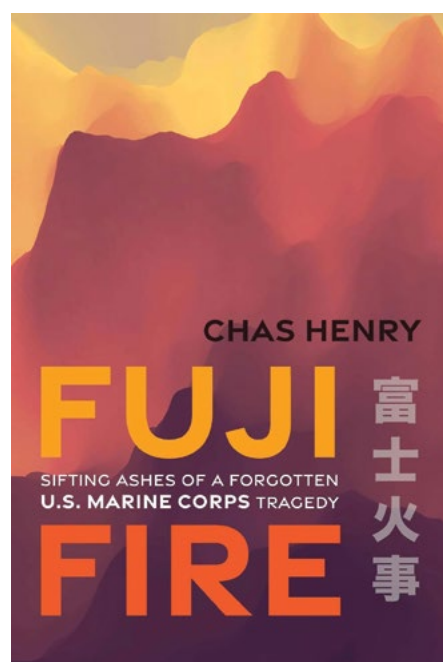


dynamic interaction of the instruments of national power. O'Brien reminds us that wars are not necessarily won by the state with the largest army, the biggest missile inventory, or the most exquisite technology. Students of war must evaluate all the elements of power and anticipate their interaction. *War and Power* illuminates the past and guides serious students of war into the future.

Frank Hoffman retired from National Defense University (NDU) in 2024 after 46 years of service in the U.S. Department of Defense (now the Department of War), including a dozen years researching and teaching at NDU.



Fuji Fire: Sifting Ashes of a Forgotten U.S. Marine Corps Tragedy

By Chas Henry
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From the “Old Breed” World War II memoirs of Eugene Sledge and Robert Leckie, Marine grunts with a flair for writing have added immea-

surably to our understanding of war. Their storytelling tends to capture the bottom-up perspectives of warriors suddenly confronted by the imponderables of military history, those unforgettable moments when events smite the best-laid plans of officials far removed from current conflicts. That same perspective frames every chapter of Chas Henry’s superb quest to preserve the memories of the 13 Marines killed and more than 73 injured when a bizarre flash fire erupted on the slopes of Japan’s Mount Fuji in October 1979.

So how bad was it? Henry extensively quotes the Marine Commandant at the time, General Robert Barrow, whose military career began in the grim days of 1942: “Having witnessed a lot of bad things, ugly things, none could compare to that experience.” Although it quickly became known as the “worst-ever peacetime disaster” in Marine Corps history, hospital orderlies remembered something else: “You could smell them as soon as the elevator door opened . . . [the] acrid odor of charred flesh” infused into their uniforms, hair, and skin. Equally upsetting was the constant shivering of the burn victims. As one Marine with second- and third-degree burns explained, “It’s 110 degrees in there but we didn’t have skin to keep our heat in.”

How could such a calamity have occurred? As a former enlisted Camp Fuji Marine, Chas Henry coolly lays bare the roots of the disaster. Although his book includes neither bibliography nor footnotes, his acknowledgments give ample testimony to his exhaustive research across two continents amid the COVID-19 pandemic: “One hundred and thirty individuals . . . shared memories of the incident . . . despite the tears often generated as they did.” Equally important: “Scores of archivists, public affairs officers, librarians, and others” raided their files to assist Henry in assembling the most comprehensive analysis ever attempted of the Fuji fire and its aftermath. Aided by maps, command chronologies, timelines, articles, and even pilot logs, the Fuji Marines at last had a historian capable of telling their unique, heart-rending stories.

Everything else about the base and its mission reflected the primacy of tough operational drilling. Pacific-based Marines typically used Fuji as a training destination after months aboard amphibious vessels, exploiting its hiking, maneuver, and live-firing ranges to sharpen their wartime skills. Since realistic, short-term exercises were their primary mission, Fuji’s bivouac areas were ramshackle, with Quonset huts “put together by infantry carpenters” that seemed “right out of Gomer Pyle.” The only real hazard of the bivouac areas came from a fuel farm improbably located uphill from the Quonset huts housing hundreds of hard-training Marines. These hazards were worsened by the use of rubberized fuel tanks that both the Army and Marines believed represented a quantum improvement in fuel-handling efficiency: “The Amphibious Assault Fuel System unpacked at Camp Fuji in 1979 included 20,000-gallon tanks. . . . When filled to capacity . . . a 20,000-gallon bladder would swell to 5 feet, 9 inches tall.”

An Army Field Manual published in 1977 gave an explicit warning about the location of fuel farms: “[N]ever choose one uphill . . . from other installations which would be in the path of escaping fuel.” Although a succession of training unit commanders seemed startlingly comfortable with the hazards to their troops, Henry cites a 32-year-old Navy chaplain whose “new eyes” enabled him to deliver a prophetic warning only weeks before disaster struck. “It just defies common sense that you would put fuel bladders . . . up above where people are living. . . . You’ve got stoves in there.” The chaplain remembered that a lieutenant colonel at the base camp curtly told him that “that’s the way it had been done for a long time. . . . So [I should] keep my thoughts to myself.”

Unfortunately, the looming menace of what became Typhoon Tip—which remains the largest tropical cyclone on record—made landfall on mainland Japan on October 19, 1979. Registering an astounding 870 millibars of pressure, Tip had gale-force winds that extended 690 miles in every direction. For the Marines at Camp Fuji, the storm was the critical

factor that combined the well-known hazards of volcanic soils, sustained tropical downpours, unpredictable slope, and highly explosive liquids. It is not known precisely when, where, or in what order these hazards ignited the firestorm that rapidly enveloped Marines, their uniforms, belongings, equipment, buildings, and everything else at Fuji that would burn. “Older Marines at the camp that day—veterans of combat in Vietnam—felt ripped back to the war zone. Initially, it was like a rocket or mortar attack, reflected one grizzled sergeant major. ‘It was as ferocious or fierce as any battle.’”

The first half of *Fuji Fire* will be of primary interest to Service schools and war colleges focused on the operational art. Just like viewers of the TV series *Air Disasters*, readers of the book will wonder what corrective actions might have broken the impending failure chain of catastrophe. But it was the disciplined adaptation to those disasters—related in detail throughout the book’s second half—that provided the most satisfaction to this reader: Marines, their doctors, and their entire chain of command struggled to collect, triage, and transport the wounded, often devising unprecedented innovations amid the chaos of the unexpected. How effective were they? Against an expected burn recovery rate of 50 percent, the Fuji fire survivors topped 80 percent—proof positive that Marines are very special people indeed!

But the disturbing counterpoint is the institutional memory lapse that persistently plagued Chas Henry’s research: “Well, what fire was that?” Four decades after the reforms of the Goldwater–Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, let us hope that those tentative inter-Service nonaggression pacts have been replaced by the entrepreneurial synergies of a joint force where voracious improvement is a way of life. In a strategic environment where ancient verities can be disrupted in nanoseconds, it does little good to strive mightily for innovation unless those breakthroughs spur future improvements.

We should be ever mindful of the stakes. In *Fuji Fire*’s most moving story, Marine Commandant General Barrow,

accompanied by his corps sergeant major, returned to visit his troops: “I went into this one room and this rather strong voice under all these bandages said, ‘It’s a pleasure to see you, sir.’ I replied, ‘I’m sorry it’s under these circumstances.’ To which he said, ‘Sir, it would be a pleasure to see you under any circumstances.’” General Barrow remembered being told later that the Marine had died shortly afterwards.

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