

Colonel Joseph R. "Bull" Fisher

A Marine's Marine: "Come on, you Marines."

Story by JoAnna M. McDonald · Photos courtesy of the Jim Mazy Collection, 2/4 Association

Military heroes have been lauded since before David was king in Israel, some more than others. But there is one such hero about which little has been written: Colonel Joseph R. "Bull" Fisher, who served America in three wars. This is an oversight soon to be corrected as you are introduced to one of America's most inspirational Marine leaders.

Joseph Fisher was born in Westwood, Mass., in 1921 and attended Dedham High School. He enlisted in the Corps in 1942 and soon found himself fighting in World War II. Fisher was a Marine's Marine, quickly learning battle tactics from practical experience—up front, getting shot at. He saw action throughout the Pacific island-hopping campaigns, where he rose to the rank of platoon sergeant for his leadership skills, courage, expertise in map reading and his finely honed proficiency in using the bayonet.

At 6 feet tall and weighing 200 pounds, the stern, blue-eyed leatherneck received many nicknames, both for his tenacious fighting and his stalwart stature. Early in the war, it was reported that Fisher obtained the name "Old Indestructible" after miraculously escaping Japanese bullets while carrying a fellow wounded Marine to safety.

His nickname followed him to Iwo Jima in February 1945. As a platoon sergeant in Company C, 1st Battalion, 26th Marine Regiment, Fifth Marine Division, Fisher landed across the beach with the regiment near Red 1. Pushing forward in a hail of Japanese fire, the Marines moved closer to Airfield No. 1.

On 21 Feb. at 7:40 a.m., Fisher's battalion, attached to Regimental Combat Team 27, continued its assault on the airfield. A Japanese machine-gun crew in a concrete bunker pinned down the Marines. Fisher grabbed several grenades and shouted, "Cover me!"

He crawled slowly forward as his men poured round after round toward the enemy machine-gun crew. Bullets flew all around him; one smashed into his



COURTESY OF JOANNA M. McDONALD

By the time Bull Fisher saw action in the Korean War, he was already a blooded and respected Marine leader who earned his spurs in the intense island-hopping campaigns of WW II.

shoulder, breaking it. Despite the terrific pain, Old Indestructible pushed forward. Another round hit him in the chest, but Fisher wouldn't quit. His chest was burning, blood covered his uniform and the ground, and his shoulder was numb. He fought through the pain knowing that the bunker had to be destroyed.

Once close enough to the enemy fortification, he found the strength to lift himself to his knees, pull the grenade pin and toss it into the Japanese bunker. There was a muffled explosion as smoke rose from the small machine-gun firing slit. Two Japanese soldiers staggered out and were instantly shot down by one of Fisher's Marines. The sergeant threw one more grenade into the foul-smelling hole. The gun went silent.

Sgt Joseph Fisher was awarded the Sil-

ver Star for "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity ... demonstrating foresight, tactical skill and determination in leading his platoon." The doctors and nurses were astounded that he had survived. Old Indestructible fully recovered by July 1945. When the war ended, Fisher received a field promotion to second lieutenant and participated in the occupation of Japan.

Between the wars, he carried another nickname that would stay with him throughout his career, "Bull." His size and aggressive nature made this a permanent nickname.

Five years later First Lieutenant Bull Fisher found himself in his second war, the Korean War. As a lieutenant, Bull commanded Co I, 3d Bn, 1st Marines under battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas L. Ridge. The legendary warhorse Colonel Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller commanded 1st Marines. The colonel had great confidence in Fisher and rightly so.

When a journalist asked Col Puller why he placed a lieutenant in command of a company instead of a captain, Puller belatedly, "Lieutenant Joe Fisher is one of the best damned company commanders who ever lived. He's equal to the toughest assignment. As long as I'm around, he'll lead 'Item' Company."

Fisher would prove his commander right. In September 1950, as the Marines invaded Inchon and pushed toward Seoul, the capital of South Korea, Item Co held an isolated hill (Hill 105-S) near the city. The height overlooked the new command post. A brisk firefight broke out, but Fisher's men held their ground and captured 10 prisoners. After days of heavy fighting, the Marines recaptured Seoul; Fisher lost one man killed and two wounded.

With the North Koreans retreating back across the 38th parallel, the United Nations gave General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, commander of all U.N. troops in Korea, permission to cross the invisible line. GEN MacArthur and his gener-

The leathernecks of 2/4 first heard themselves described as “Magnificent Bastards” by their new commander (right) in June 1964. Just over a year later, they would find themselves in heavy combat during the early days of the Vietnam War.

als proposed a two-pronged attack up the Korean Peninsula. The Marines would board Navy ships and head for the East Coast at Wonsan.

Major General Oliver P. Smith, commanding the 1stMarDiv, moved 70 miles inland from Wonsan to the Chosin (Changjin) Reservoir. The Americans were dangerously close to China’s border. On 2 Nov. 1950, the Chinese entered the war. By late November, four Chinese divisions were thrown at the Marines.

On 25 Nov., Col Puller deployed Fisher’s unit at a strategic point overlooking the village of Hagaru-ri. The Marines knew the area as “East Hill.” Puller located Fisher and ordered, “Defend it, Lieutenant.” Like Stonewall Jackson at the First Battle of Manassas in the Civil War, Fisher knew to “hold at all cost.” There was no turning back, no withdrawal. If the Chinese gained the hill, they would dominate the main supply route and block the path that the leathernecks must have in order to escape encirclement and possible annihilation.

With only three machine guns, a few mortars, and small arms, they could use



This snapshot of two legendary Marine warhorses, Lieutenant General Lewis B. “Chesty” Puller, USMC (Ret) (left) and Col Joseph “Bull” Fisher, was taken in February 1969 after Bull’s retirement from active duty.





By May 1965, the time of this photo, Marine units had established a solid foothold in the Chu Lai and Da Nang areas. Bull's battalion, working alongside South Vietnamese forces against mainly Viet Cong, like the one hog-tied in this photo, was a respected force.

every form of protection. At least Item Co had plenty of ammunition; they would need all of it. Fisher's men tensely waited for the attack. Intelligence had stated a Chinese company-sized assault could be expected around 9:30 p.m. on 28 Nov.

There was an eerie silence as 9:30 p.m. passed without a shot fired. Just as the men began to think it was a false alarm, at 10:30 p.m. red flares shot into the sky and whistles echoed. This was it; every Marine hunkered down watching, waiting for the silhouetted Chinese figures to appear out of the darkness.

The vanguard of the assault tripped the flares, and booby traps began exploding. Now Fisher's men could see their targets. The enemy charged his position three times. The Browning Automatic Rifles, Thompson submachine guns and M1s grew hot as the enemy threw them-

selves at the stalwart Marines. The leathernecks mowed them down like the Grim Reaper. But the enemy continued their onslaught. Throughout the night, chaos reigned.

Bull paced the lines yelling for mortar fire and shouting encouragement to his men. A Chinese soldier penetrated the perimeter; Fisher fired his .38-caliber pistol point-blank into the assailant's chest. The bullet somehow ricocheted. Fisher, recognizing that the projectile had not penetrated, ordered his men to "fire high or low."

For eight hours the Chinese made a futile attempt to dislodge the Marines. During one tense moment the Chinese, again at the 3d Platoon sector, broke through to the company command post. Bull counterattacked and a grisly hand-to-hand battle ensued. While lobbing

grenades at the enemy, Fisher bellowed, "Grenades and bayonets!" The Marines gave them cold steel and smashed the enemy with butt strokes from their rifles. It was Item Co's hill.

The battle lasted through the night; exhausted and nearly annihilated, the enemy withdrew. Fisher's Marines were too tough. In the morning it was a ghastly sight. Enemy soldiers lay everywhere; approximately 700 Chinese were killed. After the melee, Puller asked Fisher how many enemy soldiers were killed. Fisher frankly answered, "A whole piss pot full, sir." Col Puller replied that he was "glad that he had at least one officer who could count accurately."

For the Battle of East Hill (28-29 Nov.), Bull Fisher was awarded the Navy Cross. An excerpt from the citation reads: "His valiant fighting spirit and selfless devotion to duty throughout were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service."

Col Chesty Puller evaluated Fisher as the "best company-grade tactician" in the United States Marine Corps. This was quite an honor coming from the most highly decorated Marine commander.

After the first year of the Korean War, Captain Joseph Fisher returned to the United States with a Navy Cross and two Bronze Stars. A Marine for nine years, Fisher had earned all of his promotions in the field. Now he received orders to attend an amphibious warfare course at Quantico, Va. His instructors quickly realized that he was proficient in tactics and maneuvers.

Bull then transferred to Seal Beach, Calif., and was assigned as the Inspector-Instructor of a Reserve infantry company, and then went on to the Far East for another operational tour, this time with the 9th Marines, 3dMarDiv, before returning to Quantico as an instructor in 1957.

Now a major, he was in his element teaching tactics to new lieutenants at The Basic School. During one of the graduation ceremonies, Maj Fisher was asked to speak.

One young second lieutenant remembered Bull's remarks. "The Bull stood in the tiny sand amphitheatre and quietly looked at all the faces of Alpha Company. 'Gentlemen, I have tried to teach you everything I know about combat. If someone says they are not afraid, they are either stupid or crazy. If they are junior to you, get rid of them. If they are senior to you, get away from them. And remember, gentlemen, you have a sacred obligation: spend bullets not boys. God Bless.'" The

second lieutenant carried Bull's evocative comments with him throughout his career.

Once his tour at Quantico was complete in 1962, Fisher attended the Armed Forces Staff College in Norfolk, Va. He was then promoted to lieutenant colonel and ordered to Headquarters, Fleet Marine Force Pacific, Camp H. M. Smith, Hawaii. He and his family enjoyed living in the serene, tropical Hawaiian climate. But the peaceful times would last for only two years.

In June 1964 LtCol Bull Fisher as-



PFC Jim Mazy (above), Hotel Co, 2/4, saw a great deal of his battalion commander in the field. Senior leaders, such as LtGen Victor H. Krulak (below, right), Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, also visited Bull to see his unit in operation in Vietnam.



sumed command of 2d Bn, 4th Marines, First Marine Brigade at Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii. Private First Class James Mazy recalled, "For two weeks before Bull took over, every day we were warned that the Marine's Marine was taking over as CO [commanding officer] and that we had better be 'ready.' Almost every single Marine and corpsman was standing tall on the parade field looking better than they ever did before, shaking in their boots waiting for the combination of Attila the Hun, a Roman gladiator, Ben Hur and John Wayne all rolled into one to appear before us.

"When he did [take over the battalion], we all heard his praises of the Corps, Chesty Puller and the exiting CO, Lieutenant Colonel [Donald T.] Doxey. He gave his vow to be one of the best infantry battalion commanders that the Corps could give us. It was during this 'talk' that he made reference to us as his 'Magnificent Bastards.' But even prior to this, as Lieutenant Colonel Fisher entered the parade field area with his wife, Jean, I seem to remember him looking at us and saying something to her like, 'Look at these men; they are Magnificent Bastards aren't they!'"

One year later, on 18 Aug. 1965, Bull Fisher and his Magnificent Bastards were in a new kind of war as they sat in rumbling, deafening helicopters being carried into battle, descending upon the enemy. They were infantrymen. Now his Marines were coming in from the air. Fisher looked out the door and saw the lush, green Vietnamese countryside. This was the Marines' first attack on a Viet Cong regiment by air and from the sea. LtCol Fisher's unit was going in hot. Operation Starlite had begun.

Earlier, a Viet Cong defector informed the Americans that the 1st Viet Cong Regiment was going to attack the Marine base at Chu Lai. Lewis W. Walt, then a major general and commander of III Marine Amphibious Force in Vietnam, learned of the plot and immediately started plans to take the fight to the enemy. That planning came to fruition during Operation Starlite, 18-24 Aug.

MajGen Walt initially ordered two battalions for the operation: 3/1, commanded by LtCol Joseph E. Muir and Bull's 2/4. The 3d Bn would go in as the amphibious force. Bull's Marines would pile into helicopters and land at three separate zones: LZs Red, White and Blue to the west of Van Tuong village. Each landing zone was approximately 2,000 meters from the other. His objectives were to

7.62 DESIGN INC.
DISTINCTIVE MILITARY APPAREL

1ST RECRUIT TRAINING BATTALION
MCRD
T305

2ND RECRUIT TRAINING BATTALION
MCRD
T304

3RD RECRUIT TRAINING BATTALION
MCRD
T303

4TH RECRUIT TRAINING BATTALION
MCRD
T302

MARINES
POWER & GLORY
T164

IRAQI FREEDOM
VETERAN
T222

AMERICA'S BIGGEST
T293

MARINES
T130

**CHECK OUT OUR NEW WEBSITE AT:
7POINT62DESIGN.COM
PH: 858.693.4130**

take the ridge near the landing zones and pin down the Viet Cong headquarters near Van Tuong.

Co E, 3/1 landed at LZ White, Co G came in at LZ Red, and Co H choppers went in at LZ Blue. Bull's command element touched down at LZ White. As Fisher's helicopter landed, the rugged 44-year-old commander stepped off the aircraft. "Come on, you Marines." The situation was grim when LtCol Fisher arrived. Bull radioed 1stLt Mike Jenkins,

panies resumed their attack toward the village. The battalion was two hours behind schedule, but the Viet Cong were holding tight. Inching forward, the Marines took out the hidden VC snipers. Bull's veteran instincts told him the enemy fire was diminishing, and he drove his men hard up the ridge. The enemy, however, gave them no respite.

The VC had registered their weapons on the ridge, and as the VC began their withdrawal, they poured a deadly mortar

Air support once again dropped napalm, and the Marines continued the fight, surrounding another VC company. Hoping to escape, the Viet Cong attempted to climb down the cliffs toward the sea. The big guns of the Navy cruiser *Galveston* (CL-93) opened up; the VC could not break away.

Bull's tough Marines had shattered the VC resistance in the hedgerows. It was now nightfall, but as Fisher led his veterans closer to Van Tuong and VC headquarters, they met tough resistance from the enemy survivors still held up in fortifications. But these were just the rear guard, fighting a delaying action against the leathernecks. The remainder of the 1st Viet Cong Regiment escaped into the darkness. Very few VC prisoners were taken captive.

LtCol Fisher's 2d Bn, 4th Marines and the supporting units and Navy had killed 600 Viet Cong. The Americans lost 52 Marines, one corpsman and an Army major killed in action.

Bull Fisher had led his men through their baptism by fire. His Marines loved him. "He was an exquisite leader," noted one of his young lieutenants from Quantico. He instilled in his Marines a brotherhood that not only spanned the Vietnam era but continues for any who served under him.

Mazy recalls that LtCol Joseph R. "Bull" Fisher received the rank of colonel in late 1966 or early 1967.

After 26 years of service to his country and Corps, Fisher retired in 1968 in North Carolina. His family knew him as a gentle giant who loved to work in his garden. Judson Fisher, his son, remembered his father would say, "The key to success in life is to find out what someone wants and to give it to them if at all possible."

Although Col Fisher passed away in 1981, the Magnificent Bastards honor his legacy and that of the 2d Bn, 4th Marines with their own Association. They are about pride, spirit, love and respect of their country and Corps. Bull's warrior spirit is still with them.

Editor's note: Joanna M. McDonald attended Dickinson College and received a master's degree from Shippensburg University and the U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, Pa. She has published 10 books (eight on the Civil War and two on WW II) and is currently the Education Specialist for the MCRD Command Museum, San Diego.



Through the end of his tour in Vietnam, Bull Fisher, and his battalion, worked closely with the South Vietnamese forces, teaching and leading and remaining in the fight. He and his "Magnificent Bastards" set the bar high for those who joined the battalion in later years.

CO of Co H. The company had only two working radios remaining.

PFC Mazy of Co H remembered that night their company was trapped and not expected to make it out of the predicament. There were only about 40 Marines in fighting shape. In order to secure their area, they set up in the open with a wide field of fire in case the enemy attempted an attack. It was like an old-fashioned Western-style wagon train circle defense. Bull's Marines remained alert and prepared for the enemy to attack.

Through the night, guns and artillery continued to hit the ridge, keeping the enemy at bay from Co H. Companies G and E already had taken their first objective prior to nightfall, but they were not close enough to help their fellow Marines.

In the morning, Echo and Golf com-

fire down on Bull's men. When the Marines hit the dirt, Fisher ordered napalm dropped on the retreating enemy. As the red glow and smoke from the air strike cleared, LtCol Fisher looked down at his last objective, Van Tuong village. It was only a mile away, but he carefully studied the terrain: fortified entrenchments, bunkers and hedgerows.

A tank column came up as reinforcements, but the VC who had escaped the napalm opened fire and took out the lead tank. Bull ordered his battalion forward, trying to turn the VC fire away from the tanks in order to clear a path for the column. Hedgerows near the village created perfect firing positions for the enemy. Bull's Marines dashed forward in small units, taking out the VC hedgerow by hedgerow.

