

VICTOR H. KRULAK

1913-2008

*Military Innovator Who Sought
New Approach to Battle in Vietnam*

BY STEPHEN MILLER

An unconventional thinker in the ultimate hierarchy, Lt. Gen. Victor H. Krulak dreamed up new ways to bring force to bear on U.S. military opponents, and clashed with the Pentagon over strategy in Vietnam while serving as Marine commander in the Pacific basin.

The Marines' most prominent strategic thinker of his day, Gen. Krulak had raided Japanese strongholds during World War II and helped devise the landing at Inchon in 1950 that turned the tide in Korea. He was among the first to realize that big attack helicopters might have fearsome war-making potential. It was at his insistence that the Navy developed Higgins boats, the boxy craft that ferried men and materiel from boats to beaches in World War II, coughing them up via a flip-down ramp. Without them, Eisenhower said, "we never could have landed over an open

beach. The whole strategy of the war would have been different."

Gen. Krulak's nickname, Brute, was a Naval Academy nod to his diminutive stature. At 5 feet 4 inches, he was said to be the shortest man in the history of the Marines, and needed a special dispensation to join. As the story goes, he had a friend clobber him over the head to raise a welt high enough to satisfy the 5-foot-6 minimum—a myth, according to his son, Gen. Charles Krulak, who served as Marine commandant from 1995 to 1999.

The sobriquet stuck because it fit his warrior ethic. In bureaucratic trenches, he had helped formulate the parts of the National Security Act of 1947 and its 1952 amendments that saved the Marine Corps from being dismantled. He was given his first general's star at age 43. In his history of the Marine Corps, "First to Fight," Gen. Krulak later wrote, "Fight-

ing for the right to fight often presented greater challenges than fighting [the] country's enemies."

In 1962, President John F. Kennedy named Gen. Krulak his special assistant for counterinsurgency and special activities, a post that included planning "destructive undertakings" in North Vietnam, according to the leaked Pentagon Papers. Close to both the president and to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Gen. Krulak was in those days among the sunniest of optimists about the conflict, believing that success lay in supporting the Diem regime and bringing a battle of attrition to the Communists. Once, in 1963, he returned from an inspection tour of the country with State Department official Joseph A. Mendenhall, who was far more pessimistic. After a joint briefing, Mr. Kennedy looked at them and said, "You two did visit the same country, didn't you?"



Victor H. Krulak, shown receiving a Navy award on Guadalcanal, was known for his use of unconventional warfare as a battalion commander in the South Pacific during World War II.

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RANCES



Gen. Victor H. Krulak, shown at right in Vietnam, tried to convince the Pentagon to change its approach to the war.

In 1964, Gen. Krulak assumed command of the Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, giving him overall logistics and support responsibility for 80,000 Marines in Vietnam. Based in Hawaii, he debriefed every field officer who returned from Vietnam and developed a plan to fight insurgents by winning the hearts and minds of villagers. He dubbed the approach the "inkblot" strategy, for how counterinsurgency would slowly spread, village by village, on the map.

In late 1965, Gen. Krulak produced a lengthy strategic proposal that urged pacification through localized military units, land reform and social benefits, instead of the big-battle strategy identified with Gen. William Westmoreland, who held command of military operations. The traditional strategy of trying to interdict supply lines "can be likened to fighting an alligator by chewing on its tail," he wrote in his proposal. Rather than fighting for territory, he proposed a strategy in which "the Vietnamese people are the prize."

It was hardly a pacific plan, though, as it included the mining of Haiphong harbor to cut off foreign supplies. This detail, which might have antagonized the Russians or Chinese, soured President Lyndon Johnson on the idea.

The president dismissed Gen. Krulak from a White House

meeting and then selected a rival as overall Marine commandant in 1968. Gen. Krulak promptly retired, going to work as an executive and sometime columnist for the Copley News Service. It was an abrupt ending to a splashy military career.

On the mining of Haiphong harbor, "he hearkened back to Korea," says his son, Charles. "His idea was to isolate it and throw in more forces." His son adds that Gen. Krulak felt his differences with Mr. Johnson were why he wasn't appointed commandant.

Posted to China in 1937 as a first lieutenant, Gen. Krulak that year witnessed at close quarters an amphibious assault on Shanghai by the Japanese, their landing craft outfitted with retractable ramps. He sent a report with photos of the odd boats to Washington, where he knew that the hunt was on for a method of landing Marines on seashores. Hearing nothing, he followed up when he returned to the U.S. two years later, and found his report filed away with a marginal note that it was the work of "some nut in China." Undeterred, he built a footlong balsa model and took it to Brigadier Gen. Holland "Howlin' Mad" Smith, who helped initiate the primary landing craft of World War II.

Gen. Krulak commanded a battalion in the South Pacific in 1943, and that October conducted a series of raids on the is-

land of Choiseul, meant as a diversion for the invasion of nearby Bougainville. Then a lieutenant colonel, he made headlines, this time for his gruesome mastery of unconventional warfare. His men put razor blades in the handholds of the trees Japanese snipers used as perches.

"They would run up the trees about 10 feet, then drop suddenly, and while they were looking at their hands someone would shoot them," he explained to the Associated Press. He said that when he ambushed a group of the enemy lurching on the beach, they fled "in most un-Samurai-like fashion."

As Gen. Krulak left Choiseul with about 30 men, his landing craft was rescued from sinking on a coral reef by a torpedo boat skippered by a young Navy lieutenant named John F. Kennedy. The two veterans met again in 1961 in the White House, where they toasted their wartime experiences with a bottle of whiskey Gen. Krulak had promised Kennedy if they escaped Choiseul alive.

Hearty enough to attend a Marine parade in his honor a couple of months ago, Gen. Krulak died Monday at age 95 at a hospital near his home in San Diego. Survivors include his son, who recalls, "He was short in stature but he had a 60-pound brain."

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