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SCHOOL OF ADVANCED AIR AND SPACE STUDIES

AIR UNIVERSITY

GENERAL ROY S. GEIGER, USMC:

MARINE AVIATOR, JOINT FORCE COMMANDER

by

JAMES B. WELLONS, MAJOR, USMC

A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF

THE SCHOOL OF ADVANCED AIR AND SPACE STUDIES

FOR COMPLETION OF GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama

JUNE 2007

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

1. REPORT DATE	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED
JUN 2007		**00-00-2007 to 00-00-2007**

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
General Roy S. Geiger, USMC: Marine Aviator, Joint Force Commander	5b. GRANT NUMBER
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)	5d. PROJECT NUMBER
	5e. TASK NUMBER
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **Air University,Air Command and Staff College,225 Chennault Circle,Maxwell AFB ,AL,36112**	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT
see report

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			
unclassified	**unclassified**	**unclassified**	**Same as Report (SAR)**	**175**	

APPROVAL

The undersigned certify that this thesis meets masters-level standards of research, argumentation, and expression.

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RICHARD R. MULLER (Date)

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THOMAS HUGHES (Date)

DISCLAIMER

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author. They do not reflect the official position of the US Government, Department of Defense, the United States Air Force, the United States Marine Corps, or Air University.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Major James B. Wellons is a 1992 graduate of the United States Naval Academy, where he earned his commission as a Second Lieutenant in the Marine Corps. Following the Basic School in 1993, he attended flight training at NAS Pensacola, FL, NAS Corpus Christi, TX, and NAS Meridian, MS, earning his wings as a naval aviator in August 1995. He went on to fly AV-8Bs at MCAS Cherry Point, NC, where he joined VMA-231 in 1997 and deployed twice with the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit. In 2000, he joined VMAT-203, the AV-8B Fleet Replacement Squadron. While there, he acted as an AV-8B Instructor Pilot and graduated from Aviation Safety School and the 2001 Weapons and Tactics Instructor (WTI) course at Marine Aviation Weapons and Tactics Squadron One (MAWTS-1). In 2002, he returned to VMA-231, where he acted as pilot training officer and WTI. He deployed with the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit in 2002, acting as the HMM-263 Future Operations and Tactics Department Head and AV-8B WTI. During this deployment, he flew in support of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. His last tour was at MAWTS-1, where he served as AV-8B Instructor and Division Head and TACAIR Department Head. In July 2007, Major Wellons was assigned to U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Central Command.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project has been a rewarding and surprisingly enjoyable journey through the annals of Marine Corps history and the research process. I would like to acknowledge the support and enthusiasm of the entire faculty of the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies (SAASS), Air University, Maxwell AFB, Alabama. This great institution unhesitatingly provided the resources necessary for a project of this scope. Among the many faculty members who have supported my research, my thesis advisor, Dr. Richard R. Muller, deserves my deepest gratitude. His professionalism, insight, and motivation were critical to the success of this work. A second note of thanks goes to Dr. Thomas Hughes, my thesis reader, whose invaluable perspective and constant encouragement were instrumental in shaping the biography of General Geiger.

There is an extensive group of esteemed individuals who assisted my research and made this project possible. This group includes researchers, archivists, and librarians who helped me navigate the many research obstacles I faced. Researching this project required visits to the Naval Historical Center in Washington, D.C., the National Archives II in College Park, MD, and the Marine Corps Historical Records Branch and Alfred Gray Research Center in Quantico, VA. At each of these facilities were key individuals who helped me stay on course. Most notable was Dr. Jim Ginther, Archival Team Leader at the Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps. Dr. Ginther offered many key resources and contacts and generously read and critiqued my thesis draft. It was through Dr. Ginther that I found Colonel Roy S. Geiger, Jr., who kindly shared several of his father's personal items and sat for a lengthy interview in his home. His insight was critical in the effort to recover the memory of Roy Geiger.

The most important resource for this project was Colonel Edward C. Kicklighter, USMC (Ret.), who was General Geiger's Pilot and Aide-de-Camp in World War II. Colonel Kicklighter kindly read my thesis and provided precious insight through dozens of letters and phone calls. His dedication to this project was remarkable.

Finally, I wish to thank my wife, Grayson, and my daughters, Lilly and Lucy. It is to these lovely girls that I am most indebted for the sacrifices that made this project possible.

ABSTRACT

This work comprises an effort to answer the question of how an airman can be qualified to be a Joint Force Commander, using the biographical example of General Roy S. Geiger, USMC. Geiger was the fifth designated Marine Aviator, earning his wings in June of 1917. He then served as a squadron commander in the First Marine Aviation Force in World War I (WW I), where he flew combat sorties and earned his first Navy Cross. In the interwar years, he served in multiple command billets, acted as head of Marine Aviation, and performed with distinction as a student at the Army Command and General Staff School and the Army and Navy War Colleges. During World War II, Geiger commanded the First Marine Aircraft Wing and the CACTUS Air Force in the dark days of the Guadalcanal Campaign in 1942, where at age fifty-seven he again flew in combat, earning his second Navy Cross. He went on to serve as an Amphibious Corps Commander in the Pacific Theater, where he led campaigns at Bougainville, Guam, and Peleliu. Finally, he distinguished himself in the battle of Okinawa as the only Marine ever to command a field Army, the Tenth Army. After World War II, Lieutenant General Geiger continued to shape the Marine Corps in command of Fleet Marine Forces, Pacific until his premature death in 1947. The study is a chronological account of the life of Roy Geiger, with a focus on his leadership traits, extensive professional military education, remarkable joint relationships, and innovation, all of which contributed to his success as a Joint Force Commander. The author argues that Geiger was the most influential Marine aviator and among the most successful operational commanders in the history of the United States Marine Corps. Roy Geiger was the prototype for a Joint Force Commander.

CONTENTS

Introduction

> The relationship I had with Roy Geiger was the best I've had, anywhere, anytime, during the war, with any other service. It was partly due to his personality. He was forceful and at the same time very cooperative – a wonderful man, very knightly character. Everybody liked Geiger. But he was no "popularity jack." He was a good tough Marine.
>
> Admiral Richard L. Connolly

Roy S. Geiger was the most influential Marine aviator in the history of the United States Marine Corps, yet his contributions are largely forgotten. There is a Camp Geiger in Camp Lejeune, NC and Geiger Hall houses the Expeditionary Warfare School in Quantico, VA, and occasionally one stumbles across a Geiger Street on Marine Corps bases around the world. Despite these tokens of recognition, however, the average Marine has little if any knowledge of Roy Geiger and his name is virtually unknown among the general public.[1]

This anonymity is remarkable, as his operational success compares favorably with that of **any** Marine in history.[2] This is a strong assertion, given the significant and better-known contributions of great Marines such as John Lejeune, Smedley Butler, Alexander Vandegrift, Holland M. Smith, Lewis Puller, and others whose accomplishments and images fill history books and museums.[3] Students of military history

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[1] Roy S. Geiger's hometown of Pensacola, FL keeps no records of Geiger in its historical archives.

[2] Colonel Joe Alexander, USMC (Ret.), interview by the author, 28 March, 2007. Alexander states that Geiger was "head and shoulders above" the better known Lieutenant General Holland M. Smith, who was the other major Marine amphibious corps commander in WW II. Alexander also places Geiger ahead of Major General Harry Schmidt, who commanded the V Amphibious Corps at Iwo Jima. See also Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, USMC (Ret.), Director Emeritus of the Marine Corps History Branch, interview by the author, 28 March, 2007. Simmons concurred with the assessment that Geiger was the most talented corps commander in WW II.

[3] This thesis will show that Geiger was highly regarded by all of these men

study and celebrate the contributions of such men in shaping the Marine Corps legacy and doctrine, but rarely do they include Roy Geiger among the select group of individuals who form the bedrock of the modern Marine Corps.[4]

To do so would be particularly bold, given that Geiger was a designated Naval Aviator and did not spend his career as a ground officer. The Marine Corps rightly celebrates those ground combatants whose calling is to close with and destroy the enemy on the Earth's surface, while the contribution of the supporting aviation arm sometimes fades into the background. This should not imply that aviators are denied their rightful place in Marine Corps history, as the Marine Corps surely recognizes the contributions of Alfred Cunningham, Marion Carl, Joe Foss, Gregory Boyington, and even an Air Force fighter pilot named John Boyd, who is memorialized at the Alfred Gray Research Center in Quantico, Virginia. Yet, the legacy of Roy Geiger remains in the shadows.

What is to be gained, then, by conducting a study of his life and career, some sixty years after his death? Answering this question is the focus of this thesis, but a short biographical sketch will reveal the scope of his contributions. Born in Middleburg, Florida on January 25, 1985, he graduated from law school in 1907 and enlisted in the Marine Corps later that year, then obtained his commission and served with distinction as a ground officer until 1916. Geiger then joined the budding aviation community and became the fifth designated Marine Aviator in June of 1917. He served as a squadron commander in the First Marine Aviation Force in World War I (WW I), where he flew combat sorties and earned his first Navy Cross. In the interwar years, he served in multiple

[4] There is only one biography of Geiger, *Unaccustomed to Fear* by Roger Willock. Originally published by the author, this book is in the Marine Corps Professional Reading Program, but is not available at the recently opened National Museum of the Marine Corps, which sells a comprehensive collection of USMC historical works.

command billets, acted as head of Marine Aviation, and performed with distinction as a student at the Army Command and General Staff School and the Army and Navy War Colleges. During World War II (WW II), Geiger commanded the First Marine Aircraft Wing in the dark days of the Guadalcanal Campaign in 1942, where at age fifty-seven he again flew in combat and earned his second Navy Cross. Later, he served as an Amphibious Corps Commander in the Pacific Theater, ultimately distinguishing himself in the battle of Okinawa as the only Marine ever to command a field Army. After WW II, Lieutenant General Geiger continued to shape the Marine Corps in command of Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPAC) until his premature death in 1947.

It is clear that Roy Geiger was an important figure in World War II. But, there are dozens of military leaders from that war who qualify as important figures and whose legacies remain obscure. So, then, the questions of relevance and significance remain. Why is it useful to resurrect the memory of Roy Geiger after sixty years, especially given the sweeping changes in aviation and doctrine since that time? After all, military historians have strip-mined the events of WWI, the interwar years, and WW II for over half a century. Furthermore, many of the fundamentals of warfighting in the 21st century barely resemble those of 1945. Aside from telling a compelling story about a great man, then, what purpose does it serve to tell the story of General Roy S. Geiger?

Roy Geiger represents the prototype for an airman (or any servicemember) who aspires to be a Joint Force Commander in the 21st century. Describing Geiger, General Holland M. "Howlin' Mad" Smith remarked that "no military aviator since the Wright brothers has ever exercised, quite interchangeably, such major air and ground commands, all in one war,"[5] a description which remains accurate today. Furthermore, the study of Geiger offers a lens into a rare example of

[5] Holland M. Smith and Percy Finch, *Coral and Brass, (Wa*shington: United States Marine Corps, 1989), 155.

combat leadership that features the qualities of determination and presence-of-mind that Carl von Clausewitz described in his great study of military genius.[6] Accounts of Geiger's performance under fire reveal a man who "retain[ed] glimmerings of inner light in a dark hour and the courage to follow that light."[7] There is great value in conducting an analysis of the traits that yielded such capability.

In his career, Geiger faced multiple and varied leadership challenges, from his experiences as a small unit leader in Nicaragua to his tours as Wing Commander at Guadalcanal, Amphibious Corps Commander in the Pacific, and FMFPAC Commanding General. His many years of professional study imbued him with the requisite knowledge for command at these varied levels, but Geiger's success was much more than a reflection of his academic preparation.

Records and accounts of his command experience consistently reveal his intelligence, courage, and unflappable nature; the evidence shows that he possessed an uncanny ability to process information and make sound decisions under fire. Geiger was confident commander who had a firm grasp of the staff planning process and trusted his staff with planning details so that he could maintain a clear focus on his command responsibilities. Rear Admiral George Van Deurs recalled Geiger's demeanor on the night before the invasion of Okinawa in April, 1945:

> I walked into Geiger's stateroom and was surprised to find him with nothing on but a pair of drawers, lying in his bunk reading a detective story. I said, "You don't seem very worried about this."
> "Oh," he said, "nothing to it. Reifsnider will put us ashore and then we'll lick 'em. In the meantime, I don't have anything to do."[8]

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[6] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Rev. ed. and trans. Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 100.
[7] Clausewitz, 103.
[8] Rear Admiral George van Deurs, USN (Ret.), *Oral History,* (Annapolis, MD: US Naval Institute, 1974), 503.

Geiger famously and frequently disregarded his own personal safety by setting up his headquarters in close proximity to the front lines in an effort to gain the best possible picture of the battlefield situation (or to motivate his troops).[9] In a forty-year career as a Marine, Geiger's actions reflected a remarkable combination of competence and courage. In addition to these traits, Geiger possessed vision, presence, and determination which shaped Marine Corps force structure and doctrine, along with events on many battlefields. Indeed, Geiger's is a story worth telling.

In addition to providing a useful study of leadership, the analysis of Geiger's life and military experience leads to a focus in three main areas of relevance to the modern military practitioner: his approach to doctrinal and technological innovation, professional military education, and joint operations. Geiger's actions reveal a pragmatic nature and a practical approach to problem-solving; it is not apparent that he was ever blinded by careerism, service advocacy, or institutional culture in his efforts to find solutions to the many dilemmas he faced. In a speech, he once said that "Marines are capable of doing anything – even if it isn't done according to the book," and his actions speak to this philosophy.[10] Geiger was an accomplished innovator in the doctrinal and practical realms of Close Air Support, amphibious operations, and combined arms warfare. He never lost sight of the pre-eminent importance of the infantryman in the Marine Corps and his vision for shaping Marine aviation doctrine was based on helping the ground Marine to accomplish his mission.

Geiger's foundational experience as a ground officer, coupled with his experiences as a student in Service schools and an instructor at

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[9] Lieutenant General Merwin H. Silverthorn, USMC (Ret.), (Washington, DC: History and Musuems Division, Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 1973, Oral History Unit, transcript), 325.

[10] Major General Roy S. Geiger, Untitled address to Quantico Graduates, Quantico, VA, 2 June 1943, General Roy S. Geiger collection, USMC Historical Reference Branch.

Marine Corps schools provided him with a core competence in ground combat that was exceptional for an aviator. His educational experiences provided the ability to understand the perspective and challenges of ground combat and, as a result, he possessed a great deal of credibility with his infantry counterparts. His experience at the Naval War College gave him an intellectual understanding of the application of sea power and the opportunity to interface with Naval Officers with whom he would serve in WW II. As a result, Geiger's naval expertise gave him a rapport with the Naval officers on whom he would depend for critical support during amphibious operations. As a Marine aviator with an advanced education in ground and sea power, Roy Geiger was one of a rare breed: a master of the three dimensions of war in the mid-20th century.

In the context of the bitter inter-service rivalry that occurred during and after WW II, Geiger's educational experiences are not sufficient to explain his successful joint relationships. Instead, records show that Geiger strove to rise above institutional concerns and service advocacy to work with his joint brethren; he used the same pragmatic approach to building joint relationships that he applied to technological and doctrinal problems. Geiger was the rare General Officer who did not permit self- or service-interest to inhibit his ability to leverage joint capability for battlefield successes. As a result, he was universally admired by his counterparts from other services and his strong joint relationships were a big factor in his battlefield successes.[11]

With a focus on leadership, innovation, education, and joint relations, this thesis is a critical examination of the life and military career of General Roy S. Geiger. The narrative will demonstrate his strengths and expose his weaknesses, while providing an assessment and evaluation of his decision-making and performance throughout his

career. Ultimately, this thesis is an effort to answer the question of why the life of Roy Geiger is relevant to the 21st Century warfighter and, in particular, the airman who strives to be a Joint Force Commander.

Before embarking on the story of Roy S. Geiger, it is instructive to examine the reasons for the obscurity surrounding his legacy. First, he died before he had the chance to write his memoirs and he did not record an oral history. Second, Geiger was not a prolific writer and he left no journal and very little written material that might provide a window into his personality or decision-making methods. Famously reticent, he once responded to reporter's request for an interview with *Leatherneck* magazine by stating, "Write a story about yourself; I am just a Marine like you are."[12] Third, there does not appear to be an enormous market for biographical works in the field of Marine Aviation, aside from a few autobiographies of Cactus Air Force veterans such as Joe Foss and Pappy Boyington.[13] As a result of these factors, reconstructing the life of Roy Geiger is a daunting task that promises little commercial reward.

Fortunately, there is a significant amount of useful information in Geiger's papers at the Marine Corps Archives in Quantico, Virginia. Cross-referencing this documentation with works and correspondence located at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland helps paint a portrait of Geiger. Additionally, the author was able to leverage the work of Major Timothy Quagge, USMC, who completed a "Professional Biographical Study of General Roy Stanley Geiger" at Marine Command and Staff College, 1996. Several individuals at the Marine Corps Historical Society were also helpful in providing documentation, personal papers, and other materials on Roy Geiger.

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[11] Simmons interview. For example, Admiral Nimitz chose Geiger as the lone representative of the Marine Corps at the Japanese surrender aboard *USS Missouri*, even though Geiger was not the senior Marine in the Pacific.
[12] Untitled article, *The Leatherneck*, March, 1931.
[13] *Baa Baa Black Sheep*, the autobiography of Gregory Boyington, is one of the most popular books in print on Marine Aviation. The Marine Corps Professional Reading

This project would not have been possible without reference to a self-published biography of Geiger entitled *Unaccustomed to Fear*, by Roger Willock.[14] This book has only been reprinted once since 1984, but remains in the Marine Corps Professional Reading Program as required reading for Gunnery Sergeants. *Unaccustomed to Fear* was particularly helpful in fleshing out the details of Roy Geiger's formative years, given the passage of over a century and the virtual non-existence of records from that period of his life. Also, the Willock biography references many documents that were unobtainable in researching this thesis; in such cases, *Unaccustomed to Fear* served as the principal source. In an effort toward verification, the author conducted an extensive personal interview with Roy's surviving son and namesake, Roy Geiger, Jr., who provided confirmation of those details which are not supported by existing records.[15]

A final note of thanks goes to Colonel Edward C. Kicklighter, USMC, (Ret.), General Geiger's Aide-de-Camp from 1944 to 1947. Colonel Kicklighter was extremely generous with his time and enthusiastic about this project; he provided a wealth of information, personal recollections, resources, and contacts. Like most of the men who knew and worked for General Geiger, he loved the man and continues to celebrate his memory.

Program contains no books on the topic of airpower and just one book with an aviation theme: *Unaccustomed to Fear*, Roger Willock's self-published biography of Geiger.

[14] Roger Willock, *Unaccustomed to Fear: A Biography of the Late General Roy Stanley Geiger, USMC* (Princeton, NJ: Privately Published, 1968); reprinted (Quantico, Virginia: Marine Corps Association, 1983).

[15] Colonel Roy S. Geiger, Jr., USA (Ret.), interview by the author, 24 February, 2007.

Chapter 1

The Courtroom, the Corps, and the Cockpit

On January 25, 1885, Roy Geiger was born into a large family of modest means in the north Florida logging town of Middleburg, located 25 miles southwest of Jacksonville. The sixth of seven children (four boys and three girls), Roy grew up in a hardscrabble and unforgiving world. His father was Marion Francis Geiger, a tax assessor and Superintendent of Clay County Schools, who died unexpectedly in 1892, leaving Roy fatherless at the tender age of seven.[16]

It was Roy's good fortune that his Mother, Josephine, provided a strong role model and parental guidance, as reflected by her success in providing a college education for all of her seven children. This was no mean feat in the early days of the twentieth century, especially in a rural, fatherless home of meager assets. Mrs. Geiger was a tough, demanding parent, who was committed to giving her children the tools and education necessary for survival. It is apparent that she needed all of her maternal skills to match Roy's stubbornness and early thirst for adventure: among other exploits, Geiger's childhood experiences included a broken arm after a pre-Wright Brothers attempt at manned flight from the roof of a woodshed (twenty years prior to his first successful flight as a student naval aviator!).

Mrs. Geiger's relationship with Roy was not always harmonious. For example, when she insisted that he take violin lessons at age eleven, he resisted this notion in a dramatic manner. Running away from home, he boarded a train in hobo-like fashion, traveled to Chicago, Illinois and found refuge at the home of his brother, Ellis, with whom he

[16] Willock, 24-35. See also personal interview with Roy Geiger, Jr.

remained for several months before returning home. There are no records of his ever playing the violin.

The Geiger children learned to survive and excel under difficult circumstances and Roy supported himself financially from an early age. Roy assumed the role of primary caretaker for his sister Lily during a life-threatening battle with typhoid fever, while his mother fought her own battle against a heart disorder. Meanwhile, throughout these difficult years, Roy attended school and engaged in athletic pursuits, displaying remarkable talent as a swimmer. His savings from his continuous employment in an assortment of jobs provided him with the funds necessary for room and board at the Florida State Normal School, which he entered at age seventeen in the fall of 1902. Thus began a lifelong record of educational experiences and achievements.

The Law and the Corps

The account of Roy Geiger's civilian career is short but remarkable. Completing his term at Florida State Normal School in 1904, Roy served briefly as Principal of Palatka (Clay County) Junior High School and obtained his Teacher's Certificate in 1905.[17] His career as an educator was short-lived, as he promptly pursued a Bachelor of Laws degree from John B. Stetson University in Deland, Florida, graduating on May 28, 1907. Having passed the Florida State Bar, Geiger then established a private law practice in Green Cove Springs, Florida, where he represented a small number of clients in the summer of 1907.[18] Only

[17] B. M. Frisbee to Middleburg, Clay County, Florida, letter, 27 March, 1908. Letter documents character traits and previous work history in Northern Florida. General Roy Stanley Geiger's Personal Papers Collection maintained at the Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps, Quantico, Virginia. Folder # 1, Box #1, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps. (Hereafter cited as Folder (if applicable), Box, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps).

[18] Notice of appointment letter to the office of Notary Public dated 13 March, 1906. Circuit and Inferior Courts of the State of Florida appointment letter dated 23 April, 1907. Box #12, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

twenty-one, his educational accomplishments are a testament to his work ethic, ambition, and intellectual ability.

Disillusioned with the prospect of defending guilty clients, Roy was unsatisfied with his choice of career.[19] Records of his activities and travels in the summer of 1907 are incomplete, but it is clear that he traveled to Chicago, where he sought the counsel of his brother Ellis. Soon thereafter, on November 2, 1907, in St. Paul, Minnesota, Roy Geiger enlisted as a Private in the United States Marine Corps, signing a contract to serve for four years.[20]

There is no clear explanation for Roy Geiger's decision to join the Marines. He did not come from a military family and there is no evidence that he enjoyed friendships with any serving Marines. Furthermore, the Marine Corps of 1907 was a relatively small service, composed of only 8,500 enlisted men and 270 officers who served in three main categories: overseas postings in a variety of security forces, security detachments aboard naval vessels, and various stateside postings in training, staff, or security elements.[21] The Marine Corps enjoyed a good reputation in the public eye, given the positive press from the Spanish-American War and the Boxer Rebellion in China. It is possible that Geiger discovered the Marine Corps via the newspapers, but he could just as easily have discovered the Marines in an impulsive moment with an effective recruiter.[22]

The reason Geiger joined the Marines is of little consequence to this analysis. It is sufficient to state that the character of Geiger's childhood and education reflected a man of intelligence with a restless

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[19] Roy Geiger, Jr., interview by the author. "Daddy always said he would have preferred to defend the innocent ones."
[20] Roy Geiger, Jr., interview by the author. See also letter, HQMC to Major R. S. Geiger dated February 26, 1923, documenting original enlistment and commissioning dates. Box #12, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.
[21] Allen R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis; The History of the United States Marine Corps, The Revised and Expanded Edition*, (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 147-177, 267-286.
[22] Roy Geiger, Jr., interview with the author. Geiger's decision to enter the Marine Corps may have been impulsive and was not the result of any long-term plan.

nature and an adventurous spirit. It may simply be this sense of adventure which led him to the Marines. Regardless of his rationale, at age twenty-two, Roy Geiger joined the ranks of the "First to Fight," where he remained for the rest of his life.

While clearly possessing the educational qualifications to be commissioned, Geiger was medically disqualified in many areas: he had flat feet and double-jointed knees; he was too short (5 ft. 6/12 in.) and underweight (140 pounds); he had a heart murmur, eyestrain, and a number of other ailments.[23] The Marine Corps granted him medical waivers for these conditions and accepted his enlistment and, until his death, Geiger's medical condition would never detract from his performance. As an enlisted man, Private Geiger performed exceptionally in his assignment at the Marine Barracks, Washington, D. C.[24] He was promoted to Corporal in only seven months (well below the average time in grade of almost 4 years) and, based on his performance and educational qualifications, Corporal Geiger obtained a commission as Second Lieutenant on January 20, 1909.[25]

Life in the Infantry

For his initial officer training, Second Lieutenant Geiger reported to Port Royal, South Carolina, where he joined a class of over fifty fellow officers -- an illustrious group which included many future Marine Corps leaders.[26] Geiger built the foundation of many life-long relationships in this ten-month course and the impression he made on his peers

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[23] Willock, 34. Geiger later joked that his medical disqualifications made him appear more dead than alive!

[24] Also known as "8th and I," this is the oldest active post in the Marine Corps.

[25] HQMC to Corporal R. S. Geiger, letter, 21 January, 1909 advising Corporal Geiger of favorable results of Second Lieutenant examination. See also Certificate, Department of the Navy, Bureau of Navigation, dated 3 February, 1909 appointing Geiger a Second Lieutenant. Box #12, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

[26] Included in this group were future Commandant of the Marine Corps A.A. Vandegrift and future aviation leaders, including A.A. Cunningham, Francis Evans, and Edwin Brainard.

influenced his selection for later career postings.[27] Geiger performed with distinction and graduated high in his class, with a strong academic and athletic performance.[28] This is fortunate, as he was the subject of disciplinary action when he violated liberty regulations and was found guilty of drinking alcohol and fraternizing with enlisted men. Were it not for his strong performance, he may have lost his commission due to this misbehavior.

Geiger went on to serve in a variety of billets during his eight years as a ground officer in the Marine Corps. He began his service in December 1909 in the security detachment aboard the battleship *USS Wisconsin* and later served aboard the *USS Delaware*, which he joined on September 1, 1910.[29] These tours were mostly unremarkable, but for the swimming exploits that Geiger displayed while the ships were anchored. During these episodes he became famous for diving off the ships and swimming from vessel to vessel with ease.[30]

On June 24, 1911, the *Delaware* represented the United States at the Coronation review of King George V. After the festivities one evening, Geiger was found drunk after swimming back to *Delaware* from a social visit to a British warship. Fallout from this incident included an adverse fitness report -- he was cited for "impertinence and flippance" -- and subsequent correspondence with the Major General Commandant of the Marine Corps and the Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels![31] This

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[27] Cunningham would select Geiger to be among the first group of Aviators largely based on experience here.
[28] Unverified by academic records, which are not available. This assertion made by Willock and supported by favorable oral histories of Vandegrift.
[29] HQMC to Second Lieutenant R.S. Geiger, letter, 14 April, 1910, detaching him from *USS Wisconsin* and letter, 15 September, 1910, attaching him to the Marine detachment aboard the *USS Delaware*. Box #11, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps, cited in unpublished Masters Thesis by Major Timothy E. Quagge, USMC, entitled *General Roy Stanley Geiger, USMC, A Professional Biographical Study*. CSC 1996, Quantico, VA.
[30] Colonel Richard Camp, USMC, (Ret.), "Rugged Roy' Geiger and the Northern Bombing Group *Leatherneck*, May 2006, 34-35. See also Willock, 49-50.
[31] Roy Geiger, Jr., interview by the author. See also Second Lieutenant R. S. Geiger to Commanding Officer, USS Delaware, letter, 1 July, 1911 regarding, "Statement

was the final blemish on an otherwise distinguished military record. Geiger was grateful for a second chance and he would no doubt remember this incident for the rest of his career as a Marine leader.

Once detached from *Delaware*, Geiger served briefly as a recruiter in New York City before accepting his first combat assignment as part of the 1st Provisional Regiment, commanded by Colonel Joseph H. Pendleton, for expeditionary duty in Nicaragua.[32] This force embarked aboard *USS Prairie* from the Philadelphia Naval Yard on August 24, 1912. Sailing to Nicaragua, the force prepared for its mission to assist President Adolfo Diaz' ailing conservative government from threats of an armed uprising. This was just the sort of regional conflict in which the Marines participated in keeping with their advance base force mission: "To furnish such garrisons and expeditionary forces for duties beyond the seas as may be necessary in time of peace."[33]

Debarking on September 4, 1912, the Regiment assumed the mission of securing the national railroad and denying its use to revolutionist forces. This mission evolved into an offensive action against a rebel stronghold at Coyotepe, where Lieutenant Geiger led Marines into combat for the first time. Commended for his performance, Geiger participated in multiple skirmishes and peacekeeping efforts through January, 1913, when he reported for duty at Camp Elliott in Panama.[34]

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answering report of returning on board unfit for duty," cited in Quagge, Chapter 1, note 13.

[32] Orders, Headquarters, US Forces, Leon, Nicaragua, dated 17 October, 1912, assigning Geiger to duty with a mounted expedition to Mataglapa. Folder # 3, Box #1, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

[33] Millett, 138-142. In the early 1900's the Marine Corps transitioned from some of its traditional roles such as shipboard security to the development of an offensive capability which required training and organization of battalions for expeditionary and advanced base force duty. This gave the Marine Corps an important distinction from the Army, which was important for the institutional survival of the USMC. Also see Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 72-73.

[34] George T. Weitzel, telegram, 16 January 1913 citing complimentary remarks for US forces in Nicaragua. Letter of Commendation, HQMC, dated 28 May, 1913 to Second Lieutenant R.S. Geiger. Box #1, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch,

While stationed in Panama, Geiger made a favorable impression on Major Smedley Butler, who later earned the Medal of Honor twice and became a lifelong mentor to Geiger.[35]

Following his experience with small wars in Central America and a short stint at Mare Island, California, Second Lieutenant Geiger shipped off for his first tour along the Pacific basin in March, 1913. His Pacific tour began in the Philippines, where he joined a roster that included First Lieutenant Holland M. Smith, future Amphibious Corps commander and the foremost Marine Corps expert on amphibious operations. From there, Geiger sailed to Peking, where he joined the Legation Guard on September 2, 1913 and commanded multiple detachments of Marines and mounted cavalry troops. This period provided the young Geiger with valuable leadership experience and a familiarity with the Pacific region and Asian culture.[36]

Geiger's strong performance as a junior officer was sufficient to overcome his adverse fitness report and he was promoted to First Lieutenant on June 16, 1915, having spent six and a half years in his previous rank.[37] On January 15, 1916, he was detached from Peking and sent to San Francisco, where he received his unexpected follow-on assignment to flight training.

The Birth Of Marine Air

The early days of Marine Aviation (1912-1916) constituted little more than a proof-of-concept, with minimal resources and an unclear purpose. In this first decade of manned flight, there was a great deal of

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Library of the Marine Corps. See also Major Edwin N. McClellan, USMC, "American Marines in Nicaragua," *Marine Corps Gazette*, June 1921, 164-187.

[35] Lowell Thomas, *Old Gimlet Eye, (*Washington, D.C.: Marine Corps Association, 1981).

[36] HQMC to Second Lieutenant R. S. Geiger, appointment letter, 6 May, 1915, USMC Detachment, Peking, China, appointing Geiger as Officer Commanding the Mounted Detachment. Folder # 7, Box #1, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

[37] Willock, 65. With a note from Josephus Daniels cautioning against repeated performance.

uncertainty regarding the use of aviation in any service, much less the small force of expeditionary, sea-going Marines.[38] Furthermore, in comparison with other leading nations, the US Congress appropriated only a small fraction of resources to military aviation.[39] It is clear from the beginning, however, that Marine Corps leaders embraced the potential of manned flight as a supporting element to the infantry in the emerging USMC mission of occupying and defending advance bases.[40] Reflecting this view, the Commander of the Marine Corps, Major General Commandant William P. Biddle, remarked that "great benefit to advanced base force … might result from trained aviators."[41]

To a great extent, the initial growth of Marine aviation resulted from the efforts and sheer will of the first Marine Aviator, Alfred Cunningham.[42] An ambitious, charismatic, and tireless aviation advocate, Cunningham provided the leadership and initiative necessary to forge the embryonic Marine Air arm into a viable warfighting entity.[43] In 1912, Cunningham was the only Marine to join the first six naval aviators in the initial naval flight training program at Marblehead, Massachusetts, the foundation of an enduring partnership of Marine and Naval aviation.[44]

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[38] Craven and Cate, *The Army Air Forces in World War II*. Vol I, pp 6-7. Army aviation was established on 1 August, 1907 with the Aeronautical Division of the Signal Corps, while the Navy's air arm was established in July 1911. See also Archibald D. Turnbull and Clifford L. Lord, *History of United States Naval Aviation*, pp 10-18. See also Millett, 277, for a description of the merging of the aviation and advanced base concepts.
[39] Turnbull and Lord, 21. In 1912, Congress appropriated approximately $200,000 for all military aviation. In comparison, other nations spent the following: France-$6,400,000, Russia-$5,000,000, Britain-$2,100,000.
[40] Edward C. Johnson, *Marine Corps Aviation: The Early Years, 1912-1940.* Washington: History and Museums Division, HQMC, 1976, 1-10. This monograph offers a thorough description of the challenges of the establishment of Marine aviation.
[41] Johnson, 2.
[42] Johnson, 3. Through his political connections with the Aero Club of Philadelphia, Cunningham (a former real estate salesman) lobbied the Major General Commandant Biddle for his eventual orders to the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis "for duty in connection with Aviation." With a date of designation of 17 September, 1915, Cunningham was the first Marine Aviator and the fifth Naval Aviator.
[43] Johnson, 5.
[44] Robert Sherrod, *History of Marine Corps Aviation in World War II* (Baltimore, MD: The Nautical and Aviation Publishing Co. of America, Inc., 1987), 3.

The early form of Marine Aviation also sprang from the national response to the looming war in Europe. World War I provided the impetus for the Department of the Navy to seek funding for a Naval Aeronautic Service, of which the Marines were an integral part, and Marine Aviation first organized as a separate entity in 1915. In this year, the Major General Commandant announced the formation of a Marine Corps Aviation Company for duty with "The Advanced Base Force."[45] Thus began the long and illustrious record of Marine aviation and its enduring struggle for existence.[46]

A Grunt Learns to Fly

Alfred Cunningham was largely responsible for Roy Geiger's entrance into the world of Marine aviation. Recalling his association with Geiger at Port Royal, he offered the following enthusiastic recommendation to Colonel John A. Lejeune: "Having canvassed all of those who appear to be suitable for aviation, in order of desirability, I would place Geiger No. 1 on the list."[47] Lejeune accepted this endorsement and issued orders to Geiger to proceed to Pensacola for flight training in 1916.

While aviation must have appealed to Geiger's adventurous spirit, there is no evidence to indicate that he actively sought this opportunity. There is also no evidence of any prior correspondence between Geiger and Cunningham on this issue. Instead, it is apparent that good fortune presented him with this opportunity, which he would exploit beyond all

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[45] Sherrod, 5.

[46] Alfred A. Cunningham, "Value of Aviation to the Marine Corps," *Marine Corps Gazette*, September, 1920. 227. Cunningham wrote: "The question regarding aviation which is of most interest in the Marine Corps is: Of what practical use is it to us? We see the planes flying around and they seem to be enjoying themselves, but how will they help us perform our mission."

[47] First Lieutenant A.A. Cunningham to Colonel John A. Lejeune, letter, 26 November 1915, providing a list of potential aviation candidates. General Roy S. Geiger collection, USMC Historical Reference Branch, Quantico, VA. See also Western Union Telegram recalling R. S. Geiger, 21 March 1916, Folder # 8, Box #1, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

expectation. In any case, it is difficult to imagine that he was anything but pleased upon receipt of his orders to flight training in Pensacola, Florida. When asked about his move to the aviation ranks, Geiger was known to reply, "Oh, I just wanted to fly, that's all."[48]

From its beginning, Marine Aviation possessed a distinctly naval character. Marine aviators learned to fly at Naval Aeronautic Station Pensacola, earned their wings as "Naval Aviators," and trained to operate on or around the sea from the earliest days. The earliest naval trainers were seaplanes and Geiger did not fly a land-based airplane for almost two years; most of his "heavier-than-air" training flights were in seaplanes such as Curtiss "Pushers" and N-9 "Tractors."[49]

Geiger had a reputation for stubbornness as a flight student and his flying record was unremarkable but for one incident -- a mishap which resulted in a destroyed N-9 trainer.[50] Geiger was attempting to land on Pensacola Bay, when a submarine surfaced at his intended point of landing, necessitating an evasive maneuver which resulted in a crash.[51] Geiger was neither injured nor held responsible for the crash, and he continued his flight training without incident.

In addition to his float plane experience, Geiger qualified in the "lighter-than-air" category of free ballooning, in which he logged 14 ascents as a flight student. With his seaplane flight time of 69 hours (from March 31,1916 to June 9, 1917), this gave him the necessary flight

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[48] Willock, 71. Roy S. Geiger, Jr. believes that his father initially viewed aviation as a lark.

[49] Sherrod, 6. Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels directed that Navy and Marine Corps pilots take instruction in seaplane and landplane flying, in order to provide for advanced base work and so that "they will be available when acting with the Army." This directive resulted in cross-training between services.

[50] Ernie Pyle, "Aviation," *Washington Daily News*, 10 November, 1931. Pyle relates the story of Geiger's first solo flight. Geiger took a year to learn how to fly and his instructor, frustrated with his progress, went to the Commanding Officer for guidance. The CO told the instructor to send Geiger out solo to see how he would do by himself. Geiger took off for his first solo flight, flew around, and "made the prettiest landing you ever saw." Pyle concluded that "All he needed was enough responsibility to make him interested."

[51] Willock and verbal citation.

time to qualify as the fifth Marine Aviator (49th Naval aviator), earning his wings on June 9, 1917. During his time in flight school, Geiger also attained the rank of Captain (August 29, 1916) and met his future wife.[52]

A Foot in the Door – Flying in "The Great War"

Captain Geiger finished his flight training at an historic time because the US declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917. After receiving his wings, he accepted orders to Philadelphia, where a Marine Aeronautic Company trained in preparation for imminent deployment to Europe in support of the USMC Advanced Base Force. Given his seniority, Geiger provided much-needed leadership to the tiny Marine Air Arm. With few resources and an ill-defined mission, the Marine Aeronautic Company possessed a low level of combat readiness at the outbreak of the war.[53]

Having married the former Miss Eunice Thompson during the weeks between his detachment from Pensacola and his arrival in Philadelphia, Captain Geiger reported for duty at the League Island Navy Yard on July 17, 1917. There, he found orders to report to the battleship *USS North Carolina*, where he served until October 12, 1917 as an aerial observer in balloons and seaplanes, acting as a lookout for German submarines.

Returning to Philadelphia after logging some thirty-five observation flights in support of *North Carolina*, Captain Geiger rejoined a growing aviation contingent of thirty-four officers and three-hundred thirty enlisted men. In those days the Marines suffered from an aircraft shortage, having just five airplanes (land planes and seaplanes) and two balloons. Regarded as the Marine Corps' foremost expert in ballooning,

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[52] Major General Commandant to Captain R. S. Geiger, letter, 9 June 1917, Subject: Orders as Naval Aviator, Folder # 9, Box #1, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

[53] Craven and Cate, *The AAF in WWI, Vol I*, p. 7. In June 1916, USMC aviation had a strength of 7 pilots and 43 men, compared with 131 officers and 1,087 men in the Army's air establishment.

Captain Geiger spent much of the fall of 1917 in St. Louis, Missouri, where he conducted balloon cross-training with the US Army.

Returning to Philadelphia in December, 1917, Captain Geiger found a mostly deserted airfield and few airplanes. The Marine Aeronautic Company had split into two parts: the 1st Marine Aeronautic Company and the 1st Aviation Squadron. The 1st Marine Aeronautic Company had the distinction of being the first American aviation element to deploy overseas. Commanded by Captain Francis T. Evans, this element deployed with its seaplanes and flying boats to the Azores in January, 1918 in support of the US Navy mission to deny access to German U-boats.[54] Meanwhile, Captain McIlvain's 1st Aviation Squadron moved to Mineola, Long Island, for further training in the frigid weather of New York.[55] Captain Geiger remained in Philadelphia, where he learned to fly land planes and established a small cadre of aviation personnel and land-based aircraft, conducting training of recent graduates of the flight school in Pensacola.

A combination of poor weather and lack of airfield support led Captains Geiger and Cunningham to consider a move south, to more appropriate and hospitable training facilities. The theme of Marine Aviation in these months was "ad hoc;" the units traveled South with no clear orders, no clear destination, and, of course, no airplanes. Ultimately, Captain McIlvain took half of the unit to Lake Charles, Louisiana, while Geiger led the remainder of the Marines to Coconut Grove, Florida. One marvels at the leadership challenges that Captain Geiger faced on arrival at Naval Air Station Coconut Grove, where he and the base commander, Lieutenant Marc Mitscher, USN, established a training facility in preparation for the imminent deployment to war in Europe.

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[54] Sherrod, 7.

Geiger and Mitscher agreed to train the Marine fliers in seaplanes and land planes, but the Navy had no land planes for the Marines. Undaunted by this challenge, Captain Geiger conducted an exhaustive search for airplanes, discovering a Curtiss flying school with JN-4D Jennies at an airfield in the Everglades. Geiger checked out all of his pilots on the Jennies and spearheaded the effort to absorb these airplanes and their instructors into the Marine Corps.[56] Flight training at Coconut Grove grew rapidly when the remainder of the 1st Aviation Squadron from Lake Charles rejoined forces with Geiger's Marines. On March 22, 1918, this expanded force of 90 officers and 825 enlisted men became the 1st Marine Aviation Force, divided into four landplane squadrons (A, B, C, and D) and commanded by Major Cunningham.[57]

Throughout this process, Major Cunningham acted as the conduit between the 1st Marine Aviation Force and Headquarters, Marine Corps in Washington, D.C.[58] Resourceful and tenacious, he determined to get Marine Aviation into the war in Europe, despite the lack of a clear mission, few supplies, no transportation, and no combat-ready airplanes. Cunningham saw a window of opportunity with the US Navy, which desperately needed land-based bombers to combat the German U-boat threat. With this in mind, Cunningham negotiated a bargain for the 1st Marine Aviation Force to join the US Navy in the Northern Bombing Group, with the Marines assigned to day bombing missions with land-based bombers.[59] Marine aviation finally had a mission.

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[55] Sherrod, 8. The month of December was the coldest ever recorded by the Weather Bureau in New York – 17 degrees below zero on the 27th – and the Marines slept outside in tents!
[56] Sherrod, 9.
[57] Major General Commandant to Captain R. S. Geiger, letter, undated, "Orders to Duty with First Marine Aviation Force," Folder # 10, Box #1, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.
[58] Johnson, 15.
[59] Liet. Commander Clifford L. Lord, *History of United States Naval Aviation, 1899-1939, Vol IV, part II,* p. 302, Sherrod, p. 12.

The question of airplanes and transportation remained, however. The US remained well behind Europe in aircraft development and aviation technology in general, and shipping was in short supply in the summer of 1918.[60] The Marine fliers resorted to reliance on European airplane manufacturers for aircraft support, as their Curtiss Jennies would not be survivable in the deadly skies of Europe. The receipt of four DeHavilland DH-4's did not provide much help. The 1st Marine Aviation Force had a total force structure of four squadrons of eighteen airplanes each and remained well short of their required assets for deployment to theater. Nonetheless, the Marine aviators were ready to deploy to Europe (with or without airplanes) and join the Marine 4th Brigade and the 1st Marine Aeronautic Company, both engaged in combat operations. Again, Major Cunningham's tenacity was an asset in gaining access to Naval shipping to transport the Marines as he received less than enthusiastic support for this effort from the US Army.[61]

On June 23, 1918, the 1st Marine Aviation Force departed Miami for its long and strange journey to war. The Marines traveled via rail and ship, finally arriving in force at Oye (between Calais and Dunkirk), as the Day Wing of the Northern Bombing Group.[62] The Day Wing ultimately grew in strength to 165 officers and over 1,000 enlisted men, but upon their arrival, they did not possess a single airplane.[63] Captain Geiger traveled with the first element of Marines, which he commanded until

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[60] Sherrod, p. 13. Following the recommendation of the Bolling Commission of June 1917, the Army decided to build only trainers and the DH-4 with the Liberty engine, while the Navy maintained its inventory of seaplanes. Army fliers fiercely resisted the notion of the Navy possessing land-based bombers and this provided a niche for Marines to fill. See also I.B. Holley, *Ideas and Weapons*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1983), 181-182. Here is a thorough account of the dysfunctional US development of WWI combat aircraft.

[61] Millett, 310.

[62] Sherrod, p. 13-17.

[63] Craven and Cate, *The AAF in WW II, Vol I*, p. 9. None of the Services received any of the planned 4,500 aircraft that were to be delivered by 30 June 1918. Those airplanes which WERE delivered were not flyable.

Major Cunningham's arrival in early August. Geiger continued to command Squadron A, which was later designated as Squadron 7.

Given the obstacles which the Day Bombing Group faced, their contribution was remarkable, if short in duration. They ultimately acquired seventeen DH-4's, which they flew in multiple bombing raids during the months of October and November, 1918, dropping over 14 tons of bombs on the German forces and shooting down at least six enemy aircraft.[64] They also conducted re-supply missions in support of French forces, but the Marines of the Day Bombing Group were never tasked with supporting Marine ground forces in Europe.[65]

Geiger was temporarily promoted to Major during his tour as Commanding Officer of Squadron 7; in this capacity, he devoted much of his efforts to the constant search for flyable aircraft for his squadron. His pilots flew missions as crewmen with RAF squadrons 213, 217, and 218 in Sopwith Camel scouts, and targeted multiple German ground target sets in this capacity. The anticipated targets of German submarine pens became a low priority during the tour of the Day Bombing Group; thus, their primary focus was German ground forces.[66]

Geiger flew multiple aircraft during WWI, including the DH-4 and a DH-9A, which he managed to requisition from the RAF at Eastleigh, England. Proud of this aircraft but less than familiar with its flying characteristics, Major Geiger crashed it on takeoff before it flew a single combat mission.[67] This crash contributed to developing tensions between Geiger and Cunningham as a result of their differing leadership styles. Geiger believed in doing whatever was necessary to complete his assigned tasks and his aggressive approach was an affront to his boss,

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[64] Sherrod, 15.
[65] Johnson, 20-25.
[66] Johnson, 20-25.
[67] Folder # 11, Box #1, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps. E-4 Crash report, citing cause of crash as "sideslipped on turn near ground." October 9, 1918.

Cunningham, who tended to be more conservative and cautious.[68] After Geiger's crash, Cunningham restricted Geiger from flying and Geiger protested this decision. As a result, Cunningham placed Geiger under suspension for "making disparaging remarks about [his] superior officer."[69] Geiger never served out this sentence, as it was interrupted by Armistice Day on November 11, 1918, and there was no residual fallout from the incident.[70]

The experiences of Marine Aviators in the Northern Bombing Group fell somewhere short of illustrious, but it is a testament to their dedication, commitment, and tenacity that they were able to contribute in the small manner that they did. It is impossible to say what would have been the fate of Marine Aviation without their participation in World War I, but the experience provided men such as Roy Geiger with combat leadership experience and a shared commitment to the institution of Marine Aviation; indeed, many of the men of the Northern Bombing Group would go on to be great leaders in the next war.[71] For his service as Commanding Officer of Squadron 7, Geiger was decorated with the Navy Cross for "distinguished service in the line of his profession."[72]

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[68] Willock, 102. Cunningham was nicknamed "Ma" for his tendency to "shelter if not over-protect his flock to an … annoying degree." His personal correspondence with Geiger reflects a tendency towards micro-management and a good deal of paranoia with respect to career concerns.

[69] Richard Camp, "Rugged Roy' Geiger and the Northern Bombing Group," *Leatherneck*, May 2006, 37. Cunningham wrote a letter of reprimand for Geiger which stated, "While it may not be the fault of Major Geiger that DH-9A crashed, and fully recognizing that he is a competent pilot, I must nevertheless restrict his use of day machines at this time." When Geiger objected too vociferously, he was placed on suspension for talking back.

[70] Willock, 103. Geiger spent the next several months serving as member and Judge Avocate of a Naval Court of Inquiry at Autingues, France. He then returned to the US on January 31, 1919, traveling home to see his wife and newborn daughter in Pensacola.

[71] Such as Francis Mulcahy, future commander of the TAF at the Battle of Okinawa.

[72] Roy Stanley Geiger, Officer Qualification Record.

Chapter 2

In Search of a Mission

> The Marines … were so closely identified with military intervention as an instrument of American foreign policy that they were sometimes referred to as "State Department Troops in small wars." But it was in the Caribbean and Central America that the Marines realized their raison d'être.
>
> James S. Corum and
> Wray R. Johnson

Marine aviation emerged from WW I with an unclear mission and an uncertain mandate. Most of the WW I Marine pilots had more in common with Army and Navy fliers than with the storied Marine 4th Brigade that had fought in the Great War; in the view of many, "Marines on flying duty were basically naval aviators in Marine uniforms."[1] With his previous infantry experience and professional reputation, Roy Geiger was exceptional as a flier who understood ground combat, but Marine aviators continued to fight the perception that they were "less a military organization and more a gentlemen's flying club."[2] Tension between air and ground Marines was highlighted by the flamboyant dress of aviators (who sometimes wore riding boots) and the presence of relatively junior aviators in command positions that were unattainable by ground officers of equal rank. In the years to come, Roy Geiger would play a significant role in defining the mission of Marine aviation and integrating the air arm with the rest of the Marine Corps.

In the aftermath of WWI, Marine air and ground forces underwent a dramatic demobilization. After a wartime surge to a force of 73,000, the Marine Corps shrank to a lean strength of approximately 20,000,

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[1] Vernon E. Megee, "The Evolution of Aviation (Part I)," *Marine Corps Gazette*, Vol. 49, No. 8, August 1965, 22.
[2] Megee, 24.

with 1,020 Marines remaining in the ranks of aviation.[3] The First Marine Aviation Force disbanded and split into five squadrons (A through E), which redeployed to bases at Quantico, VA, Parris Island, SC, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and the Miami flying field.[4]

After returning to the US, Geiger proceeded to the Marine aviation section at Miami, where he remained in command until October of 1919.[5] During this time, Geiger corresponded regularly with Major Cunningham, now acting as the Officer-in-Charge of Aviation, regarding the organization of the post-war Aviation force. This correspondence indicates that Geiger and Cunningham had restored a friendly and professional relationship after their friction in WW I.[6] Otherwise, Geiger's tour in Miami was noteworthy only for his post-war demotion to Captain (routine in the aftermath of the war), a few speeding tickets, and a successful poker game which yielded a car for his family.[7] In the fall of 1919, he took his family to Haiti, where he assumed command of Squadron E from Captain Harvey B. Mims, flying Curtiss Jennies and flying boats in support of the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade.[8]

The Birth of Close Air Support

The mission of the Marine Brigade in Haiti was to assist the Gendarmerie d'Haiti (Native Constabulary) in restoring stability to the country in support of the democratic government. Groups of revolutionary bandits (Cacos) comprised a loosely-organized insurgency

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[3] Johnson, 27.
[4] Johnson, 30.
[5] A.A. Cunningham, "Value of Aviation to the Marine Corps," *Marine Corps Gazette*, September 1920, 22 1-233.Initially after WWI, all of the 282 pilots and 2180 maintenance Marines relocated to Miami.
[6] Multiple letters between Cunningham and Geiger reflect a cooperative and warm relationship, including personal expressions about family members. Folders #13-17, Box #1, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps
[7] Interview with Roy Geiger, Jr.
[8] Permanent Change of Station Orders, dated 19 September, 28 October, and 19 November 1919 to R.S. Geiger assigning him as Commanding Officer, Squadron E, Marine Aviation Force. Folder #15, Box #1, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps

which threatened to overturn the government. The ruthless Cacos employed classic guerilla tactics to gain the sympathy of the populace, and resorted to extreme acts of violence to further their political agenda. The Caco revolt culminated in an unsuccessful raid on Port-au-Prince by 2,500 men in January, 1920. A combined force of the Gendarmerie and the Marine Brigade repulsed this action and commenced a six-month offensive campaign which successfully eliminated the Caco threat by the summer of 1920.[9]

The mission in Haiti was familiar to Marines, who had trained the Gendarmerie and fought the Cacos prior to WW I, but the addition of Marine aviation was a tremendous force multiplier. It was during this time that Marine aviation established its clear purpose as described by Alfred Cunningham: "The only excuse for Aviation is usefulness in assisting troops on the ground."[10] Marine aviators remained uncertain about their future, however, as reflected in correspondence between Geiger and Cunningham during this time.[11]

Having replaced the outdated Curtiss Jennies with stocks of DH-4 Scout-bombers, Geiger's Squadron "E" made historic contributions to combined arms doctrine in the development of Close Air Support (CAS), a process that began under the previous command of Harvey Mims. In the mountainous jungle environment of Haiti, horizontal bombing of the sort used in WW I was not sufficiently accurate to achieve target destruction and involved a substantial risk of injury to friendly forces. Vertical dive-bombing would yield more accuracy, but the aircraft of 1920 were not

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[9] James S. Corum and Wray R. Johnson, *Airpower in Small Wars: Fighting Insurgents and Terrorists*, (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 23-29.
[10] Cunningham, 222.
[11] Capt Geiger to Major Cunningham, letter, 10 October 1920, mailed from Port au Prince, Haiti. "I read your article in the "Gazette" on aviation which is very good. We constantly hear rumors here of a general shake up in aviation which is to take place shortly. What is the dope on our future? General Butler did not seem to be a very strong friend of aviation when he arrived here. I think he changed his mind after he saw what was being done, or, at least, he spoke that way to me." Folder # 17, Box #1, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

structurally capable of performing the aerobatic maneuvers required for such tactics.[12]

A young pilot named Lieutenant Lawson H. M. Sanderson addressed these problems in his development of CAS techniques, which he refined under Geiger's guidance.[13] Sanderson's innovations included the use of a pilot-controlled lanyard to release 20-pound bombs from a shallow dive (30 to 45 degrees), a technique referred to as "glide bombing." It is unclear whether Sanderson was the first aviator to perform glide bombing maneuvers, but Squadron "E" was clearly the first group of aviators to perform this technique in an actual combat environment.[14]

From the beginning in Haiti, Geiger insisted that his aviators integrate with ground forces. He leveraged the relationships and experience that he had built as a ground officer to build a strong bond with the First Provisional Brigade.[15] Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller, served with Geiger in Nicaragua and recalled Geiger's attendance at a Brigade planning meeting in Haiti:

> Geiger specifically asked how his squadron could do more to support the ground effort. Puller responded by clearing crude runway strips on the front lines, allowing Squadron "E" pilots access to austere areas.[16]

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[12] Willock, 106-113. See also Corum and Johnson, 28 and Sherrod, 23.
[13] David Mets, "Dive-Bombing Between the Wars," *Airpower Historian* (July 1965): 86. See also Willock, 109.
[14] Mets, 86. "The Marines were the first to really develop dive-bombing, and to incorporate it into their tactical doctrine." Mets goes on to describe the influence of Sanderson's later dive-bombing exhibitions at the Cleveland Air Races in 1932. General Ernst Udet of the German Luftwaffe witnessed these exhibitions and his impressions reportedly influenced the development of *Stuka* dive-bombers. .
[15] A. A. Vandegrift and Robert B. Asprey, *Once a Marine: The Memoirs of General A. A. Vandegrift*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1964), 59. Vandegrift recalls the innovation of air techniques in Haiti. "On one occasion, two of Roy Geiger's pilots loaded a small bomb in one of the old Jennys and dropped it on a Caco stronghold while simultaneously a ground force attacked. Roy also used his planes to deliver mail and various supplies to patrols..one of his pilots rigged a transport plane with stretchers for air evacuation of the wounded."
[16] Burke Davis, *Marine: The Life of LtGen Lewis B. (Chesty) Puller, USMC, (Ret.)*, (Boston: Little Brown Publishers, 1962), 41.

The result of these efforts was a viable base for Geiger's aircraft and close air support for the Marine infantry forces. Geiger also arranged for Puller to fly in Sanderson's aircraft on a support mission, giving Puller an appreciation for Marine aviation that would remain with him for the rest of his illustrious career.

In August, 1920, Geiger wrote a letter which reflects his understanding of the importance of cooperation between the air and ground arms for the future of Marine aviation:

> I went over to Santo Domingo City and saw McCaughtry …Major Ellis is there … He is strong for aviation and as he is the acting Chief of Staff…he is able to work the planes in with the Brigade work to good advantage. What we need is to get the older officers of the Marine Corps acquainted with the work which we can do so that we will become a necessary part of their operations. I think that every officer who serves on this island will return to the States a strong friend of Aviation. The planes have become an essential part of operations here.[17]

In addition to CAS techniques of glide-bombing and strafing, Squadron E provided logistical support (mail delivery, supply drops, etc.), aerial reconnaissance (including the use of aerial photography), and transportation of wounded Marines to hospital facilities. A review of Geiger's logbook reveals that he participated in the full range of aviation missions, including several extremely long-range flights to the Dominican Republic.[18] Reflecting on Geiger's performance as an aviator in Haiti, Louis Woods wrote:

> On one trip, Geiger was coming back from Camp Haitien and his engine quit. He landed somewhere along the coastal region between St. Mark and Port-au-Prince. I don't

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[17] Captain Roy S. Geiger to Capt Evans, letter, 10 August, 1920. Box #1, Folder #16, PC #311, PPC, MCHS.

[18] Captain Roy S. Geiger to Major A.A. Cunningham, letter, 10 October, 1920, "Port au Prince, Haiti." Geiger flew to the service ceiling of the DH-4 (14,000') in order to clear the mountainous terrain during trips from Port au Prince to Santo Domingo. These trips were more than two hours in duration – a long flight in the DH-4 "Flaming Coffin." Folder #17, Box #1, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

> remember exactly where. He [Geiger] put his wheels down exactly 20 feet over a ditch that must have been ten feet deep, with grass coming over it. If he'd set it down 20 feet more, he'd have smashed it up into pieces. The aviators that lived through such experiences as Geiger had in that landing,…they were better aviators, and they lived longer.[19]

Captain Geiger's effective leadership was noted by many, including a future Commandant, Colonel John H. Russell, then the Commander of the 1st Provisional Brigade.[20] Geiger's former classmate from Port Royal, A.A. Vandegrift (a future comrade-in-arms at Guadalcanal and Commandant), commented on the many "cunning and wildly tricks" which Marine aviators displayed in Haiti. Vandegrift also recalled the close relationship that existed between Geiger and his infantry peers on Haiti.[21]

A congressional delegation from Florida visited Geiger's squadron and lauded him for his efficiency in constructing squadron support facilities with local materials and labor, at no cost to the US government.[22] As he had demonstrated in the airfields of France in WW I, Geiger was a Commander who was determined to find practical solutions when faced with resource limitations.

During Geiger's final days in Haiti, the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations requested Geiger's opinion regarding the question of establishing an Independent Air Service. The impetus for this request was the statement of General William Mitchell, USA, who testified before the US Senate Military Affairs Committee:

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[19] Major General Louis E. Woods, USMC (Ret.), (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1968, Oral History Collection, transcript), 103-104.

[20] William J. Flynn to Captain Geiger, letter, 30 September, 1920. Folder #17, Box #1, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps. Gunner Flynn related that he overheard the Commandant and General Butler remarking that (Geiger) had the grandest flying field that (they) had seen, especially compared with the other Marine squadron, which they described as being a mob.

[21] A.A. Vandegrift, *Once a Marine; The Memoirs of General A.A. Vandegrift*, United States Marine Corps; as told to Robert B. Asprey, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1964), 58-59.

> I think the flying personnel of Naval Aviation are really in favor of it (Separate Air Force for United States). They hesitate to express their opinions because they are all junior officers and because the senior officers who are not flying officers are against it, largely, I believe, from lack of familiarity with the subject.[23]

Responding with a lengthy memorandum which offers a lens into his thoughts at the time, Geiger expressed his view that "Aviation cannot alone capture and hold ground or control the sea. (Instead), it is one of the components of an Army or of a Fleet." His clear conclusion is best represented in its entirety:

> I do not believe that anyone claims that Aviation acting alone is able successfully to combat and to defeat an Army or a Fleet. It is able to inflict heavy damage, or to offer invaluable assistance; but it cannot alone capture and hold ground or control the sea. Therefore, it is not an Independent Army; but is one of the components of an Army or of a Fleet.
>
> A Separate Air Service with duties to furnish Aviation for the Army, for the Navy and for the Postal Department, etc. would end up in a conglomerate organization with a divided purpose and a laxity of discipline which could only result in the formation of three Corps within the Air Service.
>
> The Navy knows its needs and the Army knows its needs as far as Aviation is concerned better than any other Department. All the advantages that are claimed for a Separate Air Service can be had by the formation of an Advisory Board, by a proper system of liaison, and by the interexchange of officers especially at experimental and training stations. No experimental work need be duplicated. By this method the Government will save considerable financially and the Services will not sacrifice their internal coordination and efficiency.
>
> My belief is that all this agitation for a Separate Air Service emanates from disgruntled officers, who, during the War, held high rank and position and who are now using every endeavor to create similar positions for themselves.

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[22] Sherrod, 23. "Because he had no funds for an office, Geiger had built one out of airplane crates and shingled it with flattened gasoline cans."

[23] Captain Craven to Captain R. S. Geiger, letter, 15 December, 1919, Folder #15, Box #1, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

> To conclude: Theoretically, I think a Separate Air Service is unsound; practically, I think it would be a failure and a source of friction throughout both the Army and the Navy.[24]

In the last days of his tour as Commander of Squadron "E," Geiger regained his previous rank of Major and enjoyed the birth of his second child, a son named Roy S. Geiger, Jr. On January 1, 1921, the USMC reorganized Squadron "E" into Flights G and H, 4th Air Squadron, and Geiger turned over command of this unit to Captain Arthur H. Page on January 21, 1921. Accepting orders to Marine Barracks Quantico, Virginia, Geiger departed Haiti for the first of many tours at the base that was fast becoming the intellectual center of the Marine Corps.[25]

Selling Marine Aviation, Part I

Given the presence of relatively junior aviation officers in command positions, Headquarters Marine Corps recognized the need for experienced senior leadership in its air arm and transferred experienced ground officers into the ranks of aviation. Most notable were the transfer of Lieutenant Colonel Thomas C. Turner, a WW I veteran who had served with the Army Air Corps, and Major Ross E. "Rusty" Rowell, a former ground officer who earned his wings in 1923.[26] These men were senior

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[24] Navy Department, Office of Naval Operations, Washington, to Captain Geiger, letter, 15 December, 1919. Subject: A Separate Air Force. Folder #15, Box #1, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

[25] Millett, 323-324. Millett discusses how General Lejeune established the Marine Corps Institute and centralized officer training at Quantico, creating a "reservoir of faculty and student talent to study the Corps's new amphibious role." He was assisted in these efforts by General Smedley Butler, who "envisioned turning Quantico into a great Marine Corps school."

[26] Sherrod, 19. A former ground officer, Turner had learned to fly with the Army (in his spare time) and earned the respect of Army fliers, including Col. H.H. Arnold, who recommended that Turner be attached to the Signal Corps for aviation. Turner went on to command Barron Field at Everman, Texas and was commended as "an officer of the very highest type" who enjoyed the respect, loyalty, and admiration of his men, in spite of the fact that he was not of the Army. Turner got into some trouble with Marine Corps leadership when he was reputed to say that "Marine aviation is dead and there is no future in it." Though this statement remained unconfirmed, the controversy reflects the tenuousness of Marine aviation's early years, when it consisted of little more than a squadron of airplanes.

in rank to Geiger and went on to have exceptional careers in the Marine Corps. The transfer of Turner into Marine aviation spelled the end of the era of Alfred Cunningham's influence, and Cunningham did not go down without a fight.[27] Of Cunningham's professional demise, Allan Millett writes:

> As fanatical in his own way about naval aviation as General Billy Mitchell was about an air force independent of the Army, Cunningham had exhausted his usefulness at Headquarters.[28]

The rigid, disciplined Tommy Turner became the dominant voice of aviation at Headquarters Marine Corps in the 1920's, while Roy Geiger's leadership, intellect, and ability became well known in the fleet. Marine pilots were continuously employed in combat zones around the world during these years, when they were the only aviation personnel of any armed service to fly in combat, but they were also engaged in a continuous battle for resources on Capitol Hill.[29] In the aftermath of the Washington Naval Conference, which resulted in significant funding limitations on the procurement of weapons, Marine aviation was viewed by some as an expensive luxury that should be eliminated. In a vicious budget battle, Army leaders fought to maintain its ground force structure, the Army Air Service argued for the supremacy of land-based

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[27] Sherrod, 21. Turner relieved Cunningham as OinC of Marine aviation on 13 December 1920. In a letter to Roy Geiger, Cunningham tried to put a positive spin on his demotion, but his resentment toward Turner is evident: "For a great many reasons I am very glad to get away from this work as it could not under any conditions be considered as pleasant…The only misgivings I have are that I have been told by other officers that Major Turner had a grudge against me which he was looking for an opportunity to satisfy." See also Major A. A. Cunningham to Major R. S. Geiger, letter, 20 October, 1920, Folder #17, Box #1, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps. Cunningham went on to command the 1st Squadron in Santo Domingo and was essentially put out to pasture after that, serving in a number of obscure jobs until his retirement in 1935. See also Johnson, 31. Cunningham never felt he received the credit he deserved, writing to Major General Commandant Lejeune in 1928, "I spent the best years of my career working with enthusiasm to advance Marine Corps aviation. I did the unappreciated pioneering work and stuck by it during the time when no one considered it important enough to be desirable duty, paying the usual toll which pioneering demands."

[28] Millett, 333.

aircraft, and Navy leaders advocated spending its budget dollars on new ships.[30]

The Navy's Bureau of Aeronautics, headed by Rear Admiral William A. Moffett, provided the funding for the fleet of Marine aircraft, which amounted to 42 outdated airplanes by 1922. It was fortunate for the Marine Corps that Admiral Moffett was an advocate of Marine aviation. Pressured by "Battleship Admirals" who argued for diverting aviation funding into shipbuilding efforts, Admiral Moffett told Congress that "Marines are doing more in land aviation than any one in the world," making specific reference to operations in Haiti and Santo Domingo.[31] As Robert Sherrod stated, "Marine Corps aviation was a bargain for the U.S. taxpayer during the 1920's."[32]

As the budget battle raged in Washington, Roy Geiger arrived in Quantico to assume command of the 1st Aviation Group, a grossly underfunded and poorly resourced aviation unit. Unbowed by his dilapidated hangars of broken and outdated airplanes, Geiger pushed ahead with determination to mold his unit into a professional organization. During his three-year tour as Commanding Officer, Geiger determined to succeed with the resources he was given and he inherently understood that the existence of Marine Aviation depended, to a large extent, on his ability to demonstrate and advertise its capability and utility to political decision-makers in Washington.

In this vein, Geiger signed up the 1st Aviation Group for every exercise, airshow, demonstration, and "dog-and-pony" operation that he could find. He had zero tolerance for failure and his Marines were routinely lauded for their accomplishments by officials ranging from

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[29] Sherrod, 21-27.
[30] Millett, 319-322.
[31] Willock, 117-118. Cited as testimony before the Subcommittee of the House Committee of Appropriations, in response to a question from Congressman Patrick Kelley.
[32] Sherrod, 22.

senior military leaders to President Harding.[33] In particular, Geiger earned favorable publicity when he led a flight of four Martin Bombers from San Diego, CA to Washington, D.C., a 2,800 mile trip which was the longest 4-plane flight then on record. The purpose of this flight was for the Marines to retrieve the four Bombers from the Army Air Force unit at San Diego, which possessed a surplus of the aircraft and offered to transfer them to the Marine Corps. In order to complete this task, Geiger traveled with 20 of his men to San Diego, where they learned to fly the bombers and proceeded to break the flight record for a 4-plane flight on the 11-day trip back to the East Coast. In recognition of this accomplishment, the Chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics proclaimed:

> The flight of four Martin Bombers manned by Marine Corps pilots … was undertaken and carried out as a service mission and as a measure of economy. At a conservative estimate $20,000 was saved to the government by flying these planes across the continent. Further…the flight illustrates mobility of this and similar units.[34]

The 1st Aviation Group also flew DH-4B's with Billy Mitchell during the bombing of the *Ostfriesland* and received commendations for providing air support for a well-publicized reenactment of the Wilderness Campaign of the Civil War in 1921.[35] During the Wilderness Campaign exercise, Geiger demonstrated his courage when his unit was tasked with an urgent supply run from Gettysburg, Pennsylvania to Quantico under very poor weather conditions. When many of his pilots expressed concern that an aircraft would not make it through the weather, Geiger said: "This is a dangerous trip and I do not know if it can be made

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[33] Major General Commandant to Major Roy S. Geiger, Commendation, 2 June, 1921. See also Office of the Commanding General, Quantico, Virginia to Major Roy S. Geiger, Commendation, 22 November 1921. Folder #18, Box #1, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.
[34] Memorandum from Admiral Moffett, General Roy S. Geiger collection, USMC Historical Reference Branch, Quantico, VA.
[35] Major John H. Craige, USMC. "The Wilderness Maneuvers," *Marine Corps Gazette*, December 1921, 418-463.

safely. The only way to find out is to try, so I will make it myself."[36] Again, Admiral W. A. Moffett recognized Geiger and his Marines:

> The untiring energy and the foresight necessary to prepare the material for these maneuvers reflect great credit upon Roy S. Geiger, U.S.M.C., …the aircraft operated in conjunction with the ground troops and answered every call made upon them both day and night.[37]

Though he had clearly joined the celebrated ranks of the flamboyant fliers of the 1920's, Geiger did not forget his roots as an infantry Marine.[38] His unit was recognized for much more than its aviation prowess; the squadron received recognition for building Brown Field (practically from the bottom up) and performance in parades and inspections.[39] Geiger was identified as a superior commander by his Commanding Officer, Major General Smedley Butler, whom Geiger had known since his infantry days in Nicaragua.

During his first tour in Quantico, Roy Geiger showed his commitment to leadership-by-example. Geiger was not a commanding officer who led from behind a desk and his favored position was at the controls of the leading aircraft in a formation or in front of his men, no matter the task. He was also decisive and he trusted his instincts, favoring action over indecision. Many accounts show his impeccable judgment and an uncanny sense of perception.[40]

An event which occurred on September 23, 1921 illustrates these traits. On that night, Captain John A. Minnis crashed his Vought scout-

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[36] "Marine Aviators Commended for Work During Maneuvers," *Leatherneck*, July 15, 1922.
[37] Admiral Moffett to the Major General Commandant, letter, 8 October, 1921. Subject: Aviation Activities during Recent Maneuvers at Wilderness Run. Folder #19, Box #1, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.
[38] Willock, 130. Geiger was an aggressive pilot who flew often. By the end of his tour in 1924, he had flown over 739 hours in his 7 year career as a pilot.
[39] Roy Geiger, Jr. personal papers. Memorandum from the office of Brigadier General Butler, dated 26 May 1922. "At the review for General Pershing … The aviation troops were the only ones who executed "eyes right" properly!"

bomber (VE-7) into the Potomac River, within sight of Geiger's private residence on base. Hearing the crash, Geiger commandeered a motor launch and raced to the crash site, diving over the side in an effort to save his Marine. He repeatedly dove over thirty feet into the dark Potomac in search of Captain Minnis, diving at least ten times before finding and retrieving the body. Practically unconscious from exhaustion, Geiger was pulled from the river and given medical care against his will (he abhorred hospitals). For his actions on this occasion, Major Geiger received a letter of commendation from the Major General Commandant, John A. Lejeune.[41] Two days later, he led the group formation flight at the funeral of Captain Minnis.[42]

Geiger's final contribution to the preservation of Marine aviation during his tour as CO of the 1st Aviation Group was his involvement in the multiple fleet landing exercises which he supported in conjunction with the East Coast Expeditionary Force at Culebra, Puerto Rico. Precursors to the famous Fleet Landing Exercises of the 1930's, these experiences with amphibious operations helped to shape amphibious doctrine and the role of aviation therein, which would ultimately prove so valuable in the WW II Pacific Theater.[43]

Educating the Mind

Marine Aviators were not permitted to remain on indefinite flight status during the 1920's and Geiger faced a critical career decision at the conclusion of his tour in Quantico, having commanded aviation squadrons since 1917. Possessing a high degree of intellectual curiosity,

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[40] Woods, *Oral History,* 45, 50-52. Louis Woods recalled that Geiger could read minds. "Geiger had an eye like a fish, exactly: no more expression in it than that. And in my case he could read my mind."
[41] The Major General Commandant to Major General Roy S. Geiger, letter, 11 October, 1921. Subject: Commendation. Folder #19, Box #1, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.
[42] Willock, 4-7.

he sought out and obtained a rare Marine slot at the Army's Command and General Staff School (CGSS) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, based on the enthusiastic endorsement of Major General Smedley Butler.[44] In August, 1924, he began his course of study at CGSS, an important piece of the educational foundation that helped prepare him for his future role as a Joint Force Commander.

Geiger's class at CGSS is a snapshot of America's future leaders in WW II. Among his classmates were Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr. (future 10th Army Commander), Benjamin Foulois (future head of the Army Air Corps), Thomas Holcomb (future Commandant of the Marine Corps), and a number of future commanders of Field Armies in WW II (John R. Hodge, Alexander M. Patch, and William H. Simpson).[45] Geiger was one of four Marines in the class, but he was the only Marine aviator.

Major Geiger had not been a student since law school and, as an operational Marine officer, he had not had much time to immerse himself in professional military studies prior to his entry at CGSS. Moreover, the vast majority of his 235 classmates at CGSS were West Point graduates with a tremendous amount of educational and practical experience in the fundamentals of US Army doctrine. The mission of CGSS was to "train selected officers in tactics and in the functions of commanders and of staff officers of divisions and corps" and incoming students were expected to have "knowledge of the organization and tactics of all small units to include the reinforced brigade."[46] In many respects, therefore, Geiger was out of his element.

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[43] Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period, Assault from the Sea: The Development of Amphibious Warfare Between the Wars*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 74-75. See also Millett, 285-285.
[44] Orders, PCS, 19 May 1924. Box #2, Folder #22, PC #311, PPC, MCHS. Geiger was one of fifty-five Marines to attend CGSS during the interwar years. Timothy Nenninger, "Creating Officers: The Leavenworth Experience," 1920-1940, *Military Review*, November 1989, 60.
[45] Class roster obtained from CGSC, Fort Leavenworth.
[46] United States Army, *The General Service Schools: Instruction Circular No. 1*, Series 1924-1925, 6.

Roy Geiger possessed several key traits that contributed to his success as a student, however. He had a tireless work ethic, a zeal for learning, and a very sharp mind. When asked about his methodology for surviving CGSS, Geiger recalled that he spent hours in the library each night drafting his own solutions to the assigned planning problems.[47] After completing his work, he compared his answer to the school solution, and he continued this process until his answer matched the school answer.[48] There is also substantial evidence to indicate that Geiger had a photographic memory.[49] In any case, Geiger was a distinguished graduate at CGSS, finishing in the top 25% of his class, a remarkable accomplishment for an aviator. More valuable to Geiger, however, was the understanding of Army Corps tactics and staff planning that he gained, in addition to the priceless relationships that he built with his Army counterparts.

Upon graduation from Fort Leavenworth, Major Geiger returned to a Marine Corps that was not sure what to do with him. In 1925, the USMC was a force of some 19,000 men, of which fewer than 1,000 served in Marine air units.[50] There were few command opportunities and the few aviation staff slots at Headquarters were taken, but Geiger found command of an observation squadron available at VO-2M in Haiti. He

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[47] Nenninger, 63. "Map problems … were essentially 'written tests solved indoors.' They would help students develop powers of imagination and visualization and exercise a student's judgment and decision making. Faculty committees carefully graded each student's solution to the problem and provided a 'school solution' as a means of comparison."

[48] Colonel Edward C. Kicklighter (Ret.), multiple interviews with the author, February-May, 2007. Kicklighter was General Geiger's Pilot/Aide-de-Camp, 1944-1947. Geiger shared this story with Kicklighter.

[49] Roy Geiger, Jr., interview with the author. Roy Geiger, Jr. recalled his father's ability to memorize references, including page numbers and paragraphs. This is supported by evidence that he memorized artillery publications during WW II, quoting them from memory to his staff.

[50] Millett, 654, Johnson, 35-36.

returned to the First Marine Brigade in October, 1925, after spending the summer refreshing his flying skills at Pensacola.[51]

Major Geiger's second tour in Haiti was short and uneventful, as the Gendarmie and First Marine Brigade had managed to quell most of the Caco resistance by this date. The majority of Geiger's flying operations consisted of training and observation flights in his paltry assortment of O2B-1 and DH-4-B-1 aircraft; again, he faced the challenge of flying and maintaining old airplanes with minimal resources in an austere environment. As in the past, Geiger succeeded, garnering a number of gunnery and bombing awards for his squadron.[52] On July 27, 1927, Major Geiger turned the unit over to his second-in-command, Captain Russell Presley, and returned to Quantico, where he assumed command of Aircraft Squadrons, East Coast Expeditionary Forces, with the collateral duty of instructing at Marine Corps Schools.[53]

While the late 1920's were a period of shrinking budgets and uncertain missions for many of the Services, the Marine Corps found brisk employment in expeditionary combat zones around the world. Over two-thirds of the Marine Corps was stationed outside the continental US in 1927, serving in Haiti, Nicaragua, China, on legation guard duty, or on sea duty.[54] During this period, Marine aviation established a clear purpose:

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[51] Orders, dated 11 September 1925. Folder #23, Box #2, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

[52] Geiger was also commended by the Major General Commandant John A. Lejeune for attaining the highest bombing scores in the Navy and the Marine Corps. Commendation dated 23 February 1928. Folder #27, Box #2, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

[53] Millett, 324. Under Major General Commandant John A. Lejeune, the USMC reorganized the Advanced Base Force into the East Coast Expeditionary Force in 1920. See also *The Master Schedule for Marine Corps Schools*, which depicted Geiger as in instructor in Tactical Principles, Overseas Operations, Troop Leading, Tanks, Air Service, and Combat Orders and Solutions. His versatility in managing this range of topics is remarkable. Marine Corps Schools, *Master Schedule, Field Officer's Course*, 1927-1928. Cited in Quagge, Chapter 3.

[54] Willock, 145. "By July 1928, 11,500 Marines or two thirds of the entire Corps was stationed outside the continental limits of the United States."

> All our training and war plans are based on the idea that the Marine Corps will act as an advance base force to seize and hold an advance base from which the Navy can operate against the enemy…In any war with a major force our fleet is going to be fully occupied and the advance base force will have to … use its own aviation for its information, protection from attack from the air and assistance in holding the base after seizure. I do not believe that the commander-in-chief is going to detach any first line carrier for this duty and for that reason Marine Corps Aviation is of paramount importance in the force. It also seems self-evident that there would be far better cooperation and results if the Marine force had Marine aviators rather than some Naval unit temporarily attached…To obtain maximum results, aviation and the troops with which it operates should be closely associated and know each other, as well as have a thorough knowledge of each other's work…Marine Aviation is not being developed as a separate branch of the service that considers itself too good to do anything else. **Unlike the Army Air Service, we do not aspire or want to be separated from the line or to be considered as anything but Marines**.[55]

Marine aviators remained the only US fliers engaged in actual combat operations in the late 1920's. Major Ross E. Rowell's VO-1M established a watershed in close air support doctrine in support of ground forces in Nicaragua from February, 1927 until the summer of 1928.[56] Rowell had received training in dive-bombing tactics from Army aviators in a 1923 tactics course at Kelly Field, Texas and he refined Lawson Sanderson's glide-bombing tactics and trained his pilots in these techniques.[57] He also modified his aircraft with wing-mounted bomb racks, which greatly enhanced the squadron's flexibility and firepower.

In Nicaragua, VO-1M performed heroic acts of CAS, combat resupply, and casualty evacuation with their force of O2-B1's and DH-4B's in support of a small force of Marines and Nicaraguan National Guardsmen engaged in combat with the guerilla forces of Augusto

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[55] Edwin H. Brainard, "Marine Aviation – A Lecture," *Marine Corps Gazette*, September 1926, p. 192. Emphasis by the author.
[56] Ross Rowell, "The Air Service in Minor Warfare," *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, October 1929, 871-877.

Sandino.[58] In the seminal event of the conflict, Rowell led five aircraft in support of a small group of isolated forces surrounded by Sandinista guerillas at Ocotal on July 16, 1927, employing air-to-ground communication, strafing, and bombing attacks, with spectacular success.[59]

The late 1920's also saw a great expansion in aviation technology and capability. During this time, the Marine aviation section in Washington recapitalized its vintage force WWI-era aircraft, replacing them with more capable *Vought* O2U-1 fighters and *Atlantic* TA-1/2's.[60] Charles Lindbergh's famous trans-Atlantic flight of May 1927 placed the potential and glory of aviation at the center of the national consciousness and all of the service flying components rushed to publicize their capabilities to garner support for more funding, research, and development.

Major Geiger's pilots participated in many of the resulting flight demonstrations during his tour in Quantico. At the same time, Geiger was busy with his duties as an instructor at Marine Corps Schools. The late 1920's was a fertile period in the development of Marine amphibious doctrine and it is likely that Geiger, as the pre-eminent aviator on the instructional staff, was involved to a large degree in the development of this doctrine. His infantry experience and training from CGSS placed

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[57] Johnson, 53. This course was led by Major Lewis H. Brereton, USA.
[58] Johnson, 57. Lieutenant Christian F. Schilt earned the medal of honor when he evacuated 18 wounded Marines and provided 1,400 pounds of supplies to Marine forces at Quilali. He flew 10 trips into a treacherous, expeditionary landing strip at that location.
[59] Corum and Johnson, 35-36. Rowell recalls the event: "The setting was theatrical in the extreme. On the ground our men were fighting for their lives, and they had been fighting for sixteen hours without sleep or food…I went in first, leading the attack. As I went down I could see enemy troops firing in groups. They were absolutely unconcerned. Just before I dropped the first bomb I saw a puff of smoke come from a man sitting on a horse and smoking a cigar. After the first bomb dropped, the whole picture changed … Complete panic followed the second and third attacks…It was a complete rout for Sandino."
[60] Johnson, 27-54.

him in a key position to influence the development of Marine amphibious doctrine.

It was during this time that the USMC began to envision the need for the Navy to procure escort carriers to transport Marine aircraft to advance bases, where Marine aviators later provided critically needed air support for infantry forces debarking in the commencement of amphibious operations. This issue particularly came to light when Marine forces landed at Shanghai in 1927 with no air support, because their squadrons were located on ships which were not coordinated with the landing force.[61] The procurement of naval shipping for the use of Marine aviation forces was a tough sell in any case, and the escort carrier concept was hardly entertained by senior naval officers in the budget-limited 1920's. The battle for Marine escort carriers did not bear fruit for another 16 years and, ultimately, this shortfall had devastating effects on the shores of the South Pacific.[62]

Major Geiger left Quantico in the spring of 1928, when he joined the Aviation Section at HQMC for his first tour on the Headquarters staff. In this short but important period, Geiger continued to work to organize, train, and equip the small Marine aviation force, which remained spread around the world from China to Haiti. Major Geiger's tour in Washington ended when he obtained one of three Marine slots to the Army War College at Fort Humphreys, where he began his student term in September, 1928.[63]

By this point in his career, Geiger's intellectual prowess was well-known and his application for admission was endorsed by the Major General Commandant, John A. Lejeune.[64] Even so, he was junior in rank to attend the War College (the other Marines were a Lieutenant

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[61] Willock, 150
[62] Millett, 334-335.
[63] Orders, HQMC to Major Roy S. Geiger, Folder #27, Box #2, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.
[64] Willock, 150.

Colonel and Colonel, respectively) and his class of some fifty officers represented the top tier of the US Army. While Geiger's course of study at CGSS was largely tactical in scope, the Army War College curriculum focused on the operational and strategic levels of war, with an emphasis on the employment of divisions, corps, and field armies.[65]

Geiger grew as a joint officer during his year the Army War College, as evidenced by his academic work. He produced a paper entitled, "Relation of the Army and Navy Air Components in Joint Operations," which reflected his view that the best means of employing airpower is through a joint effort.[66] In his paper, he opposed the concept of an independent Air Force, a view which did not endear him to his Army Air Force counterparts. Geiger stressed the necessity of unity of command and a cooperative effort between the services with regard to airpower employment, noting:

> The joint air forces will not only be called upon to perform army missions and naval missions; but … a single task may comprise both military and naval functions. When they act together; they must be coordinated to achieve the best results, and this can best be obtained by placing them 'under a single command.[67]

Geiger's paper also recognized the benefits of joint training and the danger of segregating Army and Naval Aviation, observing:

> The tactical doctrines of both air components are based on the lessons learned from the war as modified to fit the needs of its parent service, together with experiments and training…The army is further developing its air tactics at its service schools, while the navy is doing this in the fleet. While it would appear that the two services having, as they do, a common basis for development would be very much alike, yet there is a difference.[68]

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[65] Ibid., 151.
[66] Roy Stanley Geiger, "Relation of the Army and Navy Air Components in Joint Operations." Student paper, Army War College, 1928-1929, 1. File: Department of the Army, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, Archives Branch, Document # 357-33.
[67] Ibid., 9.
[68] Ibid., 9.

Geiger showed foresight in his recommendations to inaugurate a Joint Air Staff School and Joint Air Maneuvers to educate aviators from all services. He was critical of the prevalent aviation training construct, which did not provide a medium for the practical evaluation of joint operations.[69]

Geiger did not accept the view that airpower might have strategic, independent war-winning capability. Instead, he believed that the air arm provided a means of increasing the "range of action" of the Army and the Navy by several hundred miles, while adding "a corresponding responsibility in defending against like weapons." He appreciated the need for air superiority, observing that "if the defender still has an air force to threaten the landing, then the primary use of our air force is to protect the vessels and the troops landing for which the Navy is responsible." With no enemy air threat, however, Geiger argued that "all available air units should support the landing by initially taking the place of the Expeditionary artillery in support of naval gun fire,"[70] when vulnerable ground forces would not possess indirect fire capability.

Geiger's ideas may have been considered heretical in 1929 at the Air Corps Tactical School at Langley Field, but the future course of events showed his prescience. To be sure, Geiger had the luxury of focusing exclusively on the role of aviation in support of ground forces, given the specialized advanced base mission of the Marine Corps, while Army Air Corps thinkers wrangled with the additional and unproven mission of strategic attack. As an author of Marine air doctrine, Geiger did not have to consider the training and resource requirements that strategic bombing would entail. Nonetheless, the challenges of WW II would require detailed coordination between air and ground forces in all air forces and those units that were unprepared for the challenges of

[69] Ibid., 9-10.
[70] Ibid., 3, 8.

close air support would suffer unnecessary losses. In a period when many service thinkers were more focused on institutional interests, Roy Geiger's views reflected a pure focus on warfighting effectiveness. His ideas, in other words, revealed the mind of a true Joint Officer.

Chapter 3

Taking the Reins of Marine Air

Graduating with honors from the Army War College in July, 1929, Major Geiger returned to his old post at Quantico as Commanding Officer, Air Squadrons, East Coast Expeditionary Force.[1] Here, Geiger was pleased to find a renewed and vigorous group of pilots and aircraft – largely the result of the efforts of Colonel Thomas C. Turner, engaged in his second tour as the head of Marine Corps Aviation.

Geiger's fliers were outfitted with new Corsairs, Hawks, Falcons, and SeaHawks, which replaced the WW I-vintage DH-4's, out of which the Marine Corps had wrung every ounce of utility. Brown Field at Quantico also benefited from Turner's improvements, with a $500,000 makeover that enlarged the base.[2] Flight operations consisted of training in basic skills such as bombing, fighter tactics, strafing, and reconnaissance. Geiger's squadrons also participated in popular barnstorming events, aviation races, and aerobatic exhibitions, seizing every opportunity to wave the flag for Marine aviation.

Under Geiger's leadership from 1929-1931, the Marine aviators of Air Squadrons East also made a tremendous impact in the realm of humanitarian relief. Responding to disasters all over the Western hemisphere, they flew into treacherous airfields and in horrible weather to provide assistance to victims of natural disasters. Geiger's efforts garnered much-needed publicity for the Marine Corps and Marine

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[1] Certificate, Army War College, dated 29 July 1929 and endorsed by Simon B. Buckner, Jr. Folder #28, Box #2, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

[2] Willock, 155. Sore spot for the Navy Secretary, Charles Francis Adams. Had no love for the USMC and believed this expenditure to be excessive. He held General Butler personally responsible and ultimately court-martialed the great Marine hero for unnamed charges that did not stand.

aviation, most notably when Marine aircraft provided support to a hurricane-ravaged Santo Domingo in September, 1930.

Having lost over 2,000 lives in a terrific storm, the Dominicans desperately needed assistance, but the persistent bad weather blocked relief efforts. A dedicated all-weather pilot, Geiger piloted the first relief aircraft to get through the weather, a Ford tri-motor which he flew into Santo Domingo. Subsequently, he established an air relief shuttle between Haiti and the Dominican Republic.[3] For his actions in the hurricane relief effort, Geiger received honors from the Secretary of the Navy, the American Red Cross, and Dominican President Rafael Trujillo, who awarded Geiger with the MEDAL OF MILITARY MERIT of the Dominican Republic. President Trujillo was eternally grateful to Geiger and kept him well-supplied with fine cigars for the rest of his life. This was a significant act of gratitude, as Geiger was known to enjoy a cigar-a-day smoking habit.[4]

Major Geiger's collateral duties instructor at Marine Corps Schools gave him the opportunity to express his views on joint air-ground operations; in his frequent presentations, he emphasized the principles he had outlined in his Army War College paper. Specifically, he continued to fight for a joint training center and an aerial observer's course for all Marine ground officers and aviators, believing this would enhance the expertise of all Marines in the employment of combined arms tactics.[5]

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[3] A number of commendations and newspaper articles (letters of appreciation from the Red Cross, etc.) in the Geiger collection offer the details of these events. Folder #29, Box #2, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.
[4] Generalissimo Raphael Leonidas Trujillo Milina, President of the Dominican Republic, Major Roy Stanley Geiger, citation, dated 15 November, 1930. Folder #29, Box #2, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps. See also Major General Commandant to Roy S. Geiger, Medal of Military Merit of Dominican Republic, 26 October, 1933, Folder #29, Box #2, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps. Cigar habit verfied by discussions with Roy. S. Geiger, Jr. and Geiger's aide de camp from WW II, Colonel Edward C. Kicklighter, USMC (Ret.).
[5] Willock, 155

During this period, Geiger cooperated with Colonel Turner in the formulation of aviation funding plans and employment concepts. With his wide range of educational and operational experience, Geiger provided valuable input to the organization of Marine aviation. When Colonel Turner tragically died on October 28, 1931, Geiger was ready to immediately assume the position of Officer-in-Charge, Marine Corps Aviation.[6] For his accomplishments at Quantico, Geiger received the following commendation from Major General Smedley Butler:

> Before I detach from this post and go to the retired list, I want to express to you my appreciation of the valuable services you have rendered to this command for the past two years, as Commanding Officer of the Aircraft Squadrons, East Coast Expeditionary Force. You have administered the aviation force at Quantico in an eminently able manner, and this force has on many occasions demonstrated its fitness by the excellent condition of its personnel and material. The high state of efficiency of your organization is due to the zealousness, ability, and tireless work of its commander.[7]

Geiger's first tour as the top Marine aviator was his first real opportunity to shape Marine aviation and he took full advantage of his position. The hierarchy of Marine aviation was complex in 1931. Geiger's position was subordinate to the Division of Operations and Training at HQMC, but he acted as the top aviation advisor to the Major General Commandant, Ben H. Fuller. As head of Marine aviation, his responsibilities included acting as the principal liaison to the Navy's Bureau of Aeronautics and the Bureaus of Engineering, Ordnance, Supplies, and Accounts. While the Marine Corps retained control of its personnel assigned to aviation duty, the responsibility for organizing,

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[6] Johnson, 65. Turner walked into the turning propeller of a Sikorsky Amphibian, suffering a severe head wound. The tough Marine survived the accident, but died three days later from associated complications. See also Sherrod, 28-29.

[7] Major General S. D. Butler to Major Roy S. Geiger, commendation, 30 September, 1931. Folder #30, Box #2, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

training, and equipping the Marine aviation force resided with the Chief of Naval Operations.

Saving the Marine Corps – The FMF

The mission of Marine aviation in 1931 was that of a supporting arm to the Advanced Base Force, but Marine Corps force structure did not facilitate this relationship.[8] Although Marine aviators were capable of shipboard operations, they did not possess organic shipping to permit seaborne transport of Marine aircraft with Marine ground forces. Thus, in any future operation aviation assets would follow deploying Marine forces by conducting flights overland or, if possible, aboard aircraft carriers.[9] This employment concept did not guarantee that Marine aviation would link with Marine ground forces. In amphibious operations, then, this might result in debarking Marine ground forces without the synergistic benefit of on-call air support.

While Marine aviation struggled to close this logistical gap in the early 1930's, the mission and purpose of the Marine Corps at large came under the scrutiny of Congress and the other services. The Great Depression and a relatively benign national security environment exacted a tremendous financial strain on all of the military services, but particularly the tiny Marine Corps and its aviation arm.[10] A true moment of crisis occurred when President Hoover directed a reduction in Marine Corps strength from about 17,000 to 13,600 in December, 1932. General Fuller determined that this stunning force reduction would require a withdrawal of all deployed forces and the elimination of Marine aviation altogether, thus reducing the Marine Corps to little more than a standing Guard force.[11] Such an outcome was clearly unacceptable to

[8] Johnson, 35. See also Millett, "Assault From the Sea," 86.
[9] Willock, 161. Most Marine pilots were carrier qualified. Leading by example, Geiger received his carrier qualification as the USMC aviation chief. See also Sherrod, 32.
[10] Johnson, 61. See also Millett, 334-335. See also Millett, "Assault From the Sea," 75.
[11] Millett, 329. See also Johnson, 61.

the Marine leaders, who summoned every ounce of the political savvy they could muster to preserve the Marine Corps. Into this crisis entered the concept that saved the Marines, the Fleet Marine Force (FMF).

Throughout its history, the Marine Corps has enjoyed the benefit of visionaries who shaped the mission to meet the security needs of the nation, thus preserving the relevance of the USMC. From Archibald Henderson to John A. Lejeune, Marines have always found inspired leadership in times of crisis.[12] With his introduction of the FMF concept in 1934, Major General Commandant Fuller was such a visionary, and Roy Geiger became the father of the aviation doctrine embedded in this concept.[13] The FMF was borne out of a long period of intellectual debate at HQMC and Marine Corps Schools, which resulted in the view that "the Marine Corps should concentrate on one specialized function – amphibious warfare in cooperation with naval forces with its major objective the seizure of advanced bases for the fleet."[14] At a time when the US Army shunned amphibious operations as a means of warfighting, the Marines continued to train to this mission, thus giving the USMC a valuable niche for resources and training. General Fuller's vision for the FMF preserved Marine force structure and Marine aviation.

The FMF was a watershed that spawned a doctrinal and technological revolution. In 1934, a team of young Marine officers drafted the pre-eminent doctrinal publication for amphibious operations, the *Tentative Landing Operations Manual*, which became a bible for

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[12] Frank Marutollo, *Organizational Behavior in the Marine Corps* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1990), 61, 90. A quote from Robert D. Heinl captures the tendency of Marine leaders to rise to the occasion in times of crisis, stating, "If ever an organization has thrived on attempts to abolish it, it is this small corps, with one foot in the sea, one foot on land, and its head perpetually under the sword of Damocles." Marutollo argues that "this organizational culture borders on, if not is identical to, religious fervor. Most Marine officers find their spiritual fulfillment in the Corps as a matter of observed fact…Commitment to the survival of the Marine Corps by its officer corps is an absolute given."

[13] Millett, "Assault from the Sea," 75-78. See also Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 330. See also Jeter A. Isely and Philip A. Crowl, *The US Marines and Amhibious War: Its Theory, and Its Practice in the Pacific*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951), 33.

amphibious training and combat operations in World War II.[15] When the US Army finally adopted its own amphibious doctrine in 1943, it was a virtual photocopy of the *Tentative Manual*, right down to the photographs and Marine-specific lingo and symbology.[16] Roy Geiger was not an author of the *Tentative Manual* but his presence is recorded at a number of the drafting conferences for this document.[17] As the senior Marine aviator, he had significant inputs to the drafting of the *Tentative Manual*.

Eliminating the old East and West Coast Expeditionary Forces, the Fleet Marine Force structure fell under the operational control of the respective Fleet Commander, with Marine air squadrons consolidated into Aircraft One (Air One) at Quantico and Aircraft Two (Air Two) at San Diego. The FMF structure successfully aligned the Marine and Naval mission and gave the Navy a stake in the preservation of Marine Air. The Marines cemented this relationship through an enduring commitment to provide two Marine aviation squadrons to supplement aircraft carrier wings.[18]

Many of Geiger's War College insights are evident in the Tentative Manual; including the requirement for coordinated air-ground operations and the concepts of joint training and organization. Implied in the operational concepts of the *Tentative Manual* was the presumption that Marine aviation would require access to land or sea bases in close

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[14] Johnson, 61.
[15] Isely and Crowl, 36. Of the Navy and Army amphibious publications, Isely and Crowl state: "If these and later publications … can be considered the Holy Writ of modern amphibious warfare, then the Tenative Manual … deserves to be thought of as a sort of combination of the Pentateuch and the Four Gospels."
[16] Robert Debs Heinl, Jr., *Soldiers of the Sea*, (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute, 1965), 305. Army Field Manual 31-5, Landing Operations on Hostile Shores, was published in 1941. This was the first publication ever issued by the Army on amphibious warfare. It is ironic that General Marshall signed this publication; in 1939, he had called the Army and Navy fleet landing exercises "impracticable." Also Isely and Crowl, 36.
[17] Anne Cipriano Venzon, *From* Whaleboats *to Amphibious Warfare: LtGen "Howling Mad" Smith and the US Marine Corps*, (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2003), 60. On January 9, 1934, Brigadier General Breckenridge convened a conference to review and critique the draft Tentative Manual. Geiger sat on the board that conducted this review.
[18] Johnson, 65.

proximity to the amphibious fight, with the ultimate goal of having an aircraft carrier assigned for Marine aircraft.[19] The "escort carrier" model continued to be a tough sell for senior naval leadership, however, and remained a missing link in the equipment envisioned by Marine amphibious doctrine.[20]

As the chief of Marine Aviation, Geiger continued to fly and he visited his fliers across the world. With a static force of only 130 pilots and 900 enlisted Marines, however, he spent the majority of his time and effort preserving the integrity and structure of the tiny Marine air arm. Promoted to Lieutenant Colonel on October 31, 1934, Geiger pushed Marine squadrons to participate in joint training exercises and he was an observer at the historic Fleet Landing Exercise Number 1 (FLEX 1) at Culebra, Puerto Rico in January-February 1935.[21] Always cognizant of the need for political support, Geiger continued to encourage his units to participate in the aerial demonstrations, races, and shows which were popular in the mid-1930's.[22]

Geiger made a number of enduring contributions during his time at the helm of Marine aviation. Throughout his tour at HQMC, Geiger

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[19] Isely and Crowl. The Tentative Manual states: "every effort should be made to provide for the participation of landing force [Marine Corps] aircraft in the initial operations. The ideal arrangement involves the assignment of a carrier or carriers solely for the use of these units." Marines repeated this plea for more than decade with no success.

[20] Major General Commandant to the Chief of Naval Operations, memorandum, undated, regarding the "advantages attendant upon the training and refreshing of Marine Corps squadrons in carrier operations. It is the firm conviction of the Major General Commandant that it is vitally essential for Marine Corps aviation squadrons of the Fleet Marine Force to receive carrier training and naval air indoctrination in order to be able to perform properly their duties in conjunction with the Fleet Marine Force..The Major General Commandant desires to reopen the matter of assignment of Marine Corps aviation squadrons to carrier duty." Folder #41, Box #3, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

[21] Millett, "Assault from the Sea," 76. The first of several FLEX events, these training exercises would be critically important in preparing Marine and Naval forces for the challenges of amphibious operations.

[22] Multiple news articles and correspondence reflecting these events. For example, correspondence with the Mayor of Miami, R. B. Gautier, regarding the Miami All American Air Races, Folder #34, Box #2, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

was frustrated by the placement of Marine aviation in the Operations and Training Section. He argued for full division status for Marine aviation and, near the end of his tour, he got it. The new structure placed the Director of Marine Aviation directly underneath the Major General Commandant. Geiger also pushed legislation which revitalized the Reserve Pilot program, resulting in the Naval Cadet Act of 1935 which gave the Flying Services access to civilian pilots in the event of a war. Given the impending requirement for a massive surge of qualified pilots in WW II, the reserve pilot legislation enabled access to a strategically significant pool of aviators. These changes are a testament to the vision of Roy Geiger, given the tremendous expansion of Marine aviation in WW II.[23]

A New Level of Training

Relieved by Lieutenant Colonel Ross Rowell in the spring of 1935, Geiger assumed command of FMF – Air One at Quantico on June 1, 1935, commanding all Marine aircraft on the East Coast. In a dramatic demonstration of his flying proficiency, Geiger's first act was to lead a flight of 19 fighters at the Canadian National Air Pageant in Toronto.[24] Roy Geiger's final command tour in Quantico had a markedly different character from his previous tours at Brown field. Where before he had focused mainly on keeping his airplanes flyable, maintaining a basic level of proficiency, and advertising Marine aviation, he was now clearly preparing his Marines for war.

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[23] Peter B. Mersky, *U.S. Marine Corps Aviation: 1912 to the Present*, (Annapolis, MD: The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1983), 286. Geiger was directly involved in legislation which created the grade of aviation cadet in the Marine Reserve, providing for the training and pay of such individuals. Among others, Medal of Honor winners Gregory "Pappy" Boyington and Robert Galer participated in this program. See also Johnson, 74 and Willock, 169.

[24] Logbook entry. Box #12, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

During his four years at Quantico, Geiger left his stamp on the Marines of Air One in two principle areas: long range aerial navigation and training with expeditionary forces. With over 2,500 flight hours in his log books at age 51, Geiger was the most experienced pilot in the Marine Corps. He had flown almost very type of military aircraft in the USMC inventory, and he had flown in all varieties of weather and terrain. With his breadth of knowledge and experience as a flier, Geiger learned to have tremendous respect for the rigors of instrument flight and aerial navigation, which can often be the difference between life and death in an airplane.[25]

Geiger's aviators were the beneficiaries of new airplanes, which were equipped with updated navigation aids and instrumentation, and Geiger trained his pilots to accomplish their mission under the worst conditions imaginable. He directed the installation of a Link trainer in his hangar at Quantico so that his pilots could train under instrument conditions on the ground, and supplemented this early simulator with a rigorous academic syllabus on the intricacies of instrument flight. He also modified the windscreens of some of his aircraft to enable pilots to fly "under the canopy" for training flights which simulated flight in actual instrument conditions. Geiger was well ahead of his time in his approach to the "black magic" of instrument flying in the late 1930's and this training ultimately saved many lives in the turbulent skies of the South Pacific.[26]

With intimate familiarity of the *Tentative Landing Operations Manual*, Geiger was in an ideal position to test the aviation doctrine therein. Commanding over half of the airplanes in the Marine Corps, he personally led a flight of fifty aircraft to the Fleet Landing Exercise

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[25] Willock, 170-171.

[26] Colonel Roy S. Geiger to Mr. Karl Day, American Airlines, letter, 17 October, 1938, requesting textbooks on instrument and radio flying. Folder #79, Box #4, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps. Letter shows

Number Two (FLEX 2) at Culebra, making the 2,150 mile flight without incident. At Culebra, Geiger and his pilots practiced CAS in support of amphibious ground forces, conducting live fire strafing, bombing runs, and practicing the use of visual marks and coordination with naval gunfire.[27]

After his promotion to Colonel in March, 1937, Geiger continued to lead his squadrons on subsequent FLEX events, enjoying the influx of new aircraft with advanced features such as retractable gear, flaps, metal construction, and improvements in engine design and radio communications.[28] For the first time in his career, Geiger was leading a flying organization with a professional warfighting capability and the technology and skill to make a significant difference in major combat operations.

Geiger's airmen improved with each FLEX event, developing innovations such as two-way communications, forward air controllers (FACs), and spotting for naval gunfire. In all of these exercises, Marine aviators worked in conjunction with naval aviators, thus developing similar techniques and tactics in the naval force. During this time, Geiger again observed the importance of aircraft carriers for the Marine mission. "Marine Corps Aviation," he wrote to Vice Admiral F. J. Horne, "cannot perform its primary mission, that of furnishing air support in the capture of a hostile base, under most conditions, unless we are prepared to operate from Carriers."[29] By the completion of FLEX 5 in 1939, the

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Geiger's efforts to obtain instrument flying publications from the civil aviation industry. See also Willock, 170-171.

[27] First Marine Brigade, Fleet *Marine Force, Record of Events, U.S. Fleet Landing Exercise No. Two, 1936*, 3-22. File: FLEX #2, Archives, MCRC, Quantico, Virginia. Cited in Quagge.

[28] Johnson, 76.

[29] CO, Aircraft One, to Vice Admiral F.J. Horne, Commander, Aircraft Battle Force, letter, 26 March, 1937. Folder #66, Box #4, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

Marine Corps and the Navy proved the concept of amphibious warfare in training and validated the principles of Close Air Support doctrine.[30]

During this period, Air One received commendations from all quarters. "The work of Air One," Rear Admiral A.W. Johnson stated on March 14, 1938, "under the able leadership of Colonel Geiger is deserving of the highest commendation. His organization is completely integrated into that of the Fleet Marine Force."[31] This was but one of many commendations recognizing the accomplishments of Geiger's Marines. More importantly, however, the FLEX training established a cooperative relationship between the Navy and Marine Corps on the eve of war in Europe. Marine aviation found its clear mission at a critical time, as Geiger stated: "the primary reason for the Marine Corps' having airplanes is their use in close support of ground units."[32]

Off the Beaten Path

Having spent 3 tours as a Commander in Quantico, Geiger was ready for a change of scenery after his fourth year of command. In his thirty-year Marine Corps career, he had served around the world from Haiti to China; he had flown in combat and he had commanded with distinction at every level of Marine Aviation. Geiger had nothing left to prove and he could easily have retired to his home in Pensacola with the satisfaction of a job well done. There is no evidence that he considered retirement, however, and the significance of his next eight years of service would dwarf that of his first thirty.

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[30] Isley and Crowl, 58. There remained the question of the primary role of Marine aviation – CAS during or after the amphibious landing. What is clear in all definitions of CAS is the requirement for detailed coordination between air and ground forces for air-delivered attacks. One of the more descriptive definitions of CAS would come from an Army soldier in the Philippines: "Close air support means that those bombs are so close that if you don't get in a hole or down as flat on your belly as you can, you're mighty likely to get your backside full of arrows."

[31] United States Fleet, Training Detachment, USS New York, Flagship, Confidential Memorandum, 14 March, 1938. Subject: U.S. Fleet Landing Exercise No. 4. File: FLEX #4, Archives, MCRC, Quantico, Virginia. Cited in Quagge.

[32] Isley and Crowl, 59.

In the summer of 1939, Colonel Geiger grasped another opportunity for professional military education at the Naval War College Senior Course at Newport, Rhode Island, where he began class on June 30, 1939 with 42 senior naval officers. In contrast with the rigors of CGSS and the Army War College, the Naval War College Senior Course of 1939 featured more of a training focus than a high-level academic environment. The mission of the course was to "develop the professional competence of officers in operational planning and the exercise of operational command."[33] As a Marine, Geiger had to work hard to learn the intricacies of naval operational planning which dominated the Newport curriculum, but he still found time to maintain his flying currency at a rate of eight hours a month.[34]

As in the past, Geiger succeeded as a student and finished in the top third of his class, graduating in May, 1940. After graduation, he traveled to Stetson University in Deland, Florida, where he received an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws, some thirty-three years after receiving his first law degree. Because of his high standing in the Senior Course, he was one of five officers to receive an invitation to remain at Newport for an additional eight month "Advanced Course," which he began in July of 1940.

Geiger felt the Advanced course was a more useful course of study, with a focus on international law, maritime law, international relations, and diplomacy. With his expertise in the legal arena, Geiger enjoyed these fields, particularly given the backdrop of geopolitical uncertainty in 1939-1940. While at Newport, he continued to fly regularly in Vought fighters and passed a check flight on the new PBY-2 *Catalina*, but his

[33] United States Naval War College, *Prospectus of the Naval War College Courses, Senior and Junior, 1939-1940*, 1 July 1939. Cited in Quagge.
[34] Willock, 183.

academic focus remained on events in Europe and the likely American response.[35]

Colonel Geiger found it difficult to focus on his studies after President Roosevelt announced a ten-fold expansion of Navy and Marine aviation in 1939. Such an expansion would require the Marine Corps to establish ten Marine Air Groups, organized into Aircraft Wings of an as yet undetermined configuration. With war looming on the horizon, the Advanced course ended early, in March, 1941, and Geiger anxiously returned to HQMC, where he awaited orders to return to the FMF.

Geiger's rank made him unsuitable for any available Marine Corps job in the spring of 1941, as there were few slots for Colonels in Marine aviation. Instead of returning to the fleet, then, he received a temporary assignment to the Office of the Chief of Naval Intelligence to perform service as an Assistant Naval attaché to Europe. His orders were to travel to the Mediterranean region to "observe British naval and aerial operations from Gibraltar east to the Suez canal as well as those conducted by the military ground forces in the Western Desert area."[36]

From April 1 until July 9, 1941, Colonel Geiger's tour included visits to Gibraltar, Malta, the *HMS Formidable*, Tobruk, Cyprus, and England. While at Tobruk, Geiger experienced the discomfort of visiting a garrison which suffered under the air supremacy of the German *Luftwaffe*. During his trip, he made a number of flights at the controls of RAF *Lysander* and *Lockheed Hudson* aircraft, among others. He observed joint operations in the Western Desert and RAF flights in support of ground forces in Crete, where he spent a good deal of time interviewing officers who survived the German assault on that island. In all, Geiger was stunned by the things he saw.

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[35] Logbook entry, Box #12, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.
[36] Willock, 194.

Returning to the US in late July, Colonel Geiger recounted his experiences to the Office of Naval Intelligence. He was critical of the lack of cooperation between the British Army and the Royal Air Force, which seemed insistent on conducting independent and poorly coordinated air operations that did not always support the ground scheme of maneuver. Geiger's view was that the RAF seemed indifferent to or incapable of executing the CAS mission, for which they seemed to have conducted little or no training. While his report complimented the bravery and spirit of the British forces of all services, he concluded that "It is time that the British Navy realize that airplanes can and will sink its ships; that the British Army realize that it cannot win battles without complete and intelligent air support, and that the Royal Air Force realize that its demand for independent action is losing the war for the British Empire."[37] Indeed, it is apparent that Geiger felt that what he saw in his tour of the Mediterranean theater confirmed his earlier beliefs about the importance of integration between the ground and air arm of any service.

On August 1, 1941, Colonel Geiger returned to the FMF, where he assumed duties as the Commanding Officer of the newly formed First Marine Aircraft Wing at his old base, Quantico. Since his departure two years prior, the ranks and aircraft of Marine aviation had doubled in size and continued to grow at a frantic pace. Roy Geiger's job was to form this bustling and scattered bunch of Marines and airplanes into a fighting force, and he was late getting started. Promoted to Brigadier General on October 1, 1941, Geiger's second career was now in full swing.

[37] Willock, 194.

Chapter 4

Marine Air – The Frontier Guard

Assuming command of First Marine Aircraft Wing (1st MAW) at Quantico in August, 1941, Geiger and his West Coast counterpart -- Ross Rowell (2nd MAW Commanding General) -- faced the awesome task of shaping Marine Aviation for its imminent duty in the Pacific. During WW II, Geiger would witness the expansion of a core force structure of roughly 1,000 Marines and 100 airplanes into a wartime posture of over 100,000 Marines and 10,000 aircraft, an impressive Air Force in its own right. As the senior Marine Aviator, his leadership was instrumental in this expansion.

Since WW I Marine aviation had consisted of a small core of experienced leaders and pilots.[1] In contrast, most of the aviators of the newly formed 1st and 2nd MAWs were fresh recruits with no combat experience, varying degrees of skill and knowledge of the Marine Corps mission, and very few flight hours. Yet these young aviators would face threats and challenges which dwarfing those the early Marines faced in Haiti and Nicaragua. Geiger was aware of the implications of such challenges, having devoted much of his career to the study of war. As much as any of his contemporaries, Geiger glimpsed the challenges of amphibious operations in the Pacific, having studied it extensively during his time at Marine Corps Schools. He recognized that he had two critical challenges as a wing commander: he needed to train his brand-new pilots for war and he required the means to transport them thousands of miles to the Pacific theater to the bases where they would be in position to support ground forces.

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[1] Sherrod, 30.

In the summer of 1941, Marine aircraft were already dispersed throughout the Pacific; Marine Air Group (MAG)-21 of 2nd MAW had 90 aircraft on Oahu, Hawaii, Guam, and Wake Island, while Geiger's MAG-11 possessed a similar number of aircraft on the East Coast. Both MAWs were growing at a steady pace, but circumstances soon called for an exponential increase in production; the total Marine Aviation Force of 220 aircraft fell well short of the 450 aircraft which Major General Holland M. Smith prescribed to support a Marine Division during an opposed amphibious landing.[2]

Despite the tremendous increase in resource availability, the early process of expansion was slow and painful. Pilots and aircraft could not be produced and deployed overnight, especially during the disorganized industrial transition between a peacetime and wartime footing. Geiger surely recalled the difficulties that the US Armed Forces encountered in the procurement of aircraft for WWI, when the US was unable to produce combat-worthy aircraft, despite all of its might and industrial capacity. Now a Brigadier General, Geiger focused on the expansion of his wing and training facilities. He and his fellow commanders provided oversight and guidance to the best of their ability, but in December, 1941, Marine aviation was not ready to take on the Japanese Navy.

The Japanese invasion of Pearl Harbor on 7 December, 1941 was devastating for Marine Air. Depleting the ranks of MAG-21 by over 50%, the Japanese dealt a terrific blow to the vulnerable Marines at Ewa (Oahu) and ultimately overwhelmed the US forces on Wake Island. These horrific events yielded two positive results, however: the morale bequeathed by the performance of Marine aviators at Wake Island and the unprecedented expansion of aircraft manufacturing and pilot training bestowed by the surprise attack. The tiny group of Marines and sailors

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[2] Marine Corps Schools, *Comments, Recommendations, and General Observations of Umpires and Observers, Fleet Landing Exercise No. 6, January – March, 1940*, 1-3. FLEX No. 6 File: FLEX 6, Archives, MCRC, Quantico, Virginia. Cited in Quagge.

who bravely defended Wake Island offered inspiration to the ranks of Marine Aviators and the American public at large and after the events at Pearl Harbor, America placed its full might behind the war effort, thus ending (temporarily) the era of resource limitations for Marine Aviation.[3]

On December 8, the Chief of Naval Operations ordered First Marine Aircraft Wing to move to San Diego "as expeditiously as possible." On December 10, General Geiger "had but 67 planes capable of making the trip, of which but 15 could possibly be considered ready for combat."[4] Nevertheless, he led his Wing west to San Diego, where they resumed expansion efforts and supported the West Coast air defense mission. In March, 1942, 1st and 2nd MAW each expanded its forces from one MAG to four. Geiger's 1st MAW expanded into MAG's 12, 13, 14, and 15, while Rowell's expanded 2nd MAW consisted of MAG's 22, 23, 24, and 25. As an illustration of the rapidity of expansion, Geiger formed and deployed MAG-13 in only one week, sending the brand-new squadrons of that unit to establish the air defense of American Samoa against the lurking, undefeated Japanese naval forces.

During the early months of 1942, Geiger conducted continuous and furious efforts to prepare 1st MAW for war, assisted by his able Chief

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[3] Vernon E. Megee, "The Evolution of Aviation (Part II)," *Marine Corps Gazette*, Vol. 49, No. 9, September 1965, 56. Herein is a vivid description of the Wake Island heroics of VMF-211. "With only four Grumman *Wildcat* fighters – with which they had not had time to become familiar – the … fliers of VMF-211 took to the air in defense of their island base. For sixteen eventful days this heroic remnant … thwarted the initial efforts of the Japanese landing force…When, inevitably, the last plane was destroyed and the last gun battery silenced, the surviving Marines, ground and air alike, took to the beach defenses with rifle in hand." Rear Admiral Jack Fletcher's carrier task force was in a position to support Wake, but instead retired to the north and east. Sherrod reports that many of the pilots on board *Saratoga* sat down and cried when they found that they would not be allowed to support their brethren on Wake Island. Marines would not forget the willingness of the Navy to withdraw forces that could have assisted at Wake, and this act left a sense of betrayal that would be reinforced in the early days of the Battle of Guadalcanal.

[4] RG 127, NARA. Official history of The First Marine Aircraft Wing, July, 1941 to December, 1941. Outline prepared by Captain W. H. Goodman, Historical Division, USMC.

of Staff, Louis Woods.[5] Geiger whipped the poorly equipped and inexperienced Marine pilots into combat-ready condition. He guided their training at bombing ranges in Southern California and Arizona and even imported the eminent Captain Weems from the US Naval Academy to provide instruction in celestial navigation for the imminent 5,200 mile trip to the South Pacific.

While most of the 1st MAW remained on the West Coast in early 1942, Brigadier General Rowell's 2nd MAW deployed its aircraft to a number of locations across the Pacific, with a small contingent of MAG-23 and MAG-24 aircraft in Hawaii, two squadrons at Midway under the flag of MAG-22, and another squadron that joined Geiger's MAG-13 in the Samoan islands. Most Marine squadrons shuttled between numerous bases during this time, rotating between aircraft carriers and a number of airfields. By the end of May, 1942, Marines of VMF-212 and VMO-251 were deployed at Efate in New Hebrides and aboard the carriers USS *Hornet* and *Enterprise*.

Mighty Japan

The Japanese Navy, meanwhile, continued to expand the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere during the early months of 1942.[6] Spreading its forces south toward the Solomon Islands, the Japanese moved into Rabaul (New Britain) and Buin (Bougainville), where they established air bases with hundreds of fighters and bombers. The well-defended island of Rabaul soon became the center of Japanese operations in the South Pacific, with forces numbering over 100,000.[7]

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[5] *Woods, Oral History*, 139-151. Woods describes the conditions as 1st MAW prepared to deploy: "Our men were exceedingly well-trained to live in tents…it was a tough winter – a cold, wet winter…We had no gas trucks; we rented gas trucks. We found 40 commercial station wagons that somebody had in Los Angeles, and we bought them." Woods interview, 139-151.
[6] Sherrod, 47.
[7] Sherrod, 65.

Having extended the front through the Philippines south and west to the Netherlands East Indies and east to New Guinea and the Bismarck Archipelago, the Japanese assumed a dominant posture in the spring of 1942. Allied coalition forces were extremely vulnerable during these months, with a comparatively small number of air and ground forces in the Southwest Pacific under the command of General Douglas MacArthur (Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in the Southwest Pacific Area - SWPA). Had the Japanese been able to cut off Allied strategic maritime lines of communication in the Southwest Pacific, the war with Japan might have been lost.

Further complicating this scenario was the Allied grand strategy. After Pearl Harbor, Washington decision-makers assumed a "Beat Hitler First" strategy in Europe and a defensive strategy in the Far East. As a result, comparatively few resources were available to commanders in the Southwest Pacific.

The Impact of Midway

While the Battle of the Coral Sea helped to stymie the intended Japanese invasion of Port Moresby on the southern coast of New Guinea, the critical turning point in the Pacific Theater occurred at the Battle of Midway from June 4-6, 1942. During this epic battle, a joint force of Navy, Marine, and Army aviators surprised the main Japanese battle fleet, sinking four aircraft carriers in a matter of hours.

While Midway may have been naval aviation's finest hour, the Marines of MAG-22 also put up a valiant but costly fight, losing 24 pilots in heroic fighter and dive-bombing sorties. Flying 64 aircraft – an assortment of SBD's, SB2U's, F2A's, F4F's – the Marines were utterly outclassed by the superior carrier-based Japanese *Zeroes*, which were particularly dominant against the Marines' F2A "Brewster Buffaloes." The fighter pilots of MAG-22 were virtually wiped out, losing 15 of 25 pilots in the battle, and dive-bombers did not fare much better, losing 8

of 16 SBD's in attacks on the Japanese carriers.[8] Making an ancillary contribution to the great naval victory at Midway, the surviving Marine fliers emerged from Midway both angry and demoralized at their poor state of training and readiness.[9]

After Midway, Geiger, who remained on the West Coast, returned to Washington on two separate occasions for conferences at HQMC, where he conducted operational planning for the impending campaigns in the Pacific. Given his breadth of education and his strong joint relationships, it is likely that his voice was influential in furious planning efforts in Washington.

WATCHTOWER

After the victory at Midway, US military commanders believed they might be able to regain the initiative against the Japanese.[10] In early July, 1942, American reconnaissance aircraft photographed Japanese construction forces building a runway on the remote island of Guadalcanal, located at the southern tip of the Solomon Island chain.[11] The implications of a main Japanese air base at Guadalcanal were unacceptable. From there, Japanese forces would be in a position to cut communications to Australia and New Zealand, where many of the Southwest Pacific-based Allied forces were headquartered.

Largely as a result of pressure from Admiral Ernest King, the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), leaders in Washington decided to conduct an amphibious invasion of Guadalcanal and the nearby island of Tulagi. The objective of this mission, code-named WATCHTOWER, was to retard the Japanese advance and establish an airfield that would be a base of operations for future advances north toward Japanese positions.

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[8] Sherrod, 60.
[9] Ibid., 63
[10] Ibid., 55.
[11] Sherrod, 70. Photograph taken on 6 July.

On 3 July 1942, the Navy's South Pacific Commander (ComSoPac) Vice Admiral Robert Ghormley informed Major General A.A. Vandegrift that his 1st Marine Division would be the ground force for the invasion of Guadalcanal, which would take place five weeks later, on 7 August. Vandegrift was shocked at this turn of events, as he had not expected to commit his Division to combat operations until 1943; his division was in a partial state of readiness, in port at Auckland, New Zealand,.

Adding to the complexity of this scenario were the command relationships for WATCHTOWER. At the strategic level the Pacific theater was divided into two main areas, with General Douglas MacArthur leading the Southwest Pacific area (SWPA, which included Australia, New Guinea, the Philippines, and the Bismarck and Solomon Islands) and Admiral Chester Nimitz (Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet or CINCPAC) leading forces in remainder of the Pacific area. The Joint Chiefs shifted the SWPA one degree of longitude to the west so that Operations in Guadalcanal would fall under Admiral Nimitz's operational jurisdiction.

Based on his flagship in the harbor of Noumea, New Caledonia, Vice Admiral Robert Ghormley (ComSoPac), was the direct commander for WATCHTOWER, with Vice Admiral Frank Fletcher acting as commander of the expeditionary task force (Task Force-61). Underneath this command structure sat the irascible Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner (Task Force-62), who commanded the amphibious force that included Vandegrift's 1st Marine Division. Vice Admiral John S. McCain, Commander, Aircraft, South Pacific (ComAirSoPac), commanded the combined force of land-based aircraft for WATCHTOWER, while General MacArthur contributed B-17's to the effort.

It is difficult to envision a less favorable operational scenario than that which faced Vandegrift's Marines at Guadalcanal. With only five weeks to prepare for an opposed landing in the South Pacific against strong enemy defensive positions, Vandegrift was not confident of his

ability to succeed in taking or holding the island for any length of time. In the inimitable words of Vernon Megee, "The decision to recapture Guadalcanal in August of 1942 was prematurely born of Naval desperation, after possibly the shortest period of gestation known to biological science."[12]

Under the best of circumstances, this was a challenging mission, but Vandegrift was forced to accept an almost unthinkable risk when Admiral Fletcher informed him that TF-61 would only be able to provide 4 days of naval gunfire support before retreating to deeper, safer waters. During the FLEX training which Marines had conducted for over a decade, it was an absolute requirement to integrate Marine Close Air Support and Naval fire support with the critically vulnerable amphibious forces, but for the first amphibious operation of WW II, Vandegrift would have neither.

The only Marine aircraft in theater were located at Efate and Espiritu Santo, well outside fighter range of Guadalcanal, and the closest of Admiral McCain's land-based aircraft were 560 miles from Guadalcanal on D-day. Fortunately, the Marines could count on support from carrier-based aircraft and MacArthur's bombers, but they could only expect intermittent coverage during the critical beach assault. Once again, the Marines were reminded of the need for escort carriers.

Given the lack of preparedness and/or doctrinal integrity in the invasion of Guadalcanal, it was fortunate that Vandegrift's Marines discovered an undefended beach on August 7. Instead of finding dug-in defensive positions, which they were woefully unprepared to attack, the Marines literally walked onto the beach and took the unfinished airfield with little resistance. In an act of unintended goodwill that was not repeated, the Japanese (who were completely surprised) effectively allowed US forces to conduct one last Fleet Landing Exercise without

[12] Megee, 57.

facing real opposition. In the process, the Amphibious Force uncovered a host of logistical, organizational, doctrinal, and technological problems.[13] Guadalcanal was a textbook case of how NOT to conduct this type of operation and future operations would showed that men such as Turner and Vandegrift absorbed these lessons.

The good fortune that the Marines initially enjoyed was short-lived. Alerted to American intentions at Guadalcanal, the Japanese marshaled all of their military might to reverse this turn of events. The Japanese enjoyed air superiority from the outset and subjected the Marines to continuous bombing and strafing.[14] Confident Japanese naval forces, meanwhile, inflicted devastating losses on the Allied coalition forces at the Battle of Savo Island (8-9 August), sinking 4 ships in a matter of minutes in a terrifying night engagement which revealed significant weakness in Admiral Fletcher's naval arsenal.

Fearing further losses to his strategically precious aircraft carriers and supporting assets, Admiral Fletcher chose to leave the Marines without Naval support within 2 days of the initial amphibious assault. In a controversial action that would be the source of inter-service tension for decades to come, Fletcher withdrew his task force on August 9, taking with him the personnel, supplies and naval gunfire support that Vandegrift's men desperately needed.[15] Vandegrift's isolated Marines were left with few options and thus formed a defensive perimeter and

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[13] Isley and Crowl, 127. An illustration of the disorganization of the beach landing was the widely reported breakdown in discipline among some of the Marines. Tensions between sailors and Marines spiked when some Marines "lounged about the beach in undisciplined idleness, shooting down cocoanuts or going swimming" while sailors unloaded "cases of pickles, butter, and fine cheeses that melted away in the hot sun."

[14] RG 127, National Achives II, Letter dated August 11, 1942 from General Vandegrift to General Holcomb, relating the events of the Marine landing at Guadalcanal. "Just ducked into the side of a hill as six Jap Zeros came sailing by at low altitude, guns blazing…I wonder why we (US) are the only ones with short range fighters. These come from 450 miles away. They climb and maneuver well. When the bombers came down…44 of them, they had fighters all over them." Speaking of the bravery of his Marines, Vandegrift said, "These men are fine and you really have to swing it on to the youngsters to keep them from chasing isolated Japs till they catch or shoot them no matter how far it is."

turned to their most critical task, preparing the unfinished airfield to accept vitally needed incoming aircraft, while bracing for the inevitable Japanese counterattack.

[15] Millett, 367. 1,400 Marines remained with the ship's company.

Chapter 5

Air CACTUS

By 12 August, the airfield at Guadalcanal was able to accept its first airplane, a Navy PBY, and the field was christened Henderson Field in honor of Major Lofton R. Henderson, who was killed in action while leading dive-bombers in the Battle of Midway. Finally, on August 20, Henderson Field (codenamed CACTUS) accepted its first arrival of Marine aircraft (SBD-3 and F4F-4), elements of Colonel William Wallace's MAG-23, which originated aboard USS *Long Island*.[1] There are reports of infantry Marines weeping with relief at the sight of the arriving aircraft, which constituted the first members of what ultimately became the CACTUS Air Force.[2]

Five hours after the arrival of MAG-23's VMF-223 and VMSB-232, Japanese ground forces launched the first infantry assault against Marine defensive positions. In the meantime, allied naval forces continued to engage the unending flow of Japanese men-of-war and supply vessels (known as the "Tokyo Express") which moved South from Bougainville toward Guadalcanal in a waterway known as "The Slot."[3]

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[1] Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Struggle for Guadalcanal*, 70. Cited in Sherrod, 79. "At 1700 these 31 pioneers, commanded by Lieut. Colonel Charles L. Fike, executive officer of MAG-23, began landing on Henderson Field. A shout of relief and welcome went up from every Marine on the island, reported Lieut. Herbert L. Merillat."

[2] RG 127, National Archives II, letter from General Vandegrift to General Holcomb, dated August 31, 1942. Relating his impressions of the aviators on Guadalcanal, Vandegrift said, "General, you should be awfully proud of these fighter and S.B.D. pilots – God what lads they are. The fighters always outnumbered by the Zeros go up after them day after day and get three or four for one…Thank the lord Wallace got in late yesterday with the other fighter squadron. As we were down to five serviceable planes on the original ones…Don't be too hard on me if I sound over enthusiastic, for they are the greatest crowd I have ever seen."

[3] Heinl, 353. It was during this time that Major General Millard Harmon, Army commander in the South Pacific, stated: "The thing that impresses me more than anything else in connection with the Solomons action is that we are not prepared to follow up. We have seized a strategic position …Can the Marines hold it? There is considerable room for doubt."

Led by Lieutenant General Harukichi Hyakutake, Japan's 17th Army consistently underestimated the defensive capabilities of the Marine forces on Guadalcanal. Hyakutake had little regard for the fighting capability of the Marines, believing that modest force could expel the Americans from defensive positions. He thus attacked with an economy of force, unwisely using direct frontal assaults. Such tactics were unsuccessful against the inexperienced, but well-trained Marines, who slaughtered the attacking Japanese in every engagement in the early days of Guadalcanal. Superior in numbers and dug into well-fortified positions, Vandegrift's Marines dominated the early engagements, gaining confidence with each event, but they were shocked by the ferocity of the Japanese fighters. General Vandegrift described the Japanese tactics as follows:

> I have never heard or read of this kind of fighting. These people refuse to surrender. The wounded will wait until men come up to examine them (two instances six hours later) and blow themselves and the other fellow to pieces with a hand grenade.[4]

Catching Up to the Fight

Most of Roy Geiger's 1st Marine Aircraft Wing continued to train in the San Diego area through the end of August, awaiting the imminent order to begin the long journey to join the forces in the South Pacific. Given the course of events in the South Pacific, the pilots knew that their time in the US was drawing to a close. Each night, their families drove to the airfield to watch them as they launched from North Island for their training flights, praying for their return.

Geiger received his orders on 21 August to report to ComSoPac and ComAirPac in New Hebrides with the following in instructions:

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[4] RG 127, National Archives II, General Vandegrift to General Holcomb, letter, 22 August, 1942.

> Brigadier General Roy S. Geiger … will assume command of all Marine aircraft squadrons operating in that area (Southwest Pacific). He will assist the Commander Aircraft, Southwest Pacific, makes plans for the current and prospective employment of Marine Air and set up appropriate air task groups. All available organized air units are, and will continue to be, placed at his disposal as rapidly as the materiel requirements can be met.[5]

These orders sent Roy Geiger and his Wing to the Southwest Pacific, where he was to assume the role of Commander of the CACTUS Air Force (ComAirCACTUS). A few days later, on a dark night in late August, the Marines of 1st MAW launched from North Island and disappeared into the western sky.

Five thousand miles to the west, the sparse airborne defenders of Guadalcanal were engaged in an air battle whose intensity rivaled the Battle of Britain. Joined by Army P-400's on August 22, the men of Major Richard Mangrum's VMSB-232 and Captain John Smith's VMF-223 fought bravely with their precious few aviation assets. The Joint force at CACTUS found success against the Japanese in the fighter and attack roles, holding their own with F4F-4's against the Zeros with vertical interception tactics and performing effectively in strafing runs against exposed Japanese ground forces.[6] In addition to flying defensive operations out of Henderson Field, these fliers supported their naval brethren from *Saratoga* and *Enterprise* in the Battle of the Eastern Solomons from 22-25 August, preventing Japanese Rear Admiral Raizo

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[5] Marine Aircraft Wing, Pacific to the Commandant, US Marine Corps, letter, 17 August, 1942. Subject: Brigadier General Roy S. Geiger, USMC, advancement in rank, Box#5, Folder #88, PC #311, PPC, MCHS.

[6] Richard B. Frank, *Guadalcanal*, (New York, NY: Random House, 1990), 206-209. Frank provides a through description of the aerial warfare at Guadalcanal. The Marines enjoyed the many advantages of point defense, while Japanese aircraft originated 450 miles away and arrived at predictable times daily (almost always from 113 to 1430 to avoid night operations). Additionally, radar and coast watchers provided the Cactus airmen with ample warning, so that they were able to scramble fighters and climb to the altitudes necessary for air combat (30,000 feet) prior to the arrival of the Japanese aircraft, which were far from home and arrived above Cactus with limited fuel. Without

Tanaka's expeditionary naval forces from offloading much-needed ground reinforcements.

After the Battle of Eastern Solomons, the SBD's of *Enterprise's* battle group departed that damaged carrier and augmented the tiny joint air force at CACTUS with its first contingent of naval aviators. With the 30 August arrival of the Midway-veteran SBD-3's of VMSB-231 and the F4F-4's of VMF-224, the CACTUS Air Force grew to a force of 64 planes and 86 pilots, representing all Services and led by Marine Colonel William Wallace. Operating from a barely usable Henderson Field that was bombed daily and not yet suitable for large aircraft such as B-17's, the joint force worked feverishly to repair and improve the airfield.

The Cactus Air Force remained grossly undersupplied, even with Japanese forces furiously working to retake the island.[7] Despite the strategic importance of holding Henderson Field and the tenuous position of the 1st Marine Division there, military leaders in Washington chose to focus critically needed resources on the higher national priority of North Africa.[8] The men on Guadalcanal would have to make do with what they had, at least for the time being.

The Old Man Arrives

On the night of 3 September 1942, General Roy Geiger, the 57-year-old veteran of WW I, landed at Henderson Field in an R4D-1, arriving with his Chief of Staff, Colonel Louis Woods. Arriving after a 50-hour flight from San Diego, Geiger assumed command at CACTUS.

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these advantages, the *Wildcats* would have had little chance of defending Henderson Field against the superior *Zeros*.

[7] Frank, 214. Admiral Ghormley: "Cactus [is] not only a base of major value to the nation holding it but is [the] first foot of ground taken from an enemy who has had some cause to consider his armies invincible…It is my considered opinion that at this time the retention of Cactus is more vital to the prosecution of the war in the Pacific than any other commitment."

[8] Frank, 214-217. Advised by General Arnold that air reinforcements were unavailable in the Pacific because of more important commitments, General Marshall authorized the release of only one of the planned fifteen air groups to the South Pacific. Given

Multiple eyewitness accounts indicate that Geiger's arrival provided a measure of inspiration to the battered and nervous forces on Guadalcanal, who remained uncertain, to that point, whether they would ultimately share the fate of the tragic heroes of Wake Island and Bataan.[9] The arrival of a seasoned commander with the gravitas of Geiger was a boost in morale that the men of CACTUS desperately needed. Geiger brought a burning warrior ethos with him. A staff officer's description of meeting his new boss gives the impression of the awe that he inspired in his men:

> He looked me over carefully with his penetrating eyes, spoke quietly and turned away to more important things. I was impressed then, as I was often later, by the feeling of almost Indian stolidity and solidity he exuded. He was 56 or 57 then, with close cropped, grizzled hair, a strong, harshly chiseled face. He seemed extraordinarily strong and vigorous.[10]

Geiger gave his men the impression that he knew who the enemy was, he knew what he needed to do, and he was not leaving until the job was finished.[11]

Hitler's progress in Russia and Egypt, the invasion of North Africa was a bigger national priority than Guadalcanal, which hung by a shoestring.

[9] Samuel B. Griffith II, *The Battle for Guadalcanal*, (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1963), 105. Griffith describes the arrival of the DC-3 with Geiger aboard: "This plane brought to Guadcanal a heavy-shouldered, white-thatched brigadier general of Marine Aviation, Roy. S. Geiger…Geiger was curt, cold, and, some said, ruthless. He certainly was determined to squeeze the ultimate ounce of performance from men and machines. And he did…the flyers had been performing superbly before Geiger came; this man, with the stern features and character of a Roman general, imbued them with renewed sprit." 105-106.

[10] Lt. C. C. Colt memorandum, undated. General Roy S. Geiger collection, USMC Historical Reference Branch, Quantico, VA.

[11] Major General Roy S. Geiger, untitled speech, 1943. Folder #189, Box #11, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps. This speech captured Geiger's worldview at the time and his sense of the stakes in the Pacific: "Time has passed so fast since the yellow dastardly Japs struck at Pearl Harbor that few have taken time to realize the seriousness of this war. The stakes are high. Hitler started it with the war aim of gaining control of all of Europe and eventually to completely dominate the whole of Western Civilization: while Japanese statesmen have repeatedly threatened the utter destruction of both the United States and the British Empire. As far as we Americans are concerned, it is a war of survival and everything that concerns our future depends upon its outcome."

As a sign of the tempo of operations on Guadalcanal, ten days passed between Geiger's arrival and his first meeting with General Vandegrift for his orders endorsement and official designation as ComAirCACTUS.[12] In a reflection of Geiger's good relationship with Vandegrift, he reported to the Division Commander's CP with a "mailbag that he described as 'fan mail' from Admiral Nimitz…a case of Johnny Walker Scotch." Knowing that Vandegrift drank bourbon, Geiger joked, "Archer, I have a case of bourbon and will trade you level even though mine are quarts."[13]

Operation SHOESTRING

Geiger, who had received sketchy intelligence reports of the situation on Guadalcanal, was shocked at the stark conditions at CACTUS. The small force was critically vulnerable, undermanned, and operated out of a barely functional airfield; pilots conducted combat operations with little or no sleep and poor nutrition, and all personnel suffered under continuous day and night bombardment by Japanese air and naval forces. With little hope of aircraft re-supply, the maintenance troops had to fix every broken airplane every day and there was no expectation that combat losses would be replaced. Fuel supplies were critically short. The CACTUS Air Force might begin a typical day with 64 aircraft and finish the day with fewer than a dozen flyable airplanes.

Aviators and maintenance crews spent much of their time (day and night) in defensive dirt trenches, enjoying a diet that consisted mainly of canned Spam, while suffering constant bouts with malaria, intestinal ailments, and heat exhaustion in the brutal and unforgiving tropical

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[12] General Vandegrift to Commanding Officer, Cub One, letter, 13 September, 1942, Subject: Duties as Commanding Officer, Cub One and all naval activities in the area. Folder #88, Box #5, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.
[13] Vandegrift and Asprey, 149.

climate.[14] For the pilots, this routine included multiple terrifying flights each day against the superior Japanese fighters and naval air defenses, under treacherous weather and takeoff/landing conditions.[15] For the ground crews, the daily routine involved fueling and repairing airplanes on the exposed airfield all day and night under an umbrella of Japanese air superiority.[16] The situation became much, much worse with each passing day. On witnessing these conditions, a lesser man than Geiger might have taken the first transport plane back to the Wing Headquarters at Espiritu Santo.

Instead, Geiger sent several of his staff officers to man the Wing headquarters and conduct liaison with ComAirSoPac and ComSoPac. Promoted to Major General on September 8, the irrepressible Geiger established his 2-star headquarters in an abandoned building known as "The Pagoda," which overlooked Henderson Field (and provided a good landmark for Japanese artillery).[17] Geiger systematically addressed each of the crises at CACTUS with vigor and enthusiasm, providing inspired leadership to the pilots, maintenance crews, Navy Seabees, and the infantry forces that his force was defending.[18] His determined approach

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[14] John A. De Chant, *Devilbirds: The Story of United States Marine Corps Aviation in World War II*, (New York, NY: Harper & Bros., 1947), 75. "These airmen in their blue ball caps, shoulder holsters, and filthy odd-lot flying gear looked and felt much unlike the giant-killers that headlines called them. They were sick. Dysentery racked their bowels and stomachs. Malaria shivered and burned them. The tasteless, clammy food, Jap rice, and hardtack seemed only to nurture the gnawing of hunger in their bellies. And sleep – sleep was a dream just beyond their fingertips."

[15] Sherrod, 94. Quickly learning that the Zero was superior to the F4F-4 Wildcat in a one-vs.-one engagement, CACTUS pilots adopted 2-ship tactics which enabled a 3:1 kill ratio against the Japanese fighters. CACTUS fighters also enjoyed the benefits of greater time-on-station as the defenders of Guadalcanal, while the Japanese fighters had limited time overhead, having originated over 500 miles away in Rabaul.

[16] "Interview of Major John Smith, USMC, VMF Squadron 223, Guadalcanal Island, in the Bureau of Aeronautics 10 November 1942," File: Guadalcanal, Archives, MCRC, Quantico, Virginia. Cited in Quagge.

[17] Navy Department, Washington to Major General Roy S. Geiger, USMC, letter, 8 September, 1942. Subject: Appointment for Temporary Service. Folder #88, Box #5, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

[18] A.A. Vandegrift, *Once A Marine; The Memoirs of General A.A. Vandegrift, Commandant of the US Marines in WWII*, Reprinted by MCA (Quantico: 1982), 162. Here, Vandegrift describes the impact of Geiger's leadership on morale.

to problem-solving was an inspiration and the accounts of his performance show that his confidence was unwavering.

During the first weeks of Geiger's command at CACTUS, Japanese naval forces conducted constant reinforcement and re-supply of ground troops who prepared to engage Vandegrift's defensive perimeter with a Brigade-sized force. Admiral Turner flew into to Guadalcanal on 11 September with a bottle of Scotch and a bleak message for General Vandegrift: naval forces would have to temporarily withdraw in anticipation of a massive Japanese naval and ground assault.[19] Turner's message to Vandegrift was clear: the Navy would not be able to provide assistance to the air and ground forces of Guadalcanal during the oncoming assault. After Turner's departure, Vandegrift told Gerald C. Thomas, his Operations Officer, "Jerry, we're going to defend this airfield until we no longer can. If that happens, we'll take what's left to the hills and fight guerilla warfare."[20] The Marines were determined that Guadalcanal would not be another Bataan.

Vandegrift informed Geiger of these developments, stating "If the time comes when we no longer can hold the perimeter I expect you to fly out your planes." Geiger's response was predictable: "Archer, if we can't use the planes back in the hills we'll fly them out. But whatever happens, I'm staying here with you."[21] With this matter settled, Geiger submitted an emergency request to ComSoPac for all available aircraft to assist in the defense of Guadalcanal, resulting in the precious addition of 36 aircraft from various locations (aircraft carriers and Espiritu Santo).[22] In the coming days, he needed every single one of these birds.

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[19] Griffith, 114.
[20] Vandegrift, 153.
[21] Vandegrift, 154.
[22] Griffith, 112. While it may seem unusual that Geiger did not ALREADY have all theater aircraft at his disposal, in actuality there were many available Naval aircraft to which he did not have ready access. "Idle *Wildcats* from the damaged *Saratoga* were available in the South Pacific. They belonged to Vice Admiral Fletcher … anxious to maintain the integrity of his carrier air group – even though he had at the moment no

The fierce ground battle which ensued from 12-14 September is known as the Battle of Edson's (Bloody) Ridge. During this engagement, a battalion of Marines led by Lieutenant Colonel Merritt Edson held a ridge to the south of Henderson Field against a night charge of a brigade of Japanese infantry. The brutal assault was a close run event. Chanting, "Maline, you Die! Banzai!," several Japanese soldiers broke through the Marine lines and almost made it to Henderson Field before they were killed by perimeter security forces.[23] The Japanese forces had been confident of victory, expecting to raise the Japanese flag over the airfield at the conclusion of the engagement.[24] Instead, they suffered tremendous losses, while the Marines survived and strengthened their position with Admiral Turner's delivery of the 7th Marine Regiment on 18 September.[25]

The intensity of the Battle of Edson's Ridge was matched by a furious aerial engagement and naval bombardment of Henderson Field, but the CACTUS Air Force survived with minimal losses - six aircraft lost against Japanese losses of 11 Zeros. It was sometimes unclear whether Geiger's airmen were defending the ground forces or Vandegrift's Marines fighting to defend the airfield. Combat operations continued daily and Geiger found that the condition of the runway at Henderson Field was almost as big a hazard as the Japanese air threat. In a later article,

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operational carrier from which to fly – he had extracted a promise from Ghormley that his fighters would not be committed to Guadalcanal."

[23] Griffith, 119-120. In one unforgettable event, a "sword-swinging Japanese officer rushed wildly through Vandegrift's command post and threw his sword, as one would hurl a spear, at a marine gunnery sergeant. The sword pierced his body. Division Sergeant Major Shepherd Banta, who was at the moment castigating a clerk, heard the scream of 'Banzai!' and rushed from his tent, drew his pistol and killed the Japanese with one shot. He then returned to his office and completed unfinished business."

[24] Griffith, 121-122. Kawaguchi's stunned men endured nearly 20% combat causalties and still faced a brutal eight-day retreat through the Guadalcanal jungle. "Haggard, filthy, barefoot, weak, with clothes in tatters, and minus every weapon but rifles," they emerged on the other side of the island to be extracted. "The Japanese Army," one Japanese naval officer later observed, "had been used to fighting the Chinese."

[25] Vandegrift, 164. By 19 September, his confidence restored, Vandegrift had a famous exchange with *New York Times* reporter Hanson Baldwin, who asked the General, "Are

Geiger wrote, "A mistake often indulged in by most people is that on Guadalcanal we had acquired a great asset in the form of an airfield. Don't believe it."[26] Roger Willock provided a vivid description of the poor runway conditions at Henderson in September, 1942:

> Only 1,000 feet of the runway had been matted, and the remainder was deeply rutted and pock-marked from enemy air bombing and naval gunfire… When the sun shone the strip became a maelstrom of black dust … when it rained in torrents the field just as rapidly was rendered a slough of sticky thick mud.[27]

The frazzled pilots of the CACTUS Air Force needed all the mental toughness they could muster to survive the unforgiving conditions on Guadalcanal.[28] Through most of September, operational losses exceeded combat losses, a reflection of pilot fatigue and airfield conditions; combat effectiveness also suffered, with no recorded hits on Japanese shipping in over thirty days.[29] General Geiger was not known for open and emotional acts of compassion and it is unlikely that he spent much time consoling his suffering pilots.[30] He led by example, not word, and he displayed this tendency in an event that occurred on 22 September. Within earshot of Geiger, one of the newest pilots complained about the horrible condition of the runway after a fairly intense period of naval bombardment, which rendered the runway out of service (in the opinion

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you going to hold the beachhead? Are you going to stay here?" Vandegrift's famous response: "Hell, yes. Why not?"

[26] Roy S. Geiger, "Marine Corps Aviation In This War," *US At War*, December, 1942.

[27] Willock, 209.

[28] RG 127, National Archives II, LtCol P.O. Parmelee to ComAirWings Pac, Action summary, 23 September, 1942. "The shortage of pilots has been more critical than the shortage of planes…The pilots now in Cactus are completely worn out, not only from overwork in the air, but also because living accommodations and food are poor, and it is almost impossible to get any sleep at night due to shelling from surface vessels. It is believed that this pilot fatigue is in a very large measure responsible for the high operational losses."

[29] Thomas G. Miller, Jr. *The Cactus Air Force*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 99.

[30] Miller, 81. Geiger once asked Louis Woods whether he was driving the men too hard. Woods answered: "They've got to keep flying…It's better to do that than get a Jap bayonet stuck in their ass!" The flight surgeon had told Woods that most of the pilots were unfit to continue flying. See also, Seven to One, *Newsweek*, December 21, 1942. It was said of Geiger that "After you've served under Geiger, you've been a Marine."

of the young aviator). Hearing this, Geiger walked to an armed and fueled SBD, took off from the damaged runway, and dropped a 1,000 pound bomb on a defended Japanese troop emplacement, returning without incident.[31]

This episode says a great deal about Roy Geiger's leadership style and character. He must have realized the extent of the treacherous flying conditions at Henderson, but he also knew that he was doing everything in his power to rectify those things that he could fix. In the meantime, there was a war to fight, and the Japanese would not wait for the Marines to fix the runway. It was important for Geiger to demonstrate to his men that he was willing to take the same risks he was asking them to take in order to accomplish the mission of supporting the Marines on Guadalcanal. Geiger's men were devoted to him not because of the things he said, but because of those things that he did. He led by example. Nowhere is that more evident than on the day the fifty-seven year-old Geiger flew his first combat mission on Guadalcanal.[32]

The CACTUS Air Force received much-needed augmentation in late September with the arrival of several squadrons from MAG-14, a number of Navy Dive Bombers, and an assortment of Marine aircraft from VMO-251 and VMF-212. During this time the South Pacific Combat Air Transport (SCAT) also provided much-needed logistical supplies using MAG-25 transport aircraft. By the end of September, Geiger could count at least 80 flyable aircraft at Henderson Field. On the last day of September, the Marines on Guadalcanal enjoyed an unplanned visit from Admiral Chester Nimitz, CINCPAC, who arrived in a B-17 that had gotten lost and found the island by chance. Nimitz' visit was fortuitous, giving

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[31] Miller, 99-100. See also MAG-23 action report from CO to CNO, dated October 6, 1942, "1130: 1 SBD piloted by Major General Geiger dropped 1 – 1000# bomb." Folder #88, Box #5, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

[32] Miller, 100. At 57, Geiger was 12 years past the officially authorized age to fly without a copilot.

Vandegrift and Geiger the opportunity to vividly show the Admiral the resource shortfalls under which they had suffered.[33]

Throughout his career, Geiger routinely sought out innovative ways to improve efficiency with the forces at his disposal, no matter their size or composition. At CACTUS, he commanded a large number of airplanes that were loosely organized into various Marine Air Groups and squadrons, and further separated along service and coalition lines. This disjointed method of command and control hindered the process of organizing assets for daily combat flight operations. Discarding traditional resistance to integration between services and squadrons, Geiger rejected the composite organizations and reorganized his combined Air Force along "type" lines, separating fighters and strikers into separate groups, each commanded by one individual.[34] He retained the previous command structure for administrative purposes, but the new system permitted much greater efficiency for operational command and control. In time this system became the model for future operations in the Pacific theater.[35]

BANZAI!

It is fortuitous that Geiger was able to streamline and augment his forces, because the forces on Guadalcanal faced the full might of the Japanese in mid-October. Frustrated with his previous losses, General Hyakutake determined not to repeat the mistake of piecemealing his

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[33] Vandegrift, 171. On his departure from the muddy Henderson field, Nimitz' B-17 conducted a high-speed aborted takeoff, almost crashing on the end of the runway. The Admiral's aircraft had to wait for the field to dry before making another takeoff attempt. Nimitz departed the field with a clear picture of the resources the Marines needed.
[34] Isley and Crowl, 146. On Guadalcanal, units were not important. "New faces were always in evidence, and heroes one by one were lost. Some pilots proved to be psychologically unsuited to this barbarian type of warfare, but the majority flew not knowing whether their wingman to port or starboard was marine, navy, or army, and in full confidence not caring."
[35] Willock, 218.

forces against the tough Marines.[36] The Japanese strategy for October was to mount a combined ground and naval assault with the crack Japanese Sendai Division, augmented by a formidable air and naval force. In preparation for this anticipated assault, Vandegrift's Marines were strengthened by Colonel Bryant Moore's 164th Infantry Regimental Combat Team.[37]

Geiger's naval intelligence officer, Lieutenant C.C. Colt, described the scene at the Pagoda on the evening of 12 October during the Naval Battle of Cape Esperance, on the eve of the Japanese invasion:

> We set chairs out on the ground at the west side of the Pagoda and watched. There was no sound – only awesome flashes and, during what seemed to be the long period that followed, an occasional explosion of extraordinary violence and brilliance. General Geiger was in the group that watched in silence. From where we sat, we could look out over our own perimeter…after one particular violent explosion far at sea, there was a burst of rifle fire, followed by machine guns, from our own lines, only 3 or 4 miles away. Geiger laughed rumblingly.
>
> "Wouldn't you know it those Goddam Marines would have to put in their two cents worth, even though the fight's thirty miles off," he said.[38]

From October 13-15, 1942, the Japanese mounted a full-scale assault on Henderson Field, inflicting one of the heaviest air and naval bombardments of WW II. Complicating flight operations was the Japanese employment of three batteries of 150-mm howitzers

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[36] Griffith, 129. Nonetheless, the Japanese continued to show a "lack of imagination and hidebound intellectual inflexibility, which characterized alike the High Commands of the Japanese Army and Navy."

[37] Griffith, 142. The reinforcement of Guadalcanal by the 164th was a key turning point and the credit for this decision goes to Major General Harmon, Admiral Ghormley's senior Army Commander (and an Army Aviator). Ghormley was concerned about rear area security and favored leaving using the regiment to reinforce the strategically irrelevant island of Ndeni. Harmon strongly opposed this and drafted a memo which argued that the enemy was capable of recapturing Guadalcanal unless the position was "materially strengthened." Harmon proposed reinforcement of Guadalcanal with the 164th RCT and Admiral Ghormley approved this proposal. Griffith calls Harmon's memo "a decisive document in the history of the Guadalcanal campaign."

[38] Colt, 7.

(nicknamed “Pistol Pete”), which shells could reach Henderson Field with devastating accuracy at all hours. Early in the morning of 14 October, the naval bombardment consisted of 900 rounds of 14-inch projectiles that landed on or around the airfield. The result of this massive bombardment was the loss of all but 5 dive bombers, at least half of the fighters, and over 40 dead.[39]

Again, Lieutenant Colt provided a vivid description of events:

> The din was really appalling as the Japanese ships, including two battleships, cruisers, and destroyers, methodically shelled the American area on Guadalcanal. The General and most of his staff [were] in the chamber, literally sweating it out. It was steaming, the tunnels crowded with men…With shells bursting and thudding with alarming regularity and proximity, General Geiger went sound asleep and snored magnificently. I think he awoke once, when the Japanese hail stopped, and mumbled, “Is it all over?” and then dropped off again.[40]

When the dust settled and Geiger and his staff emerged from their defensive trenches early in the morning, the situation was bleak.[41] The airfield was riddled with damaged and destroyed aircraft, fuel was in critically short supply, and the Japanese assault ships continued to offload equipment and thousands of troops on beaches within sight of the Marines. Geiger’s first decision was to bulldoze “The Pagoda,” moving his Command Post to the secondary airfield known as the “Cow Pasture,” outside of artillery range. Second, he set about the task of getting as

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[39] Griffith, 153-154. .

[40] Colt, 10.

[41] Lt C.C. Colt describes the defensive trenches: “Two trenches were dug into the side of Pagoda Hill, their entrances roughly 50 yards apart, both terminating in a central chamber, something like 25 feet square and ten feet high, in front of the Pagoda but well under the hill. The tunnels were possibly eight feet wide and equally high and they seemed quite long; they were timbered, as was the chamber roof. The only ventilation was the air that came in the tunnel entrances, and through a stove pipe with a fan in it, or some such contraption, which was over the chamber…when there were 25 or 30 in the chamber, it was roughly comparable to standard descriptions of the Black Hole of Calcutta. Clad only in a skivvy shirt, khaki pants, socks and shoes, one dripped sweat from every pore; choked from the cigarette smoke, and suffered with difficulty the pangs of that nausea induced by extreme fright.”

many airplanes as possible into flyable condition. Suffering under the artillery barrage was difficult enough, but Geiger knew that he had to provide air defense against the constant stream of Japanese bombers for Vandegrift to have a chance against the Sendai division. The process of launching aircraft began with a desperate search for fuel supplies and Geiger's men resorted to draining gas tanks from wrecks in order to provision the few working aircraft. Geiger also submitted emergency requests for fuel resupplies, which incoming transport planes and escort ships delivered to CACTUS.

The second night, October 14-15, was much the same as the first, with over 750 8-inch shells hitting the airstrip in another devastating assault. On the morning of 15 October, Geiger could produce only three flyable aircraft, and two of these crashed on takeoff as a result of runway damage. With no combat aircraft left to fly, Geiger's aide-de-camp, Major Jack Cram, volunteered to pilot Geiger's personal transport plane, a PBY-5A known as "Blue Goose," against the unmolested Japanese assault transports. With Geiger's approval, Cram successfully attacked one of the transports, destroying the vessel with a torpedo attack, and miraculously returned safely with at least five Zeros on his tail. Cram earned the Navy Cross for this action and the Blue Goose survived to fly another day, despite significant battle damage (at least 50 holes from Japanese machine-gun fire).[42] Against great odds, even with its meager assets, the CACTUS Air Force destroyed or damaged at least six of the Japanese assault ships, a serious blow to the Japanese attack.

The third night, October 15-16, brought another hailstorm of indirect fire as the Japanese completed their debarkation of the Sendai division while at least 1,200 rounds of 5-inch and 8-inch rounds hit Henderson field. Again, the aviators of CACTUS spent the night

[42] Jack DeChant, "Incident of the Blue Goose," *Marine Corps Gazette*, November 1944, 25-29.

hunkered down in dirt trenches, emerging on the morning of 16 October to find very few flyable airplanes. Geiger submitted another emergency call for assistance on this day and received epic support from Harold Bauer's VMF-212, which arrived from Efate with 19 *Wildcats*. On his way in to Henderson field, Bauer personally recorded kills on 4 Japanese *Val* dive-bombers. Even with these reinforcements, however, the CACTUS Air Force was barely capable of defending Henderson Field or providing support to the 1st Marine Division. Suffering from extreme combat exhaustion, many of the pilots and maintenance crew entered the third month of intense daily trauma and signs of human frailty were beginning to show. The Marines of CACTUS were punch-drunk after the 3-day assault and it was unlikely that they could retain any defensive capability if the assault continued a single night longer.

It is fortunate that the Japanese were unprepared to sustain the indirect fire assault or commence the ground attack after this 3rd day of intense naval bombardment. Rather than take full advantage of the effects of the bombardment by following it immediately with ground forces, the Japanese spent the following week arraying the Sendai division for a complex enveloping assault from the south of the 1st Marine Division perimeter. The Japanese plan, devised by General Masao Maruyama, required the large force to move deep into the dense jungle of Guadalcanal, where command, control, and timing would be very difficult to orchestrate. Exacerbating the Japanese problem was a turn in the weather, as heavy rainfall inhibited ground movement and provided a barrier to incoming Japanese aircraft.

The Marines took full advantage of this pause. Geiger recognized the tattered condition of his pilots and airplanes and he replaced as many aircrew and airplanes as possible with fresh reinforcements from MAG-14. As yet another massive force of Japanese ships traveled south toward Guadalcanal to deliver a final "knockout blow" to the Marines,

Geiger and Vandegrift furiously prepared for the inevitable ground assault.

It was during this time that ComSoPac changed hands, with the aggressive Admiral William "Bull" Halsey replacing the shaky Admiral Ghormley. Military leaders in Washington believed that Ghormley was partially to blame for the resource dilemma in which the forces on Guadalcanal found themselves. They were also concerned with the tendency of naval leaders such as Admirals Ghormley and Turner to intervene in the process of ground force employment, overriding the ground force commander, General Vandegrift, on a number of occasions.[43] Admiral Nimitz believed that Ghormley was overwhelmed by the massive scope of the task in the South Pacific and he believed that the fearless Halsey could provide the leadership necessary to turn the tide.[44] Nimitz felt that "the critical situation requires a more aggressive commander."[45]

On 22 October, Admiral Halsey summoned General Vandegrift to meet with him on his flagship, USS *Argonne*, which left Geiger in tactical command of the 1st MarDiv.[46] As luck had it, General Murayama's forces finally mounted their assault on the Marine perimeter on this day and Geiger thus faced the might of the Japanese attack on 24 October. Geiger employed the full measure of his abilities as a commander to repel

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[43] Griffith, 187. "Every time Tuner laid aside the sextant for the baton he made an egregious mistake." One of the biggest lessons from Guadalcanal was to clarify the command relationships between the Landing Force and Amphibious Commanders.
[44] Griffith, 137. There are many accounts of trauma and dysfunction at Admiral Ghormley's flagship in Noumea. General H.H. Arnold visited Ghormley there and reported that he had been so busy that he had not been able to leave his flagship for over a month. Arnold found the naval officers there under "terrific strain" and "with chips on their shoulders." He cautioned Ghormley to "stop fighting a paper war" and that no one could "sit continuously in a small office … without suffering mentally, morally, and nervously."
[45] Heinl, 183.
[46] Vandegrift, 182. Halsey made a good first impression on Vandegrift, evidenced by the following exchange. After getting Vandegrift's pessimistic situation report, Halsey abruptly asked, "Can you hold?" Vandegrift replied: "Yes, I can hold. But I have to have more active support than I have been getting." Halsey nodded. "You go on back there, Vandegrift. I promise to get you everything I have."

the fierce Japanese assault, committing his reserve when the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines threatened to give.[47] But under Geiger's command, the 1st MarDiv held the line.

The Japanese repeatedly assaulted US positions for three days with increasing levels of failure in each attempt. The rainy weather continued through the assault of 24-28 October, limiting air operations and confusing the Japanese command structure. Incessant rain had rendered Henderson Field unusable and Geiger submitted emergency requests for air support from ComAirSoPac, which mustered a small number of airplanes that were able to repel a Japanese naval assault.

In the meantime, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto's massive Naval occupation force continued south with a force of 4 battleships, 4 carriers, 8 heavy cruisers, and 24 destroyers, in anticipation of the re-occupation of Henderson Field by the Sendai division. A US pilot sighted the Japanese flotilla and based on his intelligence report, Admiral Halsey issued one of the most famous orders in the history of the US Navy: "ATTACK, REPEAT, ATTACK!"[48] With a force half the size of the Japanese task force, Rear Admiral Thomas Kinkaid met the Japanese in the Battle of Santa Cruz islands, a lopsided loss for the Americans in terms of shipping (Americans lost one carrier and two destroyers, with significant damage to other vessels). The Japanese suffered the greater strategic loss, however, of 69 naval aircraft and experienced carrier pilots. These were irreplaceable losses, given Japan's short supply of aviators. Its nose bloodied, the Japanese Imperial fleet retired, thus providing the forces on Guadalcanal with a critically needed opportunity to rebuild and re-supply forces.

Geiger possessed roughly 29 flyable combat aircraft in the CACTUS Air Force by the end of October, but help was on the way with the impending arrival of a fresh Marine Air Group from New Caledonia. In

[47] Vandegrift, 186.
[48] Griffith, 176.

the next two weeks, the forces on CACTUS continued to increase, rising to almost 2,000 aviation-related personnel and over 100 aircraft by mid-November. By then, too, a supplementary runway was under construction. The tide had turned at CACTUS and the Marines finally began to shift to an offensive mindset, with a vision of using Guadalcanal as a base for future operations rather than an outpost for a desperate last stand. On Guadalcanal, "the ground and air Marines had lived, suffered, and died together in a common cause; they for the moment had achieved a very large measure of mutual respect."[49]

Back to Wing HQ

Having turned in an exceptional performance as a Commander on Guadalcanal, Roy Geiger reluctantly turned over the responsibilities of ComAirCACTUS to his former Chief of Staff, Brigadier General Louis Woods, on 7 November 1942. There is some speculation regarding the circumstances of Geiger's relief, as Geiger, Vandegrift, and even Admiral Halsey resisted the decision. What is clear is that he was not relieved for cause. Rather, it is likely that he was simply exhausted and the more senior leaders believed that the greatest Japanese threat had passed.[50] Geiger's job was complete, but CACTUS was in need of a fresh, rested leader for the good of the Marines at CACTUS and for Geiger's own personal health. Retaining his title of 1st MAW Commanding General, Geiger departed the island for a short tour at ComSoPac Headquarters at Espritu in the New Hebrides. For his performance at CACTUS, Geiger was awarded his second Navy Cross and the Distinguished Flying Cross.

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[49] Megee, 58. This sense of common purpose between ground Marines and fliers would be short-lived as Marine aviation was gradually left behind in the island-hopping campaigns to come. Also, the increase in pilot requirements necessitated that naval aviation cadets be commissioned as second lieutenants with no Marine basic training or indoctrination. See also Heinl, 389.

[50] Miller, 177. "By early November, it was clear to all that Roy Geiger, the rock-hard old airman, was suffereing from a bad case of combat fatigue. Two months and four days of seeing his always outnumbered young men killed or evacuated, unable to fight any more, had finally broken down even his constitution." Also see Mersky, 48.

Geiger's Navy Cross citation summarizes his accomplishments at CACTUS:

> From 3 September 1942 to 4 November 1942, Major General Geiger commanded all aviation units stationed at Guadalcanal including units of the Army, Navy and Marine Corps. During this period the aviation units under his command shot down 286 planes in aerial combat … Aerial attacks made under his direction resulted in the known sinking of 6 enemy ships including 1 heavy cruiser. During the period of these operations Major General Geiger directed operations from a field which was subjected to almost daily bombings by enemy aircraft, which was the principle target for hostile naval gunfire on several occasions and was also for a considerable period under harassing fire by enemy shore based artillery. Under these conditions General Geiger, although personally endangered many times, demonstrated a degree of fortitude and courage that served as an inspiration to all the officers and men under his command.[51]

Geiger's 60-day tour at CACTUS was his finest moment as a Marine Aviator. His leadership style was well-tailored to the challenges he faced in the desperate days of September and October of 1942 and General Vandegrift could not have had a stronger air partner.[52] Geiger cobbled together a disorganized joint force of Marines, sailors, and Army aviators into a fighting element that accomplished its mission under the direst circumstances imaginable. James Winnefeld and Dana Johnson describe the scope of air operations at CACTUS:

> The air operations that General Geiger directed had a broad sweep. They included air defense of the ground forces and naval surface forces in the vicinity, close air support, and

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[51] Roy Stanley Geiger, Officer Qualification Record.

[52] Major General R. S. Geiger to Major General Vandegrift, letter, 12 January, 1943. Geiger maintained a strong relationship with Vandegrift: "I must take this opportunity to express my appreciation and admiration for you as a Division Commander. You were more than a Division Commander. The work you did at CACTUS, in my opinion, is superior to any ever performed by a Marine General, and equals that of any general in this war or any other war…During the period I was at CACTUS, and at times when the situation appeared somewhat acute, I am free to admit that I always felt perfectly safe knowing that you and the First Division were between me and the Japs." Folder #89, Box #5, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

> battlefield air interdiction, and attacks on opposing Japanese naval forces. There were no cross-service quarrels over which component did what. Marine and Navy aviators, as well as Air Force B-17 crews flying out of the New Hebrides, joined in attacking Japanese naval forces that attempted to reinforce their ground forces on Guadalcanal and in defending the precious airstrips on that island. All these air operations were satisfactorily coordinated with carrier operations when task forces were near the Solomons. The Navy and Marines shuttled in carrier pilots and aircraft to replenish stocks on Guadalcanal. It was not unusual for a Navy carrier pilot landing on Guadalcanal for refueling to find himself diverted to attack Japanese shipping, launch on an air defense sortie, or assist Marine ground forces with close air support. In all of this the press of battle was such that there was no time or incentive for role and mission controversies to appear.[53]

Within the chaotic environment at Henderson Field, with shells literally impacting around him, Geiger had the vision and courage to institute structural innovations that extracted every ounce of efficiency and capability from his sparse air force. When called to perform as a ground commander, Geiger rose to the occasion and performed brilliantly. He asked his men to perform beyond their limits because they had to, and his leadership inspired them to do just that. This is the essence of effective combat leadership, and it is clear that Roy Geiger was equal to the task of establishing the CACTUS Air Force on Henderson Field in the darkest days of the Pacific War.[54]

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[53] James A. Winnefeld and Dana J. Johnson, *Joint Air Operations: Pursuit of Unity in Command and Control, 1942-1991*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1993), 30.

[54] Griffith, 244. Between August 7, 1942 and their withdrawal on February 7, 1943, Japanese forces suffered over 21,000 deaths, 8,500 KIA and 12,300 dead from wounds or starvation. The Japanese naval air arm lost over 800 planes and 2362 pilots and crew. Admiral Raizo Tanaka said, "There is no question that Japan's doom was sealed with the closing of the struggle for Guadalcanal."

Chapter 6

Becoming a Joint Force Commander

> Thickset, poker-faced, chilly-eyed General Geiger is another Marine's Marine.
>
> -Time Magazine,
> 1943

After turning over ComAirCACTUS to Louis Woods, Geiger remained in the Southwest Pacific as 1st MAW Commander for another five months. While his official headquarters was located in the rear area of ComSoPac Headquarters at Espíritu Santo, Geiger spent much of his time on the road, flying between Henderson Field and the slowly expanding footprint of American air bases in the South Pacific. Relieved of his warfighting duties at Guadalcanal, his focus now shifted to organizing and equipping his rapidly expanding Wing.

The Battle of Guadalcanal continued to rage through the month of November, but Japanese forces were in the last throes of their long-running attempt to retake the island they had so easily relinquished in August. Geiger's job was to ensure that AirCACTUS had the resources necessary to finish off the Japanese efforts at Guadalcanal, and he did not believe that he could perform this job effectively in his rear headquarters. Instead, Geiger made up for his lost flight hours in September and October, flying dozens of hours in his Beechcraft (JRB-2) and his old favorite "Blue Goose" PBY to gain situational awareness in his area of responsibility.[1]

[1] Logbook entries, Box #12, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

Naturally distrustful of intelligence reports of Japanese force developments, he preferred to make his own reconnaissance rather than make decisions based on faith in official reports of questionable accuracy. There are several well-documented occasions when he flew aircraft over defended Japanese positions, and his command pilot, Major Cram, recalled taking evasive maneuvers against anti-aircraft fire when flying with Geiger over the Japanese airfield at Munda.[2] Geiger's command pilots eventually grew accustomed to such hair-raising events.

Director of USMC Aviation, Part II

When Geiger was relieved of his 1st MAW command in April, 1943, the tide had turned in the South Pacific. Allied forces now enjoyed naval superiority, the CACTUS Air Force possessed a force of over 200 aircraft, including the formidable F4U Corsair, and the Japanese military had adopted a defensive posture. Relieved by Major General Ralph J. Mitchell on 21 April, Geiger returned to Washington, D.C., where he began his second tour as the senior Marine aviator, now entitled the Director of Marine Aviation.

In his previous tour as Officer-in-Charge of Marine aviation, Geiger had overseen a small force of Marine Air Groups whose composition barely exceeded 1,000 Marines. Now, in the summer of 1943, Geiger found himself running a force of four Wings and personnel in excess of 60,000, a number that increased to 100,000 by the end of the war. In his new post, Geiger served as the aviation deputy to General Holcomb, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, and he also answered to the Air branch of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, who provided the funding for Marine aircraft and aviation support.

In his short tour in Washington, Geiger addressed a host of issues, none more significant than the question of basing. As the war in the

[2] Roy S. Geiger, Officer Qualification Record. Awarded an air medal for the reconnaissance missions he flew on 3-4 December 1942. Also see Willock, 233-281,

Pacific expanded north from Guadalcanal, past the Central Solomon Islands and into the Central Pacific, Geiger recognized that Marine pilots would not be able to provide air support from their bases in the Solomon Islands. As Marine Amphibious forces continued to move northward, they would be well outside the range of Marine airfields such as Henderson Field. Marines needed their own escort carriers in order to be in a position to support future campaigns and, as the Commandant's Aviation Deputy, Geiger argued for the procurement of such vessels. Geiger's arguments were not fruitful, however. The Navy had higher priorities for shipbuilding and procurement and believed that Marine amphibious forces could receive achieve adequate support from Army Air Forces bombers and carrier-based aviation.[3] It was thus only a matter of time before Marines in the Pacific would no longer enjoy Marine Close Air Support.

Given the growing perception that Marine aviation was indistinguishable from Army and Navy tactical aviation, Geiger felt it important to restate the mission of Marine aviation, with the purpose of clearly defining its unique role. Marine Corps leaders were aware of the negative budget implications if Marine air was indistinguishable from that of the other services. With this in mind, Geiger published a memorandum:

> The mission of Marine Aviation is to furnish the necessary air support of the ground forces of the Marine Corps, and to

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which provides details of flights conducted out of Espritu Santo.

[3] Sherrod, 324-326. Sherrod provides is a comprehensive explanation of the "Marines on Carriers" saga. It is clear that there is shared fault among Marine and Navy leaders. While Marines had asked for escort carriers for over a decade, they had not sufficiently emphasized this requirement. According to Sherrod, Marine leaders "showed a remarkable lack of foresight in failing to insist that their flyers be put on escort carriers [in 1943]." Sherrod argues that Marine aviators lost sight of their purpose and were "too deeply interested in shooting enemy planes out of the wild blue yonder." As a result, Marine Aviation was vulnerable to charge that it was a duplication of Army aviation and Marine ground forces were supported by Navy pilots instead of Marines. Additionally, Marine leadership (General Rowell) permitted carrier training to lapse among Marine student pilots in 1943, resulting in a generation of Marine pilots with no carrier expertise.

> provide a reserve from which the Navy may draw aviation units for service afloat on purely Naval missions…It may appear, at first sight, that, in the present war, Marine Corps Aviation has been employed on missions other than those for which it is maintained. Close analysis, however, will disclose that this is not the case and that there actually has been no change of mission…Marine Corps Aviation is an integral part of the Marine Corps, and its missions are therefore essentially the same. The fact that certain temporary circumstances have arisen in this war which have necessitated its employment on like missions in support of Army troops, in no wise alters this fact.[4]

Given his extensive network of strong joint relationships and influence as the senior Marine aviator in the Marine Corps, General Geiger should have been able to secure escort carriers for Marine aviators in the Pacific. His tour in Washington was short, but it is clear that he did not achieve his goals with respect to carrier procurement. He considered this to be a disappointment. Nonetheless, his efforts served to raise this issue to the level of the Joint Chiefs and Geiger was instrumental in several other areas during this tour. His primary accomplishment as Director of Aviation in 1943 may have been the establishment of a night-fighter group which ultimately enjoyed great success in the Pacific. He also had to make several difficult decisions to streamline the force structure of Marine aviation, eliminating the glider program and the barrage balloon program.

Bougainville – I MAC

In the South Pacific, the Marine Corps faced the challenge of assigning commanding generals to the rapidly expanding Marine amphibious forces. By the summer of 1943, the Marine Corps organized into two Amphibious Corps (I MAC and II MAC), with General Charles Barrett in command of I MAC and General Holland Smith commanding II

[4] Major General Roy S. Geiger, USMC, Director of Aviation, Memorandum, undated, MARINE CORPS AVIATION. General Roy S. Geiger Collection, USMC Historical Reference Branch, Quantico, VA.

MAC. When Barrett died unexpectedly on the eve of the campaign to take Bougainville in the Northern Solomons (Operation CHERRYBLOSSOM), General Alexander Vandegrift was selected to take his place as I MAC Commanding General.

The Marine Corps had bigger plans for Vandegrift, however; he had been selected to replace General Holcomb as Commandant of the Marine Corps. Marine Corps leaders had a pool of highly qualified ground officers from which to select Vandegrift's replacement, but instead they chose Roy Geiger.[5] It is clear that the influence of ComSoPac, Admiral William Halsey, was significant in the decision to replace Barrett with Geiger.[6] Halsey reflected on this dilemma of replacing Barrett in his autobiography:

> The only Marine officer in SOPAC who could have (replaced Barrett), Archie Vandegrift, had recently left for Washington to become Commandant of the Marine Corps…I discussed a substitute with my War Plans officer, Brig. Gen. William E. Riley of the Marines. Bill said he would go to his room and think it over. I said I'd do the same. In a very few minutes, the name of the ideal man popped into my mind, and I headed for Bill's room. He and I met halfway.
>
> His first words were, "I have the very man!"
>
> As casually as I could manage, I said, "You mean Roy Geiger, of course."[7]

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[5] Colonel Joe Alexander, USMC (Ret.), interview by the author. Colonel Alexander indicated that this was a controversial decision, initially regarded with suspicion by ground officers unfamiliar with General Geiger. After the Battle of Guadalcanal, there had formed an unofficial group of influential members of the 1st Marine Division known as the "Guadalcanal Clique," led, of course, by the Commandant, General Vandegrift. While Geiger had served on Guadalcanal, he was certainly not included in this group. As such, Geiger faced resentment when he was selected to be one of two primary Corps Commanders in the Pacific (the other being H. M. Smith).

[6] Elmer B. Potter, *Bull Halsey, a biography* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1985), 254. Halsey recalled the darkest days of Guadalcanal, when he had just taken over as Commander. "Pilots, worn out by too many missions, sleepless nights, and poor food, on returning from battles that were still raging, sometimes tumbled exhausted out of their cockpits and crawled sobbing under the wings of their planes. Brigadier General Roy Geiger, with seemingly iron nerves and tireless muscles, forced them back into their planes, slapping and kicking them if necessary. Rough measures, but necessary to save Henderson field and the pilots themselves."

[7] William F. Halsey and J. Bryan III, *Admiral Halsey's Story*, (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1947), 174.

Much quicker than expected, then, Geiger received orders to return to the battlefield as I MAC on Guadalcanal, where he arrived on October 22, 1943. CHERRYBLOSSOM was scheduled to commence on November 1 and Geiger had little time to catch up on operational details.

The strategy for Bougainville dictated several small diversionary raids in the nearby Treasury Islands and Choiseul in the days prior to the invasion. The main invasion was slated for November 1, and consisted of a surprise attack with I MAC (composed mainly of Major General Allen Turnage's 3rd Marine Division) against the lightly defended beaches at Cape Torokina, on the western coast of Bougainville. The plan for CHERRYBLOSSOM called for the establishment of a beachhead, followed by a movement inland to establish an airfield and defensive perimeter for follow-on operations and an eventual turnover of responsibility to Army forces. There was to be no preparatory naval gunfire in order to preserve surprise, but air support was to come from carrier-based and land-based Marine and naval aircraft from various air bases in the Solomons. Geiger's responsibility was to learn the plan and develop the necessary situational awareness to assume command once I MAC was established ashore.

The Marines met stiff resistance on the beaches of Bougainville, while naval forces engaged in a fierce encounter offshore in the Battle of Empress Augusta Bay. With the beachhead established, the Marines continued to engage Japanese ground forces, who mounted an unsuccessful counterattack on 7 November. Satisfied that Geiger had the situation well at hand, Vandegrift turned over command of I MAC on 9 November, leaving Geiger to continue the fight with the support of the recently debarked Army 37th Infantry Division under Major General Robert Beightler. With two Japanese divisions remaining in the south of Bougainville, Geiger's job was far from complete.

Geiger directed the construction of a fighter strip at Cape Torokina and pushed the I MAC perimeter outside of artillery range in order to avoid a repeat of his experience at Guadalcanal under the watchful eye of "Pistol Pete." Geiger believed successful completion of the airfield was critical to the success of planned operations against Japanese forces on the island and in future campaigns to the north. Located just 200 miles from Rabaul, the I MAC position was highly vulnerable to Japanese air attack, but Marine fighters from ComAirNorSols provided local air superiority, engaging most inbound Japanese aircraft. Geiger's men began building the airfield on 10 November and declared it operational by 24 November.

By the end of November, Geiger commanded over 30,000 Marine, Army, and Kiwi ground forces ashore and his I MAC faced several well-defended Japanese 23rd Infantry positions on hill masses (Hill 600, Hill 600A) to the east of Cape Torokina, in an area that came to be known as "Hellzapoppin Ridge." Geiger's 21st Marines were unable to defend themselves against the Japanese 23rd, which held the high ground and enjoyed defensive positions in defilade and outside mortar range of the Marines. In a classic use of combined arms warfare, Geiger directed ComAirNorSols torpedo bombers and scout bombers to fly close air support missions against the Japanese defilade positions just 75 yards forward of 21st Marine front lines.[8] The Marine pilots who flew these missions took off from the new airfield at Cape Torokina and initially enjoyed little success against the dug-in Japanese, before modifying their profiles and their bombs with delayed fuzes in low altitude attacks at fifty feet above the ground.[9] These air attacks had devastating effects and the

[8] Heinl, 386. "The capture of Helzapoppin Ridge on 18 December was signalized by one of the earliest and most tactically precise close air support strikes executed by Marines in World War II…under ground control from the front lines…six TBFs dropped forty-eight 100-pound bombs within 75 yards of the 21st Marines' front."
[9] Sherrod, 191. There was also a friendly fire incident which occurred on 13 December – one plane missed the target and dropped on friendly troops, killing 2 men and

21st Marines followed with an infantry assault, finding few survivors on the previously impregnable Japanese position.[10]

Having secured the airfield at Cape Torokina by 15 December, General Geiger was directed by ComSoPac (Admiral Halsey) to turn over tactical command of the Bougainville operation to the Army's XIV Corps.[11] Geiger then began the process of withdrawing his Marines to Guadalcanal, where they would begin campaign planning for their future duties in the Marianas island chain. Bougainville may be best known for the effective use of Marine Close Air Support at Hellzapoppin' Ridge, but with a few notable exceptions at Peleliu and Iwo Jima, this was the last event until Okinawa in which Marine ground forces would receive substantial close air support from Marine aviators.[12] By 1944, Marine aviation had expanded to a force of 112,626 officers and men, almost six times the size of pre-war Marine aviation. Nonetheless, this force remained largely rudderless for some time after Bougainville, mostly occupied with the "pedestrian chore of keeping bypassed islands neutralized."[13]

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wounding 6. Such accidents had been partially responsible for Army aviator denial of the efficiency of close air support. See FM 100-20.

[10] Robert A. Aurthur and Kenneth Cohlmia, *The Third Marine Division* (Robert T. Vance, ed.), p. 78. "It was the air attacks which proved to be the most effective factor in taking the ridge." Cited in Sherrod, 192.

[11] First Marine Amphibious Corps, *Action Report of Bougainville Beachhead, Phase I, Volume I*, Monograph, United States Marine Corps (Washington DC: 1943), 5. File: Guadalcanal, Archives, Quantico, Virginia. Cited in Quagge.

[12] Megee, 59. "After Bougainville, the Marine ground forces withdrew from action in the SoPac area in preparation for the great amphibious push through the Central Pacific. Lacking carriers, Marine Aviation was left behind to become part of Macarthur's air force. Under active Army Air Corps direction, as well as influence, Marine Air … was thereafter employed strictly as land-based air forces with little reference to the action of Army ground units in the area. For many dreary months the Marine squadrons made their fighter sweeps over Rabaul or bombed by-passed Japanese islands." See also Halsey and Bryan, 231. Expressing his opinion of the Army's management of Marine aviation, Admiral Halsey stated: "When Kenney was not keeping it [the 1st Marine Air Wing] idle, he was assigning it to missions far below its capacity."

[13] Heinl, 429-430. Many of these aviators were not carrier qualified (Sherrod, 325) and the schism between Marine ground and air units continued to widen. There was very little cooperation between aviation and ground commands after Guadalcanal. Sherrod, 327, Isley and Crowl, 508 – To "get Marine aviation back into the Marine Corps,"

Especially given his limited preparation time, Geiger performed exceptionally well in his first amphibious corps command. I MAC lost 400 killed and 1,400 wounded versus Japanese losses in excess of 2,500.[14] Geiger was decorated for his efforts, receiving his first Distinguished Service Medal. Brigadier General F. P. Henderson served on Geiger's staff and described the impact of Geiger's leadership:

> One of his accomplishments was to build an outstandingly good staff. The one he inherited from IMAC was mediocre at best, and he was not a man or a commander to tolerate anything but the best…The staff worked together very smoothly and I cannot recall any of the squabbling or jealousies too often encountered in staffs. He did not try to nitpick or micro-manage the staff work, but told them what he wanted and let them find the best way to do it. Before long they knew better than to go to him for a decision without having very thoroughly gathered, analyzed, and presented all of the information he needed to make a decision. I think that making decisions is the most important and critical task of a military echelon…In this he was a model of being prompt and correct in his decisions, trusting in the work of his staff and his own broad knowledge and beliefs.[15]

The Marianas and III PHIB Corps

With the Solomons mostly secure in the spring of 1944, the Joint Chiefs chose to seize the principal islands of the Marianas – Saipan, Tinian, and Guam – with the purpose of piercing the inner core of Japanese territory and establishing airfields within B-29 range of the Japanese homeland.

General Vandegrift engaged his naval counterparts aggressively on the escort carrier issue.

[14] Admiral Halsey: "On the occasion of your relinquishing command at Torokina I desire to express to you and the officers of your staff my appreciation for your magnificent efforts in taking and holding a spot so vital to our efforts. You have literally succeeded in setting up and opening for business a shop in the Japs (sic) front yard. The competition is making them most unhappy." *Action Report of Bougainville Beachhead*, 36, cited in Quagge.

[15] Brigadier General F. P. Henderson, USMC (Ret.), "Roy S. Geiger: The First Air-Ground General," *Marine Corps Gazette*, April 1995, 79-80.

During this time, Geiger was coming into his own as a commander of ground forces. Geiger embraced his new responsibilities and the infantry culture, but he retained the "work hard, play hard" philosophy that he had always followed as an aviator. His confidence and leadership style inspired effective staff work.[16] Merwin H. Silverthorn was Geiger's gifted Chief of Staff and he described the environment at Geiger's headquarters on Guadalcanal:

> We spent the spring of 1944 planning operations, none of which we executed…but we worked seven days a week. We'd get up at sunrise and work through until about three o'clock in the afternoon, with time off for breakfast and lunch. And then we'd get out and play volleyball…everybody played volleyball on the staff at 1500…at the conclusion of the three out of five games, people would go to their tents and have a shower and a highball…It was a very congenial group. I've never been associated with a more congenial group than the headquarters of III Phib Corps – very competent…altogether I'd never seen a more competent staff assembled.[17]

In late March, 1944, the command structure was established for the Marianas Campaign, codenamed FORAGER, a sequential operation that would begin with the invasions of Saipan and Tinian, followed by the invasion of Guam. Overall commander was to be Vice Admiral Raymond Spruance, Fifth Fleet Commander, while Vice Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner was designated as Joint Expeditionary Force Commander (TF-51).

Amphibious forces for FORAGER were commanded by Lieutenant General Holland M. "Howlin' Mad" Smith, who controlled the V Amphibious Corps as Commander of the Northern Troops and Landing

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[16] Major General M. H. Silverthorn, USMC, address at the Dedication of Camp Geiger, 25 September, 1953, 3. General Roy S. Geiger collection, USMC Historical Reference Branch, Quantico, VA. Silverthorn states: "Geiger displayed great patience with his staff and subordinates. Realizing they had many duties, he let them work out their problems without interference. By this display of confidence, he inspired his subordinates to maximum efforts. Nevertheless, he had his own ideas when staff work should be completed, and woe betide the staff officer that was delinquent."

[17] Lieutenant General Merwin H. Silverthorn, USMC (Ret.), (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1978, Oral History Collection, transcript), 298-303.

Force (NTLF). Subordinate to Smith was Roy Geiger, who commanded the III Corps as Commander, Southern Troops and Landing Force (STLF). The V Corps was responsible for the seizure of Saipan and Tinian, while the III Corps was responsible for the seizure of Guam under the codename STEVEDORE. Ground forces available to Geiger consisted mainly of Major General Turnage's 3rd Marine Division (3rd MarDiv) – most of whom had served with him at Bougainville – and the Army's Seventy-seventh Infantry Division, which was to be in reserve. Geiger's III PHIB Corps was ably supported by a subordinate naval task force (TF-53) commanded by Rear Admiral Richard Connolly.[18]

Initial D-day for STEVEDORE was set for 18 June, thus providing Geiger and Connolly with sufficient time to conduct deliberate planning. Geiger nurtured strong joint relationships during the planning for the Guam campaign. Both he and Connolly were experts in the intricacies of amphibious operations and the senior Army commander, Major General Andrew Bruce (77th Infantry Division), was also a highly competent and cooperative partner.[19]

With his breadth of Army education and experience, Geiger was a skilled battle staff planner and he placed a high priority on building an effective and competent staff. He understood the process of campaign planning as well as any staff officer and his expertise enabled him to guide the planning for STEVEDORE with great confidence and skill. Rejecting the option of conducting independent "stovepiped" planning at their respective headquarters, Geiger and Connolly's staffs conducted joint planning as often as possible. Geiger and Connolly first met at Pearl Harbor in early April 1944 and their staffs planned together under the tents of Guadalcanal for much of that month, conducting extensive

[18] Heinl, 421. Admiral Connolly had earned respect from the Marines at Roi and Namur. There, he had been dissatisfied with the effects of naval gunfire support from the USS Maryland and ordered her Captain to "Move really close in." From this point forward, he was known as "Close-In" Connolly.

planning sessions and rehearsals and working through the difficult amphibious problems that were to face them on the beaches of Guam. Connolly recalled this effective planning process:

> Geiger asked me if I could come down to Guadalcanal with my staff with him, for the planning phase. I got a plane, a C-54, loaded fifteen members of my staff into it, and we flew down to Guadalcanal. I lived in Geiger's Quonset hut with him until my flagship arrived. My chief of staff, the operations officer, the naval gunfire officer and all the other planning members of my staff were housed with their opposite members in the Marine camp.
>
> Geiger gave me a place to set up my staff and do the planning. We got to know each other very well that way…We lived with them in their camp, and when my flagship arrived, they lived aboard my ship.[20]

The plan for STEVEDORE called for a two-pronged invasion on the west coast of Guam, with Turnage's 3rd MarDiv on the left and Brigadier General Lemuel Shepherd's 1st Provisional Brigade on the right. Successfully joining these forces on the beachhead constituted the critical phase of the invasion, and Geiger recognized that he needed Corps artillery support (in the form of 155-mm howitzers) in order to prevent Japanese forces from spoiling the movement ashore. The movement of such heavy guns ashore was no simple task, not to mention the difficulties of establishing and employing these units after the beach landing.

Having a general knowledge of artillery employment from his days at Leavenworth, Geiger was determined to master the details of this plan in order to ensure success. He summoned the Operations Officer of the III Corps Artillery, Lieutenant Colonel Paul Henderson, and ordered him to produce every document and text that he could find on the subject of medium and general support artillery. Henderson provided Geiger with

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[19] Heinl, 419. Connolly had experience from the capture of Sicily, where he had performed with distinction.

[20] Admiral Richard M. Connolly, US Navy (Retired), (Washington, DC: Oral History Unit, Department of the Navy, 1969, Oral History Collection, Transcript), 231-259.

over twenty pounds of printed material, thinking it unlikely that the General would have time to pore through the detailed documents. Later that day, Henderson was shocked when Geiger called for him to return, along with Brigadier General Pedro del Valle, the Corps Artillery Officer, to discuss the artillery support phase of STEVEDORE. Henderson recalled that Geiger displayed a surprising degree of familiarity with the documentation he had provided, a demonstration of Geiger's impressive mental acuity.[21]

Indeed, Geiger's combined arms employment plan for STEVEDORE was a model for amphibious operations. Geiger's staff gave significant thought to the need for coordination between the landing force, artillery, air support, and naval gunfire. For this purpose, they co-located the Naval Gunfire Liaison Officer (NGFO) and the Corps Air Officer with the Fire Direction Center (FDC) ashore for the coordination of fires. This innovation worked so well that it was the model for later operations in Okinawa and was the predecessor to the Fire Support Coordination Center (FSCC) of the future. General Geiger insisted that his Corps CP be located in close proximity to the FDC and he was a frequent visitor to this facility during the battle for Guam.[22]

D-Day for STEVEDORE was moved from 18 June to 21 July as a result of unexpected strong Japanese resistance against the V Corps on the beaches of Saipan. Fearing that Geiger's STLF might have to be committed as a reserve at Saipan, Admiral Spruance maintained the III Phib Corps afloat for such a contingency.

This delay provided Geiger and Connolly with the opportunity to visit General H. M. Smith's forward command post (CP) on Saipan, where they gained valuable insight into the challenges they were about to face in Guam. Ashore at Saipan, Geiger and Connolly observed the

[21] Henderson, 79-80.

dysfunctional relationship that existed between Smith and some of his subordinate commanders and naval counterparts, a stark contrast with the harmonious III Phib and Connolly's TF-53.[23] With forces bogged down and casualties mounting on Saipan, H.M. Smith fired one of his Division Commanders, Army Major General Ralph Smith, for failure to prosecute the attack at a satisfactory pace. This action of an Army general being relieved by a Marine commander became a political hand grenade (known as the Smith vs. Smith controversy) that contributed to the bitterness of inter-service relations in the Pacific.[24] While a talented amphibious Commander, Holland Smith's aggressive advocacy for Marine Corps issues suggested parochialism and heightened inter-service tensions.[25]

Geiger continued to enjoy productive joint relationships in III Phib Corps, however. With D-Day for STEVEDORE fast approaching, he recognized that he was to have no shore-based indirect fire until the Corps artillery was established ashore. As a result, his plan was critically dependent on pre-assault fires from carrier-based aircraft and Connolly's naval guns. Beginning at least 2 weeks prior to D-Day, the air and naval forces unleashed an unprecedented barrage of devastating fires onto the Japanese defensive positions. In this effort, Connolly famously moved his ships inside of 3,500 yards of the beach, honoring his commitment to Geiger to "get the troops ashore standing up."[26] General Lemuel Shepherd recalled his experience with Connolly in the days leading to the assault on Guam:

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[22] See *Campaign for the Marianas*. Monograph. Historical Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps (Washington, D.C.: 1946). Cited in Quagge. B. P. Henderson also specifically references Geiger's receptiveness to these suggestions. Henderson, 79-80.
[23] Millett provides details of inter-service rivalries that existed in the Pacific theater at this time, 388-407.
[24] Millett, 414-415.
[25] Mersky, 97. At one point, H.M. Smith proposed to Admiral Nimitz that a combined Army-Marine amphibious Corps be established with Smith as the Commanding General. With General Vandegrift's concurrence, Nimitz rejected this proposal.
[26] Heinl, 455

> I always admired Admiral Connolly. When we (Third Amphibious Corps) went over the plans for this hazardous operation we didn't know whether we would be able to land over the reef. We thought Guam would be much better defended that it was and that the defenses would be on the shoreline. In discussing Naval Gunfire support Connolly said, "Well I'll give you support. By golly, I'll run my flagship on the beaches if necessary. And Admiral Connolly would have done it if it had been necessary. He was a fine Naval Officer and a genuine person.[27]

As a result of cooperative and well-coordinated efforts of TF-53, Japanese defenses were greatly depleted and underwater demolition teams were able to remove many of the deadly beach obstacles prior to the invasion. Ever the daredevil, Major General Geiger accompanied his combat frogmen on D-1, which gave him the rare and invaluable opportunity for a close-in inspection of the beaches his men would soon attack.[28]

Landing on 21 July at 0830, Geiger's III PHIB began one of the best-executed amphibious operations of WW II. Connolly achieved his stated goal of enabling the Marines to "get ashore standing up," and the 3rd MarDiv and 1st Marine Provisional Brigades successfully established the beachhead, successfully moving ashore against Japanese resistance in the most critical phase of the assault. The Japanese 29th Division put up a stiff and brave resistance, however, and executed a well-coordinated counterattack against Turnage's 3rd MarDiv on the northern left flank. The Marines prevailed, largely as a result of effective artillery support.

Although the execution of combined arms warfare was largely superb on Guam, a notable exception was in the arena of CAS. Ground commanders reported that close air support from carrier-based bombers was much less effective than it had been on previous campaigns. The

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[27] General Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr. US Marine Corps (Ret.), (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1967, Oral History Collection, transcript, Mr. Benis M. Frank, Interviewer), 46-47.
[28] Willock, 26.

Third MarDiv reported significant delays between their air support requests and CAS execution, resulting in the cancellation of multiple missions. Additionally, there were a number of friendly fire incidents which resulted from poor CAS execution; in one case, a strike called by the Third Marines came an hour late and hit the wrong target square, resulting in eight friendly deaths. The operations officer for Third MarDiv remarked, "pilot error, resulting in strafing or bombing of our own troops, did not improve the troops' confidence in close air support."[29]

Geiger and Connolly moved their command post (CP) ashore on 25 July, guiding the remainder of Operation STEVEDORE from their headquarters on the beachhead. Reestablishing the old Marine air strip on the Orote peninsula on 29 July, the III PHIB Corps successfully mopped up most of the remaining Japanese forces by 8 August, though pockets of Japanese resistance remained on the island through the end of 1945. The high level of interservice cooperation is reflected in Geiger's action report:

> This report would not be complete without inviting particular attention to the relations which existed throughout the operation between the elements of the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps…At no time was there a conflicting opinion that was not settled to the entire satisfaction of all concerned.[30]

Geiger earned his second Distinguished Service Medal for his leadership of the III PHIB Corps on Guam, a textbook operation against a tough Japanese force. Geiger's forces suffered 7,800 casualties in the effort to retake Guam, a number that represented half of the losses of the assault on Saipan under virtually identical conditions. Geiger's successes on Guam were a testament to his effective staff work and joint relationships, an unprecedented pre-assault bombardment, and an

[29] Isley and Crowl, 384-385.
[30] Isley and Crowl, 390.

innovative fire support plan.[31] Geiger's only regret at Guam was the absence of Marine Close Air Support; he and General H. M. Smith voiced their concerns on this issue to Admiral Nimitz in the FORAGER after action report.[32] In response to this complaint, Nimitz finally agreed to procure four escort carriers with Marine squadrons aboard to support future operations.

Brutal Peleliu

On 12 August, General Geiger departed Guam and returned to Guadalcanal to await further orders for the III PHIB Corps. Little more than a month later, he led his Amphibious Corps against vicious Japanese defenses on the island of Peleliu. Located in the Palau Islands of the Western Carolines, Peleliu represented a significant vulnerability on the Eastern flank of General Douglas MacArthur, who conducted his movement north in the Western Pacific toward the Philippines. Geiger's task was to eliminate this weakness on MacArthur's flank by destroying Japanese defenses at Peleliu.

In the Peleliu operation, codenamed STALEMATE II, Geiger's III Amphibious Corps fell under the command of Admiral Halsey, now the Third Fleet Commander. Geiger's Navy counterpart was Rear Admiral George Fort, who proved to be a poor substitute for the reliable Connolly. Complicating matters further, Geiger led a new ground component, Major General William Rupertus' 1st MarDiv (veteran of Guadalcanal), which was to join Army Major General Paul Mueller's Eighty-First Infantry

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[31] Major General Roy S. Geiger to Rear Admiral Connolly, letter, 9 August, 1944. Geiger stated, "It is my considered opinion that the Guam operation is the best executed of any in which I ever participated, or of which I have personal knowledge. Your sympathetic understanding of our mutual problems and your thorough knowledge of amphibious warfare won for you the confidence and admiration of all of us who served under you." Folder #103, Box #6, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

[32] Isley and Crowl, 385. Geiger stated, "The use of Marine Bombing Squadrons in preference for close air support of ground troops has been clearly demonstrated." Holland Smith added, "the troop experience of senior marine pilots combined with the

Division.[33] Geiger's Chief of Staff, General Silverthorn, described the differences between Guam and Peleliu:

> While Guam had nothing but pleasant memories…Peleliu has almost the opposite…Everything about Peleliu has a bad taste in its mouth. First off, we were told by the naval Attack Force Commander that we weren't going to get the type of gunfire support that we had up in Guam and no use expecting it. Secondly, when I moved corps headquarters aboard the command ship for Guam…I found opposition on the part of the Chief of Staff, Captain Decker, and was unable to put nearly the number of people on that we wanted to.[34]

In preparation for the immense challenges of Peleliu, Geiger had one month to get to know his new group of fellow and subordinate commanders, and to conduct staff planning and rehearsals. General Rupertus and his staff had already built a thorough plan for the Peleliu assault and, given the time constraints, Geiger adopted the 1st MarDiv plan as the basis for STALEMATE II. Rupertus was supremely confident in his plan, stating: "We're going to have some casualties, but let me assure you this is going to be a short one, a quickie. Rough but fast. We'll be through in three days. It might take only two."[35]

The Japanese had spent several months reinforcing their defenses on Peleliu, which was characterized by its intricate ridge and cave structure that provided natural defensive cover. The unique and brutal series of honeycombed and reinforced caves on Peleliu dominated Geiger's planning concerns, but Rupertus was confident that his Marines would be able to successfully march ashore, especially with the recent acquisition of flamethrowers and amphibian tractors (with which his

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indoctrination of new pilots in infantry tactics should insure greater cooperation and coordination between air and ground units."

[33] BGen Edwin Simmons and Col Joe Alexander, interview by the author. General Rupertus was regarded as one of Vandegrift's "boys" from Guadalcanal, a careerist, not well-liked, and recently injured (a broken foot that he did not reveal to his superiors). Rupertus aggressively sought appointment as the next Commandant of the Marine Corps and he regarded Peleliu as his "ticket."

[34] Silverthorn, 317-318, 323.

Division had little experience). Of greater concern to Geiger was the fact that he only had one rifle battalion as his division reserve.

Geiger's second main infantry unit, the Army's 81st Infantry Division (which had yet to experience combat), was located in Hawaii during most of the planning for Peleliu, but was to be in a position to assist in the event of difficulties in the landing. Otherwise, the primary plan for the 81st was to move ashore at Peleliu after the initial phase of the assault was complete. While Geiger had enjoyed productive and cooperative Joint relationships in his previous operations, he observed in the planning process that General Rupertus had little regard for the integration of his Army counterparts, a factor that haunted the III PHIB on Peleliu.

The pre-assault fires on Peleliu did not compare with those that Geiger had enjoyed in STEVEDORE. Army B-24's dropped 600 tons of bombs on the Palaus and Admiral Halsey's carrier aircraft conducted two weeks of supplemental air attacks, but the naval bombardment lasted only three days.[36] Geiger was not able to conduct a satisfactory battle damage assessment prior to the beach landing and he feared the worst as his Marines moved ashore.

When the 1st MarDiv landed on the western coast of Peleliu on the morning of 15 September, 1944, they enjoyed pre-assault fires of 1,000 tons of naval shells and a fifty-plane carrier-based attack. The conditions on the beach were reminiscent of those on Omaha Beach at Normandy, however, as there was no sign that Japanese defenses had been weakened by the pre-assault barrage. In his vivid account of the battle, Eugene Sledge recalled,

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[35] Heinl, 466.

[36] Silverthorn, 316. Silverthorn recalled: It was considerably different working with Admiral Fort than it was with Admiral Connolly. The very first thing that Admiral Fort told us was that "you're not going to get all the gunfire support here that you got in Guam. I don't have the ships, and we don't have the ammunition." It was the old Navy story.

> Everything my life had been before and has been after pales in the light of that awesome moment when my amtrac started in amid a thunderous bombardment toward the flaming, smoke-shrouded beach for the assault on Peleliu.[37]

Marines were pinned down on the beaches, moving forward by the inch and suffering devastating losses in the withering crossfire of Japanese machine guns and well-registered mortar and artillery fire. As in Guam, it was imperative to establish artillery assets ashore in the early portion of the assault and the 11th Marines were able to accomplish this vital task by the afternoon of 15 September. Again, Silverthorn illuminated the hardships on Peleliu:

> The terrain was against us. The weather was against us. We were on the tail end of a typhoon. We ran short of rations. We were on two meals a day…The terrain was abominable…The sharp coral would cut the shoes and the clothing of the Marines. Then the island had been mined for many years for phosphate deposits. So there were many tunnels running through these ridges. And in addition many caves and tunnels had been dug by the defending forces.[38]

By this time, Japanese infantry forces had learned the folly of Banzai frontal assault tactics. On Pelelieu, they remained in their covered defensive positions, forcing the attacking Marines to dig them out of their pillboxes and caves. Sledge detailed the change in Japanese tactics at Peleliu:

> The Japanese abandoned their conventional all-out effort at defending the beach in favor of a complex defense based upon mutually supporting, fortified positions in caves and pillboxes extending deeply into the interior of the island…In earlier battles, the Japanese had exhausted their forces in banzai charges … but on Peleliu, the Japanese let the Marines come to him and the approximately 10,000 troops of his proud 14th Infantry Division. From mutually supporting

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[37] E. B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa*, (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1981), 52.
[38] Silverthorn, 317-318, 323.

> positions, the Japanese covered nearly every yard of Peleliu.[39]

Marine losses under these circumstances were steep and General Rupertus was unable to establish a CP ashore during the first day of operations. For his part, Geiger was unwilling to remain aboard his command ship in the early hours of the attack. Realizing that the situation was tenuous, he moved ashore (ahead of Rupertus) to the temporary Division Command Post on the beach, surprising the occupants, led by Brigadier General O.P. Smith, the deputy Commanding General. Geiger insisted on visiting all of the Regimental CP's, but Smith was able to talk him out of traveling to the 1st Regimental CP on the northern left flank. There, Colonel Lewis Puller's Marines were conducting a series of unsuccessful and costly frontal attacks on the most difficult position on the beach, known as the Umurbrogol Pocket.[40] Geiger was disappointed that he was unable to visit Puller, but he committed his reserve, the 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines to help the struggling 1st Marines. O. P. Smith described Geiger's arrival at the Division CP:

> While we were sitting in this ditch, some time toward one o'clock in the afternoon I looked up and here came General Geiger up over the bank, with mortar shells falling into the area. He came up to me, and I said, 'Look, General, according to the book you're not supposed to be here at this time.' He said, 'Well, I wanted to see why those Amtracs were burning.' …Then he said, 'I'd like to see the airfield.' I said, 'That's simple, all you have to do is just climb up this bank and there it is.' … About that time the Japs put over in rapid succession what must have been, not mortars, but rockets; they made a horrible screech and it sounded like they were just clearing your head…he slid down the bank, and I asked him if he'd seen the airfield, and he said yes, he'd seen it. Then he went down to visit the 5th and 7th CPs. He wanted to

[39] Sledge, 53.

[40] Heinl, 469. At one point, one of Puller's companies, led by Captain George P. Hunt, had lost two-thirds of its men on Puller's left flank. When Hunt reported to Puller that he was low on ammunition and down to 18 men, Puller ordered, "That's fine, tell him to keep pushing."

> see Lewie (then Colonel Lewis B. 'Chesty' Puller), but I said, 'Now look, General, there is a gap of 800 yards above here, and we don't know who's in there, and you just shouldn't go up there.' I had to do quite a bit of talking to talk him out of that.[41]

Throughout the Peleliu campaign, Geiger remained at the front lines, where he could gain the best situational awareness to aid his decision-making. It was not uncommon for him to appear next to a dug-in Marine rifleman, one of whom famously cautioned Geiger to get down unless he wanted to get shot. The old General knew that the young Marine was right, apologized to the Marine, and walked away.[42] Silverthorn provides another revealing account of Geiger's inspiring and courageous leadership at Peleliu:

> General Geiger spent nearly every day at the front lines. Almost every day he was at the front lines – and when I say front lines: he went all the way out to battalion commander's positions, if not company commander positions…I think that had a very good effect on the people in the front line. It showed that we were interested, and it also told us what was going on, and it acted as an incentive to the Division and Regimental Commanders to be on their toes. They never knew when the Corps Commander was going to come around and ask him some real searching questions. But that's a real compliment to General Geiger, who was in his late 50s at the time and was not a ground officer – he was an aviator, as most everybody knows, but had a complete grasp of ground operations. He was a graduate of Fort Leavenworth, and he was a graduate of the Army War College. So he could talk ground operations with anyone.[43]

During the first week of operations, the 5th and 7th Marine Regiments were able to achieve their objectives, moving across the full

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[41] General Oliver P. Smith, US Marine Corps (Ret.), (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1973, Oral History Collection, transcript, Mr. Benis M. Frank, Interviewer), 136-137.
[42] Henderson, 79-80. Henderson states: "Geiger spent much of his time roving the battlefield so he could have a personal knowledge of the terrain, the action and the condition and the morale of his men."
[43] Silverthorn, 325-326.

width of the island and capturing the critically important airstrip. In that same week, the 1st Marines had barely moved, absorbing losses of 1,750, which amounted to over 50% of the strength of the regiment.[44] Even with these terrible losses, General Rupertus resisted Geiger's suggestion to employ the now available and fresh Army 321st RCT. Geiger was hesitant to override his subordinate commander, who had tactical command of the 1st RCT, and he was certainly aware of the political implications of committing an Army RCT to come to the aid of an ailing Marine regiment in combat. Nonetheless, on 20 September, Geiger decided to commit the 321st to support the 1st RCT.[45]

On 23 September, the 321st RCT moved ashore to relieve the 1st RCT, using a combined envelopment to surround the hardened Japanese defenders, not the frontal assault tactics that had failed Col Puller's men. By 29 September, the joint force controlled most of the island of Peleliu, with the exception of the Umurbrogol pocket and its prominent "Bloody Nose Ridge," where the 1st RCT had suffered such devastating losses. Completely surrounded, the Japanese defenders of that position resisted continuous air and ground attacks for another two months, before the position was finally overrun. In the first use of Marine close air support since Bougainville, Marine pilots flying the Corsairs of MAG-11 were instrumental in softening the Umurbrogol pocket, where they delivered half-ton bombs and napalm into the Japanese positions. It was only a 15-second flight from the airfield to Bloody Nose Ridge, and the Corsair pilots delivered their bombs without even raising their landing gear.[46]

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[44] Silverthorn, 323. "The 1st Marine Regiment … fought itself down to a combat efficiency of zero…They just fought themselves to a standstill until they were unable to fight any longer, and we relieved them from the lines.

[45] Heinl, 471. Geiger addressed the relief of 1st Marines with General Rupertus on 20 September at the 1st MarDiv CP. Rupertus resisted this suggestion, stating he was sure that the island would be secure in another day or two (it took 68 more days). Geiger did not concur and directed General Rupertus to prepared plans for embarkation of 1st Marines and attachment of the Army 321st RCT.

[46] Sherrod, 257.

Geiger declared the Peleliu assault phase complete on 12 October and General Mueller's 81st Infantry Division officially relieved the 1st MarDiv on 20 October. The Third Amphibious Corps suffered dearly for the unforgiving terrain on Peleliu, with 9,171 casualties and a 1.25-to-1 ratio of American to Japanese casualties that was only exceeded by Iwo Jima.[47] Geiger regretted these tremendous losses, many of which were clearly avoidable, but he chose not to point the finger of blame at anyone but himself in the aftermath of the battle. In any case, his Marines accomplished the hard-fought and strategically questionable mission of occupying Peleliu, and Geiger was awarded his third Distinguished Service Medal for his leadership. His citation read as follows:

> Disregarding his personal safety he made frequent visits to the front lines under intense artillery and mortar fire. By his brilliant leadership, gallantry and resolute tenacity, he inspired his subordinate commanders to heroic efforts in overcoming a relentless and fanatic enemy.[48]

In the aftermath of Peleliu, Marine aviation enjoyed a measure of redemption supporting General MacArthur's campaign to retake the Philippines. Thanks to the aggressive efforts of Admiral Halsey to leverage the potential of Marine aviation (which he felt had been largely wasted in the South Pacific), General MacArthur chose to employ the preponderance of the 1st Marine Air Wing to support the XXIV Corps attack. Having been supported mostly by Army and Navy fliers, the XXIV Corps units were not familiar with Marine close air support doctrine or the Marine procedure of using ground forces to control air strikes and

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[47] Heinl, 473. See also Sledge, 315. Describing his motivation to keep fighting, Sledge states: "War is brutish, inglorious, and a terrible waste. Combat leaves an indelible mark on those who are forced to endure it. The only redeeming factors were my comrades' incredible bravery and their devotion to each other. Marine Corps training taught us to kill efficiently and to try to survive. But it also taught us loyalty to each other – and love. That esprit de corps sustained us.

[48] Secretary of the Navy to Roy Stanley Geiger, Citation, 21 October 1945 in Roy S. Geiger's Officer Qualification Record (OQR).

they were impressed with the results.[49] Brigadier General William C. Chase, 1st Brigade Commander, stated: "I have never seen such able, close, and accurate close support as the Marine flyers are giving us."[50] Major General Verne D. Mudge was even more effusive in his praise: "I can say without reservation that the Marine dive-bomber outfits are among the most flexible I have seen in this war."[51]

[49] Mersky, 110. Writing of Marine aviators, General Robert L. Eichelberger later said, "Nothing comforts a soldier, ankle-deep in mud, faced by a roadblock or fortified strong-holds, as much as the sight of bombs wreaking havoc on stubborn enemy positions. It puts heart into him."
[50] Heinl, 476.
[51] Ibid., 477.

Chapter 7

ICEBERG

Having led two amphibious campaigns over the previous four months, General Geiger returned to the US in the fall of 1944 and enjoyed a brief leave in Pensacola, FL. In December, Geiger was recalled to CINCPAC HQ in Honolulu, where he testified before a special committee that was considering the plans to reorganize the armed forces. In his testimony, Geiger indicated that he favored a three departmental system with independent air, ground, and naval forces, given the distinctions in the mediums in which those forces operate. He emphasized the importance of maintaining an aviation capability in the Navy and Marine Corps, however, stating that "the use of air is an essential factor in performing any military task" and that "aviation must be available for training with ground forces for the mutual benefit of air and ground personnel."[1]

The primary reason for Geiger's return to the Pacific was to join the planning team for the anticipated capture of Okinawa, codenamed ICEBERG. For this final operation of the Pacific campaign, Vice Admiral Ray Spruance was to provide overall command as TF-50, while Vice Admiral Kelly Turner commanded the Joint Expeditionary Force as TF-51. General Simon Bolivar Buckner was designated as Commander, Expeditionary Troops ashore (TF-56) in addition to his primary duties as Commander, Tenth Army. Serving under Buckner, Major General Geiger held command of the III MAC, with Major General John Hodge in command of the XXIV Corps. As had been the case in the Guam

[1] Maj. Gen. Roy S. Geiger, USMC before special committee headed by Admiral J. Richardson, USN, at Pearl Harbor, Statement, 10 December 1944. Folder #109, Box #6, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

campaign, Geiger was fortunate to participate in the detailed planning for ICEBERG from the very beginning.

Joint Relationships

Geiger enjoyed good relationships with most of the participants in ICEBERG, having previously served with many of them. He had a particularly strong bond with Buckner, with whom he had attended CGSS, and Hodge had served under Geiger during the Bougainville campaign.[2] Geiger also had a great deal of experience and mutual respect for his Navy commanders and counterparts, including Spruance, Turner, and Mitscher.

One particular incident is illustrative of Geiger's strong inter-service relationships and trust. On Christmas Eve, 1944, he joined his old friends Vice Admiral Connolly and Army Major General Charles Mullen for dinner aboard Connolly's flagship at Tulagi. Speculating on how and when the Pacific War would finally end, each of the gentlemen agreed to a friendly wager of $100, which would go to the first of the three men to reach Tokyo. Geiger was confident that he would win the bet.[3]

Given the inter-service tensions in the Pacific during WW II, it is remarkable that Geiger was able to sustain so many productive and cooperative relationships with his joint colleagues.[4] The "Smith vs.

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[2] General Buckner to CG, US Army Forces, Pacific Ocean Areas, letter, 24 April, 1945. General Buckner was furious when he read an Army press account which failed to mention the Marines. In this letter he addressed this matter, stating, "The Marines form a powerful and essential part of the Tenth Army. While I understand that the newsmap is for army distribution only, I consider it most desirable that the Marines who are sharing the fighting and hardships of this campaign be not ignored in any publication relative to the composition of the Tenth Army." Folder #117, Box #6, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

[3] Roy Geiger, Jr., interview with the author. See also Notebook – Record of Events From 15 October 1943 to 3 September 1945. Compiled by Roy H. Owsley. Box #12, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

[4] Henderson, 5-6. "Geiger proved that he could operate with other service units under him without inter-service discord…At Bougainville, Guam, and Peleliu, the III Phib Corps had one Marine and one Army division. He insisted to his staff that they were

Smith" controversy had far-reaching implications and clearly factored into Admiral Nimitz's decision to "kick upstairs" the controversial H.M. Smith to a rear headquarters posting as Commander, Fleet Marine Forces Pacific (FMFPAC), while leaving Geiger in operational command in the Pacific.[5] Even more remarkable was the fact that General Buckner clearly designated Geiger as his second-in-command for ICEBERG, to replace him as a Field Army Commander in the event of his death. In his war diary, Buckner referenced this decision in an entry that speaks to the interservice tensions in the Pacific:

> Sent letter through Richardson to Adm. Nimitz asking that Gen. Geiger take over Tenth Army should I become a casualty. His reaction will be entertaining since he [Richardson] mortally fears and distrusts Marines.[6]

Marine General O.P. Smith, who served as the Deputy Chief of Staff for the 10th Army, described the dynamics of the Buckner-Geiger bond:

> General Buckner was a very fine gentleman…the only trouble in that Tenth Army setup was that the Tenth Army was made up of two veteran corps – the III Amphibious Corps and the XXIV Corps – that had plenty of combat experience, and General Buckner had a staff that, as far as Leavenworth staff work went, were highly qualified, but they had no combat experience. And of course the two veteran corps weren't too happy about getting orders from a staff that had no combat experience, but it worked out fairly well. General Geiger and his staff came in November, and they put on some sort of presentation for General Buckner. Well, they impressed General Buckner rather thoroughly. They knew their business, that III Corps.[7]

Buckner made the decision to designate Geiger as his second-in-command for three reasons. First, he knew from personal experience

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not to show any partiality to the Marine units, and made it clear to all hands that the soldiers were there as brothers-in-arms and should be respected and treated as such."

[5] BGen E. H. Simmons, interview with the author.

[6] Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, *Seven Stars: The Okinawa Battle Diaries of Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr. and Joseph Stilwell*, (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 19.

[7] Smith Oral History, 152-155.

that Geiger was an intelligent and capable commander, and Geiger continued to reinforce this perception in the planning for ICEBERG. On one occasion at Schofield Barracks on Oahu, Geiger even delivered a detailed operational brief to Buckner's staff, a job which was typically reserved for a professional staff officer.[8] Second, Buckner realized the important role that airpower would play in the invasion of Okinawa and he knew that Geiger's expertise would be instrumental in this regard. Finally, Buckner knew that Geiger was a true joint commander whose decisions were virtually immune to parochialism. Geiger possessed a good deal more combat experience and expertise than Buckner himself, but Buckner knew that Geiger would be a loyal and reliable subordinate commander. The strength of this bond would be tested in battle and vital for the success of ICEBERG, given the complexity of this massive Joint operation.[9]

As the senior Marine on General Buckner's staff, General O.P. Smith provided a window into General Buckner's perception of Geiger and his assignment as second-in-command:

> General Buckner told me going into this operation he should designate in advance a second in command. Now the senior Army officer in the Tenth Army…(Fred C. Wallace)…was a major general, and he was to be the Island Commander once we got some territory and he was next senior to General Buckner. But General Buckner didn't feel that he was qualified to command an army in the field, and he did feel that General Geiger was so qualified. At that

[8] Silverthorn Oral History, 338-340, 343-344, 351-352. "There was a sort of feeling of being on your toes to create the very best impression as far as the professional competency of the Marines were concerned and ourselves as individuals…General Geiger did his own presenting, which was not normal. Normally the Chief of Staff would do the presenting, but I've mentioned that with his academic background at Leavenworth and the War College…he was perfectly competent to make a presentation himself. They took our measure for ten days at Schofield, and then they came down to Guadalcanal…They looked us over pretty carefully for three or four days. And I feel that they departed there…with a feeling of respect for the competency of the Marines; and from then on we dealt mostly by dispatch …they in general just agreed to all of our recommendations.

[9] Sarantakes, 7. Buckner worked hard to get along well with the Marines under his command. He even designated Maj. Gen. Roy S. Geiger…to be his successor in case he became a casualty. The two generals got along well with one another.

> time, we were at Pearl Harbor, and he wanted to write a letter to Admiral Nimitz, but he felt he ought to send it via General Richardson, because Richardson was the senior Army officer present.
>
> Buckner did that, and he got his letter back from General Richardson with a pencil note on it that 'this is a matter for the War Department to decide.' That made General Buckner kind of mad, but he realized that once he got aboard ship, and once we started the Okinawa operation, General Richardson was out of the picture…Admiral Nimitz could make whomever he wanted commander of the task force.[10]

D-Day

The scale of ICEBERG would dwarf those of Geiger's previous campaigns. Lieutenant General Mitsuri Ushijima's Japanese forces on the island numbered well in excess of 100,000, while General Buckner's invasion forces exceeded 182,000, supported by a fleet of over 1,400 ships.[11] The 10th TAF that supported Buckner was commanded by Major General Francis Mulcahy, USMC, and consisted of four Marine Air Groups, several Army Air Corps squadrons, and a host of carrier-based aircraft.[12] For the first time in the Pacific theater, all-Marine carrier groups operated from escort carriers in support of the invasion.[13] Strategic aviation was to be provided by the Twentieth Air Force (principally B-29's based in the Marianas).[14]

On D-day, April 1, 1945, Buckner's Joint Force landed on the western beaches of Okinawa with four divisions line abreast, the Marine

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[10] Smith oral history, 155. Silverthorn oral history, 385.
[11] Millett, 433.
[12] Sherrod, 370-376. The TAF was designated as TG 99.2 as a subordinate command to the 10th Army. MGen Mulcahy commanded all land-based tactical aviation, while the Twentieth Air Force was responsible for strategic aviation. Tasks for the TAF included the establishment of units and headquarters ashore, air support missions as required, and air defense in conjunction with carrier-based aircraft. Outside the command chain of the TAF were the Landing Force Air Support Control Units (LFASCU), which would take over air support control at the conclusion of the amphibious phase of battle.
[13] Millett, 437.
[14] Sherrod, 370-371.

6th and 1st MarDiv on the northern left and the 7th and 96th Infantry Divisions on the southern right. The assault forces walked ashore with little resistance, as Ushijima's plan was not to defend the beaches, but instead to lure the US forces inland to terrain where the Japanese held a significant defensive advantage. The southern portion of Okinawa featured similar characteristics to those of Peleliu, with a variety of interlocking cave and blockhouse structures that were easily defensible. With the huge size of his defensive force and the advantage of terrain, Ushijima's strategy was to consolidate the preponderance of his forces in the well-defended southern positions in hopes that he might win a battle of attrition against US forces.[15]

Quagmire

Ushijima's plan, while brilliant, had little chance of long-term success against the tremendous might of the US combined arms force, but his plan was effective for most of the campaign. As Ushijima had anticipated, Geiger's Marine forces in the lightly defended north were able to move across the island in a matter of days, clearing the northern half of the island within a week. The battle in the south was reminiscent of Peleliu and Iwo Jima, however, and Hodge's XXIV Corps faced some of the most difficult fighting of the war in Japanese strongholds such as Shuri Castle and Naha. Japanese forces in those areas were well dug into defenses that were virtually impregnable.

Ushijima had deployed his southern forces in a defense-in-depth posture of three concentric rings in the high ground of Okinawa and especially given their willingness to fight to the death, the well-defended Japanese forces were a difficult target. The extent of their cover required

[15] Millett, 434. "Ushijima rejected senseless mass counterattacks and tunneled his forces into fortified positions on forward and reverse slopes of the island's ridges and hills…thus confining the Americans to the open farmlands and narrow roads, where they would be vulnerable to artillery, mortars, and machine guns. Southern Okinawa, with caves, cliffs, draws, and broken ridges, offered the perfect terrain for a positional, diehard defense."

a precisely registered artillery round and allied forces expended over 2.3 million shells in this effort over the course of the campaign.[16] The three Japanese lines were known as the Machinato line, the Shuri complex, and the Kunishi Hill line. A fourth stronghold of Japanese forces defended the Oroku Peninsula, southwest of Naha.

Several weeks into the battle, General Buckner's three-division offensive in the south was bogged down in frontal engagements and showed little progress. General Buckner wanted Geiger's III Amphibious Corps to join the frontal attack on the right flank of the assault in the south, but Geiger favored an amphibious assault into the rear of the Japanese defenses, on the southern tip of Okinawa. At this point in the battle, there was a great deal of pressure from the press and Washington to speed up the pace of the battle, which was becoming more costly than anticipated.[17] The slow pace of the battle was especially costly for naval forces, which suffered under the constant barrage of ferocious *kamikaze* attacks.[18] Geiger received support for his amphibious plan from a number of senior commanders, including Army General Bruce, the 77th Division commander, Admiral Nimitz, and General Vandegrift, who visited Okinawa in mid-April. Buckner rejected the proposal for an amphibious assault, however, deciding that the "tactical risks, supply problems, and shortage of shipping made another landing unattractive."[19] Geiger showed his loyalty to Buckner in this incident, as he ultimately supported his commander's decision in the face of immense pressure to dissent.[20]

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[16] Richard B. Frank, *Downfall*, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1999), 70. This number reflects a combination of ship-based and shore-based bombardment.
[17] Heinl, 499. The New York Tribune's Homer Bigart reported: "There were two ways of tmplying the Marine 3d Amphibious Corps after its speedy cleanup of northern Okinawa. It could be landed behind the Japanese lines in the south, or it could add power to the frontal assault on the Shuri line. Our tactics were ultra-conservative. Instead of an end run, we persisted in frontal attacks."
[18] Millett, 435.
[19] Millett, 435.
[20] Col Joe Alexander, USMC (Ret.), interview with the author. Alexander states that Geiger received pressure from the Commandant, General Vandegrift, and most of his

Buckner later permitted elements of the 6th MarDiv to conduct an amphibious assault on the Oroku peninsula, conducted successfully on June 4.[21] Most of Geiger's III Corps moved to the western side of Okinawa, however, assuming a position on the extreme right (west) of the US lines, with Hodge's XXIV Corps on the left (east) in a two-Corps southerly attack on the Japanese lines of defense. Moving against the brutally well-defended southern positions, the joint ground force slowly overcame the Japanese defenders over the course of May and early June of 1945, taking extremely heavy losses in the process. The infamous battle for Sugar Loaf hill virtually destroyed the 29th and 22d Marines of the 6th MarDiv, while the 7th and 5th Marines of the 1st MarDiv exhausted themselves in the capture of Dakeshi Ridge and Wana Ridge.[22]

Geiger was frustrated by the challenges of digging out the Japanese forces using direct assaults and he sought alternative approaches whenever possible. General Lemuel Shepherd commanded the Sixth MarDiv and his memoirs reflect Geiger's preference for the indirect approach and the degree of his involvement in directing the III Corps ground scheme of maneuver. Shepherd stated:

> In discussing the entry of the Sixth Marine Division into the battle going on in central part of Okinawa, I said, to General Geiger, 'Let me take the zone of action along the West Coast. We'll push right on down until we out flank Shuri Castle.' General Geiger agreed with my proposed plan of action but when I received the Corps operation order it directed the First and Sixth Divisions to attack in line along the Corps front…I went to see General Geiger and told him the Corps order was not in accordance with my proposed plan of action…I said, 'General, I want to make my main effort along the coast so that I can get around behind Shuri Castle.' Geiger turned to his staff G-3 and said, 'Why didn't you write

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senior subordinate commanders to reject Buckner's decision to opposed the amphibious assault option. Instead, Geiger recognized the importance of harmony in the leadership of the 10th Army and realized, pragmatically, that Buckner would not have changed his mind in any case. He chose harmony over discord, as he tended to do.

[21] Millett, 435-437.

[22] Millett, 436.

the order so that Shepherd could carry out his plan?' The G-3 argued that the Corps must maintain close contact along the front of both divisions. Finally, I said, 'General, if you let me push down the coast I can flank the Shuri position and get into the southern end of the island.' Geiger turned to Silverthorn and said, 'Silver, that's what I told you to do in the first place. Go and do it."[23]

On the Front Lines

Throughout the Okinawa campaign, Geiger continued his tradition of moving his CP as close to the front lines as possible. For most of the three-month campaign, he was on the ground near the front lines, and in some cases he moved his CP forward of the regimental CP's. Some questioned the wisdom of a corps commander who was so willing to disregard his own personal safety and it is fair to ask whether General Geiger's bravery under fire bordered on the foolish. Silverthorn expressed his thoughts on Geiger's aggressiveness and the impact of his example:

> General Geiger found that he was spending undue time trying to get from his headquarters up to the front lines. So one day when I was going out, he said,
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> 'You go down and pick a forward CP for the Corps and have it well forward.
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> I said, 'Yes Sir.' So I went down, all the way down, to the city of Naha, which was just in the process of being captured. And there in the building, which was now (at least it was a few years ago) the police headquarters building, I found a reserve battalion of the 6th Marine Division had established its headquarters there. I told the Battalion Commander that I was moving the Corps headquarters in there the next day, and he would have to find himself another place. He looked at me with surprise and pointed out that the Japanese front lines were exactly 1000 meters away by map distance and that I was under small arms fire from the Japanese there. But I said, "Well, that's what we're going to do, and you find another headquarters…
>
> So General Geiger went down there and came under direct fire, small arms fire, of the Japanese. Then the next

[23] Shepherd oral history, 80-81.

> day he wanted to know when I was coming down. I was supposed to bring the rest of the Corps. Well, that's the only time in my experience when I dragged my feet with General Geiger.[24]

In describing the impact of Geiger's tendency to locate his CP so far forward, Silverthorn said that "no self-respecting Division Commander could have his quarters in rear of his Corps Commanding Headquarters. So without saying a word, General Geiger's action required the Division Commanders to move their headquarters well up, and of course reduced the time that they spent on the road by a large percentage."[25] When he was not on the ground inspecting his forces, the fearless Geiger often flew sorties overhead to inspect the Japanese positions from the air, and on more than one occasion, he took evasive maneuvers to avoid being hit by ground based air defenses.[26]

Geiger's did not reserve his boldness for the battlefield; in his own headquarters, he was a force to be reckoned with. He had little patience for bothersome correspondents who asked too many questions, as reflected by a confrontation between the General and the famous war correspondent, Ernie Pyle. The reporter pestered Geiger repeatedly about the schedule for the relief of 1st Marine Division and when Pyle insisted that his sources had told him that 1st Marine Division was due to return to the US, Geiger responded that this was not the case. Pyle did not accept this answer and continued to challenge General Geiger, until Geiger sternly faced the reporter and stated clearly, "They are not going anywhere until General Buckner and I say so. Why don't you get with

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[24] Silverthorn, 369-371.
[25] Silverthorn, 373.
[26] Colonel Kicklighter to Colonel Richard Camp, letter, 14 March, 2005. Kicklighter recalls a day on Okinawa when Geiger said, "Get an aircraft – we are going to find the disposition of the enemy. Geiger had the controls for the takeoff and landing in the front and I backed him up in the rear. Once airborne, he had his binoculars and I flew the plane. He would say, 'Descend, get lower.' I would reply, 'General, see those numerous black puffs of smoke? Those are AAA! He would then forcefully shout, "Get to a lower altitude!" We did.

the troops where you can do valuable services?" This display of "strategic communication" ended the press conference immediately.[27]

Despite his gruff personality and directness, Geiger was known for his sense of humor and was a famous prankster. One of his aides, Major Roy Owsley, recalled an incident from 28 April 1945:

> About 1330, General Geiger found General Silverthorn asleep in his deck chair, slipped out quietly and picked up a long root; then sneaked back into General Silverthorn's tent and held the root up under General Silverthorn's nose. General Silverthorn was genuinely frightened, thinking the root was a snake.[28]

General Geiger was a forceful personality and a commander whose authority was definite and unquestioned, but he never lost his ability to find humor, even in the deadly environment of combat in the Pacific.

A Marine Commander for the 10th Army

As the III Corps and XXIV Corps continued their relentless attack, the Japanese resistance gradually began to break during mid-June. Crashing through the rings of the Japanese defenses, the weary US forces could smell victory, which was accompanied by the uncertain future that would follow success on Okinawa. On 18 June -- three days before the official end of the Okinawa campaign -- General Buckner was killed while visiting a Battalion observation post of the 8th Marines, just 300 yards from the front lines. Per Buckner's previous direction, General Geiger assumed command of the 10th Army after being notified of the death of his superior. The following day, Geiger received a promotion to Lieutenant General and became, officially, the senior pilot in the Marine Corps and the only Marine ever to command a Field Army.

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[27] Colonel Edward Kicklighter, USMC (Ret.) to Colonel Richard Camp, USMC (Ret.), letter, dated March 14, 2005.

Geiger did not make a big show of his new position as 10th Army Commanding General, but it is clear that he recognized the significance of the posting. He had confidence in the 10th Army staff and continued to maintain his position in the III Corps CP, checking in periodically to monitor the events at 10th Army HQ. Let there be no question that Geiger was in charge for that short time, however. On one occasion, Geiger was informed of the presence at 10th Army HQ of Army Air Force Generals Henry "Hap" Arnold, Chief of Staff of the Army Air Forces, and George Kenney, Commander of the Far East Air Force (FEAF). Geiger had not been informed of their planned visit and he stormed into the CP to witness General Kenney issuing a number of directives to the officers present. Geiger, who was well-known as an intense and intimidating figure, was not pleased to see another general officer taking this sort of action in his CP. As he strode over to the senior airmen, General Arnold took notice of his arrival, turned to General Kenney and said, "Shut up, George," then cheerfully greeted Geiger with an enthusiastic, "Roy, it's good to see you!"[29]

On 21 June, Lieutenant General Geiger declared the termination of hostile resistance on Okinawa. Meanwhile, the Army moved with great speed to deliver an army commander to Okinawa in an effort to end the awkward scenario of having a Marine General in command of a Field Army.[30] Army General Joseph "Vinegar Joe" Stillwell was the designated replacement for Geiger, and the two conducted a change-of-command on 22 June 1945.

Generals Geiger and Stillwell operated well together during the remainder of Geiger's tour. On one occasion, after the end of hostilities, Stilwell issued a very unpopular order for combat forces to unload ships

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[28] Notebook – Record of Events From 15 October 1943 to 3 September 1945. Compiled by Roy H. Owsley. Box #12, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.
[29] Colonel Edward Kicklighter, USMC (Ret.), interview with the author. Kicklighter was Geiger's aide de camp and witnessed this incident.

in preparation for future operations. General Geiger's division commanders vociferously protested Stillwell's order and refused to accept the notion that their fighting Marines would be reduced to hauling boxes after the bloody battle of Okinawa. Geiger presented his case to Stillwell on this issue and Stilwell responded, "Roy, what would you do if you were in my seat? Admiral Nimitz needs these ships for the next operation. These ships are not being unloaded. I have men here who are capable of unloading the ships. What would you do?" Geiger's response: "We're going to unload the ships."[31]

The fiercely fought Battle of Okinawa ended with over 128,000 Japanese casualties and 38,000 American casualties in the 10th Army (3,440 of which were Marine KIA). The US Navy suffered greatly during the battle as well, with 36 ships sunk, 763 airplanes lost, and at least 4,907 dead, more than the Marines or Army ashore.[32] These numbers represented the greatest total losses of any single campaign in the Pacific war, giving pause to those who were considering an invasion of the Japanese mainland.[33]

The performance of the 10th TAF was mixed, as many of the 10,000 sorties flown were diverted to address the persistent *kamikaze* threat and some ground forces complained of excessive delays in receiving support.[34] Given the scope of the operation, however, it is evident that "close air support was employed more efficiently in the 82-day Okinawa battle than in any other Central Pacific operation."[35] As for the first combat test of the escort carrier model for Marine aviation, it fell well short of Marine goal of providing continuous air support to Marine ground forces. Astonishingly, Marine squadrons aboard *Block Island* and *Gilbert Islands* flew close air support missions for only 8 of

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[30] Silverthorn, 385.
[31] Silverthorn, 379.
[32] Heinl, 505.
[33] Millett, 438.
[34] Sherrod, 409.

the 82 days of battle.[36] This partially resulted from the distracting *kamikaze* threat, but the primary culprit was the escort carrier commander, Rear Admiral C. T. Durgin, who gave lackluster support for the Marine air mission. On the topic of assigning his Marine squadrons to CAS, Durgin wrote, "this command sees at the present writing no reason for such assignments and has no intention of allowing it to occur."[37]

Final Victory

In what had become something of a routine, Geiger was awarded his fourth Distinguished Service Medal for his performance during this epic battle. During his final weeks on Okinawa, at age 60, Geiger piloted an OY aircraft from Naha airfield, conducting one final inspection of the battleground.[38] On July 1, he departed Okinawa for Hawaii, where he relieved Lieutenant General Holland M. Smith as Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPAC). Geiger was disappointed to leave the front lines, but he braced himself for what he thought would be his most difficult task – preparing Marine forces for the invasion of Japan in operation OLYMPIC.[39]

After the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there was no invasion of Japan. Instead, the Japanese surrendered, and on 31 August Admiral Nimitz arrived at Tokyo Bay with the official surrender party, which included General Geiger. Although Americans were prohibited from entering the capital, Geiger managed to hitch a ride to the American Embassy in Tokyo, where he had his picture taken as proof

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[35] Sherrod, 408.
[36] Heinl, 503.
[37] Heinl, 503.
[38] Logbook entry, Box #12, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.
[39] General Geiger to Admiral Connolly, letter, 11 July, 1945. "While it now appears that I might have lost my ticket to Tokyo, I'm still optimistic and I shall not concede that $100 bet to you until the very last. Nothing would please me more than for the two of

of his arrival (so that he could collect his bet). Ever the lawyer, Geiger even had his visit affirmed by a Swiss custodian at the embassy![40] Two days later, Geiger was the only Marine present for the surrender ceremony aboard the USS Missouri on 2 September 1945.[41]

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us to get into Tokyo together and have to split the pot, so to speak." Folder #126, Box #7, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

[40] Owsley, Box #12, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps. See also Silverthorn, 400. Silverthorn recalls: "General Geiger, whose great desire all throughout the Pacific was to get on to Tokyo, did get into Tokyo and did collect the bet. When they both sent their checks, he had them framed. He didn't cash the checks. He just had them framed as a memento in his office."

[41] Edwin Simmons, *The United States Marines: A History* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 182. "Standing little-noticed on a deck filled with US and foreign dignitaries was one solitary senior Marine, Lieutenant General Roy Geiger." As the senior Marine in the Pacific Theater, this honor should have gone to Lieutenant General H.M. Smith, but Admiral Nimitz ensured that it was Geiger, and not the controversial Smith, who was selected to represent the Marine Corps.

Chapter 8

A Lasting Legacy

The Japanese surrender represented the end of combat operations in the Pacific, but Lieutenant General Roy Geiger's tour as Fleet Marine Forces, Pacific (FMFPAC) presented him with a number of daunting challenges. As Geiger stated on the occasion of the Japanese surrender,

> Today we turn our attention from war to peace – to the reconstruction of a war-torn world. We stand ready to defend that peace – to defend it just as valiantly as we fought to attain it, remembering only too clearly the price so many of our comrades have paid to make victory possible.[1]

While the US celebrated the Allied victory with unbridled enthusiasm for demobilization, Geiger's Marines oversaw two tremendous tasks: the pacification of Japan and the repatriation of Japanese forces in China. Meanwhile, amidst the postwar jubilation in Washington, D.C., the Marine Corps faced a desperate fight to preserve its force structure and mission in the face of the armed forces unification legislation that the US Congress was considering.[2] In his final year as a Marine, Geiger played a significant role in this full spectrum of Marine Corps issues.

Geiger enjoyed a well-deserved break during September and October of 1945, when he returned to Washington, D.C. and then to Pensacola. While at home, Geiger enjoyed a hero's welcome as the citizens of Pensacola flooded the streets in a gala celebration of "Roy

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[1] Lieutenant General Roy S. Geiger, USMC, Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, Statement On the Occasion of the Surrender of the Japanese, Box #10, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

[2] Millett, 456-457. "Caught in the complex political currents that characterized the unification of the American armed forces, the Marine Corps found itself pitted against a strong War Department – executive branch – Congressional coalition that wanted to strip the Corps of its wartime amphibious assault mission, transfer Marine aviation to the newly independent Air Force, and so constrain Marine combat functions that the

Geiger Day." Geiger rode triumphantly through the crowded streets of Pensacola to the center of town, where he delivered an address and enjoyed a luncheon at the San Carlos hotel.[3] Events in the Pacific beckoned, however, and he returned to Pearl Harbor in late October.

At the conclusion of the war, Marines in the Pacific theater fell under two primary commands, the V Amphibious Corps under Major General Harry Schmidt and Geiger's old III Amphibious Corps under Major General Keller Rockey. Rather than executing the planned amphibious invasions of Japan, these forces assumed the post-war missions of pacification and repatriation. V Corps had the task of occupying and pacifying Japan, while III Corps faced the challenge of repatriating Japanese forces in China. The V Corps completed its mission in a remarkably short period of time and in early 1946 they returned to the US and disbanded.

In China, meanwhile, the III Corps faced challenges that were to occupy Marines for years. General Rockey's III Corps deployed to Shantung and Tientsin, where they oversaw the surrender of over 100,000 Japanese troops. This entailed disarming and transporting Japanese troops in the tense environment between Nationalist Chinese and the Communist 8th Route Army. Such a mission required delicacy and diplomacy that was unfamiliar to the grizzled war veterans and was particularly difficult for Marines who really just wanted to go home. Some of these Marine units remained in China until 1949.[4]

Corps could have been a "force in readiness" only if its opponents had been Pacific islanders."

[3] Pensacola News Journal, 27 September 1945, Pensacola, Florida, p. 6. In his speech, Geiger warned of Japanese treachery, stating: "They're dirty, nasty, treacherous. They're like rats and they can't be trusted. Now we must watch them or they'll be back on their feet ready for another war."

[4] There are multiple heartbreaking letters in Geiger's papers from family members with relatives in China.

The Unification Hearings

> Geiger, a gruff, plain-talking man of impressive physical proportions, snow-white hair, and ice-blue eyes, gave the committee its money's worth, and more.
>
> Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight*

The complex details of the post-war Defense unification movement lie beyond the scope of this thesis, but a short description of the issues at stake will explain the important role that Roy Geiger played in this controversy. The end of WW II ushered in the atomic age and corresponding reforms in the US military. These reforms spelled potential doom for the Marines, whose doctrine emphasized the amphibious mission. Many senior military leaders regarded the atomic bomb as signifying the end of the need for amphibious forces, given the remote likelihood of conducting opposed landings against a nuclear-equipped adversary. The Air Force, which possessed the capability to deliver nuclear weapons with heavy bombers, argued that its capabilities represented an independent war-winning potential that justified a separate service, independent of the Army. The Army, meanwhile, was determined to preserve its force structure in the frenzy of post-war demobilization.

Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, USMC (Ret.) captured the dilemma of the post-war Marine Corps:

> Standing beside Marine Lieutenant General Holland M. Smith on the bridge of the command ship Mt. Olympus, off Iwo Jima on the morning of 23 February 1945, Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal said that the raising of our flag atop Mt. Suribachi "means there will be a Marine Corps for the next five hundred years." Moments later, out of Forrestal's hearing, Smith commented, "When the war is over and money is short they will be after the Marines again, and a dozen Iwo Jimas would make no difference.[5]

[5] Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 1.

Indeed, events revealed the prescience of Holland Smith because the post-war defense unification movement did not bode well for the future of the Marine Corps. The threat to the Marine Corps rested on a competition for budget dollars; Army and Air Force leaders viewed Marine capabilities as being redundant or outdated. In the view of Army leaders, the usefulness of a Marine amphibious ground force was in question in a nuclear world, while the Air Force regarded Marine aviation as an unnecessary duplication of its own capability.[6] With limited budget dollars, the Army and the Air Force were willing to reduce the Marine Corps to a token force with no organic aviation capability. Navy leaders were engaged in their own funding battle and provided ambiguous support for the Marines, with the notable exception of Geiger's old friend Admiral Halsey, who testified to the fighting ability of Marines, calling them "the fightingest of fighting men."[7] The Marines even faced opposition in the Oval Office, where President Truman (a U.S. Army veteran) wrote, "The Marine Corps is the Navy's police force and as long as I am President that is what it will remain."[8]

Krulak described the War Department's proposed reorganization (known as the Collins Plan) as follows:

> The Army, with presidential support, was determined to see a single department comprising three elemental services – land, sea, and air – with a single administrative secretary at the top. The Joint Chiefs of Staff would manage budget and strategy, with the sole link to the president on these matters being the single chief of staff of the armed forces, who would also adjudicate all budgetary disagreements among the armed forces.[9]

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[6] Krulak, 30-31. Army leaders from General Eisenhower down through the ranks made unfavorable comments about the Marines. President Truman, a former artillery officer, was firmly in the Army camp, referring to the Marines as "the Navy's own little Army that talks Navy and is known as the Marine Corps." See also Millett, 461. One of the most caustic remarks came from Army Air Forces Brigadier General Frank Armstrong, who called the Marine Corps "a small bitched-up Army talking Navy lingo. We are going to put those Marines in the Regular Army and make efficient soldiers out of them."
[7] Krulak, 30.
[8] Marutollo, 78.
[9] Ibid., 31.

The Marines rejected this proposal and its inference that the national command authority would not clearly rest with the President. The Marine strategy to preserve its existence rested on two principles: "the preservation of unquestioned civil authority over military affairs and unfiltered access by the military to the topmost civilian echelon," and "the procurement of statutory protection for the Corps."[10] With this in mind, Marine Corps leaders believed it would be helpful for General Geiger to present his views on these matters, given his experience and credibility as a well-respected wartime commander and aviator.

In a speech before the Senate Committee on Public Affairs on December 7, 1945, General Geiger made three major points. First, he rejected the retrospective bureaucratic implications of the Collins plan, which simply elevated the War Department organization to the national level. Second, Geiger argued that the proposal's narrow focus would hinder interagency cooperation. Finally, Geiger argued against the proposal for an independent Air Force, asserting that the Air Force's desire for independence resulted in inadequate air support for ground forces during the war.[11] Citing the results of an Army Air Force Evaluation Board in his testimony, Geiger expressed his views on the Army Air Forces approach to close air support:

> The Air Force abolished its attack aviation on the theory that air power could be better applied against over-all objectives

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[10] Krulak, 29.

[11] R. S. Geiger to Admiral H.E. Yarnell, letter, 11 September, 1943. In this letter is evidence to indicate that Geiger was ambivalent about the concept of an Independent Air Force, but chose to speak the "party line" on this occasion to further the Marine Corps agenda. Geiger stated: "There should be a Department of Air on an equal footing with the War and Navy Department…but, Naval Aviation should be independent of the Department of Air. There are two reasons for this. First, Naval Aviation is primarily interested in a floating Air Arm having many problems to solve requiring expert Naval knowledge and training. Experience has proven that a Naval Air Arm under the R.A.F. is neglected and is an impracticable organization." Folder #90, Box #5, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps. See also Roy S. Geiger, Jr., interview with the author. General Geiger spoke with his son after his testimony and indicated that, "If it were up to him, everyone should wear a purple uniform."

> than to be frittered away helping the man on the ground. The result of that decision was that the Army soldier, at least in the Pacific, got little effective close support from the Army Air Force.[12]

Geiger summarized his remarks with the following statement:

> As a marine and a member of the naval service, I can be proud of our share in the recent victory without detracting in any way from the contributions of the other services, and I am not going to enter in any arguments as to which leg of a table is most important. I do know, however, that no one excelled the Navy when it came to loyally and wholeheartedly submerging its identity in support of the operations of the other branches. As a marine, I am particularly aware of this because my corps has been participating continuously in joint operations, usually in a subordinate capacity, for over 170 years. In that time we have come to have a keen appreciation of the importance of the other fellow's job, and more significant still, of the danger to the Nation born of ignorance and contempt for the other fellow's problems. In those 170 years we have never acquired the view that to support another arm or branch in the performance of a service to the country was to suffer either an indignity or loss of prestige. I wish everyone could share in this same healthy outlook.[13]

In response to Geiger's presentation, Senator Lister Hill stated: "Well, I will say this to you, General, that in my consideration of any consolidation, I do not contemplate and would not contemplate taking the air arm of the fleet from the Navy or the air arm of the Marine Corps from the Marines, and I do not see why they cannot go right ahead as autonomous units as they have in the past."

Geiger's response was characteristically blunt: "You don't contemplate that but how many people do?"

Geiger's testimony was well-received and served the purpose of clarifying for Congress and Marine Corps leaders (many of whom did not

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[12] United States Congress, Senate, Volume 24, Report of Proceedings, Hearings Held before Committee on Military Affairs (S. 84, S. 1482, S. 1702 and HR. 550), 7 December 1945, 551.

realize the ramifications of the Collins Plan) the potential consequences of the legislation being considered.[14] Geiger's presentation was in important salvo in the long bureaucratic war to preserve the Marine Corps.[15] Six months later, Geiger's testimony was followed by that of General Vandegrift, who gave one of the most famous speeches in the history of the Marine Corps in a passionate plea for the preservation of the Marines as a viable warfighting organization.[16]

Leading from the Front – To the End

The scope of the post-war demobilization is mind-boggling to consider. The Marine Corps, the smallest of the services, had grown from a pre-war strength of 20,000 to a force of over 500,000 in 1945, and faced the impending demobilization goal of little more than 100,000. After four years of hard fighting and heavy losses in the Pacific, most of these Marine were ready to return home, and their families eagerly awaited their arrival. Although these Marines had not hesitated to storm defended beaches, they were a good deal less motivated by the missions

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[13] United States Congress, 557.

[14] Marutollo, 76. LtCol J. D. Hittle, who was a key player in defeating the unification bill, remarked at how "regrettable it was that so few Marine Officers will ever realize how close the Marine Corps had been to virtual extinction." Marutollo argues that, in the beginning, the unification movement was largely a surprise to senior USMC leaders, who initially "had no plan of action or a single influential congressman … who could act in the Marine Corps' behalf."

[15] Heinl, 515. Only a few months later, Air Force General Carl Spaatz and Army Chief of Staff General Eisenhower proposed that the Marine Corps be allowed to "fight only in minor shore combat operations in which the Navy alone is interested," that "Marine units be held below the size requiring the combining of arms," and "that Marine aviation be merged without entity into what might be left of naval aviation, or be transferred outright to the Air Force."

[16] Vandegrift, 315-316. His speech ended as follows: "The Marine Corps believes it has earned this right – to have its future decided by the legislative body which created it – nothing more. Sentiment is not a valid consideration in determining questions of national security. We have pride in ourselves and in our past but we do not rest our case on any presumed ground of gratitude owing us from the nation. The bended knee is not a tradition of our Corps. If the Marine as a fighting man has not made a case for himself after 170 years of service, he must go. But I think you will agree with me that he has earned the right to depart with dignity and honor, not by subjugation to the status of uselessness and servility planned for him by the War department."

of peacekeeping and pacification in locations such as Tientsin and Shantung, China.

In Hawaii in early 1946, there were several well-publicized incidents of public protests by active duty servicemembers in the Air Force and Army. It was not long before this unrest spread to the Marine Corps and in February, 1946, General Geiger faced a group of Marines who petitioned for an early discharge.[17] Geiger had no sympathy for such a request and in characteristic fashion relieved the commanding officer of the protesting Marines, directing his Sergeant Major to strip the Marines of their rank.[18] After this well-publicized action, Geiger had no further difficulties with Marines and demobilization.

Geiger continued to fly, periodically, as his tour drew to a close. During his many tours of FMFPAC units in China and Japan, Geiger often chose to pilot his own aircraft, which included OY-type aircraft which he flew over Sasebo, Nagasaki, and Tientsin at the age of sixty-one! No armchair general, he remained engaged for the duration of his tour.

Geiger's involvement in the atomic bomb tests at Bikini Atoll during Operation CROSSROADS marked his final enduring contribution

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[17] Major H. M. Conner to Deputy Chief of Staff, letter, 16 February 1946. General Roy S. Geiger Collection, USMC Historical Reference Branch, Quantico, VA. See also "American Veterans' Committee, Oahu," petition, 15 February, 1946. This document stated, "we, the undersigned…protest the arbitrary action of the Marine Corps in holding up the rapid return of the Corps to peace-time status…All we ask is a plan which will tell us our chances of getting out, enabling us to plan our future, and giving due consideration to our service since VJ Day. Folder #152, Box #9, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

[18] W.R. Mathews to General Vandegrift, letter, January 21, 1946. Geiger's actions were widely lauded in the press. William R. Mathews of the Arizona Daily Star wrote, "The conduct of General Geiger recently at Pearl Harbor in meeting head-on and in such a characteristically marine way the unrest among his troops is so outstanding that I cannot resist writing to you of how I feel as an editor and civilian." See also Admiral H.W. Hill to General Geiger, letter, 26 Februrary, 1946. Vice Admiral Harry Hill, Commandant of the Army and Navy Staff College, echoed Matthews' remarks, stating: "I want to add my pat on the back to you for the way you have handled your people out there in the Pacific with regard to these demonstrations. It has been a credit to both you and to the Marine Corps and has been the subject of much favorable comment here in Washington." Folder #152, Box #9, PC 312, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Library of the Marine Corps.

to Marine Corps warfighting doctrine. Having witnessed the devastating power of the explosions, Geiger was impressed with the implications for amphibious warfare. He concluded that WW II – style amphibious landings would not be feasible against a nuclear-armed adversary, sending a letter to General Vandegrift that expressed these views:

> It is my opinion that a complete review and study of our concept of amphibious operations will have to be made. It is quite evident that a small number of atomic bombs could destroy an expeditionary force as now organized, embarked, and landed…It is trusted that Marine Corps Headquarters will consider this a very serious and urgent matter and will use its most competent officers in finding a solution to develop the technique of conducting amphibious operations in the atomic age.[19]

As a result of Geiger's letter, Vandegrift formed a blue-ribbon panel to a special board at Marine Corps Schools on the subject. Led by General Shepherd, the board concluded that vehicles such as "carrier-based helicopters presented the only viable possibilities for amphibious attack in an atomic war." Thus was born the concept of assault helicopters for rapid movement of troops ashore.[20] The vertical lift concept would prove its utility on the battlefields of Korea and remains viable today.

When Geiger's tour ended on 15 November, 1946, he knew that he was dying. Near the end of this tour, Geiger had visited a doctor who gave him a grave diagnosis, but the old General chose to ignore his medical condition. For his entire career, Geiger avoided doctors who stood between him and his airplane, and he was not about to allow a medical diagnosis to shorten his career, even in its twilight.

Geiger turned over the duties of FMFPAC to General Turnage on 15 November 1946 and returned to HQMC, where he prepared for his retirement. During this time, he returned home to Pensacola, where a committee visited his home and encouraged him to run for the US Senate

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[19] Heinl, 513.
[20] Shepherd, 153. General Lemuel Shepherd credits Colonel Bill Twining with the idea.

seat of Claude Pepper. Geiger politely declined the offer, surprising his son, who was home visiting at the time. Roy, Jr. queried his Father about this decision and Geiger flatly replied, "Son, I'll be dead before that election."

Roy Geiger was right. At Bethesda Naval Hospital, on January 23, 1947, he died of complications resulting from lung cancer. Lieutenant General Roy S. Geiger was posthumously promoted to full General, and he was buried with full honors at Arlington National Cemetery. A squadron of Marine Corsairs from Quantico flew three passes over the ceremony, dipping their wings in honor of the death of the Marine Corps' oldest pilot and one of America's greatest wartime Commanders.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

> Roy Geiger was a heavyset, bear-like and totally fearless man. He was someone who could only have happened in the Marine Corps. One of the pioneers from the box-kite days of Naval Aviation, he had flown and commanded almost every kind of aircraft or aviation unit that ever existed. Like all Marine officers, however, he had always kept his feet on the ground.
>
> -Holland M. Smith,
> *Coral and Brass*

When Holland M. Smith wrote his autobiography *Coral and Brass* after retiring in 1946, he employed his characteristic scorched earth style in a sweeping criticism of many of his joint counterparts. The manuscript was so controversial that the publisher chose to cut large sections of the text because of libel concerns. Given the heated atmosphere of the ongoing unification controversy, Marine Corps leaders strongly opposed Smith's publication of a polemical book which might reignite animosity toward the Marines. Before publishing his book, Smith sought the endorsement of the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Clifton Cates, in a meeting recounted by Anne Cipriano Venzon:

> Cates urged him not to publish the book. The Commandant did not want to reopen old sores and possibly create more ill will toward the Corps. The conversation got nowhere until Cates told Smith that if his good friend Roy Geiger were still alive, he would not want the book published. Cates then recalled, "And with that the tears started coming down General Smith's cheeks" …He [Smith] said, "Goddamn it, don't hit me below the belt." Cates simply replied, "All right, go ahead and publish it."[1]

[1] Venzon, 134. General Cates related this encounter in his Oral History, held at Marine Corps Research Center Archives.

Smith unwisely chose to publish *Coral and Brass*, which became an unfortunate epilogue to his storied career.

This incident highlights both the mutual respect and the differences between Roy Geiger and Holland Smith, the two great amphibious corps commanders of WW II. These men shared common backgrounds, but vastly different legacies. In completing the study of Roy Geiger, it is instructive to begin by comparing his performance in World War II with that of the better-known Holland Smith. Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, USMC (Ret.) conducted just such a comparison in a 2002 symposium entitled "The Two Great Corps Commanders." In his presentation, Simmons traced the remarkably similar career paths of Geiger and Smith. Both men were former attorneys with extensive educational and joint experience, distinguished combat records, and significant contributions to the development of amphibious doctrine.[2]

The career paths of Geiger and Smith diverged, however, in their experiences as corps commanders in the Pacific. Smith performed well as the Fifth Amphibious Corps Commander during multiple campaigns from November, 1943 through August, 1944, but his battlefield successes were overshadowed by the "Smith vs. Smith" controversy and his continuous inter-service squabbles.[3] Allan R. Millett characterized Army leaders' animosity toward Smith as follows:

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[2] Smith attended the Naval War College and Army War College and was particularly influential in the acquisition of key amphibious technology such as the Higgins Boat and amphibian tractors. He was a leader in the FLEX maneuvers which were so important in the Navy-Marine preparation for WW II.

[3] Simmons, "Two Great Corps Commanders," In an illustration of Smith's approach to joint relations, when he became infuriated by Admiral Turner's propensity to interfere with ground forces, he confronted the crusty Admiral as follows: "I don't try to run your ships and you'd better by a goddamn sight lay off my troops." Simmons believed the "Howlin' Mad" image was overplayed, however. In fact, Smith's famous "Howlin' Mad" nickname (which Smith first read about in a *Time* magazine article) was not a good characterization of the man, who rarely raised his voice and had a surprisingly mild demeanor. Smith was a misunderstood character, but his disdain for the Army and Navy is well-documented.

> The General Staff was not happy to have even one Army division commanded by Holland M. "Howling Mad" Smith. Smith, the ultimate Marine loyalist, was a bigger Navy-hater than Army-hater but had little patience with what he considered Army inefficiency. Smith…made no secret of his contempt for Army commanders … his outspokenness on the Army's amphibious inadequacies and apathy did not win the Marine Corps friends.[4]

Largely as the result of his difficult command relationships, in August 1944 Smith was "kicked upstairs to be commanding general, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPAC)," which gave him administrative, but not tactical, command of all Marines in the Pacific.[5] Even during the battle of Iwo Jima, where Smith was Expeditionary Troops commander, tactical command ashore rested solely with Major General Harry Schmidt, V Amphibious Corps commander. Geiger, in contrast, retained his tactical command of the Third Amphibious Corps (and, briefly, the Tenth Army) until the completion of the Battle of Okinawa. Geiger's strong joint relationships and command ability enabled his consistent and uninterrupted operational success in the Pacific.

Simmons' final judgment in comparing the accomplishments of Geiger and Smith was in favor of Geiger as the more successful of the two great Marines.[6] The career paths of both men indicate this view was shared by senior Marine leaders after Okinawa. Geiger received a promotion to Lieutenant General and replaced Smith at FMFPAC, while Smith was relegated to a Brigadier General's position as the head of the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego.

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[4] Millett, 351.

[5] Colonel Joe Alexander believes that Admiral Chester Nimitz played a big role in the decision to pull Smith from operational command. Nimitz was the consummate joint officer during his time as CINCPAC and thought highly of Roy Geiger, which explains his selection of Geiger instead of Smith to represent the USMC at the surrender ceremony on the *Missouri*.

[6] Confirmed in personal interview, conducted March 28, 2007. According to Colonel Joe Alexander, USMC (Ret.), Geiger was "head and shoulders above Smith" as an amphibious corps commander.

Beyond the sake of argument, there may be questionable value in the exercise of measuring and comparing the performance of wartime commanders in order to determine who was best. Nonetheless, this thesis set out to offer an explication of those characteristics that placed Roy Geiger in the highest echelon of wartime commanders, and highlighting the distinctions between Geiger and Smith are helpful in this regard. With Geiger's career narrative as a foundation, it is now possible to summarize his strengths in the areas of leadership, joint relations, education, and innovation.

Leadership

> The personal traits that impressed me most (about Geiger) were his determination, fearlessness, loyalty, humility, and patience. Of course, his professional ability as a military man was of the first magnitude.
>
> Major General M. H. Silverthorn, USMC, (Ret.)
> Dedication Address, Camp Geiger

It was said of Roy Geiger that he never issued words or phrases that were subject to more than one interpretation.[7] Whether he commanded a company of Marines or a Corps with tens of thousands of troops, Geiger knew what he wanted from his subordinates and, more importantly, he understood how to communicate his wishes.[8] This ability to issue clear commander's guidance is the mark of a great leader

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[7] Letter from Col Ed Kicklighter to Major James Wellons dated May 16, 2007Colonel Kicklighter stated: "When an individual would join (Geiger's) staff, it would be about four weeks prior to the subject receiving his first message, 'Welcome Aboard,' from the General. He was also direct when expressing his disapproval, but he rarely raised his voice or lost his temper. "Don't let it happen again" sufficed as a reprimand from Geiger.

[8] F. P. Henderson, "The First Air-Ground General," *Marine Corps Gazette*, April 1995, 80. Henderson states: "One of (Geiger's) accomplishments was to build an outstandingly good staff… he was not a man to tolerate anything but the best…he did not try to nitpick or micromanage the staff work, but told them what he wanted and let them find the best way to do it. Before long they knew better than to go to him for a decision without having very thoroughly gathered, analyzed, and presented all of the information he needed to make a decision…He was a model of being prompt and correct in his decisions, trusting in the work of his staff and his own broad knowledge and beliefs."

and a characteristic shared by men such as Napoleon Bonaparte, Robert E. Lee, and Douglas MacArthur. Geiger possessed his own brand of leadership, however, and he differed in many ways from the prototypical military commander. Brigadier General F. P. Henderson served with General Geiger and remembered him as follows:

> He was not a charismatic leader whose troops cheered whenever he appeared. No Napoleon or Lee. He was not photogenic. Not a tall, handsome, corncob smoker who waded ashore in a landing to give photographers a good photo op. He was not eloquent, but matter-of-fact. He never gave an inspiring pep talk to his men before a battle, as Henry V did at Agincourt, and many other generals have tried to do…I was one of those who wondered why the Commandant would pick a man to lead a corps who had no experience as a ground unit commander in his career. But, after serving under him in his four campaigns, I was absolutely sure he could not have picked a better man…If you had a son or daughter going into battle, you would hope they had a commander like Geiger.[9]

The record of Roy Geiger's leadership achievement speaks for itself. From his earliest days as a platoon commander, he led by example and he led from the front; he did the work required to become a competent professional at his assigned task; and his self-awareness and commitment to these fundamentals showed no signs of wavering as he advanced in rank. As an aviator he always sought the lead and as a ground commander he always fought his way to the front so that he could gain the situational awareness he needed. Every Marine learns the 12 Leadership traits in Basic Training: Justice, Judgment, Dependability, Initiative, Decisiveness, Tact, Integrity, Enthusiasm, Bearing, Unselfishness, Courage, Knowledge, Loyalty, and Endurance. This time-honored list of leadership fundamentals provides an accurate sketch of Roy Geiger, as he demonstrated on Haiti, Henderson Field, and

[9] Henderson, 78.

Okinawa. His command of the CACTUS Air Force certainly deserves its place among the great performances of Marine combat leaders.

But Geiger had his share of flaws as a leader and his record includes both mistakes and errors in judgment. As a young officer he had a few brushes with Marine regulations, he often drank excessively, and he crashed a perfectly good airplane as a squadron commander in World War I.[10] Also, Geiger's loyalty sometimes colored his judgment. Colonel Edward Kicklighter said, "General Geiger was as loyal to his subordinates as he was to his superiors," and Geiger sometimes demonstrated this trait to a fault.[11]

Geiger's unwavering loyalty to his subordinates was displayed in his support for General Rupertus on Peleliu. Geiger knew that Chesty Puller's 1st RCT needed relief in the early days of the battle and he would have committed the Army reserve immediately, but for Rupertus' objection. Instead, Geiger initially supported Rupertus' position, which was largely based on parochial resistance to the notion of getting help from the Army. The resulting delay in committing the Army 321st RCT may have cost the lives of hundreds of Marines in the 1st RCT, which was eviscerated at the Umurbrogol Pocket.

At Okinawa, Geiger faced a similar challenge to his loyalty when his superior commander, General Buckner, rejected an amphibious envelopment in favor of costly frontal assaults against the well-defended Japanese positions on the southern portion of the island. Geiger clearly favored the amphibious approach, which promised a quicker resolution

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[10] As a senior officer, Geiger showed compassion for his men when they made similar mistakes. For example, in August 1943 Geiger gave command of Marine Corps Air Station Santa Barbara to one of his men, LtCol Chauncey V. Burnett, who had previously gotten into trouble with alcohol. In a letter of congratulations, dated August 6, 1943, Geiger cautioned LtCol Burnett, "I want to remind you, however, that you have two main faults – one is getting drunk and making an ass out of yourself and the other is in having difficulties in your dealings with officers from the other services. While at Santa Barbara I shall expect you to keep your eyes on the ball and to avoid the two pit-falls which I have mentioned." MCHS papers, Quantico, VA.

[11] Letter, Colonel Edward Kicklighter to Major James Wellons, dated May 16, 2007.

to the battle at a potentially lower cost, and Geiger enjoyed the support of many senior Marine, Army, and Navy commanders in this view. When Buckner clarified his position in opposition to the amphibious movement, however, Geiger chose to line up behind his boss, rather than create discord within the command structure. Again, this was a case where Geiger's loyalty overrode his operational acumen. Although his loyalty to his Army superior was notable for promoting harmony on the joint staff in this case, Geiger may have been able to save lives and shorten the battle by taking a firmer stand on the amphibious option.

These are but a few of the errors in leadership for which Geiger should be held accountable. He was loyal to a fault, he may have taken too many risks in his obsession to be on the front lines, and his judgment was not impeccable. Nonetheless, his leadership ability consistently enabled him to overcome the many challenges he faced and, in the aggregate, his guiding hand was an overwhelmingly positive force for those he commanded.

Education

> If there is one lesson which we have learned from the history of the late campaign, it is this – that the secret of Prussian success has been more owing to the professional education of the officers than to any other cause to which it can be ascribed. Neither gallantry nor heroism will avail much without professional training.[12]
>
> Lord Cardwell

Roy Geiger could not have been a Joint Force Commander without his professional military education. He had the natural gift of intelligence and his legal training surely enhanced his decision-making ability, but he could not have developed the breadth of competencies that he enjoyed without his varied educational experiences. With this in

[12] Quoted in Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1985), 47.

mind, Brigadier General F. P. Henderson, USMC (Ret.), who worked on Geiger's staff on the III Phib Corps, cited three reasons for Geiger's success as a corps commander:

> 1. Geiger "probably had a better military education than any other Marine general. Those of us on his staff … discovered that he had gone to (school) not just to get his ticket punched, but to learn something about land and naval warfare."
> 2. Geiger was "a very intelligent man and a quick learner…As a corps commander he had to learn, and did learn, the roles and missions of his Corps Troops … their capabilities and limitations, how they functioned during an operation, and the best way to employ them in a campaign."
> 3. He was not ignorant of the nature and conduct of a ground battle, as he had already been in one at Guadalcanal."[13]

Geiger successfully educated his mind prior to facing the challenges of air and ground command on Guadalcanal and amphibious operations from Bougainville to Okinawa. Prior to facing these real world challenges, he had studied and war-gamed countless scenarios in the educational and training environment. Geiger was a master of the school solution long before he was placed in operational command. This provided him with the intellectual foundation to which he could apply his God-given intelligence in crafting real solutions to some of the most challenging dilemmas of the war in the Pacific.

Joint Relations

> In both air and ground campaigns, Gen Geiger proved that he could operate with other Service units under him without inter-Service discord.
>
> Brigadier General F. P. Henderson

A secondary benefit of Geiger's educational experiences was the ability this gave him to interact with credibility in the joint environment, along with the extensive network of inter-service personal relationships

that he developed as a result. He understood the intricacies of naval gunfire support, airpower employment, and amphibious operations; thus, he was able to establish a reputation for competency with his Army and Navy peers, many of whom he knew personally. Again, Henderson provides the close perspective of one of Geiger's staff officers:

> At Guadalcanal … he managed to meld all elements into a force that finally forced the Japanese aviation to cry "Uncle!" without inter-Service squabbling or ill feeling … He insisted to his staff that they were not to show any partiality to the Marine units, and he made it clear to all hands that the (Army) soldiers were there as brothers-in-arms and should be respected and treated as such. Again, there was no ill feeling or discord between Army and Marines.[14]

The record of Geiger's strong joint relationships is well-documented here, from his early experiences with men such as Admiral Moffett in the 1920's to his selection by Admiral Nimitz to represent the Marine Corps at the surrender ceremony aboard *Missouri*. Geiger was a friend to Navy commanders from Halsey to Connolly and Army Commanders from Hodge to Buckner – these relationships paid enormous dividends for Geiger and the forces he commanded. Geiger's professional military education is not sufficient to explain his success as a joint officer, however; after all, General H. M. Smith was similarly educated and had consistently bad joint relations. It may be that Geiger was simply born with the ability to get along with people and his practical nature led him to the conclusion that he could get more accomplished through harmony than discord. In any case, he offered a fine example of how productive such an approach can be in both peace and war.

Innovation

Finally, the record of Roy Geiger's performance is characterized by the consistent and distinguished ability to find practical solutions to

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[13] Henderson, 79.
[14] Henderson, 79.

challenging problems. Geiger's resourcefulness at the Miami Flying Field was largely responsible for the combat readiness of the 1st Marine Aviation Force, his support for Close Air Support in Haiti helped to lay the foundation for the mission of Marine aviation, and his enthusiasm for instrument flying in the 1930's prepared his pilots for the unpredictable and challenging weather conditions in the South Pacific. When faced with real challenges in combat, he retained his presence-of-mind and always found solutions, whether in the fuel crisis at CACTUS or in making artillery innovations for the terrain at Guam.

That Geiger was an operational problem-solver is clear, but he sometimes fell short in his long-term vision for the employment of Marine aviation. As one of the senior aviators in the Marine Corps who served in the highest ranking positions of influence in this area, Geiger should have been able to exert more of an impact than he did on the procurement of escort carriers for Marines in the Pacific. Furthermore, while it is clear that he had reason to be distracted by his responsibilities as a corps commander at the time, Geiger should have done more to ensure that Marine aviation was properly employed in its primary mission of close air support in the Pacific theater.

Nonetheless, Roy Geiger was an innovator of the first order. Given limited resources and a mission, his record shows that he was able to figure out a way to get the job done, whether or not it was "by the book."

Conclusion

> To me and my fellow officers, he was so special that 'living legend' really doesn't say it all. I know that without question he is the 'Father' of Marine Aviation and will always hold that honored position.[15]
>
> Major General John Condon, USMC (Ret.)

[15] Taken from Quagge Masters Thesis. Interview conducted with Major General John P. Condon, USMC (Retired), 20 February 1996.

The study of General Roy Geiger concludes that his leadership, professional military education, joint relations, and innovation led to his brilliant success as a Joint Force Commander. In writing this thesis, the author's goal was to do more than just tell the story of a great man, but also to offer suggestions for how his example can be a guide to the modern airman who wishes to be a Joint Force Commander.

Like many of the great military leaders of history, Geiger was born with tremendous natural ability, which he showed in a myriad of ways. What is most useful about Geiger's example, though, is how he applied his natural ability. It is nice to be a genius, after all, but if today's military officer was not born with Geiger-like presence or a photographic memory, he can still learn from the Roy Geiger example to become an accomplished joint officer.

Simply put, the aggressive pursuit of professional military education combined with a commitment to understanding joint core competencies and establishing strong joint relationships will go a long way toward achieving success in the joint environment. It is critical that today's Service cultures and institutions recognize the success of this approach and ensure that they provide today's Roy Geiger with the educational opportunity to become the Joint Force Commander of tomorrow.

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