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FOREBODING A 1979 tropical cyclone turned fatal at a U.S. Marine Corps training camp near Mt. Fuji in Japan when spilled gasoline flooded into the huts where an infantry battalion was housed.

The Burning Storm

Fuji Fire
By Chas Henry
Potomac, 328 pages, $36.95

By James Webb

ON OCT. 19, 1979, Typhoon Tip, at the time the most intense tropical storm ever recorded, whipped through a U.S. Marine Corps training camp near Mount Fuji in Japan. On one slope of the camp stood a recently constructed fuel farm, made up of three large, rubberized fuel tanks, called bladders, each carrying more than 5,000 gallons of fuel and weighing in excess of 30,000 pounds. As the torrent of rain continued, the loose lava soil underneath began to erode. One bladder containing 5,933 gallons of gasoline "floated up and over what remained of its encircling earthen embankment." A sharp metal corner of its frame ripped a 5-foot-long tear in the bladder. Soon "an estimated 5,500 gallons of the fuel . . . flowed downhill atop already flooding rainwater." So writes Chas Henry in his account of the disaster, "Fuji Fire."

At the bottom of the slope, an infantry battalion undergoing training maneuvers at Camp Fuji was temporarily housed in a dilapidated collection of leaky and worn World War II-era Quonset huts. The waterborne fuel flowed downhill and seeped inside some of the huts, where the Marines' open-flame kerosene heaters ignited a series of flash fires. In moments the camp turned into a rushing hell of flame. Thirteen Marines died. Seventy-three, including a Navy corpsman, were badly injured. Of those, 54 suffered life-altering burns.

The story is a painful reminder that our youngest soldiers, sailors and Marines bear the consequences of decisions made by the high-level officers and political leaders far above them. Of the 13 who died, the youngest Marine was 17, the oldest 22.

With the large number of seriously burned Marines, many of whom would remain on the edge of death for months—five died in Japan and eight others wouldn't make it—the immediate damage from the fires was only the beginning. The remote base was limited in its ability to provide emergency care, and the typhoon blurred communications. But Camp Fuji's leaders made multiple requests that enabled the relocation of casualties from the camp to the next level of triage and stabilizing care, mostly at Yokota Air Base, 60 miles northward from Camp Fuji over difficult routes.

Decisions made by high-ranking officers most often affect junior troops. The youngest Marine who died was 17, the oldest 22.

Viewing the gruesome injuries, the command at Yokota quickly coordinated with officials in the U.S. and launched C-141 jet flights with top-level medical care to keep the injured Marines from dying. One did during two nail-biting medical evacuations from Japan to the Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio. Those arrivals marked the beginning of intense, long-term medical treatments and constant efforts to save the lives of many severely burned Marines.

Even as the evacuations took place, less than a week after the catastrophe, Marine Corps leadership on Okinawa began an "informal investigation" focused on the unwisdom of placing the fuel tanks uphill from the leaky Quonset huts. Following a series of interviews, investigators protectively concluded that "no person or persons is responsible for the fire that occurred at Camp Fuji," which they called "an act of God." This informal amnesty was questioned by some within the Marine Corps and fiercely contested by some outside observers, including family members of the dead and disfigured. After personal visits and direct involvement, Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Robert Barrow, a legendary combat leader in World War II, Korea and Vietnam, came to a firm conclusion and ordered a more stringent investigation: "There were too many man-made factors involved. It wasn't just the typhoon." The Fuji fire, he said, was "the most serious peacetime disaster we've had in the Marine Corps in my time."

Whether the fire was the result of an "act of God" or a poor decision by military commanders to install a fuel farm uphill from the Quonset huts, the most important immediate task was to console the family members of those who had either died or were succumbing to death, and to look after the welfare of the surviving Marines. The rescue-flight leaders and their medical-care teams were spectacular under intense conditions. And moving the seriously injured Marines in careful stages all the way from a remote camp in Japan to the Brooke Center in Texas comprised "the largest number of acutely burned patients that has ever been moved that quickly anywhere in the world."

The complexity of this story makes it exceedingly difficult to tell. Till now it has been little remembered and infrequently taught in our military academies. Mr. Henry's scholarly rigor, knowledge of the military and storytelling skill may at last change that.

The book isn't a mere timetable or one-sided polemic. After serving a full career as a Marine Corps public-affairs specialist, Mr. Henry spent four years in the U.S. and in Japan researching and interviewing for this book. He has laid out the entire debacle, minute by minute and person by person, from the weather buildup that created the typhoon to the personal travails months later of many Marines finally released from the hospital—men who would overcome the challenges of life-changing injuries.

The most poignant pages of "Fuji Fire" recount the travails of injured Marines loyally supporting each other in the hot, odorous wards as they endured constant, often painful treatments. Many, though hoping to survive and heal, were unrecognizable from their burns. Among the story's heroes is Barrow, who faced an audience of family members with humility and told them that he took full responsibility for the disaster. He then required subordinate generals to visit the charred young Marines inside their malodorous hot-burn wards. In many cases the visitors had to use a nearby restroom to manage their nausea. Thus did Barrow ensure, in keeping with the Marines' motto, "Semper Fidelis," that those mutilated young men would know that their top leaders had not forgotten them. Such leadership might be profitably studied by high-ranking officers today.

Mr. Webb served as a Marine in Vietnam, as Secretary of the Navy and as a U.S. senator from Virginia.