

Presentation to Veterans Luncheon

Brigadier General E.G. Payne
Representing the Commandant, Marine Corps

(25 April 05, Georgia Tech, Atlanta, GA)

On behalf of the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Michael Hagee, it is a privilege to be with you today; and I am pleased to see that Georgia Tech continues to acknowledge and celebrate General Davis' achievements as a Marine and an American. The General Ray Davis Memorial Endowment further immortalizes a man whose excellence distinguished him as a true American hero.

Raymond G. Davis was born on January 13, 1915 in Fitzgerald, Georgia, the son of Zelma and Raymond Davis. It is said that his first firearm was a 12-gauge shotgun for rabbits around the Chattahoochee River. His young reputation was polished by selection to the National Honor Society, varsity wrestling at Atlanta Technical High School, and the fact that he was the best drill cadet in his high school Army Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps unit.

Partial to the military, but not committed to soldiering as a career, Davis was attracted to ROTC because of its small monetary allowance and free uniform; and he stayed with JROTC three years in high school and Army ROTC throughout college. At Georgia Institute of Technology's commencement, with a bachelor of science degree in chemical engineering and the college president's Gold Key for scholarship, Davis was named Marine candidate for the class of 1938.

During his distinguished career, Ray Davis rose from the rank of second lieutenant to become a four-star general and Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps. While General Davis is best known as a recipient of the Medal of Honor while serving as a Battalion Commander during the Korean War, he first saw action in some of the most brutal fighting of World War II. He was part of the Marine forces that participated in the capture and defense of Guadalcanal and the Eastern New Guinea and Cape Gloucester campaigns as well as the Peleliu operation.

While commanding 1st Battalion, 1st Marines in September of 1944, then Major Davis was wounded during the first hour of the Peleliu landing. He refused evacuation to remain with his men and on one occasion, when heavy Marine casualties and the enemy's point-blank cannon fire had enabled the Japanese to break through, he personally rallied and led his men in fighting to re-establish defense positions. For his actions, Major Davis was awarded the Purple Heart and the Navy Cross. In October 1944, was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel.

As a Lieutenant Colonel in Korea from 1950 to 1951, General Davis earned the nation's highest decoration for heroism during the 1st Marine Division's historic fight to break out of the Chosin Reservoir area.

In the biggest shock of the war, 300,000 Chinese Communist soldiers crossed the Yalu River from China into North Korea and trapped 8,000 Marines at the Chosin Reservoir. The only way out was an icy road that twisted around steep mountains. If the Chinese had gained control of the area, all of the Marines would have been annihilated. LtCol Davis' Marines of 1st Battalion, 7th Marines faced what had to seem like an impossible task to get the Marines on Fox Hill linked up with them or thousands would be trapped at the reservoir. That afternoon, in 24 below zero weather, the battalion began struggling up the side of the steep ridge. Davis' men climbed 1000 yards before the Chinese opened fire on them. The Marines kept clawing their way inch by inch up the icy slopes. The Chinese seemed tucked into every crevice. Atop the first ridge, the Marines sweat would freeze on their eyebrows and beards, but they put their wounded on stretchers and pushed on. As the Marines trudged towards the second ridge, snipers picked at the slow exposed line, but there was no time for the Marines to stop and fire back. The Marines went downhill by sliding on the ice.

At 4 a.m. the following morning, the battalion was close to Fox Company but had to halt since they had lost radio contact and did not want to chance getting caught in crossfire. They would rest until daybreak. As Davis started to nap, a sniper's bullet pierced his sleeping bag and grazed his head. Davis stayed in command.

With still no radio contact with Fox Company, LtCol Davis feared that the company had been overrun. Communication was finally made that morning and LtCol Davis' Battalion arrived atop Fox Hill. The Chinese had lost the battle for Toktong Pass. Within a few hours two additional Marine Battalions were moving through the pass away from Chosin. Many icy miles and more bitter fighting lay ahead before the Marines reached the port of Hagaru-ri, but the stand at Toktong Pass had opened the way. In two weeks, the 1st Marine Division moved over icy roads and ridges through eight Chinese Divisions. The Marines would bring out all their wounded, their dead, and the equipment. On the way they killed 25,000 of the enemy. The Marine lost 730 of their numbers.

Such is the legacy of General Davis and those brave Marines. General Davis received the Medal of Honor from President Harry Truman in ceremonies at the White House on November 24, 1952.

Over 1 million Americans served in Korea, and only 131 of those were named recipients of the Medal of Honor. After the General's passing, only 36 of them live to wear it today.

Besides receiving the Medal of Honor for action during that period, he twice earned the Silver Star Medal by exposing himself to heavy enemy fire while leading and encouraging his men in the face of strong enemy opposition. He also received the Legion of Merit with Combat "V" for exceptionally meritorious conduct and professional skill in welding the 1st Battalion into a highly effective combat team. Later, as Executive Officer of the 7th Marines, from December 1950 to June 1951, LtCol Davis earned the Bronze Star Medal with Combat "V" for his part in rebuilding the regiment after the Chosin Reservoir campaign. He returned to the United States in June 1951.

Between 1954 and 1966 General Davis served in a series of increasingly responsible staff and training positions, while attaining the rank of Major General. In 1968, MajGen Davis was ordered to the Republic of Vietnam, where he served briefly as Deputy Commanding General, Provisional Corps, then became Commanding General, 3d Marine Division. The arrival of MajGen Davis on the battlefields of Vietnam as the commanding general of 3dMarDiv brought about a revolution in tactics, morale and shock to the enemy.

Davis took command on 21 May 1968. From that moment, the division's approach to the war changed. Companies would occupy battalion defense positions. Whole battalions would be freed up as a mobile striking force.

"We wouldn't wait for the enemy to attack. Now, we'd go after him. My goal was to go in and ferret out the system," recalled the general.

With this strategy, came Operation Dewey Canyon. It was developed and fostered by MajGen Davis. He gave its execution to the 9th Marines, commanded by Col Robert H. Barrow, the holder of the Navy Cross for his actions in the Korean War.

Until Dewey Canyon, the NVA had been barreling down from the north on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. 1,000 vehicles a day supplied the enemy efforts in the Da Krong and A Shau valleys. These actions were in preparation for the new communist spring offensive, which Davis was there to abort. Operation Dewey Canyon was a regimental, helicopter-borne leapfrog thrust. Marines, protected by artillery fans from the hilltops, scoured the valleys for enemy arms and munitions.

Climaxing his mission strategy, Col Barrow ordered Hotel Co, 2/9 to lay an ambush on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. Capt David F. Winekoff led the ambush and shredded a lengthy convoy of NVA traffic, which was first confined in its tracks by U.S. artillery. It also slowed the movement on that trail to a very cautious trickle. Col Barrow was credited "with relentlessly executing" the Dewey Canyon thrust across the valleys "that uncovered the largest quantity of weapons ever captured or destroyed in a single operation."

For his service in the latter capacity from 22 May 1968 until 14 April 1969, MajGen Davis was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal, and three personal decorations by the Vietnamese Government. Army General Creighton W. Abrams Jr., commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, commented to Marine Commandant General Leonard F. Chapman Jr. . . . of the 50 or so division commanders I have known in Vietnam, General Davis has no peer. He's the best.'

After eleven months as Division commander, General Davis would once again return for duty in the United States. President Nixon nominated Davis for appointment to the grade of General and assignment to the position of Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps. The Senate confirmed his nomination and he received his fourth star on assuming those duties, 12 March 1971. He served as Assistant Commandant until he retired from active duty on 31 March 1972, after more than 33 years with the Marine Corps.

After 33 years of traveling the world, seeing action in three wars and serving as one of the nation's highest military officers, General Davis could have settled into a comfortable retirement on his farm here in Georgia. But this was not the way for Ray Davis, a man of life-long action and deep commitment to serving others. In his retirement, General Davis directed the Georgia Chamber of Commerce for several years and later took on the challenge of designing, funding, and dedicating the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. General Davis continued to work in support of issues of national interest, including a visit to North Korea in an effort to persuade that government to allow more travel and to become more active in identifying missing American soldiers.

This afternoon , I have touched on the highlights of the extraordinary life and career of General Davis. In war and in peace, as a Marine and citizen, Gen Davis' outstanding courage, unswerving devotion to duty, inspiring leadership, and sound judgment represent the highest traditions of military service and citizenship. This man was a true American hero.

Thank you for having me here today and thank you for honoring General Ray Davis. Semper fidelis.

Background Information

Quotes about Gen Davis

"He is a true American hero." — Senator Zell Miller, Honorary Chairman of the General Ray Davis Memorial Endowment

“Never a shouter, never profane, never a grandstander, Ray Davis expressed his thoughts with gentlemanly precision and razor-sharp logic, never closed his mind on a topic, ever remaining willing to re-open the dialogue or reconsider a decision. His soft-spoken guidance carried more authority than the strident bellowing of some other leaders.” — Major General Carl Hoffman, USMC (retired), c. 1995

“By his superb leadership, outstanding courage and brilliant tactical ability, Lieutenant Colonel Davis was directly instrumental in saving the beleaguered rifle company from complete annihilation and enabled the two Marine regiments to escape possible destruction. His valiant devotion to duty and unyielding fighting spirit in the face of almost insurmountable odds enhance and sustain the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.” — President Harry S. Truman, Citation on the Presentation of the Medal of Honor, 1952

“Although wounded during the first hour of landing, Major Davis refused evacuation to remain with his Battalion's assault elements in many hazardous missions. On one occasion, when large gaps occurred in our front lines as the result of heavy casualties, and his right flank company was disorganized by point-blank enemy cannon fire following a successful nine hundred yard penetration through heavily defended lines, he rallied and personally led combined troops into these gaps to establish contact and maintain hasty defensive positions for the remainder of the night. Despite many casualties from close-range sniper fire, he remained in the vicinity of the front line, coordinating artillery and Naval gunfire support with such effect that several determined counterattacks were repulsed. His outstanding courage, devotion to duty, and leadership were in keeping with the highest tradition of the United States Naval Service.” — John L. Sullivan, Secretary of the Navy, about events at Peleliu, on the Presentation of the Navy Cross, 1945

“He's a real American hero.” — Professor John Endicott, Director of the Center for International Strategy, Technology, and Policy, Georgia Tech, 2003

“. . . Ray Davis is endowed with those qualities of mind and person which fit a Marine officer for command and which attract and stimulate the respect and enthusiasm of both his seniors and juniors. He is highly active, moves quickly and with confidence to the jugular of any problem, yet at the same time he is deferential, courteous, and extremely modest. He is equal to any occasion as it arises and, in my opinion, is preeminently qualified for, and should rise to, the top ranks of his profession. His duties have involved joint efforts with officers of other Services and high echelons of our own government.”— Brigadier General J.M. Masters, Sr., Asst. Chief of Staff, G-2, Marine Corps Headquarters, fitness report, 1959

“Looking back over the years, I have come to realize what a tremendous individual he was. I think you will agree that he had a superb tactical ability—probably the finest division commander the Corps has ever had. I was fortunate enough to have seen him remotivate an entire Division so that it became a winning team.”— Colonel Dick Camp (retired), former aide to General Davis, c. 1995

“All of General Davis' community service accomplishments are too numerous to mention in their entirety, but suffice it to say he personifies the definition of a "public servant." His courage, devotion to duty, leadership, and lifetime of exceptionally meritorious service epitomize the true intent of the Medal of Freedom. In war and peace, as an active duty Marine and as a private citizen, General Davis' outstanding courage, unwavering devotion to duty, inspiring leadership, and sound judgment have represented the highest traditions of military service and citizenship. He is a true American hero.”— Senator Zell Miller (Georgia), nomination for the Presidential Medal of Freedom, 2003

"Above all, I see myself as a man of action. I never sit around and think about others doing this or that. . . . I am aware that as a holder of the Medal of Honor, I belong to this nation forever, because of a combat situation where literally thousands of men's lives depended on the actions that I took when someone had to take action."—General Raymond G. Davis

Timeline

1915 born to Zelma and Raymond Davis

1938 graduates from Georgia Tech with a B.S. of Chemical Engineering; attends The Basic School under Company Commander, Captain Chesty Puller

1942 marries Willa Knox Heafner

1943 leads First Battalion, First Marines, against Japanese at Peleliu, for which he earns the Navy Cross

1950 marches through icy mountains under enemy fire to secure Toktong Pass, an action that saves the trapped Fox company and enables two regiments to evade enemy forces

1952 receives Medal of Honor from President Harry S. Truman at White House ceremony

1957 serves as Assistant G-2 (Intelligence), Marine Corps Headquarters

1959 attends National War College

1960 relocates to Paris as Chief, Intelligence Analysis Branch, J-2

1968 reports to Vietnam as Deputy Commanding General, later becomes Commanding General, 3rd Marine Division

1971 receives fourth star and serves as Assistant Commandant, USMC

1972 retires from USMC, becomes Executive Vice President of the Georgia Chamber of Commerce

1975 becomes President, RGMW, Inc., a land development corporation

1987 agrees, at President Ronald Reagan's request, to serve on the Korean War Veteran's Memorial Committee

1989 Willa Knox Davis christens the USS CHOSIN

1991 attends round-table conference in Pyongyang, North Korea

1995 presides at inauguration of Korean War Memorial, for which he was committee chair

2000 selected as co-chair of Korean War Foundation to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Korean War

2002 visits North Korea as a part of a U.S. government mission to recover remains of U.S. casualties of the Korean War

2003 nominated by Senator Zell Miller for the Presidential Medal of Freedom, serves as national co-chairman of the commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Korean War and as chairman of About Face, America

General Davis died September 3, 2003. Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Michael W. Hagee, Senator Zell Miller, and Georgia Governor Sonny Purdue, along with hundreds of Marine Veterans, attended memorial services.

Military Honors

Congressional Medal of Honor

Navy Cross

Distinguished Service Medal (2)

Silver Star (2)

Legion of Merit (2)

Bronze Star

Purple Heart