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## THE PROVINCE OF MORAL COURAGE

*Donald Chisholm*

Shisler, Gail B. *For Country and Corps: The Life of General Oliver P. Smith*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2009. 384pp. \$39.95

Sixty years ago the 1st Marine Division (Reinforced) completed its epic fighting withdrawal, supported by naval aviation, from the Chosin reservoir. Although bloodied, it finished its embarkation on shipping at Hungnam on 14 December 1950 as an intact fighting unit, having brought with it virtually all its dead, wounded, equipment, and fighting spirit. The 1st Marine Division left behind a destroyed Chinese 9th Army Group, inflicting 37,500 combat casualties out of sixty thousand personnel. This justly famous feat of arms is still celebrated among Marines, knowledgeable soldiers, and military historians.

Oddly, Oliver Prince Smith, the division's commanding general and the person most responsible for its successful retrograde, remains relatively unknown even among present-day Marines. However, Smith warrants close attention, and plenty of it, not only to secure the historical record but to capture the lessons in leadership that his performance, not only in Korea but throughout his career, provides contemporary senior officers of all services. Gail Shisler, the general's granddaughter, has written a biography that accomplishes both objectives.

In April 1950, Oliver Smith received orders to command the 1st Marine Division, effective 31 July. His initial challenges were to reconstitute the division to war strength from its thin post–World War II manning and staffing (further reduced by a provisional brigade quickly sent to reinforce the Pusan perimeter), assemble its equipment and supplies, load out for Japan, and on arrival, plan for the Inchon landing. He did all these things in little more than a month. He subsequently led the division in the assault on Inchon, the operation to retake Seoul, the fumbled Wonsan landing, and the ill-fated drive to the Yalu (these last two problems not of his making). He then rehabilitated the division and continued to command it in combat through May 1951.

It may be that Smith has received less attention than his Korean War seniors, contemporaries, and subordinate commanders—say, Douglas MacArthur, Matthew Ridgway, and Lewis “Chesty” Puller—because he never manifested the color that readily attracts such audiences and was a

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thoroughly modest man, in no way a constructor or manager of his public image, either during or after the fact. He was taciturn, not obviously emotive in the professional context, and remained enigmatic (not unlike the Navy's Raymond Spruance). He viewed MacArthur and other luminaries with a certain wry detachment and his own appearance on the cover of *Time* with faint amusement.

Some of Smith's contemporaries took him for a scholarly, bookish sort, useful in his way to the Marine Corps but not especially well suited for command of a division in combat. To be sure, Smith was a scholar; he studied at the French *École de Guerre*, and at Marine Corps Schools in Quantico he was known as "the Professor." Although he had missed the epic battles of World War I, Guadalcanal, and Tarawa, he was combat experienced, having served during World War II at New Britain and Peleliu, as assistant division commander to a difficult commanding general, and in Okinawa in the unenviable position of 10th Army assistant chief of staff. Absent General Smith's consummate professionalism and courage, the outcomes at Inchon, Seoul, and Chosin would have been decidedly less favorable, and certainly more costly, for the Marines and for the United Nations.

Smith's measure as a combat commander is found in his fundamental grasp of the implications of the factors of space, time, and force—he commanded at the tactical level of war but thought at the operational level. Three examples make the point. During October 1950, when MacArthur's headquarters already believed the war would be over before Christmas, Smith had come to think the opposite. Knowing the severity of Korean winters, he ordered warming tents, stoves, sleeping bags, winter footgear, and parkas in time to equip his division. The war did not end as MacArthur anticipated, and that winter proved to be one of the coldest on record.

Smith's pragmatic assessment of Chosin's rugged terrain and roads led him to build defensible redoubts, with airfields, at Koto-ri and Hagaru-ri in order to bring in supplies and troops and evacuate the dead and wounded. Photos of the withdrawal from Chosin show Marines walking, when there was space for them in the vehicles moving with them. Smith intentionally had his Marines walk out, knowing that if they rode they would be markedly less combat effective in the event of ambush.

No rear-echelon commander, throughout Smith constantly used the helicopter (the first combat commander to do so) and jeep to maintain both physical contact with his division and a practical situational awareness. Simultaneously, his visits to subordinates were not intrusions but rather the consultations of warriors that make for superb teamwork. Smith's deep concern for his men was marked in his daily personal log, wherein he kept detailed accounting of his casualties: the general always knew the cost of the objective and of command

errors. Perhaps the most telling photo of General Smith shows him standing alone among the graves in the Marines' cemetery at Hungnam in December 1950.

As officers move up through the grades, the relevant province of courage shifts from the physical to the moral, a matter that did not escape Smith, and he was well supplied with it. By this reviewer's count, on at least five occasions in 1950 Smith spoke truth to power, stoutly resisting plans or orders that in his professional experience and judgment were likely to cause loss of blood and treasure without achieving the objective. He insisted that not one but two amphibiously experienced regiments be employed for the Inchon landing, resulting in the withdrawal of the 5th Marines from the Pusan perimeter in time for the assault. Smith viewed as ill conceived, and so scotched, a scheme by X Corps to employ a unit of the 1st Marine Division for a rubber-raft crossing of the Han River to seize the Kimpo airfield. When urged by the X Corps commander (with whom from the beginning he had enjoyed at best a cool professional relationship) to speed his division's advance from Inchon to Seoul, he responded that the fighting was heavy and that he was already moving with the greatest dispatch possible. When he learned that the corps commander was attempting to issue orders in this regard directly to his regimental commanders, he quietly confronted him, and those efforts ceased. While Seoul was still hotly contested, Smith received corps orders for a night attack against apparently retreating North Korean units. His demurral again was correct: the North Koreans were advancing, not fleeing. During the October–November advance to the Yalu River, corps orders dispersed his division over a 125-mile stretch; when exhorted to move northward faster, Smith decided that he would “drag his feet,” in the belief that the Chinese had entered the war with large, organized units and not the smattering of individual volunteers higher headquarters optimistically asserted.

This review has focused on but six months of General Smith's life and career, which of course do not define his four decades of service. They do, however, provide a lens through which he and the Marine Corps may be understood, and they represent what all organizations endeavor to achieve. Moreover, as with most leaders, Smith's contributions can be measured only with knowledge of the myriad less visible decisions and actions throughout his entire career—of which Shisler has recounted many in this book.

Another reason that Smith may not be well-known is that after Korea he was relegated to relatively invisible administrative posts on his return until retirement—possibly because he presented a profound challenge to the ambitions of others who actively sought the commandancy. Notably, until his death in 1977 he maintained a mutually warm and deeply respectful relationship with another

largely obscure but extraordinary Korean War officer, Vice Admiral James H. Doyle, the amphibious commander.

Shisler is not the first to publish a biography of General Smith. Clifton La Bree's *The Gentle Warrior* (Kent State Univ. Press, 2001) was assessed by this reviewer in this journal. I concluded then that while La Bree did not err in his portrait of the general, neither did he capture the essence of Smith's extraordinary persona that emerges from the extensive, well organized, and surprisingly intimate personal papers at the Marine Corps Historical Center. Shisler wrote to me after that review's appearance and allowed me to read an early draft of what became the present book.

She notes in her preface, "He was just my grandfather." The cynic might suppose that no man could be as good as O. P. Smith, that this book is simply "hagiolatry" by an adoring granddaughter. But the cynic would be flat wrong. Appropriately, Shisler's affection and respect for her grandfather provided the animus for the sustained labor required to see such a lengthy project to fruition. With the counsel of Marine Corps historians, Shisler has written a readable, carefully researched, well documented, and balanced (if sympathetic) biography of a man whose life is well worth knowing. In so doing she has joined a small group of "amateur" historians who have in recent years matched or exceeded the standards set by "professionals." As the general himself said to his wife about the fighting withdrawal from Chosin, "There is quite a story to be told and I hope some day it will be told properly. There is drama enough for anyone in a plain factual account of what transpired."

General Oliver P. Smith deserves greater recognition and his biography warrants a wide readership. It is a fine book.