

## Commemorative Pamphlet Series

# Outpost in the North Atlantic: Marines in the Defense

reviewed by Robert T. Foley



*In commemoration of World War II's 50th anniversary, the Corps' History and Museums Division is printing a series of historical narratives designed to provide popular, readable accounts of events during the war. Outpost in the North Atlantic is the fourth pamphlet to be issued in this planned 32-volume series.*

Before World War II, Iceland was an autonomous, constitutional monarchy that shared its monarch with Denmark. When Denmark was invaded and occupied by Germany in 1940, Iceland cut all ties with its mother country and declared itself a republic. This left the strategically important island defenseless. Recognizing Iceland's vulnerability and fearing that it might be invaded by the Axis powers, Great Britain moved in a mixed British and Canadian force to forestall occupation by the Axis powers.

By 1941, the United States was aiding beleaguered Britain and was moving towards active involvement in the war. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, believing that the survival of Britain was essential, slowly moved the United States from an isolationist position to one more sympathetic to intervention. The United States patrolled the Western Hemisphere waters for submarines, thus freeing up sorely needed British naval assets for concentration in more important theaters. The United States also agreed to provide for the defense of Greenland.

Following a series of costly set backs in the Mediterranean, Britain found it necessary to ask for U.S. assistance in defending Iceland. Britain was maintaining 25,000 troops and a number of aircraft on Iceland—troops and equipment that were sorely needed in other areas. Roosevelt acquiesced to Churchill's request even though the United States was not yet officially at war and ordered U.S. Marines to Iceland.

The fourth pamphlet in the World War II Commemorative Series published by the Marine Corps Historical Center, *Outpost in the North Atlantic: Marines in the Defense of Iceland*, deals with this first deployment of U.S. troops into what was to become the European Theater of Operations. Written by Col

James A. Donovan, USMC(Ret), who served with the 1st Marine Brigade (Provisional) during its stay in Iceland, the pamphlet provides an excellent account of the life and activity of Marines immediately before the United States' entry into World War II and, most specifically, in Iceland.



The Marines were chosen to go to Iceland for a number of reasons. First, the Army contained conscripts who could not be deployed abroad easily. The Marines, being all volunteers, did not face the same restrictions as the Army. Second, the 6th Marines, who formed the nucleus of the 1st Marine Brigade, were already at sea on their way from the west to the east coast. Roosevelt needed time to wrestle with Congress so that conscripts could be sent overseas. For political reasons, Roosevelt needed to make good on his pledge to Britain and Iceland quickly, so the Marines, the only force available immediately, were sent.

On 22 June, the 1st Marine Brigade (Provisional) left Charleston, SC, for Iceland. Comprised of the 6th Marines and elements of the 10th Marines, 2d Tank Battalion, 5th Defense Battalion, and other support units, the brigade deployed with 4,095 Marines.

The convoy was escorted by two battleships, two cruisers, and numerous destroyers. On 7 July it reached its destination and found a rather stark island that smelled of fish.

The men of the 1st Marine Brigade (Provisional) looked very much like their fathers who had fought in World War I. They wore the forest green service uniform with a greatcoat as their cold weather uniform. Officers wore knee-high leather boots and britches. The men wore spit-shined, double-soled shoes, canvas leggings, and War I-style helmets. They were armed with the World War I Springfield M1903 rifle.

The Marine force on Iceland was to be the forward echelon of U.S. forces deployed there. Once the domestic political situation allowed, Army forces were earmarked to relieve the Marines and the British forces still there on duty. Army units began slowly arriving in August, and by September, MajGen Charles H. Bonesteel, USA, had been appointed as commanding general of the Iceland Base Command. Nevertheless, Marine units were not able to depart until March 1942.

With text and photographs, *Outpost in the North Atlantic* paints a good picture of the life of Marines in Iceland. Col Donovan drew on a wealth of sources in addition to personal experience to make the story come alive. It is especially interesting for its view of the Marine Corps on the eve of the tremendous World War II expansion and as a chronicle of a Marine deployment that was overshadowed by the dramatic events of the years that followed.

Active-duty, Reserve, and retired Marines and accredited researchers and historians may order a copy of *Outpost in the North Atlantic* by mailing \$1.50 for postage and handling to the Marine Corps Historical Foundation, P. O. Box 420, Quantico, VA, 22134. Copies are available for general distribution by mailing \$3.75 to the Superintendent of Documents, P. O. Box 371954, Pittsburgh, PA, 15250 or by calling 202-783-3238.



>Mr. Foley is the Gazette's associate editor.

Marine Corps Gazette • March 1993