ROY S. GEIGER COLLECTION, MARINE CORPS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

ROY S. GEIGER

A Marine For the Ages

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

"Thickset, poker-faced, chill-eyed General Geiger is another Marine's Marine." Time *magazine, October 1944*

He was one of only two Marines to receive the Navy Cross for heroism in both World Wars. He was, and to this day remains, the only Marine to command both an aircraft wing and later an amphibious corps of three divisions that he would lead to victory. He was the only Marine to command a field army. He was Roy S. Geiger, and these things and more are exactly what he accomplished during his 40-year career as a Marine—a Marine who led by example.

A resume that included enlisted Marine, infantry officer and law school graduate. While it might be satisfying at this point to record that Roy Geiger was a natural-born aviator, it would not be accurate.

Above: Roy Geiger played a critical role in the early days of Marine Corps aviation when Marine pilots flew biplanes similar to the one shown here in 1925 as they worked to develop their own proficiency while also developing the Corps' air-ground team. (Roy S. Geiger Collection, Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections)

Left: At the controls of one of the Corps' earliest airplanes, Roy Geiger prepares for his first solo flight at NAS Pensacola in 1917. (Roy S. Geiger Collection, Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections)

The Early Years

It all began with a letter. On Nov. 6, 1915, First Lieutenant Alfred A. Cunningham, the first Marine Corps aviator, wrote to the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Major General George Barnett, in response to the Commandant's request for qualified officers for aviation training. "Having canvassed all those who appear to be suitable for aviation, in order of desirability, I would place Geiger at No. 1 on the list," Cunningham wrote.

There is no record of Cunningham having met Geiger other than casually, nor is there anything suggesting that Roy Geiger had ever requested to retrain as an aviator. Nevertheless, on March 31, 1916, 1stLt Geiger reported for duty at the Naval Aeronautic Station, Pensacola, Fla. He added student naval aviator to his resume. A résumé that included enlisted Marine, infantry officer and law school graduate. While it might be satisfying at this point to record that Roy Geiger was a natural-born aviator, it would not be accurate. What Roy Geiger did was become a superb aviator through the determined application of his lifelong quality of applying himself single-mindedly to everything he set his hand to in a relentless search for excellence. Roy Geiger never gave anything but his best.

In an old black and white photograph, left, taken at Pensacola, Geiger is seated at the controls of a Curtiss AH-13 "pusher," preparing for his first solo flight. While perched upon a flying machine that ap-

pears disturbingly akin to a box kite with wings, Geiger's face wore an expression of calm confidence. His first flight unaccompanied by an instructor was flawless. On June 9, 1917, after additional training in balloons and seaplanes, Geiger received his gold wings to become only the fifth Marine to be designated a naval aviator. At Pensacola, he also pinned on the insignia of a captain and met Miss Eunice Thompson, who would become his wife for the rest of his years.

Shortly after Roy Geiger first donned the wings of a naval aviator, America was at war. Not much later, Geiger, then a temporary major, led Number 7 Squadron of the newly established Day Bombing Group to France. It proved to be a short war, but one in which Roy Geiger would receive the Navy Cross for his leadership in guiding the squadron in bombing attacks against heavily defended targets in German-occupied areas of France. It also formed the basis of a professional belief that never left him: Marines in the air existed to support Marines on the ground. That seed would eventually germinate in the birth of a true combined arms force, the Marine Corps of today, the only such integrated force in the world.

In the post-World War I Marine Corps, that concept wasn't quite so sharp and clear. There were the twin shortages of manpower and money with which to contend. Geiger was undeterred, and in 1919, now in command of Squadron E, the sole Marine Corps aviation element in revolution-ravaged Haiti, he forged ahead. Utilizing a technique known as "glide bombing," Geiger's pilots soon were making marked inroads in the ranks of the Caco rebels who had been tearing Haiti apart. Flying in support of Colonel John H. Russell's 1st Provisional Marine Brigade and the Marine-trained and Marine-led Gendarmerie d'Haiti, the concept of combined air-ground combat made its first appearance in the annals of warfare. It was a small step in what, thanks to Roy Geiger, would become giant strides.

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Above: Lt Geiger began flight training in Pensacola, Fla., in 1916. A year later, he became the fifth Marine to receive his gold wings.

Right: The dedication for Brown Field aboard MCB Quantico was held in May 1922. The field was named for Lt Walter V. Brown, one of two aviators who died in the waters off Quantico during flight training in the early 1920s when LtCol Geiger served as the commanding officer of 1st Aviation Group. (Walter V. Brown Collection, Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections)

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Below: Marine Corps pilots, including Roy Geiger, far left, gather at Quantico in 1923.

Roy Geiger wasn't content to sit back, put up his feet and admire his accomplishments. Always seeking to make aviation a completely balanced tool of Marine Corps combat power, his innate thirst for knowledge and professionalism drove him to the perpetual pursuit of ever-increasing responsibilities of command. In the years to come, Geiger would graduate with distinction from the Army's Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., the Army War College at Carlisle Barracks, Pa. and the Naval War College at Newport, R.I. The man who always

A powerful swimmer and diver, Geiger unhesitatingly threw off his jacket, kicked off his shoes and plunged into the dark, cold waters of the Potomac to find the wreckage of Capt Minnis' Vought VE 7.

described himself as "a Marine with a specialty in aviation" was fast becoming one of the most professionally educated officers in the Marine Corps, with a broad understanding of leading large bodies of men.

None of this is to suggest that Geiger was an egghead, long on theory and short on gunpowder. Nothing more clearly illustrates Geiger's willingness to put his life on the line than an incident that took place at Quantico on Sept. 23, 1921, during Geiger's tour of duty as commanding officer of 1st Aviation Group.

Building upon lessons learned in Haiti, Captain John A. Minnis, one of Geiger's pilots, had failed to recover from his practice dive-bombing attack and plowed directly into the Potomac River under full power. Hearing the crash from his on-base quarters, Geiger was first on the scene. A powerful swimmer and diver, Geiger unhesitatingly threw off his jacket, kicked off his shoes and plunged into the dark, cold waters of the Potomac to find the wreckage of Capt Minnis' Vought VE 7.

All told, it took Roy Geiger 10 dives to clear the wreckage and retrieve the remains of Capt Minnis. Reaching the surface for the tenth time, Geiger was greeted by the base commander, Brigadier General Smedley D. Butler. "Were you able to find the pilot?" BGen Butler inquired. "I've got his body between my legs," Geiger replied. "Please don't ask me to go back down and get the rest of him." Bone weary and on the narrow edge of pneumonia, Geiger waived off medical treatment and remained on the scene until divers recovered Capt Minnis' legs, which had been all but shredded by the force of the engine being driven into them. Two days later, when many other men might have been huddled beside a stove with a cup of hot coffee in hand, Maj Geiger led a memorial flyover at Capt Minnis' funeral.

The Middle Years

The 1920s and 1930s were decades of explosive developments in aviation. New aircraft were practically obsolescent the moment they rolled off the production line. The British-designed, American-built DeHavilland DH-4, a Marine Corps workhorse since the days of the Day Bombing Group in France, gave way to the Vought O2-U before the year 1930

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Above: Roy Geiger poses with his children in one of the Marine Corps' first aircraft in 1923.

Left: Geiger served with the American Legation in Peking, China from 1913 to 1916 before being selected for aviation training.

Geiger's objective would be the same—to make the Marine in the air fully responsive to the Marine on the ground, a two-edged sword that would confront any enemy with combat power directed at him both horizontally and vertically.

appeared on the calendar. The O2-U barely made much more of an appearance than shooting King Kong from the top of New York's Empire State Building in a motion picture than a newcomer, the Grumman Aircraft Company, introduced its F3F. The F3F, despite its enclosed cockpit and its retractable landing gear, would prove to be the last of its breed, a biplane fighter.

If you put enough quarters in the machine, eventually, you may hit the jackpot. Grumman managed to do that when it introduced the F4F Wildcat. A barrel-bodied, mid-wing monoplane that featured truly useful folding wings for space-saving below-deck storage, pilot-protecting armor and self-sealing fuel tanks arrived just in time to play an essential role in a new war that many in the Marine Corps and the Navy feared would come to the Pacific.

As each of these new tools of war entered the Marine Corps inventory, Geiger was there to shepherd them into usefulness as a component of his concept of a fully integrated air-ground combat arm. Advances in radio technology, which only a few years before had been considered unattainable, made air-to-air and air-to-ground communications an increasing reality.

Under Geiger's guidance, operational capabilities that had existed only in theory, the Direct Air Support Center (DASC), the Tactical Air Control Party (TACP), and the Forward Air Controller (FAC) jumped from the theoretical to the earliest beginnings of testing. In agreement with many in the Marine Corps and Navy, deeply concerned with the ever-increasing threat of war with Japan in the Pacific, Geiger was a forceful advocate for Marine Corps aviators becoming

The United States Marine Legation Rifle Team in Peking, China, 1914. Roy Geiger was a crack shot prior to becoming an aviator. (Roy S. Geiger Collection, Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections)

aircraft carrier qualified. If Marines were to be confronted by an enemy force on the many islands that would be the battlefield, they would need to be supported by Marines in the air above them from the beginning. Always, Geiger's objective would be the same—to make the Marine in the air fully responsive to the Marine on the ground, a two-edged sword that would confront any enemy with combat power directed at him both horizontally and vertically.

The influence of Roy Geiger, now a colonel, became increasingly a factor in the annual Fleet Landing Exercises (FLEX) conducted in the Caribbean during the middle and late 1930s. Under his dynamic leadership, Marine Corps aviation began to play an ever-increasing role in support of Marines on the ground. This blending of aviation and ground assets would arrive just in time, for time was growing short.

The Cactus Air Force

On Sunday, Dec. 7, 1941, the war that many in the Marine Corps and Navy had long anticipated became a reality. In one day, the Japanese pre-emptive strike against America's Pacific Fleet at anchor in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, nearly destroyed America's naval power west of San Francisco. For the next six months, America could only fight doggedly on the defensive.

Slowly, the tide turned, and by midsummer 1942, America struck back launching its first counter-blow in the deep South Pacific, and then-Brigadier General Roy Geiger, Commanding General, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (1st MAW), was in the thick of it in the Solomons on the island of Guadalcanal.

The Japanese had begun construction of an airfield on the south side of Guadalcanal that could pose an unacceptable threat to the only practicable shipping route between America's West Coast and New Zealand and Australia. But the Japanese had been caught short and unprepared with nothing but a relative handful of construction troops on the island when Major General Alexander A. Vandegrift's 1st Marine Division surprised them on Aug. 7, 1942. Landing unopposed, the 1stMarDiv quickly had all objectives in hand, and Marine engineers and Sailors from Navy construction battalions, known as Seabees, immediately set about completing the airfield the Japanese had started.

The Marines of Headquarters Squadron, 1st MAW and their commanding general, BGen Roy S. Geiger, third from right, on Guadalcanal in 1942. (Roy S. Geiger Collection, Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections)

Two days later, Roy Geiger had his 1st MAW staff up and running on the partially completed airfield that had been dubbed Henderson Field, in honor of Major Lofton Henderson, USMC, who had been killed in action during the battle for Midway Island several months earlier. Due to wartime censorship requirements, however, Geiger's men continued to use the island's code name of Cactus.

At Henderson Field, the Japanese struck back viciously, and in the beginning, Geiger had few assets to stop them. While he had the airfield and a staff that functioned like a well-oiled machine, what the CG of 1st MAW couldn't field many of were aircraft. The skies above "Cactus" were exclusively Japanese, and they used this advantage like a bludgeon.

Each day, bombers from the major Japanese base at Rabaul on the island of New Britain, the northernmost of the Solomon Chain, plastered Henderson

BGen Geiger and his staff planning the Bougainville assault in 1943.

ROY S. GEIGER COLLECTION, MARINE CORPS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Field with bombs. As quickly as Marine engineers and Navy Seabees repaired the damage, their work was just as quickly destroyed.

Following the disastrous naval engagement of Savo Island that sent four cruisers—three American and one Australian—to the bottom, the Japanese enjoyed unopposed access to the waters around Guadalcanal. Then, in addition to the daily visits by Japanese bombers, the island was pounded nightly by heavy Japanese surface units, battleships and cruisers. In one night alone, Henderson Field was battered by more than 1,200 rounds of 14-inch and 10-inch naval gunfire. The Marines could do little more than crouch in holes in the ground and hope for the best.

Roy Geiger and his staff had it a bit better. With all the above-ground facilities obliterated by Japanese bombs and shells, the 1st MAW staff had been forced to set up shop in a cave, catching what moments of sleep that could be had in whatever corner was available. They survived as did every Marine on Guadalcanal on two meals each day, predominantly captured Japanese rations of rice and fish. Their commander, a major general now, shared these privations with them.

Slowly—agonizingly slowly—the situation began to improve bit by bit. Geiger now had some assets to fight back with. Each day brought new hope as Marine, Navy, Army Air Forces and Royal New Zealand Air Force elements made their ways to Henderson Field. Roy Geiger was now the commander of an interservice, international air command. The tide began to turn.

The airfield itself continued to be a problem. With the runway still only half-finished, landings and takeoffs were described by one Marine pilot as "a cloud of dust in dry weather," and "barely less than a swamp when it rained."

At 57 years old, Geiger solved that problem in his usual fashion. Leading by example, he took the controls of a fully armed Douglas SBD dive bomber (The "Speedy D"), sent it bouncing, lurching and splashing through the rain-soaked runway and into the air. After delivering the bomb load squarely on the intended target, Geiger returned and without comment, went back to the business of commanding.

The lesson of leadership by example was not lost on the pilots of Henderson Field, who quickly took on an attitude of "if the old man can do it, I can do it," and began to speak proudly of themselves as the Cactus Air Force. They began sweeping the sky above of Japanese as well.

The Japanese still had one card to play, though, and they played it at a time when MajGen Vandegrift was in far off New Caledonia immersed in a planning conference with Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, the commander in chief of all

A Japanese bomber scores a direct hit on the hangar at Henderson Field on Guadalcanal in 1942. (Frederick R. Findtner Collection, Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections)

forces in the Southwest Pacific. MajGen Geiger was in command of all Marines, air and ground alike, on Guadalcanal.

On Dec. 12, 1942, the Japanese threw their Sunday punch. In a well-coordinated attack supported by air and naval gunfire, the Japanese launched an entire brigade at Lieutenant Colonel Merritt A. Edson's 1st Raider Battalion, holding the line on a ridge leading directly to the airfield. In a savage fight that lasted for two days, the Japanese were tantalizingly close to reaching their goal, only for their effort to be smashed when MajGen Geiger deployed his only reserve at just the right time and place to turn the situation around completely. The wrecked attack would prove to be the final Japanese offensive action of the Pacific War.

For Roy Geiger, there would be a second award of the Navy Cross and a well-deserved reassignment as Director of Aviation at Headquarters Marine Corps.

Amphibious Corps Commander

Admiral William F. "Bull" Halsey, USN, Commander South Pacific, and his war plans officer, Brigadier General William E. Riley, USMC, were contemplating a problem in the summer of 1943. The Marine Corps, still short of what would eventually be its wartime strength of 500,000, had still expanded to a point where multi-division operations were now possible. The commander of one such force, the renowned and highly respected Holland M. Smith, was the obvious choice for one of these, the newly designated Second Amphibious Corps (II AC). Who would be the best choice for the other? ADM Halsey later wrote about it in his autobiography.

"I discussed it with my War Plans Officer, Brig. Gen. William E. Riley of the Marines. Bill said he would go to his room and think it over. I said I'd do the same. In a very few seconds, the name of the ideal man popped into my mind, and I headed for Bill's room. He and I met halfway. His first words were, "I have the very man!" As casually as I could manage, I replied, "You mean Roy Geiger, of course."

What, an aviator in command of an amphibious corps? Bull Halsey and Roy Geiger would be working closely together to bring the war to the Japanese, and the two held a mutual respect and admiration for each other. ADM Halsey's recommendation was heartily approved by both the Commandant of the Marine Corps and the Chief of Naval Operations. Roy Geiger was appointed as commander of the I Marine Amphibious Corps (I MAC).

LOUIS R. JONES COLLECTION, MARINE CORPS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Army LTG Simon B. Buckner and MajGen Geiger on Okinawa in April 11, 1945. Buckner was killed two months later, and Geiger assumed command of the Tenth Army.

The story of the Marine Corps' war in the Pacific fills volumes in libraries. What has not been told is the extent of Roy Geiger's role in that war. Few commanders have been confronted with the problems of coordinating large forces spread over such a tremendous geographic area. Roy Geiger did that with consummate skill, even while his force was enlarged to three Marine Divisions—1st, 2nd, and 6th—in the midst of it.

While there was no such thing as an "easy" campaign in the Pacific War, fought in so many places where nature itself was every bit as hostile as the Japanese, Geiger's first mission, evicting the Japanese from Guadalcanal's neighbor Bougainville, proved to be the least difficult. The same could not be said of his next campaign, one that would see a portion of his force heavily engaged in reclaiming Guam in the Mariana Islands. At the same time, one of his divisions battled Japanese on the island of Peleliu, hundreds of sea miles to the south in the Palau Group. Shuttling from one battlefield to the other to coordinate with his tactical commanders and get a firsthand view of the progress being made, Geiger kept to a schedule that would have inspired a lesser man to consider retirement.

With the arrival of the year 1945, America's relentless drive across the Pacific had sent Japan staggering back on its heels. After 37 blood-soaked days of intense, around-the-clock combat on Iwo Jima Island, Holland M. Smith's redesignated V AC had opened the door to day and night bombing of Japan's home islands. The stage was now set for the final act—the invasion of Japan proper—but where a force large enough to undertake such a mission could be assembled remained an unanswered question. There was no choice other than Okinawa.

The Japanese were well aware that

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Okinawa, and only Okinawa, was the doorway to Japan itself, and they had planned accordingly. To defend Okinawa, Japan sent Lieutenant General Mitsuru Ushijima and an army of 100,000 battle-tested troops.

They would be opposed by the 180,000 Americans of Lieutenant General Simon B. Buckner's Tenth Army composed of Major General John Hodge's XXIV Army Corps and Roy Geiger's I AC. The three had all served together in the past and held each other in high regard. So high was LTG Buckner's regard for Geiger that he designated him as his successor in command of Tenth Army should he himself become a casualty. The three made a good team and worked closely together throughout the planning phase.

The Okinawa campaign began on April 1, 1945, in what seemed at first a walkover when XXIV Corps and I AC came ashore unopposed on the western beaches of Okinawa. That condition did not last long, for Mitsuru Ushijima planned to make his fight on the Shuri Heights that stretched entirely across the central section of the island, dominating everything to the north. The Japanese lost no time in transforming the heights into an interconnected defense system, surveying and registering every foot of ground to their front for the fires of artillery and heavy mortars. Any man who ventured into that contested ground immediately became a target. The Shuri defenses became the site of relentless combat that went on and on, day after endless day.

On June 18, while visiting an observation post of one of Roy Geiger's forward units, the 8th Marine Regiment, Gen Buckner and his party were seen by a sharp-eyed Japanese artillery forward observer in the ruins of Shuri Castle. Taken under fire immediately, Gen Buckner was killed by a near-direct hit of a single 150 mm artillery round.

In accordance with Gen Buckner's directive, Geiger assumed command of Tenth Army, making him to this day, the first and only Marine to command a field army. The following day, Geiger was promoted to the rank of lieutenant general, becoming the senior Marine Corps aviation officer in the bargain.

There remained the problem of the Shuri defenses stretching entirely across Okinawa from east to west. Geiger planned to overcome these defenses, not by battering away at the heart of the Japanese position, Shuri Castle itself. Rather, he would seek to overcome the anchors of the Shuri Line, Conical Hill on the east and the trio of hills that secured the line on the west, Sugarloaf, Half Moon and Horseshoe.

In a coordinated, simultaneous attack supported by intense air and naval gunfire assets, XXIV Corps' 96th Infantry Division managed to infiltrate behind Conical Hill and take it from the rear. At the same time, MajGen Lemuel C. Shepherd's 6thMarDiv, likewise supported, brought down Sugarloaf, Half Moon and Horseshoe.

ROY S. GEIGER COLLECTION, MARINE CORPS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Roy S. Geiger died of lung cancer shortly before his planned retirement in January 1947 and was later posthumously promoted to four star general.

Under the cover of darkness and in a drenching downpour, the Japanese began withdrawing from the Shuri defenses. There would yet be another month of fighting, but the issue on Okinawa had been decided. In mid-July, the last remaining Japanese troops on Okinawa, barely more than 5,000 men out of an army of 100,000, put down their arms and surrendered. Less than two months later, Japan itself would surrender, and Roy Geiger would move on to his next assignment as Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force Pacific (FMF PAC) in Hawaii. Sadly, it would be his last posting.

An Ending

Throughout 1946, Geiger had been plagued by an increasingly deep and ever more painful cough. On Nov. 15, 1946, he turned over the command of FMF PAC and departed for HQMC to prepare for his retirement, but fate intervened. Ever aware of his worsening condition, he entered the National Naval Medical Center at Bethesda, Md. In the presence of his wife and family, Roy Geiger died quietly of lung cancer on Jan. 23, 1947. By a special act of Congress, he was posthumously promoted to the rank of general, only the second Marine to wear four stars. He is interred today in Virginia's Arlington National Cemetery. His wife, Eunice Thompson Geiger, rests beside him.

What was Roy Geiger's legacy? What did he leave the Marine Corps? What Roy Geiger left behind is nothing less than what he fought so long to establish—he is responsible for today's Marine Corps, an integrated air-ground combat force that no other country on earth can equal.

Author's note: The only other Marine to receive the Navy Cross in World War I and World War II was John J. Nagazyna. As a gunnery sergeant in the 6th Marine Regiment, Nagazyna was awarded the Navy Cross for heroic actions at Soissons, France, in July 1918. Nagazyna received his second Navy Cross when, as sergeant major of 3rd Battalion, 22nd Marines, he organized and led a countercharge that destroyed a Japanese attack on the island of Eniwetok in 1944.

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