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Lee Ballenger. *The Final Crucible: U.S. Marines in Korea, Vol. 2: 1953.*

(Washington, D.C: Brassey's, Inc., 2001). 309 pp. \$18.95

Reviewed by Derek W. Frisby, The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL

The Final Crucible is Lee Ballenger's capstone volume in his combat history of the Marine Corps' final two years in Korea. [Reviewer's Note: The first volume, *The Outpost War: U.S. Marines in Korea, 1952* (Brassey's, 2000) is being reviewed separately by the *IJNH*] Ballenger, a USMC Korean War veteran, has performed an invaluable service by providing an extraordinarily detailed glimpse into an often forgotten or ignored period of the war by culling numerous first-hand accounts, command diaries, and after-action reports. Ballenger has endeavored to include not only those acts that were awarded the Navy Cross or Medal of Honor, but to emphasize the less conspicuous acts of heroism displayed as well. Indeed, he demonstrates that uncommon valor was as common a virtue among Marines along the Main Line of Resistance (MLR) in 1953 as it was on Iwo Jima or any part of our Corps' rich historical past.

This chronicle opens with a captivating summary of the Marines' preparation for war and a brief synopsis of their previous year's struggles during the "Outpost War" of 1952. Although most consider the Korean War's last months as a "stalemate" or "static" phase and other events overshadowed the Marines' struggles in the press coverage, more than 40 percent of Marine Corps casualties occurred in 1952-53. Ballenger makes it clear that during this closing phase of the war success was measured in yards and depended upon small unit leadership. The vivid and compelling tales of individual combat experiences presented in this volume explains why. In March 1953, Chinese/NKPA commenced overwhelming assaults on the "Nevada Cities" line of Marine outposts just in front of the

Marines' MLR sector north of Seoul. Outnumbered perhaps twenty-to-one, the tenuous fighting spirit of the Marines on the ground and the courage of Marine aviators proved decisive in the four-day seesaw battle over Combat Outposts (COPs) Reno, Carson, Vegas, Berlin, East Berlin, and Elko. First, they endured unprecedented barrages of variable-time fuse mortar and artillery fire that rained shrapnel over the battlefield and decimated those units that dared to move. Night fighting ensued, often at hand-to-hand range, as the enemy poured over the hills toward the MLR. Despite inflicting a casualty ratio of two-to-one on the enemy forces, the Marines' victory seemed pyrric, given the precarious positions of the COPs.

Army units replaced the beleaguered Marines as the brass hastily devised a new but risky "defense-in-depth" strategy for the MLR, choosing to provide only minimal defenses at the COPs or abandon them altogether. In late June 1953, the Marines returned to the front, and as the cease-fire talks dragged on through the summer, the Chinese/NKPA began probing the MLR and recaptured most of the old COPs. Then, with the cease-fire almost complete, the enemy launched one last offensive to seize as much territory as possible prior to the cessation of hostilities. In torrential rains and mud, the Marines engaged in a brutal slugfest to hold a key salient of the MLR near Hill 119, better known to the Leathernecks as "Boulder City." Again, Ballenger convincingly makes the case that the Marines aggressive tactics and superior small unit leadership proved decisive in arguably the most crucial battle of the Korean War. Fighting (every bit as intense as that in March) over this strategic terrain feature continued non-stop for three days and ended only at the armistice deadline on 2200, 27 July 1953.

Ballenger has supplied a very powerful and dramatic recollection of the Marine combat experience in Korea. Yet, he has camouflaged his historian's voice behind a wall of block quotes. Most of the lengthier quotes are the verbatim accounts of veteran Marines, but the others are just short snippets, often unnecessarily taken from secondary sources, that could have been distilled to greater effect in a few short original sentences. The narrative is so distractingly cratered by these block quotes that any trenchant analysis of the role these battles played in shaping Marine Corps doctrine is difficult to discern. The narrative also lacks some sense of balance, making little attempt to provide the North

Korean combat soldier's perspective of events, although admittedly there may be a dearth of sources from which to draw at this time. Finally, the publisher has neglected to include the endpaper maps of the cloth edition in this trade paper edition. Therefore, readers are deprived of being able to orient themselves of the operational and tactical situation along the MLR's "Jamestown Line." The included maps of the COPs are exceptionally detailed and very informative. Still, Ballenger's contribution has merit and utility if not the hallmarks of the "new military history." *The Final Crucible* will undoubtedly provide the basis for more substantial histories of the Korean War and will be essential reading for historians and small unit leaders attempting to comprehend the nature of combat during the Korean War.



The Editors
International Journal of Naval History
editors@ijnhonline.org

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