

General Paul X. "P.X." Kelley

ACG interviews the former commandant of the Marine Corps.

Retired General Paul Xavier "P.X." Kelley spent a lifetime serving in the military, rising through the ranks to attain the highest level in the Marine Corps. He was a parachutist and scuba diver while on active duty, and he received numerous military decorations from the United States and many foreign governments. During his illustrious 37-year career, Kelley became the youngest Marine ever promoted to the rank of four-star general, and from 1983-87 he was the 28th commandant of the Marine Corps and one of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He currently lives in the Washington, D.C., area.

General Kelley's service to his nation should come as no surprise given his family background: his father served in the Army and died in World War II; his sister was one of the first Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) analysts; his brother attended the United States Naval Academy and later held a high position with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA); and his daughter worked at the Pentagon and was a senior staffer on the Senate Armed Services Committee.

ACG: How did you come to join the United States Marine Corps?

KELLEY: I graduated from Villanova College [now University] in 1950, and already had a scholarship from the Knights of Columbus that paid for my tuition and books;



1986. Kelley is briefed on the M249 squad automatic weapon by an instructor from Weapons Training Battalion during a visit to Marine Corps Development and Education Command.

but while there I joined the Navy Reserve Officer Training Corps, which was new after World War II, and they paid for my room and board. During my junior year, I had to select between a Marine commission and going to Quantico, Va., for 15 months or a Navy commission and going to sea for two years. At the time, I was dating a young lady from a nearby college, whom I later married, so I chose the Marines.

ACG: Can you discuss your service in the Vietnam War?

KELLEY: I had two separate combat tours there, the first as the commander of the 2d Infantry Battalion, 4th Marines, and I later went back as the commanding officer of the last Marine unit to remain in Vietnam, the 1st Marine Regiment. I brought home the flag of the 1st Regiment, which closed out

the Marine Corps operations in Vietnam. So for the two tours combined, I was there for about two years.

ACG: What was your role in the Paris Peace Talks?

KELLEY: When I came back from Vietnam, I was transferred to Washington and became the chief of the Southeast Asia Division for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and I became their liaison officer to the Paris Peace Talks and visited Paris on numerous occasions. In the end, we did sign the peace accord and I was involved in its implementation, which meant the withdrawal of troops and basically concluding all American activities.

ACG: What did your exchange tour with Britain's Royal Marines in the early 1960s entail?

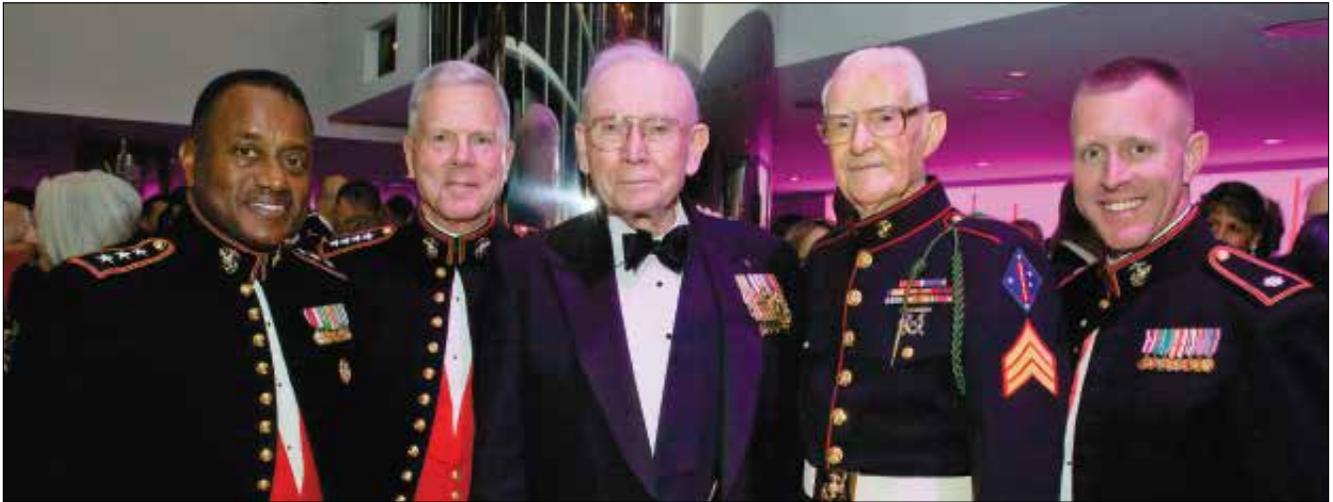
KELLEY: I was a commanding officer in the U.S. Marine Corps, working in the early phases of a unit much like the Navy Seals, meaning they jumped out of airplanes, operated out of submarines, and the like. It was a reconnaissance unit, and I was visited by and later invited to a tour with the Royal Marines, and I was sent over for one year and completed their commando course and was given a [Royal Marine] Green Beret. I was sent to the Far East and commanded a company of the Royal Marines in Singapore, Borneo, and Malaya.



1986. The Joint Chiefs of Staff pose for a formal group photograph at the Pentagon: [from left] U.S. Army Chief of Staff, Gen. John A. Wickham Jr.; U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff, Gen. Charles A. Gabriel; Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. William J. Crowe Jr.; Chief of Naval Operations, Adm. James D. Watkins; and Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen. Paul X. Kelley.

TOP: MARINE SGT. T.K. BURCH; BOTTOM: DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

“The president at the time was Ronald Wilson Reagan, and I could not have asked for a better commander in chief.”



November 10, 2012. On hand to celebrate the Marine Corps' 237th birthday are (from left to center) Director of Marine Corps Staff, Lt. Gen. Willie J. Williams; Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen. James F. Amos; and former Commandant of the Marine Corps, retired Gen. Paul X. Kelley. The 2012 Headquarters Marine Corps Birthday Ball was held at the Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center in Oxon Hill, Md.

ACG: What do you most remember from your time as commandant of the Marine Corps?

KELLEY: I was one of the most fortunate commandants and one of the most unfortunate commandants. It was unfortunate because early in my tenure the Beirut bombing of the Marine barracks occurred, an emotional time for all of us because we lost a considerable number of Marines. The positive part of that is that the president at the time was Ronald Wilson Reagan, and I could not have asked for a better commander in chief ever than Ronald Reagan, and from that he and I became close personal friends.

ACG: What was your role in establishing the Rapid Deployment Task Force?

KELLEY: After a lot of activity leading up to this potential program, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger asked me to be the commander, and I said I would be interested, so they submitted my name. After meeting with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the Pentagon, I was appointed in 1979 by President Jimmy Carter to become their first leader, and I later spearheaded the initiative that culminated in it being called U.S. Central Command.

ACG: What was your relationship with President Reagan?

KELLEY: He was one of the finest individuals I have ever known. I first met him at a

parade he officiated where I assumed command of the Corps.

In the aftermath of the Beirut bombing, there was an article in the *Washington Post* that was quite unkind toward me, and I got a call from one of President Reagan's assistants, who said the president had read the article and said to "tell P.X. to hang tough." I then told the assistant to tell President Reagan that if at any time my resignation would be helpful to the cause, I would be happy to give it to him because he is far more important to this country than me, and that if there was going to be any kind of personal responsibility, that's me and not him.

Within minutes, the president himself called and said, "P.X., I understand you want to resign from the Marine Corps?" I said that wasn't exactly how it went, but if that will help take the heat off the subject then I would be happy to resign. He said, "Well I want you to submit your resignation," and my heart jumped before he added, "because when you do, I want the great pleasure and honor of returning it as *disapproved*."

That's the kind of relationship I had with Ronald Reagan. Fortunately, I continued my relationship with him after he left office, where he and I belonged to a riding club in California and I continued to see him.

ACG: What leaders in history do you most admire?

KELLEY: Of course, Ronald Reagan would

be at the top of my list, mainly because as commander in chief he was so approachable. He is easily the greatest president I have ever known.

In the military, I admired [U.S. Army] General Jack Vessey, an unsung hero who was a sergeant in the Minnesota National Guard when he led an Army unit at Anzio Beach [1944 Italian campaign]. He became chairman of the Joint Chiefs [1982-85], and I served under him and he was one of the finest men of character I have ever known.

ACG: What do you believe are the main traits of truly outstanding leaders?

KELLEY: I believe the main trait of leaders is to have the milk of human kindness, to be warm and approachable. Then, they can understand those who serve under them, their problems, their families, and the like.

ACG: What aspects of military history are most important to you?

KELLEY: They all are important to me, but the main one is not to get too embedded in history. I believe military leaders should study any situation they are in, and not try to emulate someone from history. In other words, be your own man. ★

John Ingoldsby conducted this interview. He is an award-winning writer on the intersection of sports and the military and is president of IIR Sports & Entertainment Inc. (IIRsports.com), a public relations and media firm in Boston.