** Hegseth" train.*
For over 235 years, the idea of a civilian commander-in-chief has been a sacred premise guiding our military, enlisted and officer alike. I grew up around the Army, joined as a young man, served for 22 years, and have kept my finger on the pulse of the defense establishment since I retired from active duty. I can honestly say that never once in that time was I ever made aware of the political leanings of any officer superior to me.

Rarely would I even hear political thoughts from my peers or subordinates. In fact, I recall that early in my career, senior officers advised me not to vote in elections, as such an act might suggest I was a political partisan. The duty to remain apolitical was simply that important to officers of that bygone age. We saw ourselves as a sort of band of violent monks, bound by sacred oaths.

To me, that bygone commitment was never more evident than when Bill Clinton became president. During Clinton's 1992 campaign, it came out that as a young man he had avoided the draft, in part because he "loath[ed]" the military. Vietnam was still a raw wound in the minds of many senior officers and senior enlisted, yet despite Clinton being arguably the most anti-military president in U.S. history, he was respected as the duly elected commander-in-chief, and signs of "resistance" in the uniformed ranks were impossible to detect. We honored our oaths.

Somewhere along the way, something changed. I believe that change has taken place within the senior ranks and, by way of example, has spread throughout the force. We must once again make senior officers loyal to their oath, and the rest of the force will follow.

I have heard from some anti-Trump officers that it is acceptable for them to challenge Trump and be "disloyal" to him on political matters because while the enlisted oath of office includes the phrase "that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States," no such words regarding the president appear in the officer oath of office. This idea is highly disturbing.

It suggests that officers are not bound to follow the lawful orders of the president if they disagree politically. Not only is this contrary to the sacred officer tradition of being apolitical, but it is also contrary to the part of the officers' oath that requires officers to "support and defend the Constitution" (after all, the president's military role arises in the Constitution). Finally, it is contrary to the actual commission of all U.S. military officers, which states in part: "And this officer is to observe and follow such orders and directions from time to time as may be given by the President of the United States of America."

The trends we are seeing feel dangerously close to an embrace of 1970s South American-style military juntas. Think about Gen. Mark Milley telling China he would warn them about U.S. military activity. Think about Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman using his position on the National Security Council as a springboard for impeaching a president because he did not like the way that president was lawfully discharging his duties. These are not the marks of healthy civilian control of the military. They are instead marks of a military approaching the rationalization of a coup.

I have heard numerous theories as to how we got here, ranging from "Obama purged all the good generals" to "Gen Z are too narcissistic for selfless sacrifice," but I attribute the breakdown quite directly to DEI policies and practices. I do not mean that the advancement of officers for DEI reasons is the cause. Rather, the inculcation of DEI policies as a core ethos of military service has been monstrously destructive. Our military has always been driven by core values, such as, "Don't give up the ship," "Duty, Honor, Country," and "Always Faithful." Traditionally, those values have been apolitical and solely revolved around the military's fundamental mission of defeating America's battlefield enemies.

Somewhere in these early years of the 21st century, however, DEI also became a central ethos. One need only read the policy pronouncements of the likes of C.Q.
Brown and Lisa Franchetti to see that they embraced so-called diversity for diversity's sake and that DEI policies became a core ethos of America's military — a new "warrior ethos" grounded not in warfighting but in a purely political and public policy doctrine.

So on the one hand you have a president elected to purge the political doctrine of DEI from America's government, and on the other hand you have a generation of senior generals and admirals who mistakenly view DEI as an apolitical military ethos, every bit as essential to the military's lineage and traditions as Audie Murphy, the Medal of Honor, and the USS Constitution. Thus, when Donald Trump seeks to exercise his constitutional powers to purge a purely political doctrine, the generals and admirals mistakenly see this as an effort to purge a fundamental, essential, and apolitical military ethos. This gives them license to feel justified in "resisting" the lawful orders of their commander-in-chief and engaging in insubordination as they falsely imagine they are protecting a core competency of our nation's defense.

Fortunately, fixing this problem is not that hard. It merely requires some extreme intestinal fortitude by Trump, Hegseth, and the military department secretaries in the face of a media determined to discredit their every move. The solution lies in two parts: education and example-setting.

Education will involve reinvigorated training, in every service and at every level, regarding the military's duty of loyalty to elected civilian leaders and their lawful orders. A standard curriculum must be developed in the Department of Defense regarding those constitutional duties, and that curriculum must be taught in great detail at every level and in every professional development course, from basic training for every recruit up to the "charm school" for new generals and admirals.

Example-setting will mean more of what we have already seen: the relief for cause of senior officers for insubordinate behavior. But that's not enough. Vice Adm. Chatfield and Col. Meyers will no doubt soon be on MSNBC regaling us all with tales of the illegality of the Trump administration. Trump and Hegseth must take a more drastic approach, and the answer to that approach lies in Article 88 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, which reads as follows:

Contempt toward officials: Any commissioned officer who uses contemptuous words against the President, the Vice President, Congress, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of a military department, the Secretary of Homeland Security, or the Governor or legislature of any State, Commonwealth, or possession in which he is on duty or present shall be punished as a court-martial may direct.

This is the tool by which senior insubordinate officers must be made an example. While I doubt any generals or admirals will soon be breaking rocks at Leavenworth, the mere act of initiating a few well-publicized courts martial will drive home the message: Politics is the domain of the president, not the oath-bearing members of the uniformed services.
Good order and discipline must be restored. There is a cancer in the ranks of America's military, and it must be expunged before it's too late.

Cynical Publius is the nom de plume of a retired U.S. Army colonel and practicing attorney. The Federalist verifies the identity of its pseudonymous authors. You can follow Cynical Publius on X at @CynicalPublius

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