The Strange Case of Edmund Chamberlain
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The Strange Case of Edmund Chamberlain

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"If he had been attached to my command I would not have hesitated to commend him for the Victoria Cross."

—Maj O. M. Vancours, MC, DFC, Royal Air Force

"I therefore have the honor to recommend that Congress be asked to promote Lieutenant Chamberlain to the rank of Captain, [and] that he be given a Medal of Honor."

—George Barnett, Major General Commandant
United States Marine Corps

1 Feb. 1921

An official letter from the Secretary of the Navy to Captain Edmund G. Chamberlain, USMC, dated 1 Feb. 1921, carried these words: "The GCM [General Court-Martial] before which you were tried at London, England, by order of the Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Operating in European Waters, found you guilty of 'Scandalous conduct tending to the destruction of good morals' (2 specifications, one proved), and II. 'Falsehood' and adjudged the following sentence: 'The court therefore sentences him, Capt Edmund G. Chamberlain, U.S. Marine Corps, to be dismissed from the United States Marine Corps and from the United States Naval Service.'

"The President on 31 January 1921, confirmed the sentence of the General Court-martial in your case.

"You are hereby dismissed from the naval service of the U.S."

Who was Edmund Chamberlain? What had brought an officer once considered worthy of receiving highest awards for military valor from both America and Great Britain to where he now stood?

Edmund Gillette Chamberlain was born into a life of privilege, the son of a prominent San Antonio family, his father a successful banker with connections in the highest levels of finance and government. Born in 1891 and educated at Princeton and the University of Texas, he was one of the first to answer the call when America went to war in 1917. On 28 April 1917, only weeks after President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress for a Declaration of War against Germany, Chamberlain was appointed a second lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps.

Four days later, Chamberlain reported to the commander of Marine Flying Field, Philadelphia, as a student naval aviator. His further assignment to the 1st Aviation Squadron proved to be the first stop in a bewildering odyssey.

First, there was initial flight training at Philadelphia, an apprenticeship of sorts that saw Chamberlain become only the seventh Marine to be designated as a Naval Aviator. In September 1917, Chamberlain and the entire 1st Aviation Sqd received further training at the Army Aviation School located at Hazelhurst Field, Mineola, Long Island, N.Y.

After qualifying as a Junior Military Aviator, Chamberlain was on the road again, this time to Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps and then to further training at the Army's Gerstner Field at Lake Charles, La. Chamberlain next reported in to what was coming to be called Marine Flying Field, Miami, where Major

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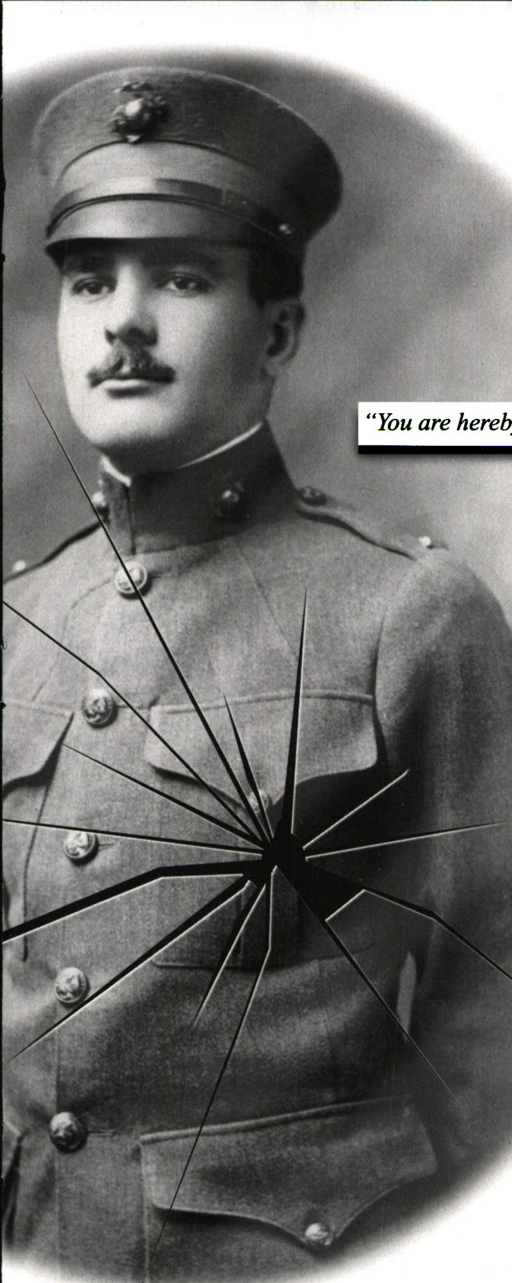

Roy S. Geiger had been sent by Major General Commandant George Barnett to organize a flying school.

For Maj Geiger, the assets didn't quite match the mission. The Marine Corps' entire aircraft inventory could have been housed in a hangar. There were no instructors. But aviation pioneer Glenn H. Curtiss did have a flying school at Miami. Roy Geiger, an inventive man who in a later war would wear the three stars of a lieutenant general and command Marines and soldiers in the Pacific, arranged for Curtiss' civilian instructors to be commissioned as Reserve officers, requisitioned the school's aircraft and started training Marine pilots. The 1st Aviation Force was born. Included on the roster of pilots was Edmund Chamberlain.

Chamberlain's stay at Miami was a brief one. The 1st Aviation Force was bound for France. After bouncing up and down the East Coast for more than eight months, Edmund Chamberlain crossed the Atlantic in USS *DeKalb* in May 1918 and reported for duty at Naval Aviation Headquarters in Paris. He saw little more of Paris than the Eiffel Tower before moving to Pauillac for duty with Maj Alfred A. Cunningham's newly designated Day Wing, Northern Bombing Group.

"You are hereby dismissed from the naval service of the U.S."

Before Edmund Chamberlain learned how to properly pronounce Pauillac (Po-ee-yack), he found himself at Frethun near the French-Belgian border assigned to 218 Squadron, Royal Air Force.

That was the handiwork of Alfred Cunningham. With no more assets in France than Roy Geiger had in Florida, Cunningham, the Marine Corps' first aviator, had been forced to scrounge for everything from tents and cots to airplanes and engines. Two RAF squadrons, 217 and 218, were near Dunkirk in the north of France. They were flying the same aircraft Cunningham's Marines would eventually be taking to the air in, DeHavilland DH-4s. With a bit of extemporaneous swapping and trading, Cunningham had his pilots fed into the British squadrons for some highly unusual on-the-job training.

Eventually built in America by the Dayton-Wright Aircraft Company, the DH-4 would be a mainstay of Marine Corps aviation for another 10 years. But the early model of the DH-4 that greeted Edmund Chamberlain had acquired the unfortunate nickname of "The Flaming Coffin" for its tendency to turn into a fireball when hit.

In 15 bombing raids over German-held areas of Belgium, Chamberlain flew the DH-4 exceedingly well, earning praise from the commanding officer of 218 Squadron for his flying skills, tactical excellence and leadership abilities. Flying alongside his British comrades in arms to attack German naval installations, submarines and surface combatants in the Zeebrugge area, Chamberlain was an aggressive pilot, boring in to place bombs on target despite intense antiaircraft fire.

When his monthlong exchange tour with 218 Squadron ended in July 1918, Chamberlain's record carried official comments: "Lieutenant Chamberlain has proved himself an experienced pilot at all altitudes over enemy territory, and his capabilities as a war pilot are excellent. On one occasion returning from Bruges,

First Lt Edmund G. Chamberlain, WW I Marine aviator, educated at Princeton and the University of Texas—was he the real deal? (Photo courtesy of Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret))

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Everyone else involved was running scared and keeping mum, and there was a great deal of pressure from on high.

he was shelled continuously for 45 minutes and, although six of our machines were shot out of action, but returned safely, he was undisturbed and out for another job. It is with regret that I part with the services of this officer."

For someone experiencing combat for the first time it was not a bad recommendation. Chamberlain may have been the son of privilege, but from all appearances he was a genuine tough guy, coolheaded and to borrow from Rudyard Kipling, a "first-class fighting man." The whole tale began to veer off into something out of an adventure novel.

On 26 July 1918, his tour of duty with 218 Squadron, RAF concluded, Chamberlain was in Paris awaiting further orders when he had a chance encounter with a group of British flying officers. His casual mention that he had recently flown with 218 Squadron in the Northern Sector brought an invitation from the other pilots to visit their squadron in a different part of the Western Front. Chamberlain wanted to accept, but was unsure if he needed official authorization.

The place to obtain such authorization was Headquarters, U.S. Naval Forces Operating in European Waters, where he was directed to the office of Capt J. H. Cone, USN, Commander, Aviation Forces, Foreign Service. After explaining the situation, Chamberlain was told, "I have no right officially to let you go, but you can go unofficially."

Chamberlain arrived at the British airfield at Touquin after dark and was given a bunk in a tent for the night. In the morning, he was introduced all around and, upon meeting the squadron commander, asked if it might be possible to "try just a little hop about the field" in one of the squadron's Sopwith Camel fighters. Chamberlain had undergone a brief familiarization with the Camel and was eager to try one in the air.

The squadron commander was willing to go one better. Chamberlain could fly over the lines with the morning patrol. Wearing borrowed flight gear, he climbed into the cockpit after a sketchy mission briefing and was into the air with the rest of the patrol.

The patrol was uneventful, affording Chamberlain little more than the opportunity to pilot a new aircraft and practice his formation flying. Invited to take part in the afternoon patrol as well, Chamberlain gladly accepted, but if he had hoped to see any action, he was to be disappointed.

The day's second patrol was as uneventful as the first. The following day had the promise of something a bit more stimulating. The squadron was to escort a flight of French bombers over a hotly defended target. Chamberlain could go along.

The next day, 28 July 1918, Edmund Chamberlain became an ace, downing five German fighters in a single engagement. It was one of the swirling dogfights typical of aerial combat in World War I. With his engine sputtering on and off and with one of his two machine guns intermittently malfunctioning, the Marine shot three enemy aircraft out of the sky, blew up a fourth in a fireball and hemstitched the upper wing of a fifth so badly that it crumpled, sending the Albatross fighter into the ground upside down.

Chamberlain wasn't quite finished for the day. With his own plane sporting an impressive number of holes, and with its engine now completely lifeless, he dead-sticked the notoriously tail-heavy Camel into a tangle of wreckage somewhere in between the French and German lines.

No sooner had he extricated himself from the pile of junk that had been an airplane than he was confronted by three German infantrymen. Like most Marines, Edmund Chamberlain was aware that the alternative meaning of "Semper Fidelis" is "Improvise and Simulate." Duping his assailants into thinking he held a hand grenade, he set two of them hightailing it for home and convinced the third to surrender. Then he set out for the French lines, herding his prisoner ahead of him, stopping on the way to pick up a wounded French soldier who was duly delivered to an aid station.

A call to Touquin from a borrowed French field telephone brought a car to deliver Chamberlain back to the field. Once there Chamberlain, the squadron commander and everyone else involved began to have second thoughts about the whole business. True, Chamberlain had pulled off an amazing feat of arms. On the other hand, there was that little matter of a crashed British fighter aircraft piloted by an American who wasn't officially authorized to fly it, never mind fly it in combat.

Somehow the whole incredible story found its way to the front pages of newspapers around the world. The saga of the flying Marine made the newspapers from Paris to London to New York to San Antonio to San Francisco. It was even the lead article in the *Straits Times* in far-off Singapore.

Ordered by Capt Francis T. "Cocky" Evans, the Marine commander at Pauillac, to write an official statement, Chamberlain recorded the entire event from his meeting with the party of

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British airmen in Paris to his return to Touquin after crash-landing between the lines. Ordered as well to obtain a statement from Maj O. M. Vancours, the RAF squadron commander, Chamberlain complied, turning in the report as soon as it was received.

But skeptical voices were beginning to ask questions. Had Chamberlain's escapade really happened, or was it all an elaborate hoax? RAF records indicated there were no Sopwith Camel or SE-5 aircraft at the Touquin airfield. Queries made with the RAF failed to disclose the presence of a Maj Vancours at Touquin. The handwriting of the statement of the supposed Maj Vancours resembled Chamberlain's own handwriting. No one who could corroborate Chamberlain's claims came forward.

Everyone else involved was running scared and keeping mum, and there was a great deal of pressure from on high. Eventually all that pressure resulted in a charge sheet directing Chamberlain to stand trial by General Court-Martial for violation of "The Articles for the Government of the Navy," Article 8, Section 1, "Falsehood" and "Scandalous conduct tending to the destruction of good morals." It would be one of the longest-running courts-martial on record, lasting from early 1919 to late 1920.

Chamberlain's defense counsel, Lieutenant Commander Frederick H. Allen, USN, pulled out all the stops in Chamberlain's defense. Despite every government effort to bar evidence in Chamberlain's behalf, LCDR Allen produced records indicating that there were in fact Sopwith Camel and SE-5 aircraft at Touquin airfield on the dates Chamberlain claimed to have been there. There were records confirming Maj Vancours' presence at Touquin.

LCDR Allen's personal inspection of the Touquin airfield found it conformed exactly to Chamberlain's description. A handwriting analyst testified that the similarities between Chamberlain's handwriting and that on the statement of Maj Vancours were minimal. French civilians provided statements confirming the crash of a British aircraft at the spot where Chamberlain claimed to have gone down. Two French sisters who operated the inn used as a billet and mess by British airmen at Touquin positively identified Chamberlain as being present on the dates in question.

The official records of French Army units in the area confirmed the delivery of a wounded French soldier and a German prisoner by a "foreign airman." British Capt E. V. Braine, aide-de-camp to General Smythe-Osborne, who had been at Touquin in late July 1918, told LCDR Allen that an RAF squadron commander might have allowed Chamberlain to fly combat missions, but would not admit to it.

Capt Braine went on to say that a squadron commander might tell LCDR Allen in private the details of such information, but would not permit the information to be used officially. Not being at Touquin officially, Capt Chamberlain should not have been permitted to fly. As far as the RAF was concerned Chamberlain was a nonperson.

In the end, Edmund Chamberlain was convicted as charged, and although vigorous appeals were made by his father, he was in effect taken to the front door, pointed toward the road and told to never come back.

Where does a man convicted of "Fraud" and "Scandalous Conduct" go when he has been cast out of the Marine Corps in disgrace? Chamberlain followed his father into banking, where there must have been some satisfaction in knowing he had a long and distinguished career.

Upon his retirement in 1960, he was the executive vice president of the Fauquier Savings and Loan Association of Warrenton, Va., and assistant general manager of the United States government's Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corporation, Washington, D.C.

Edmund Gillette Chamberlain died at his home on West View Farm, Broad Run, Va., on 13 Jan. 1964. After cremation, his ashes were retained for eventual burial with his widow upon her death. The story should have concluded then, but more than 40 years after his death there are still those nagging questions.

Why did the government fight to keep LCDR Allen's evidence in Edmund Chamberlain's behalf from being entered into the record of the court-martial? Why was the RAF suddenly silent with regards to the events of 28 July 1918? If Chamberlain invented his aerial exploit for the purpose of self-promotion, why did he keep silent about it until ordered to write an official report?

COURTESY OF THE LEE HARRIS COLLECTION, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF NAVAL AVIATION

Chamberlain completed some of his flight training at Naval Air Station Bay Shore, Long Island, N.Y. The Navy took control of Bay Shore from the New York Naval Militia in 1917 and used it as a seaplane training station until May 1920.

If Chamberlain had a shameful secret to hide, why did his son, Edmund G. Chamberlain Jr., proclaim, "My father had a justified sense of pride and accomplishment in his service as a Marine Corps aviator"?

And the most nagging question of all: How did a man who left the Marine Corps in disgrace come to eventually occupy a high appointive position of trust in the federal banking regulatory system?

Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua, a Leatherneck *contributing editor, is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars. Later in his career, he was an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va.*

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