

O. P. Smith – Savior of Chosin

BLUF: Oliver Prince Smith was a highly decorated Marine Corps combat veteran of World War II and the Korean War. Nicknamed “the Professor” by his Marines, Smith commanded the 1st Marine Division during the Battle of Chosin Reservoir, where he said, *“Retreat, hell! We’re not retreating, we’re just attacking in a different direction.”* He retired as a four-star general in 1955 after 38 years of service to the Marine Corps and his country.

LEADERSHIP TRAITS DISPLAYED: Justice, Judgment, Dependability, Initiative, Decisiveness, Tact, Integrity, Endurance, Bearing, Unselfishness, Courage, Knowledge, Loyalty, and Enthusiasm.

SETTING THE STAGE: Oliver Smith was born on 26 October 1893 in Menard, Texas. Smith grew up in Northern California, the son of farmers. He was the oldest of five children when he left home to attend the University of California at Berkley. In 1916, Smith graduated with a degree in business and history, intending to enter the business world to provide for his new wife, Esther Laurilla King. The First World War, however, interfered with his plans. On 14 May 1917, Smith enlisted in the Marine Corps as a second lieutenant. He never got the chance to test his courage in France, being assigned to the Marine Barracks in Guam for the war duration. This assignment proved to be exceptionally fortuitous for Smith as he learned a great deal about military operations in the Pacific.

Between World War I and World War II, Smith spent time at various Marine Corps posts, including Mare Island and Washington, D.C. He also served as a shipboard Marine on the *USS Texas*. Smith's most valuable postings were overseas in Haiti and as a staff member at the American Embassy in Paris. He also trained and led training at Marine Corps and U.S. Army infantry schools. With the start of World II in 1939, LtCol. Smith was the Commanding Officer of the 1st Battalion, 6th Marines at the MCB in San Diego. When the U.S. entered World War II in 1941, Smith was leading the 6th Marines in Iceland. Returning to the U.S. in May 1942, he was brought to Marine Corps Headquarters as a strategic planner for the war in the Pacific. In January 1944, Col. Smith was assigned to the 1st Marine Division in the Pacific as the Commanding Officer, 5th Marines.

Following World War II, Smith returned to the U.S. as Commandant of the Marine Corps Schools at Quantico. In January 1948, he was named Commanding General, Marine Barracks, Quantico. This assignment was in addition to his duties at the school. With the start of the Korean War in 1950, Smith was once again with the 1st Marine Division.

THE STORY: In October 1950, the 1st Marine Division landed on the eastern side of Korea at Wonsan. Smith found himself under the command of the U.S. Army X Corps commanded by General Edward Almond. The relationship between the two men was cordial at best. Many times, however, the two leaders clashed over strategy and tactics. This cold relationship dated back to their initial meeting in Japan during the Inchon invasion planning sessions. At one point, Almond referred to Smith as “son” and informed Smith that he knew nothing about amphibious assaults. Smith also believed that Almond was too aggressive, considering his lack of intelligence information. Once Smith reached Korea, he deliberately slowed his Marines' movement until he could fill Almond's intelligence gaps. These actions provoked the ill-will of Almond even further.

During the Chosin Reservoir Campaign in November 1950, Smith led operations from his base at Hagaru-ri. When the Chinese sprung their trap on the UN forces, they found themselves surrounded. On 6 December 1950, Smith led the breakout from the reservoir moving his troops 70 miles to safety at the port of Hungnam. With the statement, *“I’m going to fight my way out, I’m going to take all my equipment and all my wounded and as many dead as I can. If we can’t get out this way, this Division will never fight as a unit again.”* Smith and his Marines began a fighting “backward

advance." The 1st Marines received a Presidential Unit Citation for their efforts during the campaign. Many military historians believe that Smith's efforts at the Chosin Reservoir saved thousands of UN troops' lives.

In May 1951, Smith returned to the U.S. as the commanding general of the MCB at Camp Pendleton. In 1953 Smith was promoted to the rank of lieutenant general, which he held until his retirement in September 1955. Upon his retirement, Smith was promoted to the rank of general as a "tombstone promotion."

AFTERMATH: After serving in the Marine Corps for 38 years, General O. P. Smith was one of the most decorated combat Marines in Marine Corps history. In addition to the Army and Navy Distinguished Service Crosses, Smith received the Silver Star, the Bronze Star with a Combat "V," and the Legion of Merit with a Combat "V" and Gold Award Star. Smith was also only one of three Marine Corps Officers to command U.S. Army troops. During much of his career, Smith was known as "the Professor." His Marines respected his thoughtful tactical and logistical skills. Smith also carried himself in a very calm, unassuming manner. He retired to Northern California, where he passed away at the age of 84 on 25 December 1977.

QUESTIONS

1. Why was O. P. Smith known as the "the Professor."
2. How does the leadership trait "endurance" apply to O. P. Smith?
3. How would one evaluate the actions of O. P. Smith during the Chosin Reservoir Campaign? Was he successful or unsuccessful? Why?

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