## Contents

*(A photo section follows page 86)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preface</th>
<th>ix</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviations</td>
<td>xv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. From “A Corps for the Next 500 Years” to a Fight for Existence</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Marine Culture</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Education: Reuniting the Air-Ground Team</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Doctrine</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Post–World War II Organization</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Training</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Leadership</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Mobilizing and Embarking the Brigade</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. The Sachon Offensive</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. The First Battle of the Naktong Bulge</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. The Second Battle of the Naktong Bulge</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Why Did They Win?</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes* 217

*Bibliography* 239

*Index* 251
In 1987 Clay Blair wrote a history of the Korean War titled The Forgotten War: America in Korea, 1950–1953. He noted that the war was long, difficult, bloody, and largely ignored by historians and the American public. Although Blair’s contention that the conflict in Korea was a forgotten war was true at the time, since 1987 there has been a series of new works, including a rash of books, articles, and monographs published for the fiftieth anniversary of that war in 2000. Perhaps the Korean War can no longer claim to be a forgotten one. However, the early phase of the campaign, the long retreat down the peninsula and the defense of the Pusan Perimeter, remains overlooked even in the new literature. This critical phase is often dealt with in a single chapter. The two best-known commercial books written about the Pusan Perimeter vary greatly in quality. Edwin Hoyt’s The Pusan Perimeter (1984) suffers from being based almost entirely on secondary sources that Hoyt apparently made little effort to verify. Fortunately, in 1996 Uzal W. Ent, a veteran of the 27th Infantry’s actions in the perimeter, published a detailed history titled Fighting on the Brink: Defense of the Pusan Perimeter, based on extensive research and interviews with survivors. In 2000 Terry Addison published The Battle for Pusan: A Memoir. He wrote this account during the fall and winter of 1950–1951 while recovering from wounds received during his service as a forward observer with the 8th Artillery Battalion assigned to the 27th Infantry Regiment in the perimeter. Addison’s account is an exceptional first-person account of the 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry’s actions in the perimeter. The 27th Infantry is widely regarded as the most combat-effective U.S. Army unit in the perimeter.

Yet, despite the recent surge in interest in Korea, there are only two books that study the role of the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade in the fight for the Pusan Perimeter. The first, published in 1953, is the corps’s official history, U.S. Marine Operations in Korea, Volume 1: The Pusan Perimeter. The second, The Darkest Summer, published in 2009, provides a “band of brothers” history of the fighting
in the perimeter as well as in the Pusan-Seoul campaign. Although these histories cover the brigade’s combat actions in detail, even they don’t give full credit to its remarkable accomplishments or to the corps as a whole in maintaining combat readiness during the lean years of 1946–1950.

As its name implies, the brigade was not a standing organization. Over a week after the North Koreans invaded South Korea, the brigade was hastily assembled in California from the woefully understrength 1st Marine Division and 1st Marine Air Wing. Shipping out only six days after activation, the brigade entered combat four days after its arrival in Korea. Despite the hasty formation and long sea voyage, the brigade quickly defeated each North Korean attack it faced; for the first time in the perimeter, a U.S. unit drove the North Koreans back in disarray. What combination of factors allowed the brigade to succeed so dramatically despite the enormous obstacles it faced?

Over the years a number of authors have partially addressed this issue as part of longer works on the Korean War. Writing in 1982, Joseph C. Goulden noted the brigade’s intensive training, unit cohesion, and physical fitness:

The Marines had several inherent advantages over the army. They had been in combat training in the United States; they arrived in cohesive units in which officers and men had served together for months (not hours, as was the case with many jerry-built army “companies”); they insisted on controlling their own air support, in coordinated actions based upon years of experience. Further, given the corps’s stress on arduous physical training for every man, regardless of his assignment, the Marines arrived in Korea in far better condition than their army counterparts.1

In 1985 Donald Knox compiled a wide range of individual oral histories. In analyzing the brigade, he noted the exceptional combat experience of the brigade’s officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs): “What the brigade lacked in numbers . . . it made up for in experience. Most of its officers and two out of three NCOs were veterans of the tough island fighting of the Second World War; company commanders and platoon leaders and squad leaders had been blooded at places like Peleliu, Guam, Bougainville, Iwo Jima and Okinawa.”2

In his popular and highly regarded book on the marines in Korea, The New Breed, published in 1989, Andrew Geer wrote, “Ninety per cent of the officers of the new brigade had been in combat; sixty-five per cent of the senior NCO’s had been in action against an enemy, but of the corporals and Pfc.’s [privates first class], only ten per cent had ever been under enemy fire.”3

By 2000 the belief that the brigade had trained hard as a formed unit over the winter of 1949–1950 and been led almost exclusively by veterans of tough ground combat was firmly rooted in corps legend. In an article for Leatherneck magazine commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Korean War, Allan Bevilacqua, a retired marine major, wrote,
Save for those Marines hastily joined from posts and stations up and down the West Coast, the 5th Marines had been together at Camp Pendleton, Calif., for a year and more. . . . It may be that the Marine Corps never sent a better trained regiment to war. . . . Beyond that they had the added advantage of being led by officers and staff noncommissioned officers who were almost entirely veterans of the war against Japan—men who had fought battles as ferocious as anything on record in any war.4

In 2000 the History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, issued a series of monographs commemorating the war’s fiftieth anniversary. The first, Fire Brigade: U.S. Marines in the Pusan Perimeter, provided a concise history of the formation of the brigade, its time in combat in the perimeter, and its reembarkation and deactivation on September 13, 1950. But even Fire Brigade authoritatively ascribed the combat success of the brigade to the extensive combat experience of its leaders, its intensive training the previous year, the cohesion of its units, and the physical fitness of its individual marines.5

None of the accounts of the brigade studied the period between the end of World War II and the beginning of the Korean War. None examined the impact of demobilization, integration, atomic weapons, plummeting budgets, dramatically decreased end strengths, and peacetime personnel policies on the Marine Corps of the late 1940s. Rather, each account simply starts with the North Korean invasion of South Korea. Despite the failure to examine the years that shaped the corps before the Korean War, these interpretations have become generally accepted. Within the Marine Corps, these beliefs have become part of the internal historical narrative that is reflected not only in the official histories but in the sea stories marines tell. These internal narratives are an essential element in the culture of every successful organization.

When I first joined the Marine Corps in 1975, there were still a few Korean War veterans on active duty. In keeping with marine tradition, they told stories to the junior marines, and their stories reflected the internal legends that had grown up since they had fought in Korea. The marines who told the stories pointed to several critical factors they felt had made the brigade successful. For example, they emphasized the point that the leaders of the brigade had almost all been World War II combat veterans. They said that, unlike the U.S. Army occupation troops in Japan, who were the first U.S. forces committed to ground combat in Korea, the marines had trained hard during the years before the war. Therefore, unlike their army counterparts, the marines had been very physically fit. Finally, every marine pointed to the corps’s extensive experience using marine air in support of ground forces. They were proud to say the marines had pioneered close air support during the Banana Wars and had refined it to a high art during World War II. Our storytellers were convinced that the corps had drawn heavily on its World War II expertise to fight in Korea.
In these narratives, despite the fact that the brigade had had only six days to form, embark, and sail, the marines were able simply to reapply the skills they had used so effectively in World War II and practiced so intensely during peacetime. Obviously these accounts were a tribute to the high professional standards and intensive focus on readiness of the corps between 1946 and 1950. In 1975, with the corps recovering from the Vietnam War, the stories of the brigade stood in stark contrast to the high turnover of personnel, shortages of equipment and personnel, periodic reorganizations, and lack of training funds that marked our day-to-day lives in the operating forces.

Unfortunately, as we will see, these stories are mostly myths that have hidden the real accomplishments both of the men of the Provisional Brigade and of the U.S. Marine Corps as a whole between World War II and Korea. By attributing intensive training, unit cohesion, and physical fitness to the brigade, the myths minimize the exceptional courage and determination shown by these marines during the perimeter defense. They also denigrate the farsighted efforts of the corps’s leadership and its exceptional efforts to maintain the corps’s culture despite enormous pressures that included three efforts to do away with the corps altogether.

The purpose of this book is threefold. First, I hope to provide insights into how the corps’s leaders maintained its culture and combat effectiveness during the extraordinarily tough period between World War II and Korea. Second, I want to dispel the myths concerning training, organization, and combat experience of the units that formed the brigade. Finally, I want to provide a detailed account of the brigade’s frenetic embarkation process and its monthlong combat operations.

Obviously the first issue, how the corps maintained combat effectiveness between the wars, is not entirely new ground. A number of studies have examined what makes military organizations effective in combat. Probably the best known are Millett and Murray’s three-volume work *Military Effectiveness, Volume 1: The First World War, Volume 2: The Interwar Period, and Volume 3: The Second World War*. Using a case-study method, the authors explore the reasons behind the successes and failures of the armed forces of six nations over this period. Though exceptional in their scholarship, these volumes measure effectiveness more than they explore the reasons for it. Their *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period* takes the studies a major step further by exploring the factors that either encouraged or inhibited innovation during this critical period. Unfortunately, they have not explored the period after World War II.

Stephen Biddle’s *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* measures effectiveness by how well a force can inflict damage on an enemy force while preserving its own, how well it takes and holds ground, and how quickly it can accomplish these two tasks. He argues that effectiveness flows from a military’s ability to use the modern system of force employment—essentially effective combined arms at the tactical and operational level. By Biddle’s measures, the brigade was highly successful in using the modern system.
Although his measure is a very good one, it does not explain how a force becomes good at the modern system—particularly when facing the political and budgetary pressures the corps faced after World War II. In an effort to give both the brigade and the corps as a whole proper credit for the truly remarkable accomplishment of maintaining combat effectiveness, I will examine six aspects similar to those van Creveld labeled *Fighting Power* when he compared the U.S. and German armies in World War II.

Because the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade existed only from 7 June to 13 September 1950, I will examine the Marine Corps’s culture, educational system, doctrine, organization, training, and leadership between Victory in Japan (VJ) Day (15 August 1945) and North Korea’s invasion of South Korea (25 June 1950). Actions taken during those years set the conditions for the brigade. The combat accomplishments of the brigade are indisputable, but the incredible handicaps it had to overcome have not been properly appreciated. In particular the widely held beliefs that the brigade’s units had trained together, were physically fit, and were led by officers and NCOs with extensive ground combat experience during World War II are all false.

This book will try to separate the myths from reality to determine the reasons for the brigade’s truly remarkable record. This attempt at clarification is particularly important for marines, who draw much of their identity from a deep regard for their history. The men who set the conditions and the men who fought in Korea deserve to have their incredible accomplishments properly recorded—unclouded by the myths that have arisen since. Despite the enormous handicaps they faced, their actions upheld the standards of previous generations of marines and passed them along intact for generations of marines to come.

This book would not have been possible without the guidance and assistance of many people. Three historians in particular have spent a lifetime assisting others in research and writing and generously shared their time with me. I would particularly like to thank Professor Hew Strachan, who was willing to supervise a decidedly overage graduate student; Professor Allan R. Millett, who both introduced me to academic research at the Mershon Center for Strategic Studies long ago and shared his encyclopedic knowledge of the Corps and the Korean War to help me refine the various drafts of this book; and finally, Professor Kenneth Hamburger, who was kind enough to read the manuscript and recommend significant improvements in both content and presentation. All errors of both omission and commission belong solely to me.
Abbreviations Used in This Book

ALO  air liaison officer
ANGLICO  Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company
ASCU  air support control unit
BAR  Browning automatic rifle
BLT  battalion landing team
CG  commanding general
CNO  chief of naval operations
CO  commanding officer
CP  command post
CPX  command post exercise
CVE  escort carrier
DASC  direct air support center
FAC  forward air controller
FDC  fire direction center
FEAF  Far East Air Force
FSCC  fire support coordination center
FMF  Fleet Marine Force
FMFLant  Fleet Marine Force Atlantic
FMFPac  Fleet Marine Force Pacific
H&S  Headquarters and Service
Hedron  Headquarters Squadron
HMX 1  Marine Helicopter Squadron 1
JCS  Joint Chiefs of Staff
KIA  killed in action
KMAG  Korea Military Advisory Group
LSD  landing ship dock
LST  landing ship tank
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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>MACG</td>
<td>Marine Air/Aircraft Control Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAG</td>
<td>Marine Air Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAW</td>
<td>Marine Air/Aircraft Wing</td>
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<tr>
<td>MGCIS</td>
<td>Marine Ground Control Intercept Squadron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIA</td>
<td>missing in action</td>
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<tr>
<td>MP</td>
<td>military police</td>
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<tr>
<td>MOS</td>
<td>military occupational specialty</td>
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<tr>
<td>MTACS</td>
<td>Marine Tactical Air Control Squadron</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCO</td>
<td>noncommissioned officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>NKPA</td>
<td>North Korean People’s Army</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pfc</td>
<td>private first class</td>
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<tr>
<td>PHIB</td>
<td>amphibious</td>
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<tr>
<td>RCT</td>
<td>Regimental Combat Team</td>
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<tr>
<td>RLT</td>
<td>regimental landing team</td>
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<tr>
<td>ROK</td>
<td>Republic of Korea</td>
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<tr>
<td>SNCO</td>
<td>staff noncommissioned officer</td>
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<td>T/Os</td>
<td>Tables of Organizations</td>
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<tr>
<td>TAC</td>
<td>tactical air controller</td>
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<td>TACP</td>
<td>Tactical Air Control Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAD</td>
<td>temporary additional duty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TF</td>
<td>Task Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TG</td>
<td>Task Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VJ Day</td>
<td>Victory in Japan Day</td>
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<tr>
<td>VMF</td>
<td>Marine Fighter Squadron</td>
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<tr>
<td>VMF(N)</td>
<td>Marine All Weather Fighter Squadron</td>
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<tr>
<td>VMO</td>
<td>Marine Observation Squadron</td>
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<tr>
<td>VMP</td>
<td>Marine Photo Squadron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WIA</td>
<td>wounded in action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XO</td>
<td>executive officer</td>
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On the morning of 25 June 1950, the North Korean Army launched seven divisions, a tank brigade, and two independent regiments across the 38th parallel. Having failed to achieve peaceful political union, Kim Il Sung, North Korea’s dictator, was gambling that he could unify Korea by force. Although both U.S. and South Korean military officials had been predicting an invasion, the ferocity and power of the actual attack stunned the ill-prepared, poorly trained, and under-equipped South Korean Army. While the conflict was obviously a serious matter, most Americans did not think it would affect them. The Truman administration had repeatedly stated that Korea was outside the area considered vital to the U.S. defense, strongly implying that the United States would not fight in Korea. Yet, within thirty-six hours of the North Korean invasion, U.S. forces were at war.

The sudden U.S. commitment to fight in Korea was more accidental than planned. It grew out of the postwar division of Korea, which itself had been an accidental result of World War II. At the Yalta Conference in February 1945, the United States had pressed the Soviet Union to enter the war against Japan upon the defeat of Germany. To entice the Soviets, the United States offered them limited territorial gains in postwar Manchuria. Despite this incentive, the Soviets did not declare war immediately after the Germans surrendered on 8 May 1945. Instead the Soviets waited until 8 August, after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, to declare war and then used the declaration primarily as an opportunity to occupy Manchuria and parts of Korea. In contrast to this apparent Soviet planning for Korea, U.S. military planners remained focused on the invasion of the Japanese home islands—a campaign expected to take between one and two years. There was no apparent immediate need for the United States to finalize postwar political plans; in fact the United States had not even developed a plan for the postwar occupation of Korea. The sudden surrender of Japan on 15 August, following the
atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, genuinely surprised U.S. planners. With Soviet troops moving into Korea from the north, the allies needed an easily defined boundary to prevent accidental clashes as U.S. forces arrived in Korea. With virtually no planning or thought, the United States proposed the 38th parallel, and the Soviets accepted. Both agreed this was to be a temporary division for the purpose of accepting the surrender of Japanese troops.

The United States had hoped Korea could be an area of cooperation between China, the United States, and the Soviet Union. The Truman administration saw the division as a temporary expedient until an independent Korean government could be formed. This proved a false hope, and as the U.S. and Soviet postwar positions hardened, Korea remained divided. In the north the Soviets installed Kim Il Sung as the leader of a communist dictatorship. In the south, after years of indecision, the United States finally turned to Syngman Rhee to form a government. Neither man was willing to compromise to create a unified Korea. Instead each started a subversive campaign in an effort to overthrow the other and unify the Korean Peninsula under his rule.

Once the repatriation of Japanese forces was complete, the only remaining U.S. interest lay in establishing an independent Korea. Although remaining engaged in attempts to unify Korea under an interim government, the Truman administration clearly wanted to minimize the resources it expended in Korea. On 25 July 1947, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) made the following recommendation to Secretary of State George C. Marshall: “In light of the present state of severe shortage of military manpower, the corps of two divisions totaling some 45,000 men, now maintained in Korea, could well be used elsewhere. The withdrawal of these forces from Korea would not impair the military position of the Far East Command, unless in consequence, the Soviets establish military strength in South Korea capable of mounting an assault on Japan.”

In a follow-up memo dated 25 September 1947, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, chairman of the JCS, confirmed the JCS position by writing, “Given America’s limited resources, the United States has little strategic interest in keeping bases and troops in Korea.” Reflecting this assessment, the United States withdrew its last combat troops in March 1949. Despite its decision to withdraw, the administration remained concerned that the Soviets would read the withdrawal as an opportunity to step up subversive activities in South Korea. U.S. officials decided the best way to prevent such a misinterpretation was a rapid buildup of the South Korean Army to the point at which it could defend itself. For that purpose, the United States created the Korea Military Advisory Group (KMAG) on 1 July 1949. KMAG was tasked with raising and training a South Korean army of 100,000 soldiers as well as a small navy and air force. In theory, that force would be sufficient to defend South Korea from a North Korean invasion. Just as important from the U.S. point of view, the force would be insufficient to allow South Korean president Syngman Rhee to initiate an invasion of the north. Although Kim’s aggressive statements made the administration worry about a North Korean
invasion, Rhee’s equally shrill declarations raised concern that, if provided with an effective army, Rhee would attack the north. Thus, despite Rhee’s repeated forceful requests for more military aid, the Truman administration limited military aid to $11 million for 1950 and focused more on the economic development of Korea. The administration planned to provide $300 million of economic aid over the next three years because it believed that a prosperous South Korea would evolve only after the national economy was developed.4

Budgetary limitations and the belief that Korea was not vital to U.S. strategy meant KMAG was assigned only 500 men and very limited resources. The advisory group was simply too small to overcome the numerous deficiencies of the South Korean Army. Despite KMAG’s efforts over the winter of 1949–1950, South Korean troops still lacked training in the fundamentals, from combat skills to maintenance of weapons and equipment. The maintenance deficiencies provided an insight into the true state of South Korea’s army. Vehicle readiness rates were less than 40 percent. In fact, South Korean army maintenance was so bad that after one inspection of the cavalry regiment’s armored vehicles, KMAG seriously suggested converting the unit to horse cavalry.5 Although equipped with some artillery, more vehicles, and additional weapons during the latter part of 1949 and early 1950, the South Korean Army remained essentially a constabulary force despite the fact that the South Koreans had been fighting the North Koreans in various ways almost since the separation had taken place in 1945. During the summer of 1949 alone, there were over 500 combat encounters between South Korean troops and insurgents across South Korea as well as frequent border incidents with North Korea.6 Further, the South Korean Army predicted an invasion in 1950, perhaps as early as March. They knew the Soviets had built a real army for the North Koreans and that the North Koreans were preparing to use it.

On 12 January 1950 Secretary of State Dean Acheson gave a speech titled “Crisis in China—An Examination of United States Policy.” In this now famous speech to the National Press Club, Acheson described the new U.S. defense perimeter in Asia as running “along the Aleutians to Japan and then . . . to the Ryukyus . . . to the Philippine Islands.”7 Both Korea and Taiwan were outside the perimeter. At the same time, no less an authority than Gen. Douglas MacArthur, commander of U.S. forces in the far east, assured the National Security Council that the South Korean army was trained and equipped well enough to defend itself without assistance from U.S. forces. Unfortunately, this statement was not true. As noted earlier, the South Korean Army suffered from major deficiencies and was no match for the North Korean Army the Soviets had trained and equipped. Yet despite the inferiority of South Korea’s army, KMAG gave highly optimistic reports that supported MacArthur’s position. On 8 March 1950 Brig. Gen. W. L. Roberts, chief of the U.S. Military Advisory Group to the Republic of Korea, wrote Maj. Gen. C. L. Bolts, G-3 of the army, stating that the North Korean Army was “an inferior ground force” compared to the South Korean Army. His only concern was that the North Koreans had an air force of 100 aircraft.8 Based
on these reports and in keeping with Secretary Acheson’s statement, the admin-
istration continued its disengagement from the peninsula by reducing KMAG in
the spring of 1950.

When almost eight North Korea divisions supported by a small air force in-
vaded on Sunday, 25 June, they were faced by only four understrength South
Korean divisions and one independent regiment. The North Korean divisions
were larger, better equipped, and better trained than their South Korean counter-
parts. Each North Korean division had an artillery regiment and a self-propelled
artillery battalion as well as antitank and reconnaissance battalions. The North
Koreans also committed an armored brigade equipped with 150 T-34 tanks. In
contrast, each South Korean division had only a single light artillery battalion
(short 105mm howitzers), no armor, no recoilless rifles, and not even any antitank
mines. Worse, the South Korean Army had only a few days’ ammunition supply
on hand. Because the South Korean Army was in peacetime status, only a single
regiment from each division was occupying defensive positions along the border.
The bulk of each division was in garrison fifteen to thirty miles to the rear. Further,
the South Korean Army had a liberal weekend-pass policy, which meant many of
its officers, including KMAG advisers, were not present with their units.

Despite the overwhelming surprise and weight of the attack, the South Ko-
reans fought hard. The North Koreans took Seoul only after four days of tough
fighting. It was two more days before the North Koreans drove the South Kore-
ans south across the Han River. In those six days the South Korean Army lost
44,000 of its 98,000 men, almost all its artillery, and 70 percent of its individual
weapons.9

Still confident in their prewar evaluations that the South Korean Army was
a match for North Korean forces, U.S. decision-makers were slow to grasp the
seriousness of the situation. Despite the confusion, on Monday, 26 June (U.S.
time), President Harry Truman ordered U.S. air and naval forces to defend South
Korea and protect Taiwan.10 The same day Truman authorized MacArthur to send
a survey party to Korea. Led by Brig. Gen. John H. Church, the survey was tasked
to determine the logistical requirements of the Republic of Korea (ROK) forces.
MacArthur still believed ROK forces could defeat the North Koreans without
intervention by U.S. ground forces. It was not until MacArthur returned from his
own brief visit to Korea on 29 June (Korea time) that he requested permission to
commit U.S. ground forces in the defense of Korea. On 29 June (U.S. time) Tru-
man authorized him to do so.11 Despite a lack of preparedness, the U.S. armed
forces found themselves at war.

In Korea ROK forces continued to fight delaying actions along all three in-
vasion corridors but were unable to halt the North Korean advance. The North
Koreans spent 30 June to 3 July getting three divisions (3rd, 4th, and 6th) across
the Han River. By the morning of 4 July the North Korean 3rd and 4th Divisions
were assembled south of the river and poised to continue the attack.

Within hours of Truman’s authorization of ground forces on 29 June, the 8th
Army dispatched Task Force Smith, built around the badly understrength 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division under Lt. Col. Charles B. Smith, to Korea. Most Americans were convinced that once U.S. troops arrived, the North Korean attack would easily be defeated. First Lt. Phillip Day, who was typical of the survivors of Task Force Smith, commented, “We thought they would back off as soon as they saw American troops.” Instead the badly equipped and poorly supplied Task Force Smith met the onrushing North Koreans and was defeated and badly scattered in an eight-hour fight on 5 July.

This was only the first in a series of stinging defeats inflicted on U.S. Army units. From 5 to 12 July, successive U.S. battalions were committed to stop division-strength North Korean attacks, and each battalion was overwhelmed in turn. It was not until 13 July that the U.S. Army fought a higher-level action when it defended the Kum River line with the 19th and 34th Infantry Regiments. Driven back from that line on 16 July, the two regiments attempted another stand at Taegon and held this position from 19 to 20 July. The lack of training, equipment, and personnel combined with their piecemeal commitment doomed the U.S. units to one defeat after another.

As the U.S. Army fought in the main corridor between Seoul and Pusan, the ROK troops fought delaying actions of their own in the corridors that run down the east coast and center of Korea. Defending multiple axes, the U.S. and ROK armies bought time for U.S. reinforcements to arrive. The infantry regiments of the 24th Infantry Division closed on Korea by 5 July, the 25th Infantry Division by 15 July, and the 1st Cavalry Division by 22 July. The 8th Army fed these forces into the fight as it continued a fighting withdrawal south.

On 23 July 5th Air Force aerial reconnaissance confirmed reports that North Korean forces were moving to flank the 8th Army by moving down the west coast to Kwangju, then turning and advancing across the southern end of the Korean Peninsula. Gen. Walton “Bulldog” Walker, commander of the 8th U.S. Army (the senior ground headquarters in Korea), had no forces in place to meet this threat. He ordered the 24th Infantry Division to move south to defend a sixty-mile stretch of front from Chinju to Kumch’on.

On 1 August the 8th Army issued orders for all units to withdraw into the Pusan Perimeter. Anchored on the Sea of Japan, the perimeter ran west from the vicinity of Pohang to northwest of Taegu and then south along the Naktong River to the ocean. Roughly 50 miles across the top and 100 miles along the west side, the perimeter was much too long to establish a continuous defense line. Nonetheless, Walker declared that the allies could retreat no farther. His battered forces would have to hold this line to protect the port of Pusan. If the 8th Army lost Pusan, it lost Korea.

Thus, the situation at the end of July was grim. Walker had the remnants of four ROK and three U.S. divisions to hold more than 150 miles of front. The ROK army had sustained 70,000 casualties and U.S. forces just over 6,000. Walker’s depleted forces were being pressed hard along four major axes by ten North
Korean infantry divisions, an armored division, an independent motorized regiment, and an independent infantry regiment. The only good news was that the North Korean People’s Army (NKPA) had suffered an estimated 58,000 casualties during the thirty-six-day campaign.\(^{13}\)

Even as the 8th Army withdrew into the Pusan Perimeter, major reinforcements were arriving. Between 31 July and 5 August the U.S. Army’s 2nd Infantry Division and 5th Regimental Combat Team as well as the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade arrived in Pusan. Walker was gaining the strength necessary to hold his line just in time.

**WHAT HAPPENED?**

Americans were stunned by these early defeats. At the end of World War II, the United States had more than twelve million men in uniform, more than ninety well-equipped divisions, tens of thousands of aircraft, and more than a thousand combat ships. Yet by July 1950 the U.S. Army had been reduced to the point at which its forces were being overrun by troops from a nation most Americans could not find on a map. How did the U.S. military that had smashed both Germany and Japan less than five years before end up in this condition?

To understand what happened in Korea during the summer of 1950, we have to understand what happened to the U.S. armed forces between the end of World War II and the Korean invasion. Only by examining this period can we appreciate the challenges and triumphs of the forces fighting in Korea.

Quite simply, the United States had demobilized at an astonishing speed. Never a nation to maintain significant forces in peacetime, it traditionally counted on mobilizing its population and resources in times of crisis to win wars. Throughout U.S. history the regular army had been no more than a nucleus around which to form a wartime army of mobilized civilians. World War II had been no different. Thus, at the end of the war the vast majority of U.S. soldiers, sailors, and marines naturally expected to return immediately to their rudely interrupted civilian lives. Although career military personnel were concerned with maintaining U.S. military capabilities, demobilization was a politically driven priority that disregarded concerns about military readiness. After all, there were no more enemies left to fight, and if another appeared the people of the United States were confident they could once again mobilize to defeat it.

To appreciate the suddenness of the demobilization, it is necessary to remember that at the time of the Japanese surrender, U.S. officials believed it would take at least one and very possibly two more years to conquer Japan. At the beginning of August 1945 U.S. armed forces were making massive preparations to invade Japan. The vicious fighting and high casualties that had occurred on Iwo Jima and Okinawa indicated the invasion would be the bloodiest of the war. The navy, army, and army air forces were shifting resources from Europe to the Pacific in anticipation of a long, bloody campaign. They were not planning for any form of
demobilization. Then the use of two atomic bombs brought a sudden halt to the war.

At the beginning of August 1945 the U.S. Army (including the army air forces) had 8,200,000 men on its rolls. By the end of 1945 it had cut that number in half. By 1947 the army, which still included the army air forces, was down to fewer than a million men. By the summer of 1950 it had only 591,000 men, and the now independent U.S. Air Force had only 411,000. The navy fell from 3,380,000 on VJ Day to just 380,000 in June 1950. Yet the American people were not concerned. Although slashed over 90 percent from the end of World War II, these forces were still four times their 1939 strength. In World War II, the Allies had defeated Germany and Japan despite starting with minuscule forces. The American people could see no justification for maintaining a large standing force.

U.S. MARINE CORPS, 1945–1949

Because the topic of this book is the U.S. Marine Corps, it is appropriate to examine more closely what happened to the corps during this vital period. Naturally it was not exempt from the pressures applied to the other services. It demobilized at the same frenetic pace—yet demobilization was not the worst of its problems. Without any time for planning, the corps was faced with six major tasks:

To demobilize a Corps of five hundred thousand officers and men and “get the boys home” under pressure of a wave of home-town hysteria that temporarily crippled our foreign policy.

To maintain efficient occupation forces, two or three divisions strong in North China and Japan.

To shape the organization and select the right people for a postwar regular Marine Corps about five times the size of the 1939 Corps (in 1945, Congress had established 107,000 officers and men as the authorized peacetime strength of the Corps).

To confront ill-defined but disturbing pressures for extensive reorganization of the defense establishment, which boded nothing but trouble for the Marine Corps.

To respond professionally to the chorus of doubts and unanswered questions inspired by the advent of the atomic bomb, especially prophesies that “there would never be another amphibious landing.”

Demobilization

The most politically charged issue facing the corps was managing the extremely rapid demobilization while still meeting its continuing operational missions and
preparing for the next fight. Although the vast majority of marines were focused on a quick discharge and getting on with civilian life, those who were staying in the corps faced the immediate problem of maintaining operationally ready forces during this period of extreme turbulence. Thus, despite the push for demobilization, the quartermaster general of the Marine Corps, Maj. Gen. W. P. T. Hill, directed all marine units to recover as much material as possible for shipment back to the United States. Although rapid demobilization caused a shortage of skilled supply, maintenance, and aviation personnel, marines across the Pacific complied by packing up everything they could get their hands on (without being too fastidious about who actually owned the gear they were packing). The marines returned from the Pacific with huge stocks of equipment and even entire buildings (quonset huts). This material was moved to Marine Logistics Base in Barstow, California, for refurbishment and storage to be ready for the next fight.

This frugality was a hallmark of the corps and permeated the thinking of marines from the commandant to the privates. It reflected each marine’s belief that his service would always be the last to be equipped, and therefore he must rely on “initiative” to ensure that he was properly equipped for a fight. Each marine believed he had a license to acquire government property at any time without observing the niceties of paperwork. This reallocation of government property was seen, at least by those marines staying in the corps, as an essential part of demobilization.

Occupation

Although demobilization was the political priority, the immediate operational issue was deploying the forces required for occupation duty. In the preparation for the invasion of Japan, the V Amphibious Corps had been focused on Hokkaido, the southernmost island of mainland Japan. The corps, consisting of the 2nd and 5th Marine Divisions and already assigned to 6th U.S. Army, was the logical choice for the marines’ contribution to the occupation of Japan. Both divisions immediately deployed to Japan for occupation duty. The III Amphibious Corps, consisting of the 1st and 6th Marine Divisions, was assigned to the 8th U.S. Army, which had been preparing for the follow-up invasion of the Tokyo Plain on Honshu, the main island of Japan. Instead the III Amphibious Corps was detached from the 8th Army and sent to China to accept the surrender of Japanese troops stationed there.

Although the Marine Corps deployed these forces quickly and efficiently, maintaining them would have been impossible given the demands of demobilization. Fortunately, occupation duties in both countries proved much easier than anticipated and allowed for the rapid demobilization demanded by the American public. In November 1945 the 4th Marine Division was demobilized. In December the III Amphibious Corps headquarters, 3rd and 5th Marine Divisions, followed. In March 1946 it was the V Amphibious Corps’s turn. At the same time
the 6th Division was reduced to a single brigade. In June 1946 the 2nd Marine Division left Japan and sailed to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, to become one of the two active marine divisions. The 1st Marine Division remained on occupation duty in China. It would not come home until 1948, but by June 1946 it was one of only two remaining marine divisions and was maintained overseas despite the reduced strength of the Marine Corps. The aviation and logistics elements of the corps demobilized just as rapidly.17

From 485,000 personnel on VJ Day, the corps was reduced to 155,000 in less than a year.18 That still wasn’t enough. In April 1946 Congress passed a naval strength bill that required the corps to be reduced to 7,000 officers and 100,000 enlisted men by August.19 This would be the corps’s authorized strength until the beginning of the Korean War. However, due to further budget cuts, the corps could not afford to fill its authorized strength. By June 1950 the entire Marine Corps comprised only 74,279 men.

Postwar Organization and New Realities

Despite the enormous problems presented by massive demobilization, the corps still had to shape its postwar organization. This proved difficult because first Congress and then the Pentagon kept reducing the corps’s manpower. The corps had hoped to maintain a force of three division-wing teams. However, the cuts mandated by the April 1946 naval strength bill ensured that the corps could not maintain a force anywhere near this size.

Although struggling with the implications of the new strength limits, the corps also had to understand the impact that atomic bombs would have on amphibious warfare. In July 1946 Lt. Gen. Roy Geiger, USMC, observed the atomic bomb test at Bikini Atoll. He immediately wrote the commandant a letter stating, “It is trusted that Marine Corps Headquarters will consider this a very serious and urgent matter and will use its most competent officers in finding a solution to develop the technique of conducting amphibious operations in the Atomic Age.”20

The commandant, Lt. Gen. Alexander A. Vandegrift, responded quickly by assigning Brig. Gens. Lemuel Shepherd, Oliver P. Smith, and Field Harris to a board to study the problem and make recommendations. On 16 December 1946, after several months of intensive study, the board made a series of recommendations:

- The existence of atomic weapons meant wide dispersion of forces was required with emphasis on the ship-to-shore movement phase.
- Radical changes in doctrine and equipment would be required for future amphibious operations.
- The Corps must explore a number of different possibilities to include helicopters, landing craft and large fixed wing sea planes.
- “Vertical envelopment” using the very recently developed helicopters could give new life to amphibious operations.21
Despite the fact that the best helicopter of the day could carry only the pilot and two passengers, the board specifically recommended the immediate formation of an experimental squadron of helicopters to serve as a platform for developing the concept.

A year later, on 1 December 1947, Marine Helicopter Squadron 1 (HMX 1) was established at Quantico, Virginia. Quantico was the logical location because the corps had already assigned dozens of top-notch combat veterans there to capture their wartime experiences while they were still fresh. The Advance Base Team had been reactivated and was drafting a series of slim blue volumes (known as the PHIB, a U.S. Navy abbreviation for “amphibious,” series) to codify the amphibious techniques refined during the war. In addition, a navy-marine team had just completed a compilation of amphibious doctrine for the postwar naval forces, cryptically titled USF-63. In a single location, the corps was both recording its recent combat experience and experimenting with how to conduct amphibious operations in the presence of atomic weapons. In short, the aggressive, enterprising spirit that had driven the development of amphibious warfare concepts in 1933 returned to Quantico to prepare the corps for the next war.22

Thus while the corps’s operating forces grappled with the problems of occupation, rapid demobilization, and drastic budget cuts, the marines at Quantico, under the direction of Headquarters Marine Corps, were developing the concepts and organizations that would prepare the corps for future battles to include the possible use of atomic weapons. Finally, headquarters was developing the personnel selection and retention policies that determined which officers and NCOs would be retained in the drawdown. Each of these difficult issues was being dealt with successfully.

By early 1947, in response to concerns about atomic weapons and demands for manpower reductions, the 1st and 2nd Marine Divisions were preparing to reorganize under the new J-Series Tables of Organizations (T/Os). This reorganization, which cut the strength of each division from 22,000 to only 10,500 men, is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Unification

Unification, the final postwar challenge to the corps’s leadership, would consume enormous amounts of time and effort over the next seven years because it threatened the corps with extinction. The effort to do away with the corps surprised the marines. Because of the corps’s exceptional wartime success, its leaders believed its future was secure. At Iwo Jima in February 1945, Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal had said that the “raising of that flag on Suribachi means there will be a Marine Corps for the next 500 years.”23 Fifteen months later the commandant was fighting for the corps’s very existence.

The army began planning for unification in 1943. By 1945 the army staff had presented the Collins Plan to the Senate Military Affairs Committee. The plan
proposed an independent air force, a Marine Corps reduced to a light infantry constabulary force, and a single chief of staff who would control the budget of the armed forces and act as the primary adviser to the president on military matters. The navy and Marine Corps, by appealing to Congress, turned back this effort in 1946. However the army, backed by President Truman, continued to push for unification. A struggle ensued, which, due to strenuous efforts on the part of Marine Corps headquarters, resulted in a compromise that became the National Security Act of 1947. Despite the apparent statutory protection provided by the act, the secretary of defense and the Joint Staff continued to cut marine end strength and to threaten the existence of the corps. Over the next three years the corps struggled through the roles and missions debate, modifications to the National Security Act of 1947, and steadily declining end strengths and budgets. Gen. Clifton B. Cates, who became commandant in 1948, noted that “the unification fight, you might say, was the top priority because they were trying to cut us to six BLTs [battalion landing teams] and six squadrons, which really would have just made us what President Truman said, a police force.”

Obviously, with the focus on unification, Marine Corps headquarters had less time to assist the operational forces, which faced massive challenges of their own during the five years between World War II and Korea.

SUMMER 1949 TO SUMMER 1950: THE LAST YEAR OF PEACE

With Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson stating he would cut the corps’s manpower authorization to 65,000 active-duty marines, the corps knew it could not maintain the eight battalion landing teams the J-Series T/Os called for. In addition, after two years of testing, the 1947 “atomic” T/Os had been found wanting. Thus, on 1 October 1949, the marine divisions reorganized under the K-Series T/Os. Under this plan the strength of each marine division would consist of a single peacetime-strength infantry regiment supported by reduced artillery, armor, engineers, and other support elements. The division’s other two regiments and their supporting elements would be activated only for wartime. The K-Series would allow the corps to meet the requirement to reduce personnel while maintaining the essential structure necessary to allow rapid mobilization of a full division in time of war. In October the eight existing battalion landing teams were disbanded to create six peacetime infantry battalions. These battalions were consolidated into two infantry regiments—the 5th and 6th Marines. The 5th Marines were assigned to the 1st Marine Division and the 6th Marines to the 2nd Marine Division.

The 6th Marines at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, took command of its three battalions on 1 October 1949. The U.S. military envisioned the next war as being against the Soviet Union, so the 6th Marines was considered the regiment
most likely to go to war. The 5th Marines at Camp Pendleton, California, did not receive its third infantry battalion until the Guam brigade was disbanded and its ground combat element returned to Camp Pendleton. The brigade’s arrival at Pendleton stretched out over late February and early March 1950, and many key personnel who had been overseas for years were reassigned. During March and early April, as the old personnel were transferred and new members joined, the brigade’s infantry battalion was redesignated as the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, and assigned to the 5th Marine Regiment. At the same time, the battalion reorganized under the new K-Series T/Os.

Even with the greatly reduced peacetime T/Os, Fleet Marine Force (FMF) units, the corps’s combat forces, could not be brought up to strength. The Department of Defense’s fiscal year 1950 budget reduced the corps’s end strength from the congressionally authorized 100,000 to only 79,000. As a result, the corps was forced to drastically reduce the strength of the FMF. In addition, the corps had to plan for a further cut to 65,000 in fiscal year 1951. Thus, instead of the K-Series wartime organization of three rifle companies, a weapons company, and a headquarters and support company per infantry battalion, the battalions had been reduced to the K-Series peacetime organization of only two rifle companies. To save even more billets, each rifle company had only two rifle platoons and two-thirds of a weapons platoon. Thus, a battalion had only four rifle platoons instead of the normal nine, and for a variety of reasons inherent to most peacetime military organizations, even these few platoons were understrength. The battalion weapons and headquarters and service companies were similarly reduced.\textsuperscript{26} The artillery suffered as well. Each division had a single artillery regiment, which was reduced to a single cannon battalion with only twelve 105mm howitzers in three four-gun batteries rather than the eighteen in three six-gun batteries called for in wartime battalion.

The corps’s aviation elements were no better off. At the end of World War II the Marine Corps had 120 flying squadrons. Under the 1951 budget, the total would be reduced to 6 flying squadrons. Due to the ever-present budget shortages, the flying squadrons had severely reduced flight hours and suffered from continual parts shortages throughout the late 1940s. The other aviation squadrons—such as air traffic control, airfield operations, and engineering—faced the same problems in conducting the training required to be ready for war. In addition, both marine air wings were in the process of activating and training their first jet squadrons. And of course HMX 1, though not an operational squadron, was still consuming Marine Corps operational funds and personnel. Both the new jets and the new helicopters absorbed resources as the corps organized, trained, equipped, and experimented to determine how these new squadrons could best be employed in combat. Jets and helicopters represented the future of the corps, and these early efforts were invaluable. However, they naturally reduced the resources available to the World War II–era, prop-driven F4U Corsair squadrons. Unfortunately, in
1950 the Corsair squadrons were the backbone of the marine air forces. The one major advantage of these squadrons was the fact that every pilot had been flying Corsairs since World War II.

By late June 1950 the normal summer personnel rotation was taking place across the Marine Corps. This regular but necessary turbulence further reduced the FMF’s readiness. After World War II the corps had generally established a program of one-year tours for most personnel in the operating forces. The thinking was that with so few units, the only way to maintain any level of individual training was to rotate individual marines through the units on short tours. Then, if war came, the corps could rapidly expand. Thus, many, if not most, of the officers and NCOs transferred every summer. All but two of the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade’s regimental, group, battalion, and squadron commanders were in their first month in command on 25 June 1950; most were in their first week or took command after the war started. Further, key staff officers were just arriving at Camp Pendleton at the end of June. And, in keeping with personnel policies, all staffs were intentionally undermanned. For instance, none of the 5th Marines’ infantry battalions was assigned executive officers in June 1950.

THE 1ST PROVISIONAL MARINE BRIGADE (REINFORCED)

When North Korea invaded on 25 June, it caught the U.S. Marine Corps at a bad time. In the middle of a seven-year battle for existence, struggling to deal with massive personnel and resources cuts and in the midst of summer rotations, the corps was a shadow of the force that had performed so well in World War II. Despite these issues, Fleet Marine Force Pacific (FMFPac) was given less than ten days to embark a brigade-sized air-ground team for Korea. In fact, when FMFPac received its warning order on 3 June, no such brigade existed. Thus, a brigade had to be formed, absorb over 50 percent new personnel just to reach peacetime strength, transfer hundreds of marines who could not deploy, field new equipment, and build new subordinate organizations. All this had to be accomplished while simultaneously embarking the units at ports more than 100 miles apart. The one factor the brigade leaders were told not to worry about was training. The plan was for the brigade to sail to Japan, disembark, and train for thirty days before being committed to the fight.

In fact, the ground elements of the brigade sailed right past Japan and unloaded in Pusan Harbor, South Korea. The air elements did unload in Japan, but only to immediately redistribute the squadrons to the ships and bases they would fight from. After almost three weeks at sea in extremely cramped transports, all air and ground elements entered combat within days of reaching pierside.

The day-fighter squadrons unloaded in Japan on 31 July, sorted themselves out, conducted refresher training, reembarked on two escort carriers, and started flying strikes on 3 August. The night-fighter squadron disembarked on 31 July
and began flying night interdiction missions over Korea on 8 August. The observation squadron unloaded in Japan, flew its aircraft to Korea, found an operating base, and was flying in support of ground marines on 6 August. The ground-combat elements unloaded in Korea on 3 August and were in combat by the night of 6 August.

Yet, unlike every other U.S. unit committed to Korea, the brigade decisively defeated the North Koreans each time they met. In its first action the brigade not only stopped the North Korean attack; it also drove the 6th North Korean Division back twenty-six miles in four days, rendering that division combat-ineffective. Then, as it pursued the remnants of the 6th Division, the brigade was suddenly ordered to send a battalion twenty-nine miles to its rear to restore a breakthrough in the adjacent army unit’s line. The next day, with two battalions attacking to the west to finish the destruction of the North Korean 6th Division and a third moving rapidly east to destroy the North Korean penetration, the brigade commander was ordered immediately to break contact, reassemble the entire force, return to reserve, and prepare to counterattack in a different sector. Within hours the marines successfully broke contact with the enemy and rapidly withdrew to a designated assembly area.

Despite the crisis, when the brigade arrived at the assembly area the 8th Army commander had not decided where to commit it, so he put the brigade in reserve. Making good use of the break in combat operations, the brigade replenished its depleted rifle platoons by assigning rear-echelon marines to the line units. There were no other replacements available, so the brigade was forced to test the corps creed that every marine is a rifleman. The brigade had only two days to integrate the new marines, attempt to replace damaged equipment, and grab a bit of rest. On 17 August the brigade launched a counterattack against a North Korean breakthrough on the Naktong River. In three days of fierce fighting, the brigade destroyed the North Korean 4th Division and drove the remnants back across the river. On orders from MacArthur’s headquarters, the brigade turned the restored defensive line back over to the army and withdrew to prepare for the upcoming Inchon landing.

When the brigade reached the assembly area, 800 replacements arrived. The units immediately started an aggressive training program to integrate the new men while simultaneously trying to scrounge sufficient weapons to replace those worn out in the month of fighting. As the brigade prepared for embarkation, Col. Edward W. Snedecker, the brigade chief of staff, led a team of planners to Japan to confirm the myriad details necessary for the planned 15 September amphibious assault at Inchon. While integrating the new marines and planning for the assault, the units were sending their heavy equipment to the pier to embark for the landing. Time was critical. The brigade had less than three weeks to prepare for an exceedingly difficult, complex assault directly into the city of Inchon.

In the middle of these hectic preparations, the North Koreans launched a final all-out effort to destroy the Pusan Perimeter. Once again they broke through. The
U.S. 8th Army commander stated that without the brigade, the perimeter could not be held. Despite protests from the amphibious planners, MacArthur allowed the 8th Army to commit the brigade to the Naktong Bulge fight. From 3 to 5 September, the brigade drove the North Koreans back yet again. Finally, at midnight on 5 September, the brigade was ordered out of the line. After a day of movement back to Pusan, the brigade had only five days to absorb more replacements into its existing organizations, integrate the newly arrived third rifle companies, and again scrounge for replacement weapons and equipment, all while rapidly embarking upon amphibious shipping. On 12 September the brigade sailed out of Pusan Harbor, destined to be the assault wave at Inchon. On 13 September, somewhere in the South China Sea, the brigade ceased to exist. It was deactivated and its units reassigned to their parent organizations in the 1st Marine Division and 1st Marine Air Wing.

During its brief existence from 7 July to 13 September 1950, the brigade accomplished legendary feats. Given only six days from activation to sailing, the brigade had overcome enormous challenges just to get under way. The operating forces had been in the middle of the normal summer personnel rotations, which had completely changed the key leaders from FMPac down to the battalion level. Activated on 7 July, the brigade had to form a staff, assemble an air group, find personnel to bring the regiment up to peacetime strength (still a third below wartime strength), form a combat service element, absorb more than 50 percent new men, and move everything to two different ports—San Diego and Long Beach—for embarkation.

All this had to be accomplished after the Marine Corps had struggled through five years of precipitously declining budgets, personnel cuts exceeding 80 percent of the corps’s strength, and desperate fights for its very existence. Despite the fact that the brigade had been literally thrown together, squeezed aboard ship, and delivered directly to the fight, it not only fought well but drove back three different North Korean offensives. The question this book will attempt to answer is: What combination of culture, education, doctrine, organization, training, and leadership allowed the corps to survive the enormous stresses imposed between 1945 and 1950 and still assemble a small brigade that not only stopped but drove back the North Koreans?