

Gen. Paul X. Kelley, Top Marine Tested by a Bombing, Dies at 91

As commandant from 1983 to 1987, he came to be viewed by many as an embodiment of the Marine Corps. But the deadly attack on a barracks in Lebanon proved personally traumatic.

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Gen. Paul X. Kelley, a highly decorated Vietnam veteran who rose to become commandant of the Marine Corps from 1983 to 1987 and endured the devastating bombing of a Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, that killed 241 service members in 1983, died on Sunday at a care facility in McLean, Va. He was 91.

His wife, Barbara Kelley, said the cause was complications of Alzheimer's disease.

At a time when the nation's military was rebuilding both equipment and morale, a decade after the Vietnam War, General Kelley, regarded as politically adept and well connected, was trusted by President Ronald Reagan's inner circle. But the bombing hurt him deeply.

The Marine Corps that he led was also embarrassed by the role played by Lt. Col. Oliver North in the Iran-contra affair and by an espionage scandal involving elite guards at diplomatic outposts in the Soviet Union.

On his path to becoming the 28th commandant of the corps, when he was a three-star lieutenant general, General Kelley became the first commander of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force in 1979. It was a novel command, comprising elements of each military service, that marked a new readiness to intervene militarily in the Persian Gulf and nearby regions.

The task force would eventually grow into the Central Command, which in later years would oversee the 1991 Persian Gulf war and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

General Kelley — inevitably best known as “P.X.” — came to be viewed by many of his peers as an embodiment of the Marine Corps, a leader who took to heart all that happened to those he led.

“He was a tough Boston Irishman,” recalled Bernard Trainor, a retired Marine lieutenant general who was a trusted deputy at the time of the Beirut bombing (and later a military correspondent for The New York Times). “He was vigorous and very open, but he could charm birds out of a tree.”

Paul Xavier Kelley was born in Boston on Nov. 11, 1928, to Albert and Josephine (Sullivan) Kelley. His mother was a librarian; his father, an Army major who was wounded during World War I, taught military drills and history at local high schools. His father was called back to active duty after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941, and died during the war.

In 1950, General Kelley earned a bachelor's degree in economics from Villanova University in Villanova, Pa., and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Marines. The next year he married Barbara Adams, who lived with him at a care facility in Washington before his condition deteriorated. In addition to her, he is survived by a daughter, Christine Cimko; a sister, Joanne McCarthy; and a granddaughter.

At the best of times, the office of commandant is one of the proudest in the military.

Like his predecessors for nearly 200 years, General Kelley and his wife lived in elegance in a historic Washington residence with high ceilings, crystal chandeliers, a reputed ghost and a view of parade grounds clattering with ceremonial drills.

But General Kelley also served through some of the hardest of times for the Marines.

He completed two tours in Vietnam, as a battalion commander in the 1960s and later as a regimental commander, commanding and bringing home the last Marine combat unit to leave Vietnam, in 1971. His combat decorations included the Silver Star, two Bronze Stars and two Legions of Merit. After returning to civilian life he saw to it that other veterans were honored, serving two stints as chairman of the American Battle Monuments Commission.

Early in his career he had served on the Sixth Fleet's flagship in the Mediterranean, and in 1960 and 1961 he trained as a commando with the British Royal Marines and deployed with them to Aden, followed by Singapore, Malaya and Borneo.

But nothing, it turned out, prepared him or the Marine Corps for what would happen in Beirut in 1983, four months after he was promoted to general and took over as commandant.

President Reagan had sent hundreds of Marines as peacekeepers to Lebanon — first to allow the departure of the Palestine Liberation Organization's militants, and ultimately in defense of a government beleaguered by civil war and threatened by powerful neighbors.

Welcomed at first as a stabilizing force, the Marines began to come under attack as the fragile nation relapsed into chaos. On Oct. 23, 1983, a suicide bomber drove a big truck packed with thousands of pounds of explosives into a lightly defended compound near the Beirut airport, killing 241 people.

At a moment when the imminent United States invasion of Grenada was secretly in the works, General Kelley was dispatched as President Reagan's emissary, watching the survivors uncover the dead from the rubble and comforting the wounded in Germany.

"When you see 144 caskets on an airplane," he later said, as quoted by Marine Corps Times, "it will have an impact on you for the rest of your life."

At a memorial service years later, Maj. Gen. Robert Dickerson told how a gravely wounded Lance Cpl. Jeffrey Nashton, in a hospital in Germany, reached out to touch the top Marine's star-studded collar, then scribbled two words: "Semper Fi."

But back in Washington, tempers were raw, especially on Capitol Hill, and General Kelley faced sharp questioning, the more so when it became known that Marines guarding a key checkpoint did not even have bullets in the chambers of their guns.

Perhaps General Kelley, as commandant, shared institutional responsibility. But he pointed out that as far as military operations were concerned, the formal chain of command bypassed him. The regional commander in chief, Gen. Bernard Rogers, took responsibility for what had happened. A Pentagon commission that reviewed the disaster did not mention General Kelley in its report.

Eight days after the attack, appearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, he said it was “not the place of a Marine” to question the vaguely defined mission of the corps to provide a stabilizing presence. But, he declared, “Let me tell you that presence as a mission is not in any military dictionary.”

Susan C. Beachy contributed research. Daniel E. Slotnik contributed reporting.