

CHAPTER 2

Between the World Wars

Background—China Duty—Second China Duty

Background

The “Great War” was over, and the country relaxed, including the Marine Corps. There was a decided let-down in the Corps, but it did not include the intellectual giants the Corps was fortunate to have. It was not long before attacks against the Marine Corps by the Army and the Navy threatened its very existence. The Army attacks were led by officers hostile to the great record made by the Marines in France, and particularly the favorable publicity it had generated. The Navy again tried to do away with ships’ detachments, as it had almost accomplished in 1908 during President Teddy Roosevelt’s administration. In fact, Roosevelt did not hide the fact that he thought the Marines should be absorbed into the Army. In that case, Congress saved the Corps. Now again the Corps found itself on the defensive.

One of the intellectual giants was Lejeune. When General Harbord was commanding the 2d Division in France, General Pershing sent for him. Pershing told Harbord he was putting him in command of the Services of Supply of the American Expeditionary Force, and instructed him to turn over command of the division to Lejeune, the senior brigadier general in the 2d Division. Harbord sent for Lejeune and urged that the latter be promoted to major general very soon so he could retain command. Lejeune told him that the new Naval Appropriations Bill had authorized two major generals in the Marine Corps—the Commandant and one more. Lejeune was promoted within a few days. He was, therefore, a major general when the war ended.

After reaching the States, participating in parades, and taking leave, he assumed command of Marine Corps Base, Quantico in October.¹ Upon the demobilization of the 4th Brigade, he gathered many of its most outstanding officers for his staff. Among them was Lieutenant Colonel Earl H. “Pete” Ellis.

Although Major General Commandant George Barnett had compiled a distinguished record during the war, and was esteemed by the President, Wilson had not yet recovered from the paralytic stroke that had almost closed his political career. The Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, first reappointed Barnett to another four-year term in 1918. He then turned on

Barnett. Two years later, on 18 June 1920, Daniels sent a letter to the Commandant. It said Barnett was to be relieved as Commandant “. . . one day next week most suitable . . .” to him. In the meantime, within three hours, would General Barnett please inform Daniels whether he intended to retire immediately or (as the law allowed) remain on active duty, taking a reduction to his permanent rank of brigadier general?

On 30 June 1920, General Barnett was relieved as the Twelfth Commandant of the Marine Corps, and was succeeded by Major General John A. Lejeune.²

While he had been at Quantico for less than a year, Lejeune already had begun solidifying his thoughts concerning the future of the Corps—both immediate and long range. It was his duty to rebuild the structure of the Corps, expand its thinking, increase both

MajGen John A. Lejeune, shown wearing the shoulder insignia of the 2d Division, which he commanded in World War I, was a leading figure in the development of the Marine Corps’ amphibious doctrine.

C.B. Cates Papers, MCHC



its efficiency and economy, protect it from its detractors, and prepare it to meet future emergencies. He had many problems.

During his three terms as Major General Commandant, Lejeune not only charted the future of the Marine Corps, he convinced Congress that the country needed a strong nucleus of Marines in the event of war. Internally, he improved the education of Marine officers and encouraged the development of the arms, equipment, and tactics needed for the Corps' unique amphibious mission.

Recognizing the great value of favorable publicity, the Commandant made use of the colorful Smedley D. Butler, the most senior brigadier general in the Corps. The 6th Marines was reactivated 15 September 1921 at Quantico. Together with the 5th Marines, they reenacted some of the great Civil War battles, The Wilderness, Gettysburg, New Market, and Antietam. The Marines' dress uniforms were a convenient blue for playing the part of the Northern soldiers, and cadets from Virginia military schools wore their grey uniforms to represent the Southern ones. Besides the long marches to many of these reenactments, strenuous sports such as boxing, football, and baseball were encouraged to keep the Marines in good physical condition.³

In 1921, work began on what is now known as Butler Stadium. General Alexander A. Vandegrift, then a major, recalled that, together with about 150 men from his battalion, he worked 80 days moving 19,307 cubic yards of earth; dug 200 excavations for concrete pillars; poured 197 pillars; laid 30 rails; laid 381 concrete slabs; and poured concrete footings for stone walls. The Marines also leveled the field and planted grass seed on the sanded base.⁴

The Marines gradually tore down and replaced the old World War I wooden barracks. Some of the then-lieutenants (later to become high-ranking Marine general officers) recall being given a detail of Marines, a blueprint, and instructions to build what are still the officers' quarters at Quantico. Of course, the base has repaired and modernized these quarters many times since then. Some veteran officers recall that as colonels they lived in the same quarters they had built as second lieutenants.

All of the Quantico activities involving the 6th Marines, however, were not concentrated on building a base, reenacting old battles, or fielding fine athletic teams. Late in 1921, Marines from Quantico, along with those from other posts in the Corps, were called upon to protect the United States mail. Heavily-armed Marines performed this duty until March 1922, when

the situation had dramatically improved. Concurrently in 1922, the Marine Corps established a Basic Course, a Company Officer's Course, and a Field Grade Officer's School. Lejeune also saw to it that the Corps' amphibious role advanced, with Ellis providing great impetus. Ellis had prophesied openly for many years that at some date the Japanese and the Americans would fight one another. So convinced was he that he developed Operation Plan 712-H, which was a step-by-step military plan for moving across the Pacific Ocean amphibiously against certain Japanese islands. He had the Commandant's complete backing and approval. Ellis died in late 1922, while on leave of absence, scouting out Pacific islands. He died in the Palaus without realizing that 20 years later Marines would storm Peleliu of that group as part of a plan which turned out to be remarkably similar to his Operation Plan 712-H.⁵

Another intellectual giant was Colonel Robert H. Dunlap. When the Advanced Base Force moved from Philadelphia to Quantico and expanded in 1921, he took command. He agreed completely with Pete Ellis, and set out to establish coordinated staff work, develop concepts, and test everything in maneuvers.⁶

On 23 September 1922, the 83d Company of the 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, represented the Marine Corps at the opening of the Brazilian Exposition in Rio de Janeiro. The company arrived earlier on 5 September to participate in a celebration commemorating Brazil's anniversary. Approximately two years later, in June 1924, the 3d Battalion performed expeditionary duty in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. In July 1924 this battalion performed expeditionary duty in Cuba. The 3d Battalion was stationed at Guantanamo from July until January, when it was replaced by the 1st Battalion, 6th Marines, which returned to Quantico in September.

During this time, most of the Corp's energies were absorbed in extensive operations in several countries in the Caribbean area. This not only delayed the development of the Marine Corps' educational and training system, but it slowed the building up and training of an expeditionary force similar to today's Fleet Marine Force (FMF). Nevertheless, since the name of the Marine expeditionary units was later changed to the Fleet Marine Force, the 6th Marines participated in the very birth of today's modern force in readiness, even though the Fleet Marine Force itself did not become a reality until 7 December 1933 under Navy Department Order 241.⁷

All of these activities cost money. Congress's desire to restrict appropriations for military purposes during



Historical Collection, MCHC

Members of the 6th Marines prepare to erect tents over wooden platforms after the regiment's arrival in China in 1927. A U.S. Navy destroyer is at anchor in the harbor.

the post-war period made it impossible for the Corps to reach its authorized strength. In addition to the Caribbean area, the Marines were called upon to keep a force of varying size in China, provide security for the mail in 1921 and again in 1926, furnish guards for Presidents during visits to their favorite retreats, and join in Army and Navy maneuvers. However, on 15 March 1925 at Quantico, the 6th Marines once again was deactivated.

In March 1927, Lejeune concluded that the China forces needed to be built up to a brigade size. The 4th Marines, already there, were threatened by Cantonese troops menacing Shanghai. Serious disorders and attacks on foreigners were taking place.

China Duty

On 26 March 1927 the Marine Corps reactivated the 6th Marine Regiment at the Philadelphia Navy Yard. Its men were veterans from east coast posts and stations, as well as graduates from Parris Island's recruit depot. Colonel Harold C. Snyder was in command.

Shortly after the 6th Marines arrived in China in May 1927, trouble arose in the north. The regiment shifted to Tientsin to protect the lines of communication to the American Legation at Peking.

The duty turned out to be little more than watchful waiting. Officers embarked on a routine of drills, exercises, demonstrations, gymkhanas, anything to fine-polish the troops and keep them happy.

Early in 1929, the situation in China had quieted, and the 6th Regiment moved to San Diego, Califor-

nia where, on 31 March 1929, it was again deactivated. It had been a good tour: peaceful, lots of sight-seeing, and plentiful and cheap servants available. Even the lowliest private could hire a "Coolie" to clean his rifle for him.

Second China Duty

Japan was successful in cutting off Manchuria from China in 1931-32. Keeping continuous pressure on northern China, the province of Jehol came under Japanese influence in 1933, and Chahar Province became a demilitarized zone in June 1936. The pressure continued.⁹

On 1 September 1934, the 6th Marines reactivated in San Diego. Lieutenant Colonel Andrew B. Drum was commanding officer of the two-battalion regiment. The regiment was the nucleus for the 2d Marine Brigade. Though badly understrength, this brigade formed the West Coast portion of the newly created Fleet Marine Force. Only three years later, the newly reactivated 6th Marines was needed in China. Since the regiment was understrength, a decision was made to bring it up to full wartime strength as the situation worsened in China. Many young officers had been sent to the San Diego FMF to play football. These men were transferred into the 6th Marines.

When China was reorganized in December 1935, Chiang Kai-shek became a virtual dictator. Using the expertise of German officers, he built a sizable army, and made every effort to build the defenses of the country. During the early summer of that year the

Japanese increased their efforts to control northern China. The small embassy guard of about 500 Marines, and other foreign troops in the Chinese capital, found themselves in the midst of fighting around Peiping. Fighting intensified. The then-commandant, Major General Thomas Holcomb (who commanded the 2d Battalion, 6th Marines, in World War I as a major) decided to increase the size of the West Coast brigade to a reinforced brigade. Brigade Headquarters, under Brigadier General John C. Beaumont, and the 6th Marines sailed on the USS *Chaumont* on 28 August 1937. Other troops followed. The brigade's mission was to defend the International Settlement in Shanghai and to maintain its neutrality.

It was after this move that the 6th Marines acquired the nickname "The Pogeys-Bait 6th," which it retains to this day. There are various versions of how the term "Pogeys-Bait" came into being. The most logical is that the term is an old one developed by all of the services during the Philippine war. It seems the native ladies, referred to uncomplimentarily as "Pogeys," enjoyed American candy bars so much they would sell their charms for one or more bars. It is reputed that the post exchange supplies loaded hurriedly at San Diego for China duty in 1937 inadvertently included several thousand candy bars but only one case of soap. Although the nickname was not sought, it stuck.⁹

The Brigade and its 6th Regiment carried out their mission, although at times the situation was strained. General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., the Twenty-third Commandant, then a young officer, recalled an incident involving Lieutenant Colonel Clifton B. Cates, who later became the Nineteenth Commandant of the Marine Corps. When a Japanese machine gun crew set up their weapon across the street pointing at the Marine position, an angry Cates, ignoring the danger to his life, walked over to the position, seized the gun, and threw it across the street.

The 2d Brigade carried out its duties while trying to ignore the fighting of the Chinese and Japanese. As recounted by one officer who was still a bachelor second lieutenant, duty was pretty routine. Inspecting the sentry at the entrance to the compound, and waiting for liberty call were his main daily chores. He recalled that the 4th Marines did challenge the 6th Marines to a football game. The 6th Marines had all of the officers recently transferred to the regiment in San Diego on their team. The 4th Marines' team was primarily enlisted men. Transportation to practice was by Chinese ricksha. The players would put on their football uniform and call for a ricksha, a sight that startled even the placid Chinese. The 6th Marines won the game, but just barely.¹⁰



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo 521056

Two Marines, one of whom wears the fourragere of the 6th Marines, stand guard by an observation post of 2d Battalion, 6th Marines in Shanghai, China, in 1937.

By February 1938, the war zone had moved west of the city. It was no longer necessary to maintain an entire Marine brigade in Shanghai. The brigade headquarters and the 6th Marines left Shanghai on 18 February 1938, proceeding via Manila and Guam to Honolulu, where they participated in fleet maneuvers. It was not until April 1938 that the regiment finally reached San Diego, California.¹¹

The 6th Marines' Table of Organization called for only two battalions, the 1st and the 2d, in those days of a reduced Marine Corps. Each battalion had three rifle companies of three platoons each, and a machine gun and 81mm mortar company consisting of one mortar platoon and three machine gun platoons armed with World War I water-cooled .30-caliber machine guns. The company was equipped with Cole carts to haul the guns and ammunition. These were small, low, two-wheeled carts pulled by two men. The enlisted riflemen were armed with World War I .30-caliber, bolt-action M1903 Springfield rifles and Browning Automatic Rifles. Gunners were armed with Colt .45-caliber pistols, as were the officers. The field uniform was khaki shirt and trousers and a campaign hat (the same as the wide-brim types worn by today's DIs). Commissioned officers wore scarlet and gold braided bands on their hats. The enlisted men wore

canvas leggings, the officers riding pants with either leather boots or puttees.

Colonel Philip H. Torrey relieved Lieutenant Colonel Oliver Floyd, who had previously relieved Lieutenant Colonel Drum as commanding officer of the regiment. Lieutenant Colonel James L. Underhill relieved Torrey in 1938 and was in turn relieved by Lieutenant Colonel Alphonse DeCarre. Later in 1938 DeCarre was relieved by Colonel Harry L. Smith, who kept the regiment until relieved by Lieutenant Colonel Earl H. Jenkins in early 1939. He in turn was relieved by Colonel Samuel L. Howard. Fortunately, the turnover rate of the commanding officers of the two battalions was not as rapid.

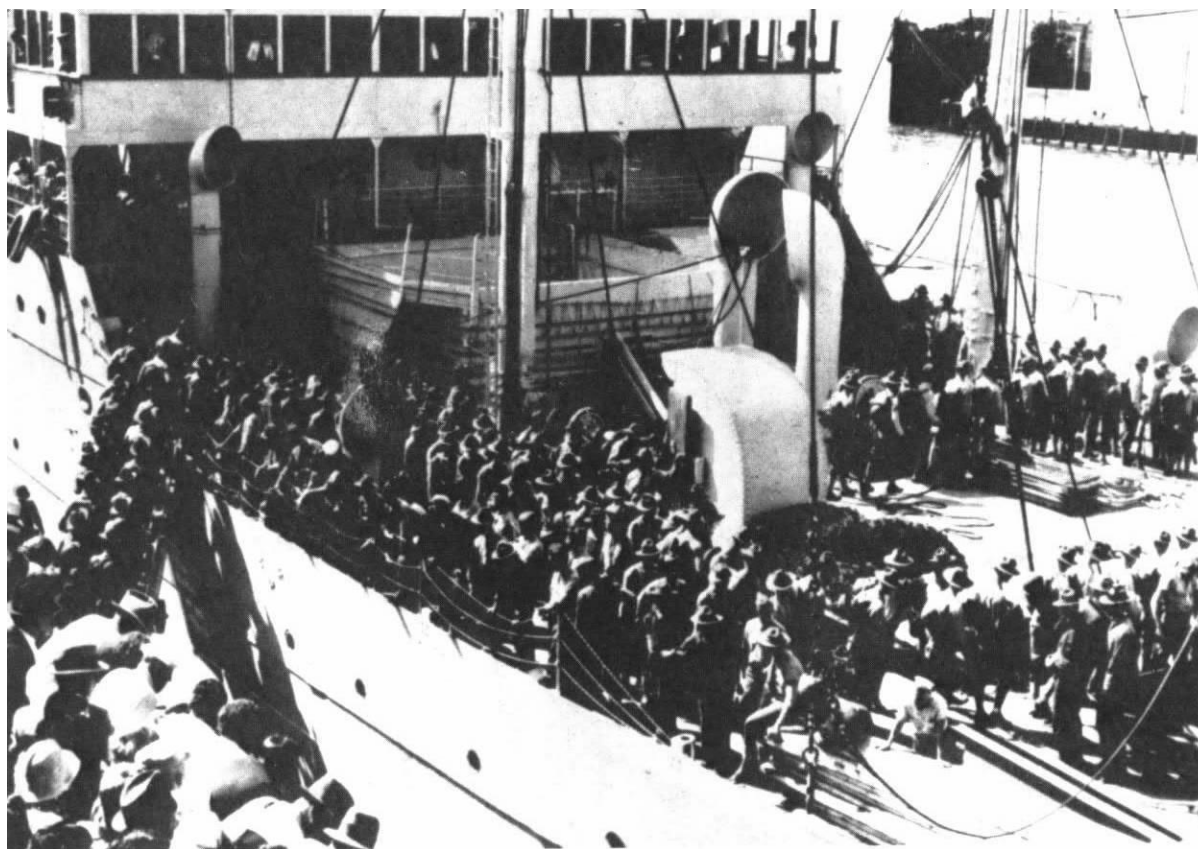
By late 1939, the 6th Marines was commanded by Colonel Howard; the 1st Battalion by Lieutenant Colonel William W. Ashurst, a distinguished marksman, and the 2d Battalion by Lieutenant Colonel John W. Thomason, Jr., the prolific writer and sketch artist. All three were Southerners—Howard from Virginia, Ashurst from Missouri, and Thomason from Texas. Mess nights, although seldom held, reminded

one more of a Confederate “the South will rise again” reunion than a get-together of Marine officers. All three colonels were courtly and gentlemanly. Ashurst encouraged rifle and pistol marksmanship. Thomason wrote articles and a book containing his own sketches. He drove around in a Ford convertible coupe with the top down, and wore his overseas cap tilted over one eye. He was very distinguished looking, and the subject of many rumors. One was that, as a young man before coming into the Marines, he rode with Pancho Villa, the Mexican bandit chieftain. Another was that he made so much money from his articles he forgot to draw his pay, making him the only Marine ever to have the paymaster beg him to draw his money so the books would balance. True or not, the commanding officers were a colorful lot.

In 1939, as the European war became more and more intense, President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared a limited national emergency. This caused a letter to be sent from Headquarters Marine Corps to each Reserve officer. It asked them if they were interested in volunteering to come on active duty for six months.

The 6th Marines board the USS Chaumont on 29 August 1937 enroute to China duty.

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National Archives No. 80-CF-71765-4

This photograph shows the Marine Corps base at San Diego at the time the 6th Marines were there in the late 1930s. The surrounding land, then largely rural, is now an urban area. To the left of the foreground building is an outdoor boxing ring. The white lines in the foreground are laundry hoisted up on a tall pole for drying and safekeeping.

There were not many Reserve officers, but most of them, around 160 in number, volunteered and were ordered to Quantico in September 1939 to attend the first Reserve Officers Course. This course was originally due to run the entire six months of the Reserves' volunteer duty. The Basic School for Regular officers was still at the Navy Yard in Philadelphia. First the course at Quantico was shortened to three months. Finally, the length was cut to six weeks. The Twenty-second Commandant, General David M. Shoup, then a captain, was one of the instructors. On the first floor of one of the brick barracks was the school for the newly forming defense battalions, whose officer students were the most proficient in mathematics, as shown in their college records. On the second floor was the school for the artillery officers, who were the next most proficient. On the third floor was the school for the infantry officers, i.e., the rest of the Reserve volunteers. The first two floors devoted most of their time to classroom work. The infantry officers, while having some classes indoors, spent most of their time practicing close-order drill, on night compass problems, or on terrain studies.

In late October the class graduated in their new green uniforms. Half were assigned to remain at Quantico. The other half traveled to San Diego. Once they arrived in San Diego, the 6th Marines experienced an influx of these inexperienced officers in their new green or khaki uniforms—the only two types they were required to purchase.

Their arrival was greeted with a great deal of skepticism by the Regular lieutenants already in the regiment. The latter had been looking forward to wearing their required "mess dress" uniforms to their first Marine Corps Birthday Ball. When the commanding general put out an order shortly before the ball that the uniform would be "greens," not even their "blues," much less their "mess dress," their resentment of the Reserve officers grew.

Not only were the better-schooled Regular officers bemused, the NCO's were also aware of the challenge. One young Reserve officer rounding a building came upon his platoon sergeant, who had his back turned to the officer, telling his cronies, "I'm going to make an officer out of him if it kills me!" It nearly did.

So far, considering the fine record the 6th Marines

had made in World War I, the 1920s and 1930s had been pretty quiet: deactivations, reactivations, and a lot of personnel turmoil. Its expeditionary duties in the Caribbean had been pretty tame in comparison to the other Marine regiments involved in the 20-year occupation of Haiti and the intervention in Nicaragua. The 6th Marines' two expeditions to China, although eventful, were nothing compared to the everyday fare of the 4th Marines. Yet, life in San Diego was delightful.

The yellow stucco, Spanish-style barracks, still standing at today's Marine Corps Recruit Depot, were comfortable. The regiment shared these with the recruit depot and other units. On the second floor were the squad bays for the enlisted men. Double-decked iron cots with locker boxes at the end, and communal showers, sufficed. Bedding was aired once a week by hanging the mattresses and mattress covers over the low second-floor wall just off each squad bay. Offices were on the first floor. The men kept their rifles in rifle racks in the squad bay. Pistols, machine guns, mortars, and Cole carts were stored in company gun sheds under the watchful eye of the company gunnery sergeant.

Married officers and NCOs lived in the civilian community. Bachelor NCOs usually lived in the barracks. Bachelor officers banded together to rent civilian houses.

Both the staff NCOs and the officers had their own clubs on the base, which were the centers for social activities, particularly on the weekends. The more junior enlisted men found their entertainment in the city of San Diego. When the fleet was out, they were "top dogs" in downtown San Diego, under the suspicious eyes of the shore patrol. If a Marine did get into trouble, the San Diego police would lock him up for the night. The next morning his platoon leader was notified. This officer would go down to the jail, where the police would release the culprit to the lieutenant's custody. The most effective disciplinary step a platoon leader could take was to threaten that if the man got into trouble again, he would tell the rest of the platoon that it only took three or four shore patrolmen to subdue him. This was always effective, especially if the man in question was a sergeant or a corporal.

The drawback to military service then was that the pay was barely adequate. Privates drew only \$28.00 per month, though they got free room, board, and uniforms. Second lieutenants drew only \$143.50 pay, \$18.00 subsistence, and \$22.00 rental allowance, for a total of \$183.50 per month. From this they had to pay rent, eat, buy and maintain their uniforms, support a car as most of them did, and have something left over for recreation. A lot of them were married, which compounded the problem. More senior ranks, usually with families, didn't fare much better. Con-

A group of Marines and a Navy medical corpsman (right) haul a heavily-laden Cole cart up a steep California hill during field training near San Diego in the late 1930s.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo 400753





Author's collection

Marine officers and wives put on a musical skit at a party at the base officers club at San Diego in the peaceful days prior to the 6th Marines' 1941 expedition to Iceland.

sequently, dinner invitations from the regimental and battalion commanders and their wives were considered to be big events. After work, but before dinner, formal calls were made by those junior on their seniors. Cards were left. The length of the call was restricted to 15 minutes. The senior returned the call in due course, and also left his card.

Social life for everybody reflected the shortage of pay. The big event that started the weekend was the Friday Afternoon Parade. The entire brigade, which consisted of the 6th Marines; the 2d Battalion, 10th Marines; Headquarters; and other assorted elements, fell in on the parade ground in front of the barracks for a parade and review. Reviewing stands were set up on each side of the reviewing platform for the many spectators, including wives, sweethearts, dates, and interested civilians from San Diego. After the parade, the officers with their wives or dates moved to the Commissioned Officer's Mess for the Parade Tea. A long table was set up in the foyer, with cups and coffee at one end, and cups and tea at the other. Officers' wives took turns pouring the coffee and tea—acting as hostesses. This was a thankless job, since just about everybody walked past the table on their way into the bar and started their weekend. Every Saturday night there was a well attended dance. Once in a while a costume party would be held or a variety show would be put on by the officers and ladies. These were hilar-

ious affairs. One such was the night when one of the lieutenants, dressed as a flora-dora girl, insisted on putting two grapefruits in his dress to portray breasts. Slightly inebriated, after the show he sat on Major General Upshur's lap and one of the grapefruit fell out. The startled general, who had a front row table since he was the commanding general, was nonplussed. The officer's wife and his friends were frantically motioning for the lieutenant to come back on the stage and disappear behind the curtain, while everyone else was laughing and clapping. On another occasion, at a costume party, a different lieutenant sent his wife with another couple and said he would join them as soon as he tended to some matters. Unfortunately, he had chosen as his costume a sailor's uniform. Also unfortunately, he looked just like a sailor from one of the farm states. When he tried to go through the officers' gate to the officers club, the Marine sentry on duty, thinking he was from the Navy Recruit Station next door, refused to let him enter. The lieutenant finally persuaded the sentry to let him telephone the club and ask one of the other officers to come to the gate and identify him. When his friends understood his quandary and his request, they naturally told the sentry that they'd never heard of the guy. He was very late for the party.

The big event of the month was payday. Each platoon leader went to the paymaster and drew cash to

pay his platoon. The platoon sergeant stacked a couple of locker boxes on top of each other, covered them with an issue green blanket, and got a chair for the officer. The officer had a platoon roster in front of him. Each man stepped up in turn and signed his signature behind his name to receive his pay. If he could not read or write, he would make an "X" behind the name pointed out to him by the officer. Many Xs were not uncommon.

The area between the parade ground and San Diego Bay was a bare, sandy expanse. Gun drill, squad tactics, bayonet practice, field meets, and other activities were conducted in this area. The mosquitoes inhabiting the area were so large that, as one sergeant put it, "They could stand flat-footed and f--- a turkey."

Usually once a week the battalion commanders or the separate company commanders led their units off the base for a long conditioning hike through the sparsely populated foothills. Water discipline, as it was known, consisted of trying to make these grueling hikes on one canteen of water, carrying a pack, weapons, and wearing a World War I type of helmet. The old-time NCOs who had served in Nicaragua were unsympathetic, and would regale the troops about the heat, the bandits, and the mud. One platoon sergeant was heard explaining, "The mud was so deep, I was riding a mule on patrol down a road when we hit a mud hole. All you could see was the mule's ears, but we kept on going." Machine gunners and mortarmen pulled their Cole carts with their guns mounted. Once in a while, a simulated air raid with suitable reactions on the part of the troops would break the routine.

Morning colors started the day. The units formed on the parade ground facing the flag pole shortly before 0800. Young officers had to report at about 0730 to polish their riding boots or leather puttees, shine their Sam Browne belts, check their swords, and plan their day. Roll calls were held and suitable reports made to commanding officers. After "Present Arms," the flag was raised as either the band or a bugler sounded "To the Color." "Order Arms" was given and company commanders turned the platoons over to the platoon leaders. Usually a half hour of close-order drill was held before entering the other training activities scheduled for that day.

These were carefree times for the 6th Marines. Officers who were second lieutenants in World War I, such as Cates, were now battalion commanders. Field grade officers in that war, such as Holcomb, were now general officers. The horrors of the first World War gradually dimmed in memories. The terrors still to come could not even be imagined. "Live, love, and be

happy" was the prevailing mood. The country was slowly coming out of the Great Depression. The war in Europe seemed a long way off. Only the men in Washington knew what the future would hold. Consciously or unconsciously, a thoroughly new, larger, and more confident Corps was girding itself for the unknown coming challenges. This, in comparison to the Marine Corps which entered into and made such an outstanding record in World War I, time would tell and history would relentlessly document. Now, however, combat, privation, separations, killing, and maiming, i.e., war, were not really thought about or discussed. Indeed, it wasn't even comprehended. The Marines were having so much fun few people could see the storm clouds gathering on the horizon of their lives.

The days and nights were pleasant but routine. Finally the 6th Marines moved to quarters at the new Camp Elliott on Kearney Mesa. The galleys and mess-halls were screened wooden structures. The enlisted men slept in pyramidal tents set on wooden decks, with the sides of the tents rolled up for ventilation. Offices, except those of the very senior officers, were in similar tents. The bachelor officers and staff NCOs each had rooms in two-story wooden buildings. Their clubs were on the bottom floors of the structures.

Training took place in the sandy, scrubby area around the camp. Prominent terrain features were quickly given colorful names, such as the hill known as "Nellie's Tit." Rattlesnakes were plentiful. Sometimes, when the tent sides were rolled down for airing, a rattlesnake which had gotten into the rolled-up tent side for warmth would fall out. These reptiles gave the Marines many scares. Once, while taking a break during a hike, a Marine unknowingly sat directly on a rattler. When the snake rattled, the frightened Marine jumped so far the snake didn't even come close when it struck. The Marine, however, fainted from fright.

After a while the novelty started wearing off. Coyotes howled at night, the sleeping accommodations were hot, and not nearly as comfortable as those at the base. Days spent on the range qualifying and firing live ammunition were enjoyable, but came all too infrequently.

Some of the Reserve officers who were unmarried and 25 years of age or younger, were selected by their battalion commanders to take academic examinations in certain subjects. If they passed, they were to be given Regular commissions. Although they all had college degrees, very few had taken some, if any, of the subjects on which they were to be examined. These subjects included such things as solid geometry, quadratic

equations, English literature, and geography. This meant that most of the young officers had to hire tutors and cram at night to learn the subjects in the two months they were allowed. Their daily routine with troops and occasional night duty did not change. The great day came all too soon. Eventually 40 of them were commissioned Regular second lieutenants—and went to the bottom of the lineal list. (After World War II those Reserve officers who in 1940 had been either married or too old were commissioned Regular officers anyway, and those who had passed the test were realigned on the lineal list to regain their lost precedence.)

Few people followed the war in Europe closely. Those bachelors with civilian accommodations in town were allowed also to keep a room at the B.O.Q. Driving to Camp Elliott was usually done in car pools. Life was once again becoming monotonous. Everyone wished for a change, for some action.

The new parachute battalions were being formed and volunteers sought. Many Marines became interested, until one day, looking up at the sky above Camp Elliott, they saw a two-engine cargo plane circling over San Diego with a lone parachutist entangled in its tail. The man's name was Lieutenant Walter Ossipoff. After his men had deplaned during a practice jump, Ossipoff was about to follow when his main parachute inflated, pulling him out the open door. The shrouds caught in the tail of the plane, leaving Ossipoff hanging upside down. He was afraid to inflate his spare parachute for fear he would pull the tail off the plane

and kill all of the crew. He could not reach the shrouds with his knife to cut them. The Navy's North Island Air Station wouldn't let the plane land for fear Ossipoff would be killed. Finally, a pilot took off in a two-seater, open-cockpit plane with a Navy chief petty officer in the front cockpit. The pilot flew under and below the cargo plane, allowing the chief to grab Ossipoff and hold him across the fuselage. The pilot pulled up, cutting the shrouds and a part of the cargo plane's tail section. Both the plane and Ossipoff landed safely. However, the number of volunteers for the parachute battalion fell off.

In the summer of 1940, the decision was made to form the 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, giving the regiment three battalions once again. Foreseeing that the 1st and 2d Battalions would unload their troublemakers if a certain number of the various ranks were requested, regimental headquarters decreed that the two older battalions would each have their companies send one platoon intact to provide the veteran nucleus of the new battalion. The lost platoons, as well as the additional platoon needed in each company of the 3d Battalion would be formed by replacements arriving from recruit depots and the newly mobilized Reserve battalions. The operation went smoothly, and the ensuing reorganization provided a welcomed change for a while from the routine of camp life.

Still, there was little excitement in the offing until orders came to prepare to move out. Everyone was excited. Although few knew where they were heading, they still looked forward to a new adventure.

CHAPTER 3

Iceland

*Background—Expeditionary Duty!—The First Marine Brigade (Provisional)—Arrival and Movement Ashore
Camp Life—The Days Wear On—Assigned Priorities—Assigned to a U.S. Army Command
Pearl Harbor—Heading Stateside*

Background

"It has been said," wrote Winston Churchill, "whoever possesses Iceland holds a pistol firmly pointed at England, America, and Canada."¹ He referred to what was called the "British lifeline," i.e., the northern convoy route between Great Britain and the Western Hemisphere. This route, since it followed the Great Circle from North America to Britain, lay not too far from land in both its eastern and western portions. It was, therefore, possible to provide air cover, as well as surface protection for the ships for much of the trips. Although much shorter than the southern route with its fair weather, the northern trip was an arduous one because of gales, fogs, and the long days of the summer months. It was axiomatic, nevertheless, that the longer the time spent at sea, the greater the chance of being intercepted and destroyed by German submarines.² The submarines already were exacting a heavy toll against the flow of supplies and material vital to sustain the British in their struggle against Germany. The establishment of hostile air and naval bases on Iceland would render the northern route practically unusable to Britain and put tremendous pressure on the longer and more vulnerable southern route. To both Washington and London the threat was desperate and demanded immediate attention.

Early in May 1941, a month after the Icelandic Parliament voted to sever ties with Denmark because of the Nazis' occupation of the latter, early-rising Icelandic fishermen discovered a reinforced battalion of Royal Marines had landed and was occupying their capital, Reykjavik. The Royal Marines seized the German Consul before he could destroy his papers, rounded up known Nazi sympathizers, and sent all on their way to England for the duration of the war.³

The Royal Marines departed 10 days later, following relief by a Canadian army brigade, which later handed over the responsibility to British army units. Soon, nearly 25,000 British troops occupied the island. Airfields near the capital became home bases for squadrons of patrol bombers which hunted German submarines. Hvalfjordur, a deep fjord 30 miles north of Reykjavik, was the site of a vital naval and repair base.⁴

During the first months of 1941, American and British staff officers meeting in Washington made con-

tingency plans in case the U.S. should be drawn into the war. In these plans, the defense of Iceland was the responsibility of the U.S., and American army units would relieve the British as soon as practicable. The plans stipulated that this would be no sooner than 1 September 1941, as the U.S. Army did not feel it would be ready to take on such a commitment before then.⁵

As the spring progressed, the U.S. moved closer to war through various measures, such as Lend-Lease. Polls showed that the large majority of Americans were in favor of helping Britain. The previous year, on 28 May 1940, the Belgian Army surrendered to the Germans, and the British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.) and some French units withdrew into a bridgehead around Dunkerque on the northern French Channel coast. Over a nine-day period the Allies evacuated 338,226 troops, despite heavy attacks by German ground and air forces. The effort involved more than 900 vessels of all sizes. Casualties were heavy.⁶

Churchill asked President Roosevelt in 1940 to send American troops to Iceland to replace the British units who were sorely needed in England to prepare for Germany's expected cross-channel invasion. Britain had already withdrawn some and replaced them with units manned by survivors from Dunkerque, many of whom were still recovering from their wounds. On 4 June 1941, the President ordered a plan prepared for the U.S. Army to relieve the British garrison on Iceland. The Army, however, was completely involved in training and organizing raw draftees and recently mobilized National Guardsmen. In addition, legislation prohibited these men from being sent beyond the Western Hemisphere unless they volunteered for such service. The Marine Corps, by default, would have to furnish the initial force for replacing the British. Since all Marines, both Regular and Reserve, were volunteers, the restrictive legislation did not apply.⁷ In September 1939, shortly after the President declared a Limited National Emergency, the Corps had started calling its Reserve officers to active duty. Throughout 1940, organized Marine Corps Reserve units were mobilized, disbanded, and absorbed into the Regular forces. Additionally, the recruit depots were bulging with volunteers.

On 5 June 1941, Roosevelt directed the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Harold R. Stark, to fur-

nish a Marine brigade and the necessary ships in 15 days' time for relief of the British in Iceland.⁸

Iceland, slightly smaller than the State of Kentucky, is geographically rich in mountains, glaciers, volcanoes, geysers, hot springs, and lava beds. The remainder of the country has a limited road network, and consists of rapidly flowing springs, lakes, and tundra, with some flatlands used for sheep pasturage. The population in 1941 numbered 120,000.

Expeditionary Duty!

The beginning of 1941 found the 6th Marines comfortably settled in tents at Camp Elliott, California. When, on 1 February, the 2d Brigade, reinforced by the 2d Marines, became the 2d Marine Division, the daily routine of the regiment was unaffected. War engulfed Europe, and the news was full of what was happening—blitzkrieg, wolfpacks, Dunkerque, and all. Marines in California, however, found training on the parched Kearney Mesa becoming monotonous. Some officers and men, seeking greater excitement, volunteered for the newly formed parachute battalion. In addition, each battalion had to provide an officer to be sent to the Army's Communication School at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. There were many volunteers. The regimental adjutant, Captain David M. Shoup, sent three officers' names to Headquarters Marine Corps, and posted a copy of the message on the regimental bulletin board. It provided welcome amusement for days over the way he had arranged the three names—Lovett, Petit, Prickett.

At this time, the Marine Corps was busily organizing, equipping, and training both the 2d Division at Camp Elliott and the 1st Division at Quantico.

Nevertheless, both divisions were still considerably understrength in the spring of 1941. So, when higher authorities selected the 1st Division for a proposed landing operation in the Caribbean, the Commandant had to bring it to full strength. On 24 May, he directed that the 2d Division provide a reinforced infantry regiment to augment the 1st Division. The 2d Division selected the 6th Marines (Reinforced) "for temporary shore duty beyond the seas with the 1st Division."⁹

The regiment, under command of Colonel Leo D. Hermle, was reinforced by the 2d Battalion, 10th Marines (armed with 75mm pack howitzers); Company A, 2d Tank Battalion; a parachute platoon; an anti-tank platoon; and the 1st Platoon, Company A, 2d Service Battalion. The regiment and the reinforcing units filled up to peacetime strength following arrival of a draft of 58 officers and 577 enlisted men from the 2d and newly formed 8th Marines.¹⁰ The division ordered the regiment to take 10 units of fire for all weapons, gasoline, 30 days' rations, and other supplies.¹¹

The excitement and activity around Camp Elliott was high. The reinforced regiment had to vacate its camp area, consisting of tents, mess halls, galleys, showers, and heads. No one at Camp Elliott, however, wanted to accept responsibility for the facilities. The safety of the expensive mess equipment was particularly worrisome to the regiment. Finally, it prevailed upon the Camp Inspector to look over the mess hall and galley, note whether all was in order, and simply lock them up.¹²

To add more to the confusion, the deployment order arrived when the 1st Battalion, 6th Marines was in the

The 1st Battalion, 6th Marines parades at Marine Corps Base, San Diego before Iceland.

National Archives No. 127-G-515852



midst of conducting a practice embarkation on the USS *Fuller*, tied up at the San Diego docks. The battalion had to remove the practice load from the ship and reload it with the designated quantity and types of ammunition and supplies.¹³

No mission or destination came with the message from Headquarters Marine Corps, so determining the uniform and equipment that the regiment might require was perplexing. Some officers thought the destination would be Guantanamo, others Martinique or even the Azores. In the end, Colonel Hermle decided each Marine would take his complete kit of winter and summer uniforms. There were those, however, who wished to be fully prepared for any conceivable challenge. As described by Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins (then a first lieutenant):

The executive officer of the 2d Battalion, a man of full figure, carefully prepared himself to meet any type of contingency. In addition to the usual winter and summer service uniforms with breeches and boots, he came aboard with evening dress, mess dress, a civilian tailcoat, and a full set of golf clubs. He had often observed that there was no sense in a fellow getting caught short.

The 6th Marines took everything available, including a few of the new 60mm mortars, even though no sights and very little ammunition were yet available for these weapons. Transportation was woefully short, and the docks were 10 miles from Camp Elliott. Jeeps were not yet available.¹⁴ The necessity of having to draw rations, gasoline, and ammunition from sources other than Camp Elliott further complicated the loading out. Regardless of this, the loading commenced and continued around the clock. Then, as usual, higher headquarters thought up new items for the regiment to take, which caused some crowding and disruption of accepted combat loading procedures.¹⁵

Although no particular precautions served to deny access to the docks by civilians, there was no publicity about the departure of the convoy on 31 May 1941. On the day of sailing, however, families, sweethearts, and envious Marine friends remaining behind were there to bid farewell. They had a long wait. Because of unexplained delays, it was not until early evening, 1845, that the ships cleared the docks and headed to the open sea.

The convoy transporting the 6th Marines (Reinforced) consisted of three attack transports (APAs), four fast destroyer transports (APDs), and two destroyer escorts (DEs). Each APA carried an embarkation team consisting of an infantry battalion and elements of the reinforcing units. The 1st Battalion was on the USS *Fuller*, the 2d Battalion on the USS *Heywood*, and

the 3d Battalion on the USS *Biddle* with the Regimental Headquarters.¹⁶ The fast destroyer transports were the *Manley*, *Little*, *McKean*, and *Stringham*, each capable of transporting the equivalent of one rifle company.¹⁷

On the trip south towards Panama, days became carbon copies of the previous ones. The officers and NCOs exercised their imaginations to the fullest to keep the troops occupied and not bored. Competition for the limited deck space became intense. There was very little water for showers and below decks quickly became hot and odorous as the days grew warmer. Men risked getting soaked with a sudden shower in order to sleep on the weather decks. The monotony broke only when the Marines watched USS *Fuller* refuel the two escorting destroyers at sea. The ships held fire drills, collision drills, and abandon-ship drills frequently, more for their own crews than for the embarked Marines. Although the captain and executive officers of the APAs were experienced officers, most of the remaining officers and men were Reservists and ignorant of Navy customs, procedures, and shipboard routine.

When the President, on 5 June, recognized the approaching crisis and ordered that a Marine brigade be sent to Iceland within 15 days, the convoy was approaching the Panama Canal. When it embarked at San Diego, Washington planners considered the reinforced regiment's probable mission to be either the seizure of Martinique or the occupation of the Azores as part of the 1st Marine Division. The government of the French island of Martinique had been collaborating with the German-controlled Vichy government and Washington suspected Martinique was providing information to the German submarine packs operating in the Caribbean. Further, the Naval Governor of the island had issued a declaration to the inhabitants to "resist invasion by the United States."¹⁸

Events in Europe were changing rapidly. On 7 June, Roosevelt ordered suspension of planning for seizure of either of these islands. Emphasis shifted to the relief of the British forces in Iceland. Washington decided that the projected brigade would consist of the reinforced 6th Marines; the 5th Defense Battalion from Parris Island, South Carolina, less certain of its elements; and the necessary headquarters and support units. The port designated for the hurried assembly of units, supplies, and ships was Charleston, South Carolina.¹⁹

Meanwhile, six days at sea, the 6th Marines' convoy darkened ships at dusk until sunrise. On 9 June, after floating around waiting for darkness, orders sent the

troops below decks at 2100 and the convoy began the transit of the Panama Canal. Washington didn't want the people ashore to know that a troop convoy was passing through the canal from west to east, hence the night passage and the order to keep the men below deck. This was a disappointment to the Marines since everyone had looked forward to the passage, as only a few ever had had the experience or even been in Panama. The ships completed the passage by early morning, but permitted no liberty or contact with the shore.²⁰

From Panama, the convoy headed north, still observing "darken ship" at night. Those who had guessed that the destination was Guantanamo were hooted down as the western tip of Cuba passed. Conjectures ranged from Corpus Christi, to Galveston, to Charleston.²¹ Excitement grew in expectation of liberty on the East Coast of the United States. Bachelors, both officers and enlisted, boasted of how they were going to give the southern belles the thrill of dating real combat Marines. After all, had they not been at sea for almost two weeks, transited the canal at night secretly, and were headed toward a highly secret, probably dangerous mission? Two more destroyers joined the convoy, adding to the sense of impending danger and adventure.

On 15 June 1941, the regiment arrived in Charleston harbor at about 1400. The Marines dressed up for liberty, but no liberty call sounded. Some did not give up until 2200. A shore patrol got ashore the next day around 1430, shortly before the granting of liberty for about 500 Marines from each APA.²²

It is doubtful that so many U.S. troop transports (APAs), supply ships (AKAs), and their escorting destroyers had been assembled in one American harbor since World War I. The 1st Marine Division, having just completed practice landings in the Caribbean, also had put into Charleston for shore leave. The small, charming, southern town was teeming with young sailors and Marines looking for diversion. The local citizens had taken precautions, and not a young lady was to be seen, except as waitresses and clerks. The joint Navy-Marine Shore Patrol set up in the local police station. Besides a large room for the purpose, the police had loaned one of their police prisoner vans. Every hour, two shore patrolmen, one Navy and one Marine, cruised the streets and the city square, picking up drunks and taking them back to the station house. Once these men had sobered up enough to recall the name of their ship, they were taken to the docks and turned over to their ship's personnel. By and large, the local population stayed indoors, and sim-

ply let the servicemen have the run of their downtown. Surprisingly few and minor incidents occurred.

The senior officers held innumerable conferences, while the lieutenants, when not supervising endless working parties, spent their base pay (\$125.00 a month) at the naval base's officers' club and making long-distance phone calls to their new brides and sweethearts left behind in San Diego.²³

The 1st Marine Brigade (Provisional)

In addition to the 6th Marines (Reinforced) and the 5th Defense Battalion (Minus), the newly formed 1st Marine Brigade (Provisional) consisted of a company of engineers, a chemical platoon, and a platoon of scout cars from the 1st Marine Division. The 2d Marine Division furnished Company A, 2d Medical Battalion. The brigade detached its parachute platoon and sent it to the 1st Marine Division. A Brigade Headquarters and a Brigade Band completed the organization.²⁴ Brigadier General John Marston assumed command of the brigade. He informed the senior officers that Iceland was their destination, but that it must be kept secret until notified later. He also divulged the plans for the Army to relieve the Marines in September.²⁵

The period 16-22 June saw the brigade's Marines maintaining continuous 300-man working parties on eight-hour shifts. They loaded supplies, lumber, camp material, weapons, equipment, and a miscellaneous collection of winter clothing—socks, fur caps, wind and rain-resistant clothing—on board the ships.

During the days in Charleston, when not on working parties, the Marines usually exercised on an abandoned golf course in the morning, and went on liberty in the afternoon. On the last day, the 21st of June, the brigade cancelled liberty at midnight.

Early the morning of the 22nd, the convoy sailed out of Charleston harbor. One battalion reported seven deserters. As it later turned out, most had had too much to drink and did not come to in time to make their ship.

On 23 June, the convoy, consisting of four transports, two cargo ships, and two destroyers met an imposing force of American warships; still more joined the following day. When the entire convoy began its movement north, it consisted of 23 vessels, including 2 battleships, 2 cruisers, and 10 destroyers.²⁶

The Marines had to furnish the ships with 32 anti-aircraft and submarine lookouts on four one-half-hour watches, which lasted from one hour before sunrise to one hour after sunset. They also furnished a few .50-caliber machine gunners. The weather became



Author's collection

Ships of the armed American convoy carrying the 1st Marine Brigade (Provisional) to expeditionary duty on Iceland in 1941 are silhouetted against a chill North Atlantic dawn.

colder and the days longer as the convoy steamed north. On 27 June, the convoy anchored at Argentia, Newfoundland. Only the officers received a two-hour liberty ashore, as it was bitterly cold and no recreation was available for the troops. The stop at Newfoundland "to await further orders" continued until 1 July, when Iceland finally, and reluctantly, invited the American occupation that Churchill had promised.²⁷

The convoy put to sea early on 2 July, and immediately ran into heavy fog, causing all ships to blow their whistles intermittently. In spite of this, there were several near collisions. The seas grew rougher, and the ships ordered all hands to wear lifejackets at all times, except in bunks.

On the way, the Marines improvised one of World War II's first parodies (of "The Caissons Go Rolling Along"):

Over sea, over foam, wish to Christ that we were home,
But the transports go sailing along.
In and out, near and far, wonder where the hell we are,
As the transports go sailing along.
So it's ho-ho-hum, Iceland here we come,
Or maybe the Azores or Dakar.
But where e'er it be, we'll get no liberty,
As the transports go sailing along.²⁸

The evening of 5 July, one of the 3d Battalion lookouts on the USS *Biddle* sighted a red flare, and then a lifeboat adrift in the convoy area. One of the escort destroyers went to check it out and found that the boat contained four American girls of the Harvard Red Cross Unit, who had volunteered for duty in Britain, and 10 Norwegian sailors. Their ship had developed engine trouble and could only travel at half speed. When it fell behind the convoy, the Germans had

torpedoed and sunk it.²⁹ Eleven Marines enroute to the Embassy Guard in London and seven of the girls also went down with the ship. The American convoy saw no other indication of the presence of submarines, although there were numerous reports of submarine contacts from the escorting destroyers.

Arrival and Movement Ashore

The transports anchored in the Reykjavik harbor about 1600 on 7 July 1941, and Marines crowded the railings. They could see green hills and mountains in the distance. The town looked clean, and people ashore were looking and pointing at the ships. By 2330, it was still light enough to read a book, and the troops had to be ordered to get some sleep in preparation for the unloading, which would start the next day.³⁰ The ships' radio had picked up the President's announcement that the Americans were there "to supplement and eventually to replace the British forces," and that the defense of Iceland was necessary to that of the Western Hemisphere. Unannounced was the obvious purpose of securing a naval and an air base in Iceland for use in our antisubmarine war in the North Atlantic.

The brigade commander called a conference for early morning on 8 July on the *Biddle*. There, the 6th Marines' battalion commanders learned that, because of the limited dock space in Reykjavik harbor, the *Fuller*, *Biddle*, and *Heywood* would unload over the shore at Bilboa Beach. This beach, on an inlet near Reykjavik, had only about 100 yards of usable width. Access to the beach consisted of a single road leading down from the bluffs. Although the beach was pebble rather than sand, and was gently sloping, its 14-foot drop in tide gave the Marines considerable

trouble. Because of the crowded condition of the beach, the Marines unloaded as much as possible directly from boats to trucks. The boats—a limited number of tank lighters and the then-standard Higgins boats without ramps—would gradually back off to keep up with the falling tide and the trucks would follow, thanks to the hard pebble bottom. This procedure reversed during a rising tide. The unloading progressed around the clock. In four days, Marines moved 1,500 tons of supplies and equipment from the three transports over the beach to the assigned camps of the battalions.³¹

The British units were very cooperative and loaned the 6th Marines all the trucks, with British drivers, that the regiment could use. The one platoon of motor transport attached to each battalion would have been wholly inadequate to haul the supplies and equipment to the 20 camps, some of them 15 miles distant.³²

The Marines on the beach and the British, both officers and enlisted men present, took their measures of each other and liked what they saw. To the British this was the closest involvement of the Americans in the European war in which England was faring so

badly, and desperately needed American help. The Marines respected the British who were veterans who kept up their good spirits even through the Germans were bombing their country and threatening to invade.

Camp Life

The regiment moved into various camps turned over by the British. These were in the only strategic and most defensible areas of the island—the southwestern corner near Reykjavik. During unloading, advance parties from each battalion went to their assigned camps to receive the supplies and equipment, and to ready the camp for the remainder of the troops. Headquarters, 6th Marines billeted in the same camp as the Brigade Headquarters—Camp Lumley nearest to Reykjavik. Further up the road, the 1st Battalion occupied two adjacent camps with a small parade field separating them—Camp Victoria Park and Camp MacArthur. They were about 10 miles from Reykjavik, near Alafoss, and on the western slopes of the Varma River Valley. The river itself was only about two miles long and about 15 feet wide. What was so unusual to the Marines was that it was a hot river, having a temperature

LtCol Oliver P. Smith and his staff pose inside a Nissen hut on Iceland in 1941.

Author's collection.





Photo courtesy of SgtMaj L. J. Michelony, Jr.

Marines on expeditionary duty in Iceland in 1941 pause during their field training in the months before winter weather made heavier clothing a necessity. These Marines wear the polar bear shoulder patch on both shoulders of their forest green uniform coats.

of 90 degrees at the source, but its tributaries were clear-running cold streams. Just below the camps was a dam, which provided a swimming pool with water at about body heat. When the first truckload of Marines drove by towards the camps, some of the local maidens were swimming in the nude. Although this was the custom in Iceland, as in much of Scandinavia, the girls took one look at the expression on the Marines' faces and turned up from then on in an assortment of odd, old-fashioned style bathing suits.

Camp Baldurshagi, which was closer to regimental headquarters, but in another direction from the 1st Battalion, held the 2d Battalion. This was a picturesque camp in a rocky stream valley, near a rushing river. The river was well stocked with salmon, but Icelanders owned the fishing rights. Lieutenant Colonel William A. Worton had some difficulty keeping his men from trying their luck.³³

The 3rd Battalion was initially billeted in Halogoland Camp, which had been lent on a temporary basis by a British Signal Company. It lay in the midst of excellent pasture land on the main highway within two miles of Reykjavik. This battalion had to give up the camp in September and moved to a rocky knoll surrounded by wet swampland at the entrance of Hvalfjordur, north of Reykjavik. Balbos Camp, as it was called, was inadequate in size and facilities, and not until early in January did the battalion have bathing facilities.³⁴

With the exception of a garage, galleys, and mess halls, all buildings were Nissen huts, the forerunner of the U.S. Quonset, but much more primitive in construction. A single pot-bellied stove which burned coal and coke heated each hut. Soft coal served as the basic fuel in the huts and galleys, with coke added to sustain the fire. The allowance was 30 percent soft coal and 70 percent coke. The Marines saved all boxes for kindling wood for at no time during the nine months the Marines stayed in Iceland could they dispense with a fire.³⁵

Each Nissen held about 14 men with their canvas cots. The corrugated iron roof and sides were lined with composition or "beaver" board. The hut had a single door at one end. To prevent a cold blast of air from pervading the hut each time the door was opened, there was a small vestibule behind the entrance door, with another door opening into the sleeping area. There were two windows at each end, but none on the sides. The ventilation was poor.³⁶ Two bare electric bulbs hung from the ceiling for light. Dirt was banked halfway up each side, so the huts could withstand the high winds that often sprang up with little warning. Since the camps were located on tundra, indicating water close to the surface, the Marines could not dig holes for latrines. Defecation took place in large pails placed on a platform under wooden seats. The lucky camps arranged for local farmers to pick up these pails of "night soil." The unlucky ones had to

use Marine working parties to dump and clean them.

The galleys and mess halls were primitive and separated from each other by up to 100 feet. Marine cooks soon found that sealed containers were necessary to prevent loss of heat from the meals. There was no refrigeration, but Iceland needed none. There was no running water in the galleys, and until the Army later brought in hot water heaters, no way to heat water for cleaning the mess gear, except on the stoves. The mess halls had rough wooden benches and tables. Both the galleys and mess hall reeked of mutton.

The rations consisted of a 30-day supply of canned Navy B-rations and later, Army dehydrated rations, which made for a tasteless diet.* This was supplemented by what could be provided locally, namely, mutton and fish. Mutton and spam were the main meat courses. Mostly mutton. In an attempt at camouflage, the mess sergeants served it in different ways. They would grind it and call it "ramburgers." They would make a stew and call it either "lamb stew" or "mutton surprise." A typical conversation in the mess line would be the query, "What's for chow today?" And the messman's answer, "mutton, lamb, sheep, or ram." Local milk and cheese could not be consumed because many Icelandic cows were tubercular.

At first, there were no showers in the camps. About a half mile up the road from Camp MacArthur there was a mobile bath unit run by the British, who piped in water from a hot spring nearby and from an equally close cold spring. The brigade headquarters published a schedule for its use by units, so that everyone got a shower once a week. Since the water was sulphuric, it had a terrible, rotten-egg odor. Most of the men preferred to wash out of buckets. When they learned that U.S. Army units would not relieve the brigade in September, as expected, the Marines built showers in all of the camps.

The Marine Corps, at the time, numbered about 40,000 officers and men. While the Corps had made an earnest effort to equip the brigade for field duty just below the Arctic Circle, the results were startling. The artillerymen had civilian sheepskin coats they had brought from Camp Elliott. The supply system had purchased these for use during live-firing exercises on the Mojave Desert, where it became quite cold at times. The tank company wore a comfortable and warm twill windbreaker, but the infantry had only their tight-fitting uniforms and overcoats. Washing-

*Rations were divided into four categories. A-rations meant fresh food. B-rations came in large cans suitable for feeding units in a mess hall. C-rations consisted of small cans and packages for an individual's field or combat use. D-rations were dehydrated foods.

ton finally provided flannel shirts, long underwear, parkas, and round, pile hats with ear-flaps similar to those worn by the China Marines. At first however, the Marine officers had purchased certain British items of clothing such as flannel pajamas, woolen shirts, scarves, trench coats, and beautiful, pebble-grained British battle boots, some of which went on to be worn in battle in the Pacific. In fact the Marines were buying out NAAFI—the Navy, Army, Air Force Institute, i.e., the British post exchange.

Recreational facilities were extremely limited in the city. Restaurants were small and just barely able to accommodate the local population and the British troops. With the coming of the Americans, it proved impossible to accommodate everyone. The same held true for the two moving-picture theaters. The Hotel Borg, the largest and finest in the country, served the local populace as a center of social life. It made every effort to serve the officers of the brigade, but it too could not meet the demands placed on it. The hotel was out-of-bounds to enlisted personnel. The staff NCOs soon had their favorite restaurant, and the junior enlisted men made do with what little was left. Transportation was so scarce that most Marines didn't even make the effort to go into town after the first visit.

The Days Wear On

The Icelanders were handsome people. The girls, called *stulkas*, were quite pretty, mostly blonde and blue-eyed. The females outnumbered the males almost six to one, so they were quite eager to date the American and British troops, over the objection of the native males. The men were tall, but knew nothing about boxing, so were no match against a smaller Marine if it came to a fight. The great majority of Icelandic citizens believed the American occupation to be in their best interests. In the younger generation, however, there was an element with a pro-German attitude. German engineers had built Iceland's roads and piped in hot water from the geysers to heat the cities and villages, as well as the greenhouses in which Icelanders grew their fruits and vegetables. There was a Nazi-like youth group. One of its unpleasant habits was to spit on a British soldier as he went about his business in town. One day, they tried this insult on a couple of Marines. After the offenders had picked themselves up off the pavement, and had received as a bonus a series of swift kicks in the backsides, the spitting routine stopped—abruptly.³⁷

One of the prime morale boosters was a small newspaper, "The Arctic Marines," published by the brigade every Thursday. The paper was the only way,

besides the radio, to keep up with world news. Additionally, it was full of American sports news that the English radio broadcasts didn't cover. It published poems and Marine humor, and even had a "Dear Abby" type column.

The British good humor, different way of saluting, and precision were infectious. The Marines frequently had to be reminded to get back to doing things the Marine Corps way.

Even though entertainment facilities were sparse, the long winter nights found the Quonset-hut clubs echoing to the ribald singing of Marines and British friends.

The Marines never knew what to expect. For instance, one British officer asked his Marine counterpart if the Marines were equipped with an adjutant's gun. The Marine answered that the Corps had many types of guns but he'd never heard of that gun. The British explained that it was a weapon of exceedingly large bore, kept in the adjutant's closet, brought out twice daily, filled with b---s---, and fired in all directions, covering up the unit commanders. The Marine allowed as how the Corps was amply equipped with such weapons.

The one competitive sport the Marines engaged in with the British was boxing. These matches were a most welcomed diversion for the servicemen of both nations. The finals of the Anglo-American boxing tournament took place in the town hall of Reykjavik, kindly loaned by the City Fathers. Major General H.

O. Curtis and his senior British officers took their places along one side of the ring. Brigadier General Marston and his senior officers sat on the opposite side. The adjutant announced that the Marine Band would play the "Star-Spangled Banner." This was done with all present standing at attention. Then the adjutant announced that the band would play "God Save the King." The minutes ticked on, embarrassing all present, as the Marine musicians searched frantically through their sheet music. Finally, the mortifying silence was broken by the bandmaster's whispered instructions, "Play 'My Country Tis of Thee'—slowly."³⁸

Assigned Priorities

Tactically, the brigade was attached to the British 79th Division and wore its black-and-white, polar-bear shoulder insignia. The 79th Division's commander was Major General H. O. Curtis, CB, DSO, MC. He became very popular with the Marines of all ranks. He often observed and sometimes tried his hand at bat at Marine softball games.

The brigade's mission was twofold. General Curtis designated the 6th Marines as a mobile column for use at any point along the road leading from Reykjavik to the naval base at Hvalfjordur. The 5th Defense Battalion served as an antiaircraft unit, with the mission of defending the city, the harbor, and the airfield against air attack.

Being veterans of Dunkerque and impressed with German air capabilities, the British were very air and

A group of U.S. Marines, civilians, and British soldiers visit one of the hot springs and geysers which are so characteristic of the volcanically created geography of Iceland.

Photo courtesy of SgtMaj L. J. Michelony, Jr.





Author's collection

A machine gun crew from the 1st Marine Brigade practices on an Iceland road in 1941.

parachute attack conscious. The landing of airborne troops on Iceland from Norway was quite feasible, as parachutists and gliders easily could land in the extensive flat gravel beds in southwestern Iceland, near Reykjavik. Consequently, the Marines' defense preparations reflected this concern, including locating machine gun positions for both antiaircraft and ground missions.

Usually on the weekends, one or two German planes would make reconnaissance flights over the island. They would cruise leisurely at high altitudes over the southwestern parts of Iceland and depart. Marines would man both the .30-caliber machine gun and the antiaircraft guns, but they were not permitted to fire at the planes, presumably because the United States was not yet technically at war with Germany. These flights served as the reason for not flying the American flag over any of the camps.

The advent of winter made it imperative that the first priority be given to constructing suitable living quarters, not only for the Marines, but also for the Army units already enroute from the United States. Since the native population had too small a labor pool to draw upon for this work, the job fell to the Marines.³⁹ Fortunately, the British Nissen hut was available in quantity. The wooden floor consisted of panels resting upon a two-by-four lumber frame. Curved I-beam steel ribs supported the corrugated metal panels that covered the sides and roof. The two ends were made of three wooden sections. Each hut came with a complete set of tools and hardware. The most time-

consuming requirement was the leveling and the pouring of the concrete pilings supporting the hut. The 1st Battalion improvised an assembly line technique and organized crews specializing in different stages of the construction. The Marines were soon completing 16 huts per day.⁴⁰ The British Royal Engineers were amazed and often came by in small groups to observe.

On 14 August, disquieting rumors set the "scuttlebutt" network buzzing. When the brigade finally confirmed the news, all hope of an early departure rapidly disappeared. The brigade had learned that its stay in Iceland would be "indefinite." Yet, at the time, the days were long, the weather pleasant, and there were interesting challenges to meet, and discoveries to be made each day. It was still an adventure.

A welcomed diversion from the daily work details building and expanding the camps occurred on 16 August. Prime Minister Churchill visited Iceland enroute to England, after the meeting with President Roosevelt aboard a United States warship in the North Atlantic, where they had agreed upon the Atlantic Charter. The 6th Marines stood in a platoon-on-line formation on the paved highway that ran northeast from Reykjavik. Winston Churchill and his party walked the entire length of both the Marine regiment and the British forces, stopping now and then to closely inspect individual men. The regiment then passed in review before a hastily built reviewing stand. Churchill wrote later: "There was a long march past, in threes, during which the tune 'United States Marines'

bit so deeply into my memory that I could not get it out of my head.”⁴¹

The first U.S. Army contingent to arrive in Iceland in early August was small, and went into quarters near the airfield. It was well over a month later, when larger Army units started to arrive, that life became complicated for the Marines.

Assigned to a U.S. Army Command

On 22 September 1941, President Roosevelt signed an order directing the Marine brigade to report for duty under Major General Charles H. Bonesteel, U.S. Army, the newly designated Commanding General, Iceland Base Command. The Marines had considerable misgivings because of the two Services’ radically different systems of administration and discipline. The Commandant, Major General Thomas Holcomb, protested vigorously to the Chief of Naval Operations, but it was a losing fight, and Holcomb received directions to report to the Secretary of War on all matters pertaining to the brigade.⁴²

The changeover proved to be an annoyance more than anything else, mainly because of the tremendous amount of paperwork coming out of the base command’s staff sections. On the other hand, the quality

of the food improved and, to the delight of the bachelor officers, an Army field hospital, complete with a bevy of young nurses, arrived. Soon, the bachelor officers had made dates with the nurses, whose feminine presence enlivened Saturday nights in many of the officers’ messes in the various camps. The married men also had their fun. In the 3d Battalion, two captains staged a mock argument in the bar, culminating in the smaller one inviting the larger one to “settle it outside.” Soon afterwards, they returned, having smeared catsup on the face of the small one. Clutched in his hand was a glass eye they had borrowed from a doctor. It was also smeared with catsup. When he staggered to the bar saying, “Look what the big bastard did to me” and opened his hand with the “bloody eye,” one of the nurses fainted. The others got mad, and despite Marine protestations that it was only a joke, the bachelors were without dates for some time.

One directive from General Bonesteel’s headquarters seemed unfair to the Marines. Before turning over any camp to Army units, the Marines had to place new full-sized mattresses on each bunk and then make up each bunk with fresh sheets, pillows, and pillowslips (all supplied by the Army). Additionally, to make sure

Marines repair a defensive position on Iceland in 1941. The muzzle of a .30-caliber, water-cooled heavy machine gun protrudes from the earth-covered bunker toward the camera.

Author’s collection





Author's collection

Members of the 6th Marines erect their own Nissen huts after the regiment's arrival in Iceland in 1941.

the Army troops were comfortable, the Marines had to lay fires in all of the stoves which needed only a match to set them off. These requirements angered many Marines, who saw them as a deliberate affront. During their entire stay in Iceland, the Marines had been living in almost field conditions, sleeping on folding canvas cots with thin pads rather than mattresses and using regulation-issue blankets. The Marines had no pillows, sheets, or pillowslips. They saw no reason the Army could not issue the equipment to their troops after they took over the camps. Marine commanders at all levels issued the necessary orders with great reluctance. The enlisted Marines, in many instances, took their own revenge by shaving toothbrush and comb bristles into the bunks as they made them, and building the fires in the stoves upside down—coal first, then kindling, with the paper on top.

Still another bone of contention was the base command's order for the Marines to furnish working par-

ties to unload Army units' equipment upon their arrival. Each battalion furnished large working parties, while the artillery battalion and other brigade units provided trucks and drivers. While the Marines worked, the Army allowed their troops to go on liberty in Reykjavik. Finally, the Army recognized that its units had the responsibility to unload their own gear.⁴³

As the realization set in that the brigade would be in Iceland under Army command indefinitely, and with the onset of winter, spirits sagged. Daylight slowly diminished from almost 24 hours a day to about six. The wind seemed to blow constantly, with gusts up to 70 and 100 miles an hour, necessitating lifelines between huts and mess halls. Some of the huts didn't have electricity, and the men had to burn candles. They begged five-gallon tin drums from the British. These tins, filled with water and placed on top of the pot-bellied stove, were the only way for the Marines to take turns washing their clothes. Some improvement in morale occurred after installation of moving-picture equipment in all the camps, and when beer began to be available in plentiful quantities in the post exchanges. Further, there continued to be excellent relationships between the British and American servicemen, with men visiting back and forth between camps and sharing food and supplies with one another.

Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill of Great Britain moves toward the reviewing stand for a parade by American and British forces honoring his Iceland visit.

Author's collection





Author's collection

A unit of the 6th Marines, with the white polar-bear patch on its uniforms, stands ready for an inspection on the dirt road outside its Nissen huts on Iceland in 1941.

Four Marine lieutenants, returned to the U.S. and still wearing the polar-bear patch on the sleeves of their uniforms, raise a toast to Iceland. They are, from left, Francis X. Beamer, William K. Jones, Jeff P. R. Overstreet, and John A. Ptak. The latter two later transferred from the 6th Marines to newly formed regiments, and Ptak, as a major, died on Guam.

Author's collection



However, there were less beneficial aspects from the prolonged Arctic nights and availability of beer. In the 1st Battalion on 31 December 1941, a private first class tried to go into the sergeants' mess after leaving the beer hut. When the sergeants started to throw him out, he drew a pocketknife and cut two of them. Then he ran, with several sergeants in pursuit. He burst into one of the junior officers' huts, pleading, "Don't let them kill me." Unfortunately, the nearest officer was the most ineffectual and least respected second lieutenant in the battalion. The lead sergeant, who had not even had a drink, was one of the best in the battalion. Since he was boiling mad, he simply lifted the lieutenant by his elbows and moved him out of the way. As the sergeant moved toward the private, the man lashed out wildly with the knife and pierced the sergeant's heart, killing him.⁴⁴ The funeral of the popular sergeant, and the investigation and court martial that followed, cast a pall over the battalion for days.

In November, Washington decided to withdraw the Marines. Since a large number of Army personnel were scheduled to arrive early in the year, Washington decided to use those transports to bring the Marines back to the States. When the word spread, the Marines greeted it enthusiastically, and the anticipation helped make the cold, dark, damp winter months bearable. Furthermore, there was a strong affinity throughout the Corps towards the Orient. All of the older officers and NCOs had seen duty in the Orient and the younger Marines yearned to enjoy the adventures they had heard about. Lastly, there was the strongly rooted desire to rejoin their Corps and regain their identity, which many felt had been diluted by being part of an Army command in far-off Iceland.

Pearl Harbor

A group of young officers in the 1st Battalion were playing cards in their huts when a messenger burst through the door. "The colonel wants to see you immediately in the officers' mess."

"What's up?" one asked, as they scrambled to their feet.

"The Japs bombed Pearl Harbor," came the answer over the shoulder of the departing messenger.

Similar scenes were going on throughout the American forces, as people clustered around the few available radios in the messes and recreation huts. After the first shock, excitement took over. Confidently, and then anxiously, the 1st Battalion Marines followed the siege of Wake Island with its gallant garrison and aviators. Their battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Oliver P. Smith's calm assessment, made quite early,



Author's collection

Two members of the 6th Marines pose in heavy parkas following the onset of winter in Iceland in 1941.

that "it was only a question of time until Wake Island fell to the Japanese," couldn't be believed by most of his younger officers. Surely, help was on the way. Surely, Wake would be saved somehow.

Even the grim losses at Pearl Harbor and the fall of Wake failed to dampen the excitement of leaving Iceland. The United States was at war, and a Pacific war at that. In the nightly bull sessions, the feeling of kinship grew. The Marines recalled friends, some on sea duty, others in barracks and detachments throughout the Pacific, and with the 4th Marines in the Philippines, all now in action. Both a vague envy of them and a strong desire to be helping them grew.

Heading Stateside

On 31 January 1942, the 3d Battalion became the first unit of the 6th Marines to sail from Reykjavik. The remaining two battalions, with attachments from brigade units, started loading out on 8 March, the 1st Battalion on the USS *Manargo*, Brigade Headquarters and the 2d Battalion on the USS *McCawley* (later sunk off New Georgia).⁴⁵ The weather was cold, and sporadic rain made the movement from camp to the docks and the loading itself both difficult and, at times, dangerous. Loading went on around the clock, however, since the ships had a tight turnaround schedule in order to join a convoy coming out from Ireland enroute to the United States.

The 1st Battalion, 6th Marines, was the last element of the brigade to sail from Reykjavik. Its ships sailed at 0800 on 9 March, and proceeded to Hvalfjörður to wait for the convoy. There was no one living near this naval base, and ships could come in and out at night without being noticed. The Marines' ships remained at anchor until 14 March, and got underway that af-



Author's collection

Cards identical to this one carried holiday greetings from Marines in Iceland to friends and relatives in the United States during the first weeks after Pearl Harbor.

ternoon. Some of the ships had been in the South Atlantic passenger trade, and had not been designed for the rougher North Atlantic, with its bigger swells and greater distance between swells. They were also lightly loaded. As a result, they plowed into a swell, taking green water over the bow with the propeller coming out of the water, causing the ship to shudder. They also rolled badly, and the gear had to be lashed

to withstand a roll of between 30 and 40 degrees. A good many of the Marines became seasick.

The 1st Battalion's ships made contact with the Irish convoy the morning of 17 March, almost due south of Iceland. The convoy then continued south to the mid-Atlantic before heading north and west to New York. This route, being out of the normal shipping lanes, avoided German submarines which were plentiful at that time.⁴⁶ The weather was quite rough, and since it was necessary to keep the ships battened down, the men had to remain below decks. There were no disciplinary problems, however, partly due to the fact that the Marines were glad to be leaving Iceland, but mainly because they didn't want to jeopardize their chances for leave upon returning to the United States.

The approved leave plan granted men living east of the Mississippi 15 days' leave upon arrival at New York. At the expiration of their leaves, they were to report to San Diego. Those living west of the Mississippi would receive 15 days leave after the battalions arrived in San Diego and unloaded their gear from the trains.⁴⁷

As the convoy neared New York, the submarine contacts increased, and the destroyers' activity and the air cover intensified. A blimp remained on station continuously, and multi-engine airplanes on antisubmarine patrol flew over periodically.

The 1st Battalion arrived at Linda Vista Junction in midafternoon on 30 March for unloading and movement to Camp Elliott. The 3d Battalion, which had been back a month, took care of the unloading. The 2d Battalion arrived that evening. The band and a good many wives were on hand to meet the trains. The first adventure of World War II for the 6th Marines was over. At the time, few realized that the regiment and its attached units were the first American troops sent overseas as a result of World War II.⁴⁸

CHAPTER 4

Guadalcanal

*Background—Preparing for Overseas Duty—New Zealand—The Baptism of Fire
The Return to 'The Land They Adored'—McKay's Crossing*

Background

The members of the 6th Marines on leave savored the excitement of America at war. Their uniforms drew admiring glances, and the polar-bear patch on their shoulders promoted many questions. After explaining they had just returned from expeditionary duty to Iceland and were on their way to the Pacific War, the girls were impressed and older men sent many free rounds of drinks to the Marines' tables.

Those members traveling across country first became aware of their enhanced status when the train arrived in Los Angeles. There they were fed in the depot. As Colonel Oliver P. Smith, the commander of the 1st Battalion, wrote, "We were very much surprised when we found that the restaurant would accept no money, not even from the officers."¹

The West Coast was intrigued by the war with Japan. Rumors of Japanese submarines observed lying off the harbors, enemy carrier task forces steaming towards California, and the presence of saboteurs, were as numerous as they were false. Blackout restrictions were enforced with varying degrees of success.

Enemy ships had been observed reconnoitering close to the vital Australian-American air and surface lifeline near the Ellice Islands, Samoa, the Phoenix group, and Hawaii. While Hawaii was adequately defended against a ground attack, the others were not. Washington decided to send an expeditionary force to America Samoa. The Marine Corps reestablished the 2d Marine Brigade and formed it around the 8th Marines (Reinforced).² On 6 January 1942, the brigade sailed from San Diego. This left the 2d Marine Division with only one regiment, the 2d Marines (Reinforced), until the return of the 6th Marines. The 9th Marines was in the process of forming with cadres from the 2d Marines and later from the 6th Marines.

On the East Coast, the 1st Marine Division practiced amphibious landings and was in a high state of readiness. In June 1942, because of the Japanese threat to Australia, Washington prepared for an offensive against the lower Solomon Islands. By this time, one reinforced regiment of the 1st Marine Division was on the high seas approaching New Zealand.³ On 2 July 1942, the Joint Chiefs of Staff designated the first objective of the offensive to be the islands of Guadal-

canal and Tulagi, and set 1 August 1942 as the planning date for the attack. The commanding general of the division, Major General Alexander A. Vandegrift, and his headquarters arrived in New Zealand with the 5th Marines in mid-June. He attended a planning conference in Hawaii on 26 June, and received the dismaying 1 August execution date. The division's 7th Marines (Reinforced) was in Samoa as part of the 3d Marine Brigade, which had joined the 2d Brigade. The third regiment, the 1st Marines, had just embarked on the East Coast and was on its way to join the division.⁴

Three weeks after the Battle of Midway on 4-6 June 1942, the 2d Marines (Reinforced) sailed from San Diego to rendezvous with the understrength 1st Division in the vicinity of Guadalcanal.⁵

On 3 August 1942, the 9th Marines detached from the 2d Division and moved to Camp Pendleton to serve as the cadre for forming the 3d Marine Division. The 2d Division had only one infantry regiment left—the 6th Marines.

Preparing for Overseas Duty

While the regiment was in Iceland, the Marine Corps adopted a new field uniform. This consisted of a herringbone cotton cloth long-sleeved jacket with matching trousers. The Marine emblem was stamped in black on the left breast pocket. The web belt and buckle and the canvas leggings remained the same. The shoes were ankle-high, sand-colored, with the rough side of the leather out—polishing boots no longer required! A major, welcomed change was the discarding of the old World War I helmet—"the skimmer"—with its hard leather knot that relayed the weight pressing squarely on the top of the head. The new Army helmet adopted, with its comfortable protection, also was useful for other purposes. It is still in use at this writing.

The Reising sub-machine gun and the air-cooled machine gun had been added, and the 60mm mortar was standard issue. The Browning automatic rifle and the .45-caliber pistol remained. The hand-pulled, two-wheeled Cole carts for crew-served weapons and ammunition were replaced by the new jeeps.

In April 1942 the regiment received many gradu-



Author's collection

Humor, a common phenomenon amid the rigors of military service, shows up in this 1942 cartoon about the author by his friend and fellow captain, Loren E. Haffner.

ate recruits and newly commissioned officers. Other factors also contributed to the personnel turbulence. A large number of the Iceland veterans were now non-commissioned officers. As soon as they returned from leave, a third of these were due to be transferred to new units forming. Later, as promotions began to come in for officers and NCOs alike, the regiment was stripped of a large proportion of its experienced personnel for use as cadres for still more new units. Of the three battalions, the 1st Battalion fared the best in retaining experienced personnel. This stemmed from members' status as the rubber boat experts in the regiment, a basis strongly defended by the battalion, and just as strongly decried as a spurious claim by the other two battalions.

The previous month, a system of division training schools began operating, and more than 4,000 men received specialized training in many techniques, including demolitions, intelligence, and chemical defense. The Marine Corps was desperately short of officers, and an officers' training school for specially selected NCOs opened at a location called Green's Farm. While many outstanding NCOs declined to be commissioned, the school eventually graduated 335 officers.⁶

Soon after returning to Camp Elliott the 6th Marines was stripped of its polar-bear patches, but they still proudly wore the fourragere. Excitement was high, for there was no doubt in anyone's mind that soon the regiment would be in action against the Japanese. The Navy assigned three converted President liners to the 2d Marine Division for practicing amphibious landings. Near the end of June the 2d Marines (Reinforced) combat loaded the liners, along with two additional ships—the *Crescent City*, an APA, and the *Athens*, an AKA. The convoy sailed to reinforce the 1st Division in the southern Pacific.⁷

Colonel Leo D. Hermle, still commanding the 6th Marines, knew that the days were few before he would be ordered to move his regiment to war. Training was strenuous and every effort was made to stabilize the personnel turnover so that meaningful unit training could be accomplished. Yet all that summer, demands were made for additional cadres of officers and enlisted men for the 3d Marine Division, then being formed at newly acquired Camp Pendleton. As men departed the regiment, newly commissioned officers from Quantico, Reserve officers' classes at The Basic School in Philadelphia, and Green's Farm, as well as gradu-

ates from the Marine recruit depot at San Diego, took their places.*

Gradually, the personnel situation stabilized. Unit pride built as competition sprang up. The conditioning hikes grew longer as battalions sought to set records, both as to distance and time. Intracompany and intrabattalion "field days," pitting infantry squads, gun crews, and individuals against one another, added zest to the training. The 1st Battalion hiked 20 miles to the Delmar Race Track, which had been closed for the duration of the war. The officers were billeted in the Jockey Club. The enlisted men bedded down on canvas cots in stables, four to a stall. They never tired of whinnying, kicking the stall door, and announcing they were "Man-of-War" or some other famous race horse of the period. During the day, trucks carried the rubber boats to the beach, while the companies marched to meet them. Gradually the battalion became proficient in handling rubber boats in the surf, albeit not before first suffering from sore muscles unaccustomed to paddling the unwieldy craft.

Despite the strenuous training and the rapt following of the war news from both Europe and the Pacific, the Marines' mood was ebullient and contagious. Liberty was granted freely. The Saturday night dances at the Commissioned Officers' Mess at San Diego were crowded. Combat was a tomorrow somewhere in the hazy future.

While this occurred, vehicles were prepared for loading, weapon boxes were readied for the crew-served weapons, and crates were built for other equipment. Classes were held for junior officers on the art of combat loading ships.

When the order to move out came, it turned out that the destination was Wellington, New Zealand. The 6th Marines' regimental headquarters and the 1st Battalion were to sail on the Matson luxury liner, the *Matsonia*. Colonel Gilder D. Jackson, highly decorated as a captain in World War I, was now the commanding officer. Colonel Hermle moved to the division headquarters as chief of staff. All were delighted that there would be time in New Zealand for some more badly needed unit training before the regiment engaged the enemy. On 19 October 1942, the *Matsonia* left San Diego harbor. Few of its passengers realized that it would be almost four years before their regiment would return home, and then for duty on a different coast.⁸

Shipboard life aboard the *Matsonia* was a far cry

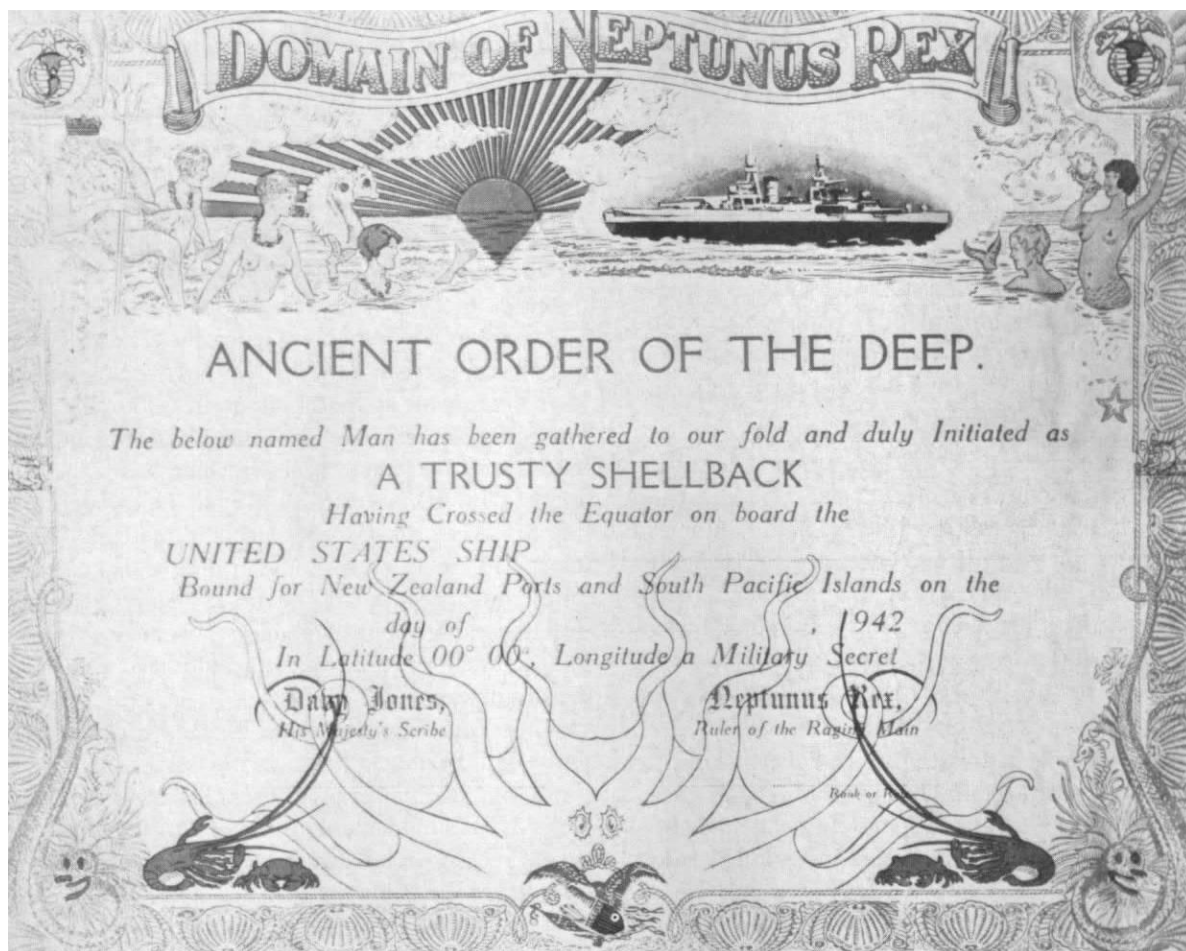
*San Diego was not named a recruit depot until after World War II. Its official title was Marine Barracks, San Diego, until 1924, and Marine Corps Base, San Diego, until 1948.

from what the remaining nucleus of Iceland veterans experienced when they had embarked from San Diego 16 months earlier. Although the cabins had been stripped and their beds replaced with steel double bunks for the company-grade officers, even these were cared for by cabin stewards. The officers ate in the spacious dining room, ordering from a bountiful selection on the prewar daily civilian passenger menu. The enlisted men's accommodations and mess areas, though less luxurious, were bright and well ventilated in comparison to the converted President liners. With so many Marines aboard, the available weather deck areas for exercising and relaxation were limited.

The 3d Battalion was not so fortunate. Embarked on the Dutch charter ship *Brestagi*, it also set sail in mid-October, but in convoy with the 2d Battalion's ship and others. Also on board were a U.S. Navy gun crew, signal crew, and a Reserve commodore with a small flag staff. Because it was much slower than the *Matsonia*, the convoy's course was farther south of regular shipping lanes to avoid enemy submarines.

The crew of the *Brestagi* was Dutch, and the mess stewards were tiny Indonesians who squatted in the dark passageways when off duty, to the annoyance of the sweltering Marines. The ship was impossible to black out, even with blankets, canvas, or other material over ports, hatches, and ventilators. As a result, the officers' wardroom-lounge could not have lights after dark and they sat in the dark each night. The officers' meals, unlike those of the 1st Battalion, consisted mainly of rice and curry dishes. Like the Dutch crew, the Marine officer passengers did receive a daily ration of Bols gin. The staff NCOs did not appreciate this arrangement.⁹

The standard procedure at sea for friendly allied ships crossing each other's course was to turn about and head away from each other. Not to do so indicated the ship was probably unfriendly. The *Brestagi* sighted a ship which continued on course, so the captain ordered a change of course at flank speed. As a result, the engines broke down, and the other ships in the convoy continued on their way and soon disappeared over the horizon. Under pressure from the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Arthur D. Chalacombe, to complete the job quickly, the ship had been loaded in an unprofessional manner, with boxes and crates in a jumble in the holds. As the ship wallowed in heavy swells for hours during the engine repairs, the cargo began to shift. The potato locker on the boat deck broke its lashings, slid around the deck, and almost crushed a Marine, sending him to sick bay. Eventually the ship got under way with its uncomfortable passengers luckily unaware of the rela-



Author's collection

Each member of the 6th Marines received one of these certificates after his ship crossed the equator during the regiment's 1942 voyage from San Diego to New Zealand.

tive comfort enjoyed by their fellow Marines on board the *Matsonia*. "The entire mountout, passage, and unloading was at times comical and not very professional."¹⁰

The 2d Battalion's passage was somewhere between that experienced by the other two battalions. Embarked on the *Mariposa*, a converted passenger liner similar to the President Line's ships, the accommodations were remarkably better than the *Brestagi*, while falling far short of those provided on the *Matsonia*.¹¹

Upon crossing the equator, abbreviated "Shellback" ceremonies were held on all of the ships for the "Polliwogs." The comparatively few sailors and Marines aboard who had previously been initiated into the Domain of Neptunus Rex did the best they could. A suitable Shellback certificate was issued at the conclusion of the ceremony.

The 12-day voyage of the *Matsonia* was unescorted because her speed was in excess of 20 knots. "Darken ship" measures and frequent change of course com-

prised the only antisubmarine precautions observed. On 1 November 1942, the ship arrived in Auckland harbor.

It was a beautiful harbor and a clear, bright day. Tugboats and ferries surrounded the ship. The 2d Marine Division Band, also on board, played stirring marches. Everything was quite festive, until everyone learned that the ship had come to the wrong place—it was supposed to be in Wellington, 500 miles to the south.¹²

The order of arrival of the battalions in New Zealand was the 1st Battalion on the speedy *Matsonia*, and the 2d Battalion on the *Mariposa*. Staying with the convoy and not making the mistake of stopping first in Auckland, the latter battalion arrived in Wellington within a week of the 1st Battalion. Lastly, after almost three weeks at sea, the 3d Battalion happily disembarked from the *Brestagi*. The crowded and boring shipboard routine behind them, the 6th Marines looked eagerly to the adventures that lay ahead.

New Zealand

The first sight of Wellington after the *Matsonia* swung around the headlands into the harbor was reminiscent of San Francisco—hills climbing to the sky. As the evening wore on while the ship waited to move to the quay, lights from the private homes covering the hills seemed to send a warm welcome. The usual excited and ill-founded rumors of an early liberty immediately became the main, if not the only topic of conversation. Later that night as working parties and advanced echelon groups were posted on the bulletin boards, the realization set in that first there was a great deal of work to be done.

The ship tied up at the Aotea quay during the night. Early in the morning, the unloading commenced. The difficulties with the highly-unionized stevedores, previously experienced by the 1st Marine Division in its movement from Wellington to Guadalcanal, resulted in the unloading being done by Marine working parties.¹³ As each battalion arrived, advance echelons from company-sized units were dispatched to the assigned camps.

A light drizzle had started at first light, making the town look dreary. As the shops began to open, many people came to the quay and watched the unloading in spite of the rain. Conversations were struck up and acquaintances were made that later grew into friendships. New Zealand army trucks assisted in moving the supplies and equipment to the assigned camps.

The camps, formerly occupied by New Zealand army troops, were ready for the Americans. They were located along the railroad that ran from Wellington for about 35 miles, first to McKay's Crossing, and then on to Paekakariki. Trains moved many of the troops and their equipment from the ships. The regularly scheduled passenger trains later became the main transportation to and from town for Marines on liberty.

The huts in the camps held up to eight enlisted men. Captains and above had small but adequate individual huts. The galleys, messhalls, and showers were clean and functioning properly. The "old timers" from Iceland remarked that it was a far better beginning than the Nissen huts and greasy galleys that had greeted them before. It wasn't long before the regiment was comfortably billeted, liberty parties were regularly appearing on the streets of Wellington, and attention to training began.

The training areas included portions of a large sheep ranch. Foothills of forest-covered mountains a few miles away, part of a government reservation, provided excellent challenges for conditioning hikes. Even

closer was a near-primeval forest ideal for scouting and patrolling. Combat veterans came back from Guadalcanal to lecture on their experiences in fighting the Japanese, jungle hardships, and malaria-control measures. Invariably, these were almost scarecrow-thin Marines with gaunt faces. Their skin had a yellowish tinge from the preventive medicine, atabrine. Their words were followed with rapt attention by officers and enlisted men alike who knew their turn would come soon.

Liberty in Wellington was enjoyable. The girls were pretty and eager to date the Marines. Their countrymen of the same age had been overseas for more than three years, fighting the Germans. The restaurants and hotels served excellent meals which broke the monotony of camp menus. Steak and eggs, a local specialty, rapidly became a favorite with the Marines. "Milk bars," serving ice cream sodas and milk shakes, were numerous and popular. The movie theatres played to full houses. Without the reminder of the few visiting Guadalcanal veterans, the war would have seemed to be in another world.

The Marines and the New Zealand girls realized quite rapidly that words and phrases had different meanings in their two cultures. Having picked up "bloody" as a mild epithet from the British in Iceland, the Marines soon learned that it was a word not to be used in polite company in New Zealand. On their part, the girls learned not to use the word "screwed" as slang for "paid."

Early in December the gray transports began appearing in the harbor. Shipping-out preparations commenced, and liberty became curtailed, as the number of working parties increased. Although the Christmas season was at hand, families who had "adopted" a Marine into their homes started planning to celebrate it early. Their premonition was correct, as the 6th Marines ate their Christmas dinner on board ship. The following day, 26 December 1942, the advance echelon of the 2d Marine Division Headquarters, under command of Brigadier General Alphonse DeCarre, together with the 6th Marines, sailed from New Zealand to Guadalcanal.¹⁴

Lost in their own thoughts, the Marines lined the rails watching Wellington's familiar hills grow smaller as the transports exited in column from the harbor. From the houses and apartments dotting the hills worried eyes peered and thoughts flowed from ship to shore and back again, seeking some sort of one last communication. The 6th Marines were on their way to combat, would they return to what had become their home away from home? If so, certainly not all. What indeed did the future hold?

**GUADALCANAL
and FLORIDA ISLANDS**

A scale bar showing distances in miles (0 to 15) and kilometers (0 to 20).



The Baptism of Fire

Enroute, debarkation plans were prepared and rehearsed. Since it was to be an administrative landing, no full scale rehearsal was held. The regiment knew that on 9 December command of the Guadalcanal campaign passed from Vandegrift to Major General Alexander M. Patch, USA. So as not to have a Marine major general ashore who was senior to Patch, Marston remained in New Zealand, giving the mission to his assistant division commander, DeCarre.¹⁵

On 4 January 1943, the 6th Marines landed on Guadalcanal, still under the command of Colonel Jackson. General DeCarre established the division headquarters just east of the Matanikau River, and assumed command of all Marine ground forces. The 2d Marine Division was complete again after more than a year.

The regiment bivouacked the first night at Kukum, near Lunga Point.¹⁶ Occasional artillery and small-arms fire could be heard from the direction of the ridges to the west. The C-ration dinner was a far cry from the hot meals on the transports, yet few Marines were worrying about food. The sound of the distant gunfire pushed to the front of their thoughts the age-old questions of men first entering combat. "How will I react when I see the enemy? Will I freeze and be killed? Will I be brave or a coward?" But their time was yet to come. Although the original plan had been for the 6th to relieve the 2d and 8th Marines on the front lines so these two exhausted regiments could displace to New Zealand, General Patch wanted to use them for one last drive to Cape Esperance. In the three weeks this effort took, the division was therefore united as a fighting force for the first time.¹⁷

While waiting to move up to the front, the 6th Marines became acclimated to the hot, muggy weather. Patrols were sent out, and not always with the mission to look for the enemy. Colonel Gilder D. Jackson had a mean little black "Scotty." The dog was forever disappearing, first on the *Matsonia*, then in camp in New Zealand, and now here in the jungle. Search parties would be sent out, but now they were armed patrols. The men fervently hoped the Japanese would catch the dog and eat it. One day, when the colonel was crossing a coconut log spanning a stream while carrying the Scotty, the dog nipped him on his stomach. The dog flew in one direction while the colonel yelled and fell into the stream. The story was told and retold for days. The men felt they had finally had their revenge.

"D-day" was set for 10 January. Patch decided to move the newly arrived 25th Infantry Division inland

to attack northward toward the beach and Cape Esperance. The Marines, with their right flank on the beach and units of the Americal Division inland on their left flank, attacked westward towards the Cape. The 2d Marines were on the inland portion of the Marine attack, with the 8th Marines anchored on the beach. Two days before "D-day" DeCarre ordered the fresh 6th Marines to relieve the battle-weary 2d Marines. The 1st Battalion was assigned the left flank of the regimental front, with the 2d Battalion on its right in contact with the 8th Marines. As the 1st Battalion moved in a column of twos up the narrow road through the damp jungle, it encountered its first smells of the battlefield—of unburied, often undiscovered enemy dead in the thick jungle growth. Some men gagged. Faces were grim. They were finally near combat.

The relief took place on a grassy ridge with a wooded ravine to the front. Foxholes marked the outline of the front lines, with occasional machine gun emplacements interspersed. The area was filthy with half-eaten C-ration cans rotting in the hot sun. A few shallow graves were partially uncovered by the periodic heavy rains. Since the only water available for bathing or shaving was the Matanikau river well to the rear, the veterans of the 2d Marines were dirty, bearded, and also needed haircuts. They stared at the freshly shaven faces and clean uniforms. Then the derisive taunts began: "Well, if it ain't the Pogey Bait Sixth! How did they get you darlings out of Hollywood?" The 2d Marines were happy to see the 6th. It meant the scuttlebutt was true that they would soon be leaving "this stinking island."

The first night on the line most men only pretended to sleep when not on watch. After dark a whisper was passed along the line from the outposts in front. "Tell the colonel there must be 200 Japs in the ravine just ahead. You can see them smoking cigarettes!" Barrage after barrage of artillery fire blasted the ravine. "Still see them smoking," the outposts reported back. Finally a Southern voice rang out "Chee-rist! Ain't none of you f----- people ever seen lightning bugs?" The front was quiet the rest of the night.

At 0645 on "D-day" the attack jumped off inshore in the 25th Division's zone of action. The 6th and 8th Marines had a holding action to contain the enemy while the Army wheeled through the foothills into position. By the night of 12 January the Army had reached its objective. The next morning the Marines launched their attack. Both regiments met scattered resistance. What was not known then was that the Japanese were making frantic efforts each night to ex-



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo 53384

Two dead Japanese soldiers, clothed in rags and emaciated from lack of food because the Americans cut off the flow of enemy supplies, lie in their bivouac on Guadalcanal from which they had continued to fight until killed by advancing Marines in early 1943.

tricate their command and as many troops as possible on submarines and fast surface craft from Cape Esperance. Those covering their withdrawal were the expendables—most of them sick or wounded, but all determined to sell their lives dearly.

On 15 January the 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, under Major William A. Kengla, relieved the 8th Marines on the beach. The 2d Battalion under Major Raymond L. Murray took the center, and the 1st Battalion under Major Russell Lloyd was inland. There, the terrain was the principal deterrent, with only scattered sniper fire encountered. That night, those Marines who had not bothered to dig foxholes wished they had around midnight. The enemy had located the 1st Battalion's position and fired a battery of land-based 8-inch naval guns at it. Company A had six dead and 11 wounded in about thirty seconds.¹⁸

The 3d Battalion's procedure was to blast the jungle and coconut groves to the front with artillery and cannister rounds every morning before starting the attack. Most of the time it met only light resistance, but it received some nasty casualties from mines it encountered on the coast road. Since its command post was usually near the road, it had many more visitors from the rear than did the other two battalions. These were

mainly Army sightseers and souvenir collectors. Occasionally naval personnel from the ships or SeaBee units would hitch a ride up to the front. None of them apparently realized there could still be enemy to the rear of the lines. For example, one morning a private attached to the command post went to relieve himself and ran into a fully armed Japanese officer asleep behind a log. The private pulled up his pants, left to get his rifle, returned, and kicked the officer on the foot. When he sat up, the private shot him and returned, proudly bearing the officer's sword. Instead of the acclaim he expected, he was sternly reprimanded by his officers since few, if any, Japanese officers had been captured. Other examples of valuable intelligence being lost were frequent occurrences because of the Marines' tendency, early in the war, not to take prisoners.

The Marines' front narrowed steadily. On 18 January the 1st Battalion reached its objective and was relieved by an Army battalion from the 182d Infantry Regiment.¹⁹

The three previous days had been successful. The 6th Marines had relatively few casualties and, in addition to finding numerous enemy dead, seized large quantities of ammunition and equipment. One patrol

from the 1st Battalion had located and destroyed the 8-inch battery that had caused so much damage the first night.²⁰

The relief of the 1st Battalion took place during the noon hour. The Army set up mess flies and trucked in metal containers from the rear with hot food. The Marines who had had nothing but C-rations for two weeks immediately sized up the situation. Word spread along the line—"Tell the doggies [soldiers] that if anyone hollers 'Condition Red!' that means a Jap air raid is coming and they'd better jump in the nearest foxhole." Shortly thereafter, tray after tray of chocolate-covered doughnuts were being unloaded from a truck. Someone yelled, "Condition Red!" The soldiers jumped in the foxholes. The Marines grabbed the doughnuts, ran down the line passing them out and eating them as fast as they could. The Army lieutenant colonel was livid, and yelled at Major Lloyd demanding the food be replaced. Major Lloyd, convulsed with laughter, finally raised a huge hand, waved at a stack of C-ration cases and choked, "Help yourself."

For the first time the enemy had to be dug out of coconut log emplacements. The 1st Battalion, 18th Marines*, which was attached to the 6th Marines, had experimented with the flame thrower assault team. The technique involved using a flame-thrower, smoke grenades, and demolitions in combination against the enemy bunkers. It proved to be most effective and was used for the remainder of the war.²¹

The first eight days of the assault had moved the American lines 5,000 yards beyond Point Cruz. The last battalion of the 8th Marines had been withdrawn. The 6th Marines and two Army regiments, the 182d and the 147th, continued the drive towards Cape Esperance. In the following five days of sometimes brisk fighting, the assault became a pursuit.²²

The 6th Marines advanced along the beach in column of battalions with the 1st Battalion leading. It was a dubious honor, as the battalion encountered many ambushes. The first day Company A ran into a skillfully laid trap. Thirty to 40 enemy soldiers tied themselves high in trees of a coconut grove where they were concealed by the palm fronds. Another force with machine guns was on a small ridge to the front and left flank. When the Japanese opened up the Marine company received fire from the front, the rear, and above. As one Marine described it, "You didn't know which side of the log to get on." The snipers were finally killed, some dangling from the trees but many falling to the ground. The Marines' losses were considerable, including the company executive officer.²³

The ferocity, even savageness, displayed by the enlisted teenage Marines on Guadalcanal stands in stark contrast to the cool professionals they became in later battles. Gold teeth of the enemy dead were knocked out with rifle butts, collected, and traded. Many enemy wounded, too weak from starvation and malaria to flee, much less fight, tried to surrender but were summarily shot. Japanese skulls were wired to the radiators of jeeps. The officers thought little about it, or if they did, took little action. Although personnel were instructed to take prisoners when feasible, all reports stressed the treachery of the enemy and their fanaticism, so on Guadalcanal, in effect, no quarter was given or received.

Beards began to appear and "jungle rot"—running sores on the wrists and hands—drew flies. The river crossings were welcomed for a chance to clean up. Malaria began to take its toll. The men hated the bitter-tasting atabrine tablets. Although the officers passed out the daily dose and watched each man take a swallow of water from his canteen before moving on to the next man, many held it under their tongue and spit it out at the first opportunity. Few bothered to put on insect repellent or use the mosquito head nets at night, although both were in plentiful supply and readily available. The anopheles mosquitoes swarmed nightly.

Colonel (later General) Edwin A. Pollock recounts riding in a jeep at night on Guadalcanal along the coastal road during the period enemy warships were shelling almost nightly. The jeep's headlights had been covered with flat black paint with narrow slits to let slivers of light show. Every few minutes a voice would come out of the darkness. "Turn off them f----- lights." After awhile the young driver, at the end of his patience, bellowed back "I can't! I'm driving the f----- Colonel!"

Throughout early January 1943 there had been no Japanese aircraft over Guadalcanal; this changed abruptly on 26 January. Earlier the 6th Marines had captured a dazed Japanese engineer sergeant who told intelligence officers his command had called for one last big air raid. His warning was heeded, and Marine and Army planes were airborne on station. Forty Zeros appeared and violent dog-fights rolled through the sky. The Marines watched the show with fascination, thrilled at being spectators to an unusual sight for an infantryman. However, the Zeros had been only bait. Seven Mitsubishi 97 bombers, flying near tree-top level, suddenly swept in, scattering their bombs. They caused some casualties, but it was mainly only a gesture.

The 6th Marines and the 182nd Infantry were well

*The 18th Marines was a combat engineer regiment.



Author's Collection

Members of the 1st Battalion, 6th Marines, unshaven in an effort to conserve fresh water, pose on Guadalcanal prior to the regiment's return to New Zealand.

west of the Poho river. They made contact with the 25th Division attacking down the ridges towards Cape Esperance.²⁴ Resistance continued to be sporadic. On 28 January Company A of the 1st Battalion, 6th Marines, sent out a patrol before digging in for the night. Almost at once the patrol ran into trouble. It was about 1600 hours, a few hundred yards southwest of Tassafaronga Point, where three Japanese transports had been beached during the main naval engagement in November. When the firing began, the company commander, Lieutenant Baine P. Kerr, sent a runner to the platoon leader with instructions to withdraw. Kerr, with another platoon leader, Lieutenant Robert B. Patrick, and a runner then went forward to investigate. Lieutenant Kerr immediately was wounded in the leg and knocked to the ground. As he was crawling back to his lines, Patrick and the runner ran over. Each grasped him by an arm and started running to the rear. The enemy machine gun fired another burst. Patrick was hit in both legs, and the runner squarely in the small of his back. Eventually litter bearers were able to evacuate all of them to the aid station.²⁵ These sharp, quick skirmishes took their toll. They also turned the men of the 6th Marines into seasoned veterans for future battles.

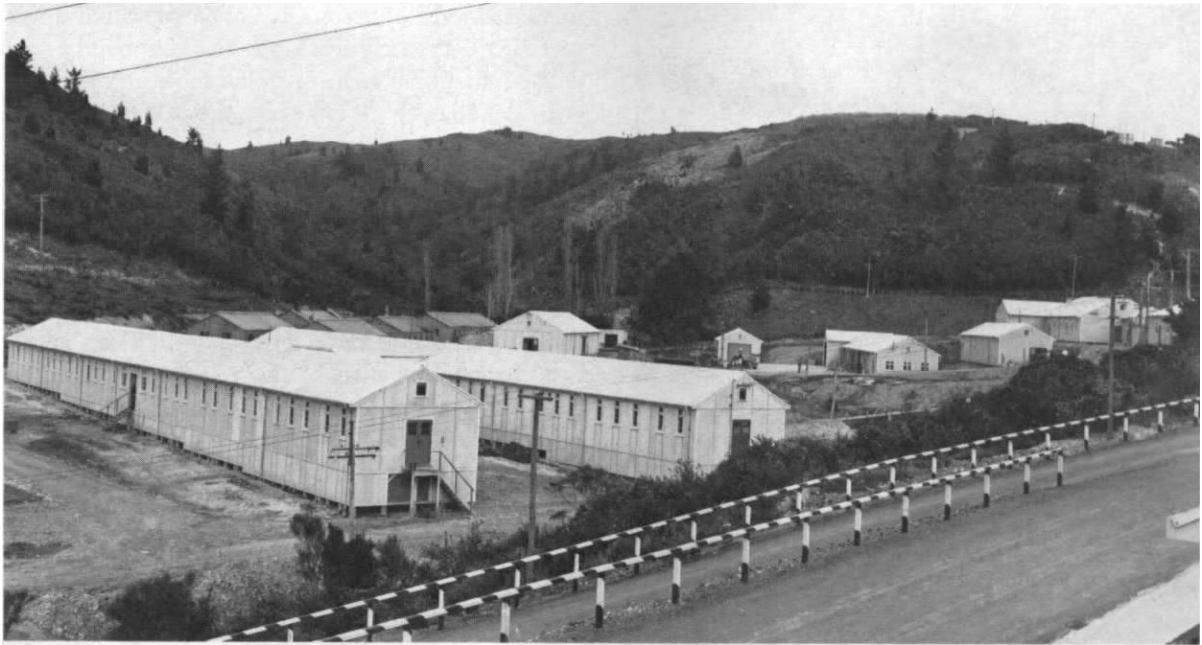
On 7 December 1941, the young men on the Navajo reservation in New Mexico had no idea that they would ultimately play a significant role in the prosecution of the war against Japan. These young Indians were

soon selected to become combat communication specialists—the first of a kind. The commanders on Guadalcanal were aware of stolen codes and that the enemy could easily decipher new ones. One writer said, “Military communications were being made available to the enemy like sand sifting through a sieve since many of the Japanese could speak English fluently.” Yet in short, fierce encounters there wasn’t time for the enciphering and deciphering that ordinary code requires. The Navajo Code Talkers “speaking their native dialect became the secret weapon.”²⁶ Two were assigned to each infantry battalion. One traveled with the lead patrol or one of the assault company commanders, and one stayed with the battalion commander. On the advance to Cape Esperance, however, an unanticipated difficulty arose. The two Navajos with the 1st Battalion had an argument and refused to speak to one another. No amount of cajoling by big burly Major Lloyd, a former Annapolis football player, could get them to shake hands and make up. As his temper rose, their obstinacy grew; the more he threatened, the stonier their expressions became as they glared alternately at him and each other. Finally, completely exasperated, he sent them to the rear in a jeep, calling the wrath of Custer’s ghost down on their heads and on all of their brethren.

The end was in sight. The 2d Marines boarded ship the 31st of January. The 8th Marines followed shortly thereafter. The 6th Marines traded assignments with the 147th Infantry on the left flank, releasing the Army unit for the final sweep to Cape Esperance.

On 9 February 1943, Guadalcanal was declared secured.²⁷ The next day the regiment marched from the Cape Esperance area to the fine camp near the original beachhead, which the 2d and 8th Marines had vacated. There was time to stop and bathe in the rivers enroute. From the 10th to the 19th of February the 6th Marines was assigned the mission of coast defense. Hot food rather than C-rations was now on the daily menu. Mail calls were regular, if not daily. More and more men, however, lay awake at nights with malaria attacks, alternately bathed in sweat or shaking from a chill. Those with dengue, also called breakbone fever, groaned with pain. Some men’s eyes were turning yellow, and weakness set upon those with jaundice.

All of the Marine units suffered a great deal of sickness, from malaria carried by the anopheles mosquitoes that attacked at night, dengue fever that developed from the bite of daytime mosquitoes, and jaundice from unsanitary eating conditions. Fungus, acquired quickly in the hot, moist climate, was aggravated by sweat. Everyone had “the crud.” The 6th



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo 58051

A portion of Silverstream naval hospital, the facility in New Zealand which helped many members of the 6th Marines recover from wounds and diseases acquired on Guadalcanal.

Marines was less severely hit by all four of these maladies, but every day new cases appeared.

A little more than six weeks had elapsed since the regiment landed, but it seemed like six months. Only about four weeks had been spent in actual combat against a sick and already defeated enemy, but that thought was not allowed to dampen the Marines' feeling of accomplishment. The regiment's casualties were 53 KIA and 170 WIA, out of the 2d Marine Division's total of 342 KIA and 776 WIA.²⁸ They had been bloodied. They had carried out all assigned missions promptly and efficiently. Their "baptism of fire" was over. They were now combat veterans, and they were proud of it.

The Return to "The Land They Adored"

The day everyone looked forward to—19 February—finally arrived.²⁹ Although rested, washed, and well fed, many of the Marines were too ill to savor the day of departure from "that f----- island." Embarkation was made from small craft up cargo nets slung over the sides of the transports, while wearing full field transport packs. The upper and lower portion of a field transport pack, complete with blanket roll and entrenching tool, weighed approximately 80 pounds. Combined with web gear and an individual weapon, it became a crippling load to have on one's back while crawling up the 40 foot side of a ship. Remarkably, no one fell between the bobbing small craft and the

huge bulk of the transport. Many of the sick Marines made it only with the help of two or three solicitous buddies. Once aboard, the ship's sick bays were filled immediately, mainly with jaundice victims.

With the ship's laundry working at full capacity, it wasn't long before everyone was in clean utilities. With showers and sunbathing on the weather decks, "jungle rot" sores soon cleared up. Men cleaned weapons and equipment, wrote letters, and swapped tales of their experiences.

The rails were lined with smiling faces as the transports tied up at the quay in Wellington. Eyes searched for girlfriends dated earlier. Unfortunately, few were spotted in the gathering crowd of waving middle-aged couples coming to welcome "their Marines" into their homes again. The regiment soon discovered why more of the young ladies who had previously been so friendly had not shown up. The 2d and 8th Marines had spread the word that the 6th *had* to wear the fourragere, that it was not awarded for bravery in World War I as they had been told, but meant that the wearer had a venereal disease.

Silverstream hospital, 12 miles outside of Wellington, was the first destination for many men of the 6th Marines. Soon filled to capacity, this U.S. Navy Base Hospital had to be augmented by one established by the division at Anderson Park nearer Wellington. The Marines with milder cases of malaria and dengue fever



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo 62883

A unit of the 6th Marines passes through the main gate of Camp Russell, which housed the headquarters of the 6th Marines in New Zealand in 1943, prior to the Tarawa battle.

The various company offices of the 1st and 2d Battalions, 6th Marines occupy these wooden framed buildings in New Zealand in the months before the Tarawa campaign.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo 62872



were treated by corpsmen in the battalion areas. The jaundice cases, because of the infectious nature of the disease, were treated at the hospitals. Few officers and men escaped one or more of the three maladies. A large number of the more serious cases requiring extended hospitalization were invalided to Hawaii or to the United States. For several weeks, strenuous training activity had to be curtailed. Maximum liberty was granted, and soon the 6th Marines had convinced their girls that the 2d and 8th Marines had told a monstrous lie about them because they were jealous of the great combat record the 6th had compiled on Guadalcanal in the short time there. This, of course, infuriated the other two regiments.

McKay's Crossing

The New Zealand Army camps previously occupied by the 1st and 2d Battalions were near Paekakariki, while the 3d Battalion's camp was at McKay's Crossing. Upon returning to New Zealand, the regiment moved into new camps which had been constructed at McKay's Crossing on the opposite side of the railroad tracks from the original 3d Battalion camp. These

camps extended from McKay's Crossing to Paekakariki on the sea- and beach-side of the tracks. Personnel were billeted in pyramidal tents with wooden decks and strongback wooden frames. Offices, mess halls, galleys, showers, and officer messes were in wooden buildings. Some of the senior officers rented beach houses. The 1st Battalion acquired the use of a farm house on the leased training area. Some of the officers lived in this house which was also used as their commissioned officers mess. Saturday in all of the C.O.M.'s was party night. Many officers brought dates out from Wellington. Friends from other units often showed up on the spur of the moment. The cleaner songs learned in Iceland were sung with gusto, together with college songs and new ones learned from their New Zealand dates.

Replacements, both officer and enlisted, arrived. As the sick regained their health, the tempo picked up. Promotions were made. Units were reorganized. Raymond L. Murray, now a lieutenant colonel, retained command of the 2d Battalion. Russell Lloyd, also now a lieutenant colonel, and senior to Murray, moved to

Mr. and Mrs. Lipsham of Manurewa, New Zealand, host Marines and their dates at a quiet party in their home in July 1943, an event similar to ones shared by many Marines.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo 59374



the regimental executive officer's position. He was relieved by newly arrived Lieutenant Colonel John W. Easley. Major Kengla, also promoted, left the regiment and was replaced through an intradivision transfer from another unit by recently promoted Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth F. McLeod. Colonel Gilder D. Jackson was succeeded as commanding officer of the 6th Marines by Colonel Maurice G. Holmes, who had commanded the 3d Battalion in Iceland.

There were other promotions and intradivision transfers which took place. The Guadalcanal wounded soon recovered, and were released from the Auckland naval hospital. As they returned, they were warmly greeted by old comrades and newcomers alike. The battalions received many newly commissioned second lieutenants.

The only hard liquor readily available in New Zealand was an Australian concoction officially named *Corio*, but nicknamed "jump whiskey" by the Marines (one drink would "make a man jump like a kangaroo"). One of the first questions posed to a newly arrived lieutenant was whether he brought any whiskey from the States. They all replied in the affirmative, each having brought at least one, and sometimes several, cases. Parties were immediately organized and spirits were high—until the first taste. The "high-class Scotch" expected turned out to be a villainous green Mexican distillation called "Juarez." Since the New Zealand girls always drank their whiskey in Coca-Cola or ginger ale, they didn't mind it. The Marines gagged, and drank it anyway.

It is doubtful that a New Zealand division would have received as warm and sincerely friendly a reception in the United States as was accorded the 2d Marine Division in Wellington. Thousands of homes were opened to them. As often as they could, Marines put on their green winter service uniform and enjoyed dinner or weekend invitations in Wellington or Paekakariki and other suburbs. In the field of romance, hundreds married their New Zealand sweethearts in spite of the obstacles deliberately instituted by their officers.

The logic behind these obstacles was to do what was fair and best for both of the young lovers. It became apparent early on that some of the girls, well-educated and sophisticated, had grown towards maturity without the company of the boys their own ages who were fighting a war on the other side of the world. Often these young ladies became enthralled with an unsophisticated but handsome boy from a farm or ranch who had barely finished high school. Other mismatched situations occurred which indicated very little chance for a successful marriage. Consequently, a



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo 62871

A Marine officer conducts an equipment inspection of a lieutenant's platoon in October 1943 as the 6th Marines' stay in New Zealand draws to a close.

Marine first had to get his regimental chaplain and one of his company officers to interview the young couple, and then go with them to visit the girl's parents. Final approval had to be obtained from the battalion commander. The 6th Marines' Catholic chaplain was a huge Irishman from New York City named Father William O'Neill. He decided to try humor to reduce Marines' resentment at having these strangers butting into their love affairs. On the bulletin board outside his office, he displayed a large centerfold from *Esquire* magazine showing Rita Hayworth, a Hollywood movie star, wearing a sheer negligee and reclining on a chaise longue. Underneath he printed, "Unless the girl you want to marry is as pretty as this, wait until you get home." Usually the Marine entered for his interview with a grin on his face.

The movie theaters in Wellington were popular with the Marines, both those with and without dates. The movies ran on a set schedule, with intermissions between showings. At the beginning of each show, the lights dimmed, a picture of the King came on the

screen, and the British national anthem was played. Everyone stood and remained standing. Then a picture of President Roosevelt was shown while the American national anthem was played. Everyone then took their seats and the movie started. During May, a Maori battalion, 400 strong, returned from more than three years in the war in the African theater. These Polynesian natives of New Zealand were known to be fierce fighters. One evening in one of the movie theaters the Maoris present stood for the British national anthem but sat down during the American one. The Marines demanded that they stand and show the same respect to the American anthem. The Maoris refused. A brawl resulted, which rapidly spread to the streets, with other Maoris and Marines joining the fight. Both American and New Zealand MPs were unable to break it up. With the approval of the Wellington Police, a four-square-block area of the downtown was closed off and the combatants allowed to fight it out. The injured from both sides staggered to the edges of the area, where military ambulances waited to take them to first-aid stations. There was no property destruction and very few serious injuries. From then on, however, the Maoris remained standing during the American anthem. The fight cleared the air.

A comprehensive sports program had been deve-

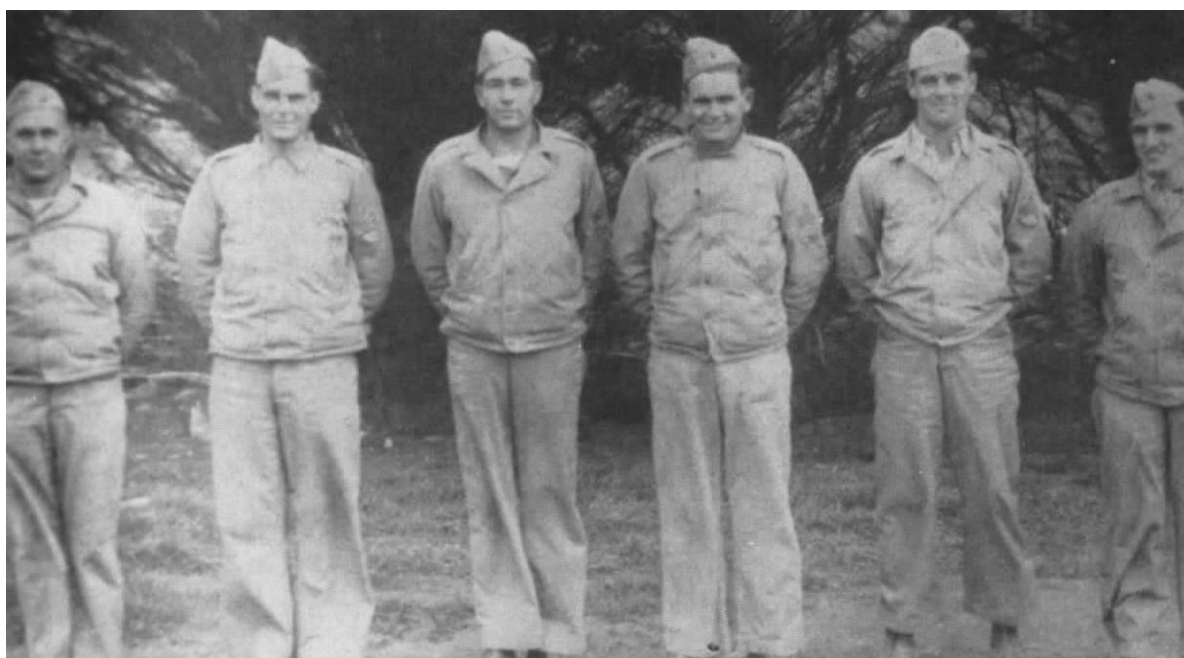


Author's collection

A racing form from the racecourse in Wellington, New Zealand, provided one form of diversion for members of the 6th Marines as they recovered from combat on Guadalcanal and prepared for future campaigns.

The staff NCOs of Company D, 1st Battalion, 6th Marines, warmly jacketed against a blustery day in New Zealand, pose for a group photograph before sailing for Tarawa.

Photo courtesy of SgtMaj L. J. Michelony, Jr.





Author's Collection

Marines parade through sunny streets of Wellington, New Zealand, in September 1943, as they near the end of training for their next amphibious campaign.

loped by the Division Special Services office. It not only provided diversion and exercise for the Marines, it also contributed to good public relations with the New Zealanders. The 2d Division Boxing Squad under Lieutenant Shannon Burke fought 110 bouts all the way from Auckland in the north to Dunedin in the south, winning 80 and losing 30.³⁰

The Marines' had a distinguished American visitor in New Zealand. Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt toured some of the camps and visited the wounded who were still in the hospital in July.³¹

In September 1943, the 2d Marine Division paraded through downtown Wellington, led by the Division Band. The Marines marched in battalion mass formation in their green uniforms, with rifles slung,

and wearing steel helmets. The streets were lined with cheering crowds; balconies and office windows along the route of march were filled with pretty waving girls. In a short two months many of these fine young men strutting so proudly would die for their country on a tiny island far away.³²

During the months before the parade Marines who still had unused leave on their records took weekend trips to Rotorua, the valley of geysers; visited friends in the 3d Marine Division encamped near Auckland; or toured Christchurch, an overwater trip to the next island.

The Red Cross sponsored dances at the Hotel Cecil, which had been converted into a club. These were very popular. Occasionally a USO show turned up, to the delight of both the Marines and their New Zealand friends. The division produced and staged a musical comedy called "The Fourragere Follies." Those Marines not lucky enough to have an overnight pass joined the commuter's rush for the last train to Paekakariki at 1201. If they missed the train, they had to share the expense of a long taxi ride. Additionally, if they missed the train and then had difficulty locating a taxi, it could mean they would be logged as being "absent over leave" when they checked through the camp's gate. In at least one battalion, the 1st Battalion, 6th Marines, a hole had been cut in the barbed wire surrounding the camp. This hole was in a remote section, and secretly crawling through it added spice to the liberty. Not until near the end of the war did the culprits using it discover that officers and senior NCOs knew about it all along—in fact, some of them had used it themselves.

Memories of Guadalcanal faded into the distance; unit spirit was high. The 6th Marines not only felt like professionals, they also looked professional. They were, to a man, cocky, self-confident, and enjoying themselves. Yet always lurking in the backs of their minds was the thought that this couldn't go on much longer. There was a war out there, a big one, and they had a part to play.³³