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THE UNITED STATES MARINES IN ICELAND, 1941-1942

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Prime Minister Churchill of Great Britain reviews the 6th Marines two miles south of Reykjavik, Iceland, on 16 August 1941. (USMC 524200)

THE UNITED STATES MARINES IN ICELAND, 1941-1942

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PREFACE

The material in this pamphlet has been extracted from Chapter 4 of Pearl Harbor to Guadalcanal---History of the United States Marine Corps Operations in World War II, Volume I by Lieutenant Colonel Frank O. Hough, USMCR, Major Verle E. Ludwig, USMC and Mr. Henry I. Shaw, Jr. In addition, a bibliography and appendix has been added. This pamphlet supersedes Marine Corps Historical Reference Series pamphlet number 34, The United States Marines in Iceland, 1941-1942, published and last reviewed in 1962, by the Historical Branch, G-3 Division, Headquarters, U. S. Marine Corps.

The Marine defense of Iceland is one of the many actions categorized by Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison as "short of war operations." It is an important story and this pamphlet is published for the information of those interested in this particular era in our history.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

(1)

Marine Occupation of Iceland

"It has been said," wrote Winston Churchill, "'Whoever possesses Iceland holds a pistol firmly pointed at England, America, and Canada.'" (2) At the time of which he wrote, the "pointed pistol" threatened most immediately the British life-line: The northern convoy route between Great Britain and the Western Hemisphere, upon which the island kingdom was dependent for most of the materials to sustain its war effort as well as much that was needed for its very subsistence. Iceland perched on the flank of these shipping lanes, which were under heavy attack by German submarines. Hostile air and naval bases on the island would almost certainly render the northern route unusable, and put pressure, perhaps untolerable pressure, on the longer and more vulnerable southern route.

At the outbreak of the war Iceland enjoyed the status of autonomous parliamentary monarchy, sharing the same king with Denmark. When the Nazis overran the latter nation in April 1940, the Icelandic Parliament voted to take over the executive power of the Danish King and to assume control of foreign affairs. The strategic island became, for all practical purposes, a completely independent republic (3)--and a wholly defenseless one without even the pretense of an army or navy. This state of affairs gave rise to considerable concern in London and Washington, more genuine concern than it caused initially among the insular-minded Icelanders.

To the British the threat appeared very desperate indeed. Early in May they determined to occupy Iceland, and the need for speed and secrecy fused decision and action.(4) There was no time to stand on ceremony; despite Churchill's bland assertion that the British occupation of Iceland was effected "with the concurrence of its people,"(5) they had, in fact, not been consulted beforehand. "As the attitude likely to be adopted by the Icelandic Government toward such an 'invasion' was in some doubt they were not informed of the proposed expedition."(6) Indeed the first inkling the natives had that anything out of the ordinary was afoot came when early-rising fishermen discovered a British destroyer nosing up to a jetty in the harbor of the island capital, Reykjavik. At 0620 on 10 May, a reinforced battalion of Royal Marines landed and occupied the town, moving so swiftly that it was able to seize the German Consulate before the hapless Consul could destroy his papers.

According to plan, the Royal Marines were to take the situation in hand in order to pave the way for larger occupation forces. They were relieved in ten days by a Canadian Army brigade which was first reinforced and later replaced by British units. By the time Iceland began to loom large in U. S.

defense plans, the big, bleak, sparsely-populated island was occupied by nearly 25,000 British troops. Hvalfjordur, a deep inlet of the sea 30 miles north of Reykjavik, became the site of a vital naval fueling and repair base, while the principal airfields, also near the capital, were home bases for squadrons of patrol bombers that hunted the German submarines.(7)

As reverse followed reverse, however, the British increasingly felt the need for the return of their troops from Iceland to the home islands, seriously threatened with invasion and under heavy air attack. The prospect of British withdrawal caused some alarm among the Icelanders and led to diplomatic soundings of the American position.

On 18 December 1940, the Icelandic Minister of Foreign Affairs, V. Stefansson, arranged a private meeting with the U. S. Consul General, Bertel E. Kuniholm. After firm assurances that his proposal was strictly unofficial, the Minister suggested to Kuniholm that the United States might consider the possibility of declaring Iceland part of the area convered by the Monroe Doctrine, in effect joining the island to the Western Hemisphere.(8) Kuniholm duly reported the tentative proposition to Washington and nearly a month later he received a cautious reply from the Secretary of State which advised him that no action was likely to be forthcoming in the near future but that he should neither encourage nor discourage further approaches along this line.(9)

In unheralded American-British staff conversations which took place in Washington in the first months of 1941, plans were laid for Allied action in case the U. S. should be drawn into the war beside Britain. Under these plans the defense of Iceland was to become the responsibility of the United States; Army troops were to relieve the British as soon as practicable after the outbreak of war, but certainly no sooner than 1 September 1941, as the Army did not feel it would be ready to take on such a commitment until then.(10) But as the spring of 1941 wore on, American measures in aid of Britain, such as Lend-Lease and the progressive extension of the Neutrality Patrol into the mid-Atlantic, brought the U. S. closer and closer to conflict with Germany. Open and increasing support of the British seemed to suit the public mood; a survey of public opinion taken by the Gallup Poll in early May showed that an overwhelming majority (75%) of the American people favored helping Britain even if such a course was sure to lead the nation into war with Germany.(11) The stage was thus set for what one exhaustive study of this period has called an "overt act of participation in the European conflict."(12)

By late spring Britain felt her back against the wall. Churchill asked President Roosevelt to send American troops to Iceland to replace the British garrison. The President agreed, provided an invitation to the American occupation force was

forthcoming from the Icelandic Government. Churchill undertook to produce this invitation, but the process proved more one of extraction than of production. Icelandic reluctance to "invite" a foreign force to occupy the island very nearly upset a timetable already in operation.

On 4 June, the President ordered the Army to prepare a plan for the immediate relief of British troops in Iceland. The question of where the troops were going to come from arose immediately. Although the Army had reached a strength of nearly a million and a half men, the great bulk of its soldiers were raw recruits gathered in by Selective Service and recently called up National Guardsmen. Under existing legislation these men could not be sent beyond the Western Hemisphere unless they volunteered for such service. Equipment in nearly every category was in short supply, even for training purposes. The Army needed its comparatively small force of regulars to form cadres for new units. To withdraw these cadres for an expeditionary force would throw the whole immense training program out of gear.

A review of the Army's immediate capabilities convinced the President that the Marine Corps would have to furnish the initial occupation force for Iceland. Since all Marines, both regular and reserve, were volunteers, there were no geographical restrictions on their use. On 5 June, Roosevelt directed the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), Admiral Harold R. Stark, to have a Marine brigade ready to sail in 15 days' time. The organization of this brigade was facilitated by the fact that a reinforced infantry regiment slated for expeditionary duty was at that moment en route from the west coast to the east.

At this time the Marine Corps was heavily committed to a program of organizing, equipping, and training two divisions, one on each coast. Since infantry regiments of both divisions were still forming, they were considerably understrength, and it had been necessary to reinforce the east coast's 1st Marine Division when it was tabbed for a major role in a proposed landing operation. On 24 May, the Commandant drew on the 2nd Marine Division at Camp Elliott, California, for the necessary regiment, and Colonel Leo D. Hermle's 6th Marines (Reinforced) was selected "for temporary shore duty beyond the seas."(13) The regiment was brought up to full strength by substantial drafts from the 2d and 8th Marines, (14) and on 28 May it joined its assigned reinforcing artillery, tank, and service elements. Six days after he received his orders, Colonel Hermle had his command combat loaded; the ships, three large transports and four destroyer transports, sailed from San Diego on 31 May.

When it had embarked, this regiment had orders to report to the Commanding General, I Corps (Provisional), FMF, Atlantic Fleet. At that time, its most probable mission appeared to be either the seizure of Martinique or the occupation of the

Azores. Momentous events, however, were developing in Europe, and these served to change the whole pattern of the war, as well as the mission of the regiment. Both British and American intelligence indicated that Hitler was getting ready to attack Russia, and soon. Such an event would automatically cancel any immediate threat to Gibraltar and render the Azores venture pointless. President Roosevelt, in fact, ordered a suspension of planning for the Azores operation on 7 June, while preparations for the movement to Iceland proceeded apace.

While the 6th Marines' convoy was still in the Pacific heading for the Panama Canal, the wheels were set in motion to complete the organization of the projected brigade. One other major unit, the 5th Defense Battalion at Parris Island, was designated for duty in Iceland; its commanding officer, Colonel Lloyd L. Leech, flew to Washington on 7 June for a two-day round of briefing and reports. The battalion's antiaircraft guns and gunners were what was wanted, so when the order assigning the 5th Defense to I Corps (Provisional) was published on 10 June the 5-inch Artillery Group was shown as being detached. In addition to the 6th Marines (Reinforced) and the 5th Defense Battalion (less 5-inch Artillery Group), the budding brigade received a company of engineers, a chemical platoon, and a platoon of scout cars from the 1st Marine Division at New River. The port for the hurried assembly of ships, materiel, and men was Charleston, S. C.

The men of the 5th Defense Battalion had some inkling of their probable area of employment; Colonel Leech's warning order phoned from Washington on the 8th had directed that special attention be paid to provision of warm clothing. On board the 6th Marines' transports, however, speculation was rife that the regiment was heading for the Caribbean, perhaps for Guantanamo Bay, but more popular was the rumored destination of Martinique. When the convoy turned north after clearing the canal, passed the western end of Cuba, and headed for Charleston most of the "scuttlebutt" still held out for a tropical objective. Needless to say, the issue of winter clothing after the regiment arrived at Charleston on 15 June came as a real "shocker." The severely limited time to assemble and load out the Iceland force made this cold weather gear "the darndest collection of winter clothing ever assembled;"(15) there were bits and pieces of everything.

On the day following the arrival of the 6th Marines in Charleston the 1st Marine Brigade (Provisional) was formally organized; its commander was Brigadier General John Marston. The troop list included:

Brigade Headquarters Platoon
Brigade Band
6th Marines
5th Defense Battalion (less 5-inch Artillery Group)
2d Battalion, 10th Marines

Company A, 2d Tank Battalion (less 3d Platoon)
Company A, 2d Medical Battalion
Company C, 1st Engineer Battalion
1st Platoon, Company A, 2d Service Battalion
3d Platoon, 1st Scout Company
Chemical Platoon

On 18 June, General Marston arrived in Charleston from Quantico, bringing with him a small headquarters detachment and his instructions from the CNO for the operation of his brigade in Iceland. These orders, dated 16 June, gave him a simple and direct mission:

"In cooperation with the British Garrison, Defend Iceland Against Hostile Attack."(16)

The question of over-all command in Iceland had, of course, risen early in the top-level negotiations. The British wished the brigade to be placed directly under their control since they had the major force on the island, but Admiral Stark thought that it would be going too far for U. S. troops, ostensibly neutral, to be placed under the command of an officer of a belligerent power. Marston's orders, therefore, read that he would coordinate his actions "with the defense operations of the British by the method of mutual cooperation,"(17) while reporting directly to the CNO.

The brigade spent a week in Charleston, most of it devoted to loading supplies that arrived from camps and depots all over the eastern half of the U. S. The Army might not be sending any troops in this first contingent, but a good portion of the weapons and equipment that went out with the Marines was taken from Army units.(18) On 22 June, the last cargo that could be handled within the time limits set was loaded and at 0800 the four transports and two cargo vessels carrying 4,095 officers and men set sail for Argentia, Newfoundland.

At sea a formidable escort force including battleships, a couple of cruisers, and 10 destroyers joined up.(19) Five days out of Charleston, the convoy arrived at Argentia and hove to awaiting further orders. These orders were not forthcoming until 1 July, when the Icelandic reluctance to actually "invite" American occupation was finally compromised in a much qualified statement by the island's Prime Minister to President Roosevelt that the presence of U. S. troops was "in accordance with the interest of Iceland."(20) This left-handed invitation was the go-ahead signal and the brigade was headed east by dawn on 2 July. The Marines were going with the blessing of Churchill who had written the President earlier that:

"I am much encouraged by . . your Marines taking over that cold place and I hope that once the first installment has arrived you will give full publicity to it. It would give us

hope to face the long haul that lies ahead."(21)

The President made the desired announcement on 7 July as the convoy anchored in Reykjavik harbor, pointing out that the Americans were there "to supplement, and eventually to replace, the British forces," and that an adequate defense of the strategic island was necessary to ward off a potential threat to the Western Hemisphere.(22) A third, but unannounced, purpose of this American occupation was the acquisition of a naval and air base in Iceland to facilitate the prosecution of our anti-submarine war in the North Atlantic.(23)

While the threat of German attack was always present, the likelihood of it happening steadily lessened as the year wore on.(24) On the day that the 1st Brigade left Charleston, Germany attacked Russia. Hitler repeatedly in the months that followed indicated that he wanted to avoid provoking the U. S. into war while he concentrated on the offensive in Russia. His submarine commanders were given orders to spare American shipping as much as possible, even though it had been publicly announced that U.S. Navy vessels were affording protection to British and Canadian ships that joined American convoys headed for Iceland. Still Hitler decreed that there would be no accounting for the submarine commander who sank an American vessel by mistake. Up until the actual U. S. entry into the war this partial immunity of American vessels from attack held good.(25)

The fact that Hitler had decided to go easy on U. S. ships in the North Atlantic was naturally not known to American naval commanders. There was considerable pressure to get the brigade and its equipment unloaded in the shortest possible time and the convoy headed back for the States. This unloading proved an onerous task. There was little local labor. Marines had to furnish all working parties and the men toiled around the clock, helped not a little by the fact that at this time of year it was light 24 hours a day.

Only two ships could be docked at Reykjavik at a time and the places beside the wharves were reserved for the cargo vessels which carried heavy equipment of the 5th Defense Battalion. The rest of the convoy rode at anchor in the harbor, while men and supplies were lightered ashore to a gently sloping pebble beach near the city. Early on 12 July the job was finished, the convoy sailed, and the Marines had their first real chance to look around them.

They drew small reassurance from what they saw. The Icelandic landscape was something less than prepossessing, at least to men raised where soil produces vegetation and a tree is a tree. No trees above dwarf height grow on Iceland's rugged, mountainous terrain, and vegetation is limited to a little sheep pasturage on the comparatively flat stretches. It has

been described as the most volcanic region in the world. Craters, many of them occasionally active, pock its surface, and lava flows lace across it.

The most unpleasant thing about Iceland's weather is its very uncertainty; the mountains usually insure that the same kind of weather rarely exists simultaneously all over the island. Although the temperature range is moderate, the humidity is consistently high, and precipitation frequent but erratic. About the only constant is the assurance of steady winds, which may change abruptly to gale force.(26)

The island is slightly smaller in area than Kentucky, but barely supported a population of about 120,000 at the time of occupation. Along its 2,300 miles of jagged coastline were a number of small fishing villages; and except for the area around Reykjavik where there was a roadnet, all communication was by sea. The prim little capital boasted about 38,000 inhabitants, two movie houses, and one first class hotel; as a liberty town for nearly 30,000 British and American troops it boasted nothing. The only living things the island had in abundance were sheep and ponies,(27) and the Marines never developed a taste for mutton and were forbidden to ride the runt-sized steeds. Altogether, it was probably good for morale that the Marines did not know at this time that they were destined to see Iceland—and nothing but Iceland—for eight dreary months to come.

Even before the first brigade unit set foot on shore, the Marines learned what the term "mutual cooperation" meant to the British. They could not have been more cordial, generous, and helpful. As the brigade was woefully short of motor transport, the British put more than 50 trucks at its disposal, together with drivers familiar with the region and the traffic problems peculiar to Iceland—and left them in the hands of the Marines for several weeks. They also furnished rations and turned over several of their permanent camps to the new arrivals, moving into tent camps to make room.(28)

The enthusiastic reception by the British included a highly prized offer by their commander, Major General H. O. Curtis, to provide the Marines with the distinctive polar bear shoulder insignia of the British force. General Marston accepted for the brigade and noted later that:

"The mutual cooperation directive worked, to the entire satisfaction of the British Commander and the Brigade. The British complied with our requests and we complied with theirs. It was as simple as that. A British commander less sympathetic than General Curtis might have upset the applecart but under that talented officer no incident of conflict occurred."(29)

In their new camps the Marines made their first acquaint-

ance with the Nissen hut, an introduction that was to ripen into familiarity that rarely reached the friendship state. In the months to come the men of the brigade were to build and maintain roads and construct defenses; they were to become very practiced at the art of the stevedore; but most of all they were to become efficient builders of the ubiquitous Nissen hut. The hut itself "was an elongated igloo covered with corrugated iron roofing and lined with beaver board"(30) designed to accommodate about 14 men. It was possible to erect several huts in combination to accommodate larger numbers of men or for use as offices, mess halls, recreation rooms, and classrooms.

For the first week ashore the Marines were fully occupied getting their camps established and then they were fitted into the British scheme of defense. Initially, the brigade's mission was to serve as a mobile reserve although its lack of transportation meant that most of its mobility would be dependent on foot power.(31) The various units, which were spread out over a good part of the countryside around Reykjavik, were also responsible for local defense of their bivouac areas, a responsibility that grew to include long segments of coastline when the British units defending these possible landing points were later relieved.

The machine guns and 3-inch guns of the 5th Defense Battalion were integrated into the British antiaircraft defenses around the airfield and harbor and remained a part of this system for the rest of the Marines' stay. As a result, the 5th Defense Battalion spent most of its time performing the duties for which it was constituted; its state of training was good and it improved as a result of a steady round of gun watches and drills and frequent though unproductive enemy aircraft alerts. In contrast, the men of the 6th Marines and its reinforcing units had reason to think that they were on one gigantic and never-ending working party, and the regiment labelled itself a "labor regiment" in its August report to General Marston.

A welcome break from the steady grind of labor details occurred on 16 August when Prime Minister Churchill visited Iceland en route to England following his famous Atlantic conference with President Roosevelt. He was accompanied by an imposing array of high British rank: Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley Pound, First Sea Lord; General John Dill, Chief of the Imperial General Staff; and Air Chief Marshal Sir Wilfred Freeman, Vice Chief of Air Staff. After paying their respects to local officials, they attended a large joint British-American military review held in their honor. Of this event 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."(32)

The reason for the continous round of camp construction was two-fold. First, somebody had to build the camps to accom-

modate the expected influx of Army troops; neither the British nor the Icelanders were in a position to do so. The process of simple elimination gave the Marines the job. Second, it soon became apparent that the Marines themselves were going to stay for a while and a good part of their time had to be spent preparing their own facilities for the onset of winter.

A common, indeed, official, belief that the Marines were going to be relieved in September by Army troops held strongly for about a month after the brigade arrived in Iceland. There were numerous evidences that this was the intention of the top planners when the concept of the Marine Corps furnishing the initial occupation troops was first broached. By mid-August, however, it became evident that the Army would not be able to provide enough men to relieve the brigade and that the lack of readily available troops would make the role of those who did arrive one of reinforcement rather than relief. The British, who were supposed to return to their home islands, had to stay on to bolster the defenses. The crux of the Army's dilemma was the fact that not all of its men were available for assignment; "the passage of legislation in August 1941 permitting the retention in service of the selectees, Reserve officers, and the National Guardsmen still left the problem of restriction on territorial service—a problem which was to remain with the Army until Pearl Harbor brought a declaration of war."(33)

There was really not too much trouble taking care of the first Army contingent to arrive, a small force of about 1,000 men built around a pursuit squadron and an engineer battalion. Their convoy made port on 6 August and the units, which came under Marston's command, moved into a camp set up for them by the Marines. However, preparations for the arrival of a second Army echelon of brigade strength due in mid-September meant that every Marine available had to turn to on camp construction. It was the difficulties attendant upon the raising of this second force that led to the decision to hold the Marines in Iceland.(34)

The commander of the Army troops of the September echelon was senior to General Marston; according to the original occupation plan, the principle of unity of command was to hold in Iceland, and under it the senior officer present, regardless of service of origin, would have assumed operational control over all American troops. According to this concept, Army Major General Charles H. Bonesteel would simply have superseded General Marston and all hands would have carried on as before. But in the interim between June and September, the Army Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall, had decided that unity of command did not go far enough, at least as far as Iceland was concerned. He determined that if General Bonesteel was to have full responsibility for the American occupation, then he should also have full administrative as well as operational control over all the troops in Iceland.

Such a transfer of the Marines from Navy control could be effected by a executive order, as had been done by President Wilson in the case of the Marines serving in France in World War I. Unfortunately, from the Marines' point of view, this transfer involved a great deal more than a simple change of command. It brought them under the Army's administrative and disciplinary system which differed considerably from that of the Navy and with which they were unfamiliar.

The Commandant, Major General Thomas Holcomb, who had seen the system at work in World War I, protested vigorously. On 4 September he wrote Admiral Stark:

"The proposed change will not only necessitate a complete revision of this plan (unity of command) but would introduce many administrative difficulties, with no corresponding advantages in so far as command relations are concerned. A complete change of the administrative system would again be required when the First Marine Brigade is detached from the Army."(35)

And again on 5 September:

"In view of the existing situation in Iceland and the probable nature of other operations to be conducted by the Navy elsewhere, the proposed plan has many undesirable ramifications. If carried to its logical conclusion, it will mean, at best, frequently shifting Marine units from the Navy to the Army and back again, with much administrative grief. It will probably change our concept of command relations in joint operations."(36)

But it was a losing fight. Marshall stated that he had no intention of establishing a precedent and remained adamant. The Commandant did not learn of the proposed change until it was practically an accomplished fact, and the support he received from the CNO was lukewarm. The actual transfer of command took place on 24 September and General Holcomb was directed to report to the Secretary of War on all matters pertainint to the brigade.(37)

The resultant administrative difficulties did not prove to be as bad as Holcomb and many others had feared. The changeover was more of an annoyance than it was a definite hindrance; after all, as one battalion commander commented later, "while administration difficulties may be bothersome they can be handled."(38) In the course of trying to master Army procedures, General Marston wrote the Assistant Commandant:

"They have a tremendous amount of paper work which the Marine Corps seems able to avoid. The barrage of force orders coming out of staff sections is appalling. Of course we are getting along all right but it will be months before we are oriented in the new direction . . . If the future develops

another situation similar to that of this Brigade in Iceland, I hope that you will be able to have the transfer deferred with at least two months notice so that the officers concerned can get themselves oriented in preparation for the jump."(39)

One of General Bonesteel's first acts as the Commanding General of the new Iceland Base Command was to send a letter of appreciation to the 1st Marine Brigade (Provisional) which extended his "sincere thanks for the splended assistance /given/ in the preparation of the various campsites and in numerous other ways prior to and during our arrival in Iceland. The amount of hard and extended labor involved is fully recognized and deeply appreciated."(40)

The onrush of winter made it necessary for all troops to devote a good part of their time to camp maintenance and weatherizing. And as supplies continued to come in for the depots being built up near Reykjavik, working parties had to be provided to empty ships as well as to construct the storehouses needed to protect the equipment. Days rapidly shortened until there were only four hours of a sort of hazy daylight to accomplish necessary functions.

With the continued requirements for camp construction and preparations for an arctic winter, the brigade was not able to conduct a satisfactory training program.

Every possible opportunity was seized by unit commanders, however, to improve the state of readiness of their men. Many of the specialists, of course, like the communicators, engineers, and service personnel received considerable on-the-job training. While large-scale exercises were not possible, small units operated together as the press of construction allowed. In particular, a considerable amount of range firing of crew-served weapons was accomplished. When the 3d Battalion of the 6th Marines was moved to a camp too far away from Reykjavik to make it feasible to use its men for working parties, the commanders of 1/6 and 2/6 agreed to alternate in furnishing working parties "in order to get in a minimum amount of training."(41) The 3d Battalion, encamped in a pass that lay right in the path of winter winds howling out of the mountains near Hvalfjordur, was forced to "button-up" for the winter almost as soon as it shifted in September.

The lack of adequate unit training has been emphasized by some critics of the Marines' employment in Iceland. Training did not stop; it was hampered and curtailed by the weather and the requirements of working details, but it did go on despite all the very real obstacles. The men, trained and indoctrinated as amphibious assault troops, however, were perturbed when they heard the news of Pearl Harbor while huddled around the stoves in their Nissen huts. Were they to be left forgotten in the wrong ocean?

Once the war broke out in earnest the Navy, too, did not view with favor the employment of a Marine brigade on a defensive mission in Iceland. The Marines were needed in the Pacific and pressure was put on the Army to get them relieved. Plans were laid to send a convoy with 8,000 men from New York on 15 January to provide the brigade's relief and return transportation. But, like so many previous false starts, this was not to be. Several of the ships in this convoy were diverted elsewhere and the resulting troop lift was only enough to relieve one battalion. General Marston picked 3/6, which cheerfully turned over its wind-blown billets to the Army troops and embarked on 28 January. The battalion left Iceland on the 31st and reached New York on 11 February.

A start had been made and the brigade began negotiations to turn over its camps, defense mission, and heavy equipment to the Army. The convoy carrying the final relief put into Reykjavik on 3 March, and the Marines began loading out the following day. At 1010 on 8 March, General Marston closed his CP on shore and opened it on board the USS McCawley; at noon that date the brigade returned to the jurisdiction of the Navy. It is interesting to note that this is the only instance in World War II where a Marine unit was "detached for service with the Army by order of the President." In the many joint operations that followed, all services adhered to the principle of unity of command. General Bonesteel recognized the Marines' dislike for the "detached service" concept but in a final letter to General Marston commended the brigade whose "every officer and enlisted man gave his whole hearted support and cooperation to our efforts to a much greater extent than mere compliance with instructions implied."(42)

The brigade landed at New York on 25 March and was immediately disbanded. The 5th Defense Battalion was ordered to Parris Island, the 6th Marines to the Second Division at Camp Elliott, and the supporting units to their parent organizations wherever those might be.

Thus passed into history an uncomfortable and at times frustrating mission, the military value of which was not clearly apparent at the time. The Marine Corps' expansion program in late 1941 and early 1942 was admittedly hampered by the absence of such a sizeable body of well trained regulars and reserves. The brigade had relieved no appreciable number of British troops, which had been the original purpose of the American occupation. The military value of the Iceland occupation stemmed from rigorous service in the field. In the many scattered and detached posts, heavy responsibilities fell on the shoulders of the young company grade officers and NCOs. Adversity developed and strengthened leadership. Once the brigade reached Iceland there was a minimum rotation of officers and men. This stability of personnel gave the commanders an opportunity, seldom afforded in peacetime, to develop teamwork

and unit esprit de corps. Upon return to the United States, almost all ranks received a promotion and all units of the brigade were drawn on heavily to provide leaders for newly activated units. The 6th Marines furnished large drafts to the raider and parachute battalions, as well as to units of the 2d Division.

The military know-how, discipline, and qualities of leadership developed in Iceland were invaluable in providing cadres of experienced Marines around which to form these new units. As a result, the 6th Marines, which sailed from San Diego for New Zealand in late October 1942, contained only a very small percentage of "Iceland Marines." The military wealth had been shared.

NOTES

(1) Unless otherwise noted the material in this chapter is derived from the 1st MarBrig(Prov) Rept of Activities 16Jun41-25Mar42, 26Mar42; 6th Mar(Reinf) Repts of Activities 25May-30-Nov41, 13Dec41; 5th DefBn Repts of Activities 7Jun41-28Feb42; Correspondence files dealing with Marine occupation of Iceland; J. L. Zimmerman, Notes and MSS on Marine occupation of Iceland (located at NRMC, Job 14051, Box 9, Folders 129-130), hereinafter cited as Zimmerman MSS; Gen O. P. Smith, Diary and Narrative covering the occupation of Iceland, hereinafter cited as Smith Narrative; S. Conn and B. Fairchild, "The Framework of Hemisphere Defense," MS of a now-published volume in the series United States Army in World War II (located at OCMH); B. Fairchild, MS chapters titled "Planning the Iceland Operation: The Army's First Task Force," "Establishing the Iceland Base Command," and "Bermuda and the North Atlantic Bases," part of a now-published volume of the same series; W. L. Langer and S. E. Gleason, The Undeclared War (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), hereinafter cited as Undeclared War.

(2) W. S. Churchill, The Grand Alliance (Boston: Houghton Miffin Company, 1950), 138.

(3) On 16May42 the Parliament announced that Iceland would not renew its union with Denmark and in 1944 the island became in name as well as fact a republic.

(4) J. R. M. Butler, Grand Strategy: Volume II—History of the Second World War (London: HMSO, 1957), 262.

(5) Churchill, loc. cit.

(6) Maj D. B. Drysdale, RM, ltr to LtCol J. L. Zimmerman, 7Sep54, in Zimmerman MSS, folder 130.

(7) Butler, op. cit., 262, 287,402, 469.

(8) Although the location of the eastern boundary of the Western Hemisphere is a subject of debate among geographers, most maps of this period show Iceland as clearly within the Eastern Hemisphere. Secretary Hull, however, remembered associates bringing him maps (at the time Hitler seized Denmark) which showed Greenland wholly and Iceland partly within the Western Hemisphere. The Memoirs of Cordell Hull, 2 vols (New York; The Macmillan Company, 1948), I,73.

(9) Ibid., I, 754.

(10) M. E. Matloff and E. M. Snell, Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare—United States Army in World War II (Washington: OCMH,1953), 46, hereinafter cited as Strategic Planning.

(11) E. Roosevelt and J. P. Lash (eds.), F. D. R.: His Personal Letters 1928-1945, 2 vols (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1950), II 1158.

(12) Langer and Gleason, op. cit., 575.

(13) 6th Mar(Reinf)Repts, op. cit., 1.

(14) "The rule was that (these) men must have been in the service for one year and must have clear records. The other regiments 'played ball' in this respect and we received good men." Smith Narrative, 17.

(15) MajGen H. R. Paige ltr to ACofS, G-3, HQMC, February 1957.

(16) CNO Serial 069312 to CG, 1st MarBrig (Prov), 16Jun41.

(17) Ibid.

(18) G-4 draft memo for TAG, "Transfers of Equipment to the U. S. Marine Corps," 5Jun41.

(19) U. S. Atlantic Flt OPlan F-41, 20Jun41, 1-2.

(20) Msg sent by Prime Minister Herman Jonasson of Iceland to President Roosevelt, 1Jul41.

(21) Quoted in Hull Memoirs, op. cit., II, 947.

(22) S. I. Rosenman (ed), The Public Papers and Address of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 13 vols (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), X, 255-256.

(23) S. E. Morison, The Battle of the Atlantic-September 1939-May 1943-History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1947), 78, hereinafter cited as Battle of the Atlantic.

(24) An estimate of the situation prepared by a special board convened by the brigade shortly after its arrival in Iceland attributed to the Germans the following capabilities: To land in force from air or sea; to conduct bombing attacks; and to conduct raids by surface vessel and submarines. The board concluded, however, that as long as the British Home Fleet operated in superior numbers in the water surrounding Northern Scotland, the Orkney, Shetland, and Faroe Islands it would be impossible for the Germans to support a force of any size in Iceland. 1stMarBrig(Prov) Estimate of the situation (Defense of Iceland), 5Aug41.

(25) "Fuehrer Conferences on Naval Affairs, 1939-1945," Brassey's Naval Annual 1948 (New York: The Macmillan Company,

1948), 220ff. See the transcripts for the conferences of 21-Jun41, 9Jul41, 25Jul41, 17Sep41, and 13Nov41 for the continuity of German policy regarding American shipping.

(26) In a hurricane on 15Jan42, wind velocities of over 125 mph were recorded. It did an enormous amount of damage. Ships were driven on the rocks and huts and other buildings which were not firmly anchored were blown away. Paige, op. cit.

(27) Most of the information on Iceland's climate and terrain was taken from Col L. P. Hunt, "Report of two-day reconnaissance of Iceland, June 12-13, 1941," 18Jun41.

(28) "Our reception by the British has been splendid. They have placed at our disposal all of their equipment and have rationed us for ten (10) days to cover the period of disembarkation." BriGen J. Marston ltr to MGC, 11Jul41.

(29) MajGen J. Marston ltr to ACofS, G-3, HQMC, 31Jan57.

(30) Smith Narrative, 34.

(31) Iceland Force memo IF/168/1/G to CG, 1st MarBrig, 16Jul-41; 1st MarBrig OpOrd No 3-41, 16Jul41.

(32) Churchill, op. cit., 449.

(33) Stategic Planning, 51.

(34) AG memo to ACofS, War Plans Div, 6Sep41. In order to field the force that finally reached Iceland in September, the Army had to draw on posts and stations all over the U. S. AG WrnO to Army commanders concerned, 14Aug41 (located at TAGO).

(35) MGC memo for Adm Stark, 4Sep41.

(36) MGC memo for Adm Stark, 5Sep41.

(37) Presidential directive to SecWar and SecNav, 22Sep41.

(38) MajGen W. A. Worton ltr to CMC, 1Feb57.

(39) BriGen J. Marston ltr to BriGen A. A. Vandergrift, 10Oct-41.

(40) CG, IBC ltr to CG, 1st MarBrig(Prov), 27Sep41, quoted in Zimmerman MSS, Folder 129.

(41) Gen O. P. Smith ltr to ACofS, G-3, 7Feb57.

(42) CG, IBC ltr to CG, 1st MarBrig(Prov), 1Mar42, quoted in Zimmerman MSS, Folder 130.

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Appendix

A German Invasion of Iceland?

The following material was extracted from the file entitled: "Miscellaneous studies and translations, 'German Intentions with regard to Iceland and Greenland', German Naval Archives and Related Records," maintained at the Naval History Division, Washington, D. C.

The question of whether the Germans ever seriously planned to attack Iceland was subsequently resolved by the capture of German naval documents of the War Historical Division of the German Naval Staff at Tambach, Germany. After translation and declassification, this material definitely supports the fact that the German Supreme Command had included Iceland in their plans for further aggression.

The fact that the British landed forces in Iceland in May 1940, did not deter the Germans. June 1940 marked the zenith of German victories in the West. Dunkirk had been evacuated by the British, Paris fell on the 14th of June, and three days later Marshal Petain announced that France had asked for armistice terms. But to go back to May, orders had been given to convert the two large, modern German liners, Bremen and Europa into troopships, as it was intended to use them for landing German troops in Lyngenfjord for the relief of Narvik, Norway, which was then occupied by British troops. When on the 10th of June, the British Government announced the withdrawal of British and French forces from northern Norway, the Germans decided to cancel the conversion of the two liners, but within two days this decision was reversed.

The Commander-in-Chief of the German Navy, Admiral Erich Raeder, received instructions from the German Supreme Command to proceed with the conversion, and, on inquiring by telephone as to the intended plans for the liners, he was told on the afternoon of the 12th of June that the invasion of Iceland was under consideration and was to be given the cover-name ICARUS.

The idea of seizing Iceland originated within the Supreme Command without previous discussion with the German Naval authorities. The immediate reaction of the German Naval War Staff is shown by the following extract from their War Diary, dated 12th of June:

> "The risks involved in conveying troops across a sea area dominated by the enemy are incompatible with any

results to be expected from the occupation."

Apparently a grave doubt was expressed as to whether the troops, once landed, could depend upon further seaborne supplies as the island had no supplies of food other than fish and mutton.

On the 18th of June, the question was discussed between staff officers of the Navy and Air Force. The Air Force officials showed themselves strongly opposed to the landing "as this could only take place if landing strips for bombers and fighters could be provided."

On the 20th of June, Iceland was still in Hitler's mind for it figured among the questions discussed between him and Raeder on that day. The size of the occupation forces is not mentioned in the record of the conference, but there was talk of using six ships to land troops on the west coast of the island, where landing conditions were best. Raeder pointed out that the naval covering force would amount to only one battleship and a few destroyers, for the losses in light craft during the Norwegian operation had been serious, leaving the German surface forces in a weak state.

Finally, on the 2d of July, Hitler issued his first directive for Operation SEALION (the invasion of England) and nothing further was heard of ICARUS.

In July 1943, there was talk of a German Commando raid on the island, but this was dropped, and smaller projects were decided on, involving Greenland, Spitzbergen, and Jan Mayen.

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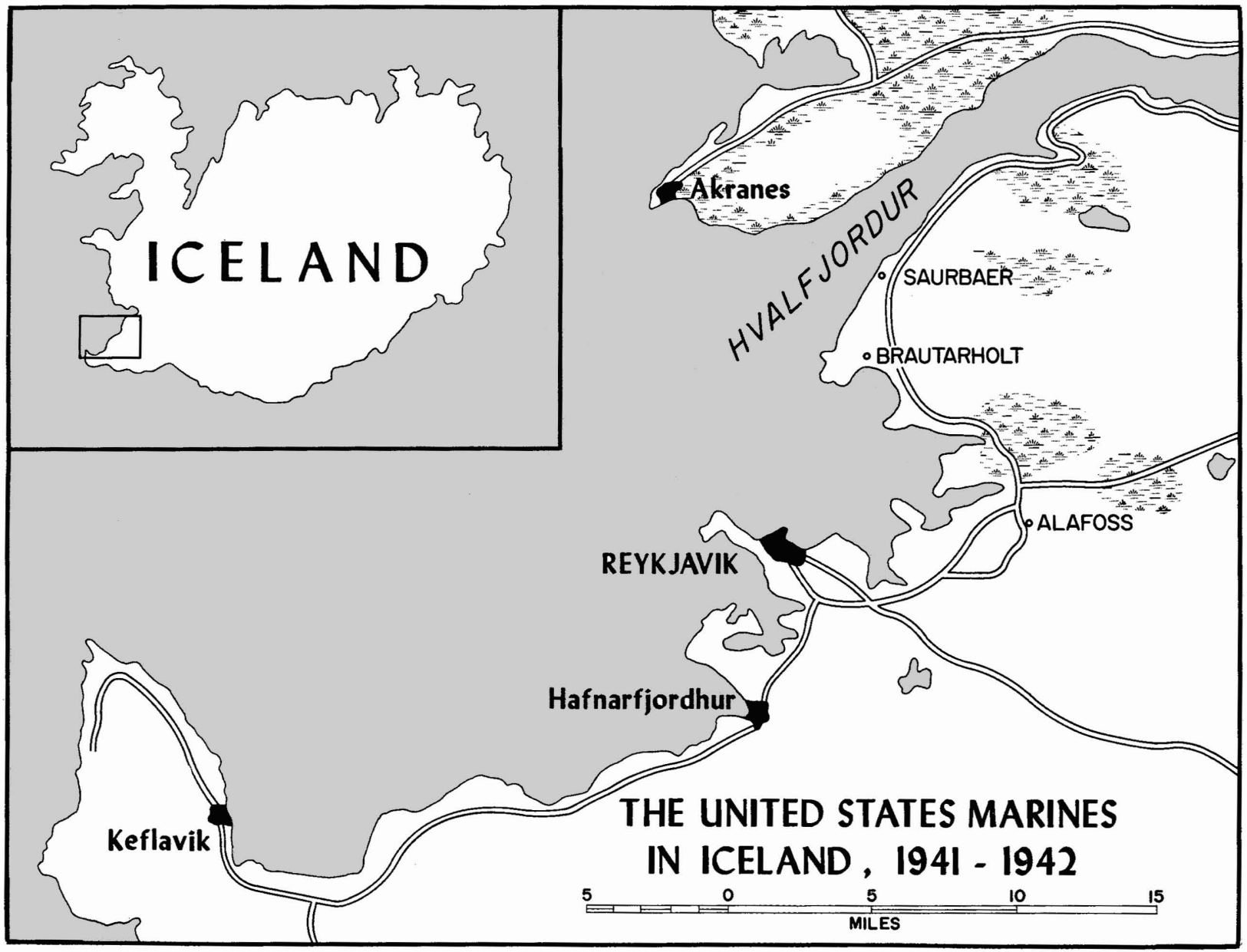
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IN ICELAND, 1941 - 1942
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