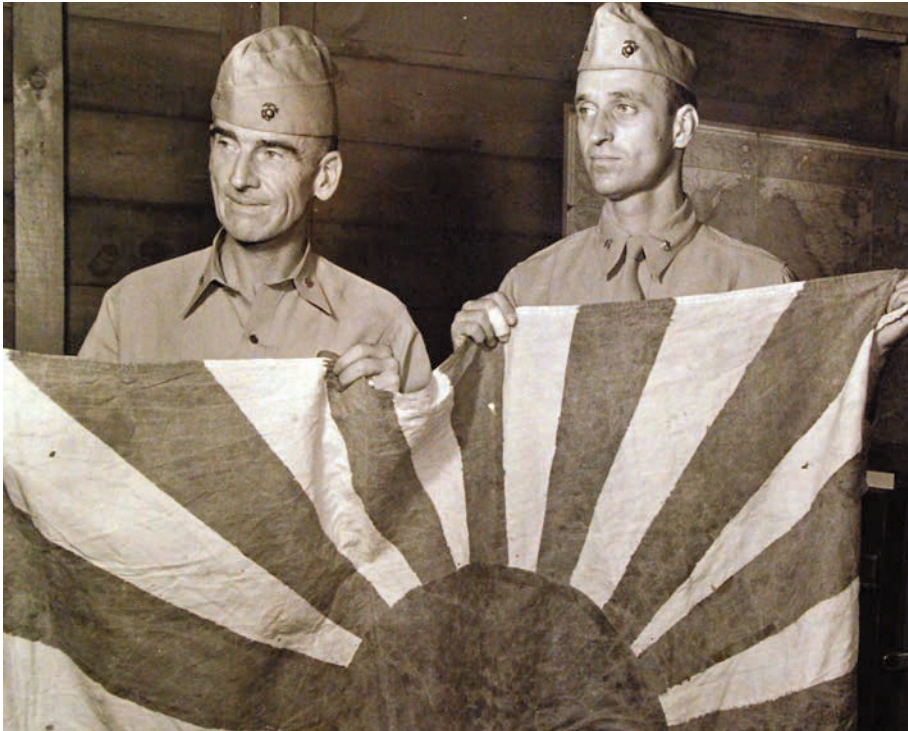


The Forgotten Marine

The Legacy of James Roosevelt, Marine Corps Innovator And Navy Cross Recipient



LtCol Evans F. Carlson, left, and Maj James Roosevelt hold a Japanese flag taken from the Japanese headquarters after the raid on Makin.

By LCpl Evan F. Weiss, USMC

Editor's note: The following article is the first-place winner of the Leatherneck Writing Contest. Maj Richard A. "Rick" Stewart, USMC (Ret) sponsored the contest, which is open to enlisted Marines, through the Marine Corps Association and Foundation. Upcoming issues of Leatherneck will feature the second- and third-place winners as well as other submissions.

Bespectacled, lanky, balding and flat-footed, he certainly did not convey the image of a fighting man, let alone that of a United States Marine. Then again, he was no average Marine. He was the son of the President of the United States.

James Roosevelt, the oldest of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt's four boys, joined the Marine Corps in 1936 under rather ignominious circumstances. Having been

given a lieutenant colonel's commission—no doubt arranged by his father—Roosevelt at first avoided the rigorous training and indoctrination that officer candidates were required to undergo, much to the quiet outrage of his fellow Marines.

Roosevelt felt overwhelmed as an untested lieutenant colonel in the world's most elite fighting force, later reflecting, "I was totally out of my depth. I didn't know what I was doing." So out of his depth was he that three years later, Roosevelt resigned his "honorary" commission and joined the Marine Corps Reserve at the lower and more fitting grade of captain. Given his inauspicious beginnings, it is no surprise that his command viewed Roosevelt as a Marine "in name only."

History must forgive these critics as nobody could have imagined that the awkward and oft-underachieving Roosevelt would go on to play a central role in the development of one of the nation's

first special forces battalion—the Marine Raiders—while being awarded a Navy Cross for valor during the famed raid on the Makin Atoll.

Like so many other Americans, the turning point in Roosevelt's life and career came when the Japanese empire attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Anticipating a large-scale war, Roosevelt immediately sought the influence of his father. Only he was not looking to avoid the impending conflict; on the contrary, Roosevelt demanded his father's assistance in order to obtain a combat billet.

No doubt reminded of his son's lackluster academic performance and unremarkable foray into the business world—despite amassing moderate wealth in the insurance industry, James became mired in controversy when accusations arose that he used his official White House position to acquire clients for his private firm—President Roosevelt likely questioned James' judgment and abilities. He admired his son's desire to fight but understandably wanted to do all that he could to protect him from harm.

The President reasoned that James would be an ideal counterpart to Major Evans F. Carlson, who was tasked with forming small, specialized units of Marines to gather intelligence on the Japanese army and execute small offensive operations aimed at disrupting the enemy and boosting American morale. In his role as Maj Carlson's executive officer, James would lend political credibility to Carlson's attempt to advance a style of warfare that was, at the time, unfamiliar and off-putting to many of the Marine Corps senior leaders.

Meanwhile, Carlson—who had become a close and trusted friend of President Roosevelt while leading a detachment of Marines assigned to the White House—would keep a watchful eye on the President's oldest son.

If history has downplayed the role that Evans Carlson played in essentially designing the military's modern-day special forces model, it has all but omitted Roosevelt's involvement in the process. Perhaps no document was more important

to the creation of the first Marine Raider battalion, originally referred to as “Carlson’s Raiders,” than a January 1942 memo penned by James Roosevelt to the leadership of the Marine Corps entitled “Development within the Marine Corps of a Unit for Purposes Similar to the British Commandos and the Chinese Guerillas.”

In his influential treatise, Roosevelt advocated “an outfit based on Carlson’s observations of the Communist Eighth Route Army’s notion of ethical indoctrination, which called for a policy of close relationships between officers and men, elimination of class distinctions, and full sharing of information to all ranks,” according to Carlson biographer Duane P. Schultz. “It also proposed to do away with military titles; the only distinction being that between leaders and fighters.”

Unquestionably the ideas conveyed in the memo were Carlson’s, but Roosevelt’s enthusiasm for the mission and his understanding of Carlson’s methods and influences enabled him to persuade the reluctant Marine Corps leadership to authorize the controversial plan. To be sure, it helped their efforts that the pro-



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Above: LtCol Roosevelt, center, stops off at Funafuti, Ellice Islands, on his trip back from Makin Atoll.

Below: Col James Roosevelt (in white uniform), his father, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Governor-General Murchison review the constabulary at the Port of Spain, Trinidad, Dec. 11, 1936, as part of President Roosevelt’s “Good Neighbor” cruise to South America. (Photo courtesy of Naval History and Heritage Command)



posals were written by the President's son, but absent such a cogent synthesis of Carlson's experiences with the Chinese Communist Army and British Special Forces, the inception of the Marine Raiders might have been stalled, or even worse, thwarted, by the conservative Marine Corps command.

As a testament to James Roosevelt's growing competence as a military leader, Carlson trusted him with more than just the "politics" of their mission. In fact, Roosevelt was intimately involved in selecting the 1,000 Marines who would comprise Carlson's Raiders. Moreover, in Schultz's words, the physically unimposing Roosevelt surprisingly "kept up the pace" with the other Raiders during their grueling training activities, which included a 35-mile hike two times per week and a 70-mile nighttime trek once per week, all on a near-starvation diet of raisins and rice. Among those who knew him best, Roosevelt dispelled the perception that he

was a Marine "in name only," having earned the respect, even the admiration, of many of the Corps' most elite warriors.

Surely then, James Roosevelt was justified in his outrage when he learned that the military brass planned to exclude him from the Raiders' first combat mission for fear of a propaganda nightmare if he were to be killed or captured. Upon receiving this news, Roosevelt again petitioned the help of his father, who agreed that his son deserved to fight with Carlson and the newly formed Raider battalion, no matter the risk. According to Schultz, one very stern call by President Roosevelt to Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, the commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, was enough to ensure that Roosevelt would be included in the now-legendary raid on the strategically significant Makin Atoll.

The initial assault on Makin was designed primarily to gather intelligence on Japanese forces while distracting the enemy

from the planned invasion of Guadalcanal. It would represent many firsts for the United States military: the first American offensive of the Pacific war; the first official use of an American Special Forces unit; the first employment of motorized rubber boats for amphibious insertion; and, without question, the first time the son of a sitting U.S. President would enter a combat zone as an infantry officer.

In an intimate exchange with his mother shortly before the mission, Roosevelt revealed his motivation for participating in the raid even though he could have honorably avoided combat. He lamented his deteriorating physical condition—including a lifelong gastrointestinal problem that required a portion of his stomach be removed which would have precluded anyone else from service—but avoided characterizing his ailments as a disadvantage. To Roosevelt, his failing health was a measure of his worthiness as a Marine. He explained, "When this next job is done, at least inside I'll feel I have stood the test of making it no matter what the odds."

Indeed, efforts were made to ensure that the President's son was insulated from the extremely close combat and guerrilla-style warfare that took place during the nearly two-day raid. While most of Carlson's Raiders directly assaulted the enemy force of around 200 Japanese soldiers, Roosevelt was tasked with managing the combat center, including maintaining communication with the submarines from which they had disembarked a few miles off the coast of the island and providing Carlson with regular battlefield updates.

Still, as Schultz puts it, "Nowhere on Makin was safe." In fact, so exposed was the shack from which Roosevelt directed operations that several times it was fired upon by snipers and machine gunners. Roosevelt himself recalled having a radio shot out of his hand only to grab another and continue working. Carlson was so concerned by Roosevelt's constant eagerness to survey the battlefield that on at least one occasion, he angrily ordered his second-in-command to take cover in a sump hole.

Despite the obvious measures taken to protect Roosevelt, he is credited with risking his life to rescue three Marines who nearly drowned while evacuating the island amidst a relentless current. Though details of the incident are uncertain, James likely aided the Marines when their small boat capsized or when they became detached from the vessel while trying to return to one of the awaiting submarines. Several other Marines were not as fortunate, helplessly drifting off course and succumbing to the forceful surf. It was for this heroic action, and for his proficiency



COURTESY OF NAVAL HISTORY AND HERITAGE COMMAND

LtCol Roosevelt, commanding officer of 4th Marine Raider Battalion, with two Korean scout-interpreters in the Pacific theater, April 4, 1943.



LtCol Carlson (left) and Maj Roosevelt (right) consult a map as they prepare to return to Pearl Harbor after the successful Makin Island raid in August 1942. (USMC photo)

in managing battlefield operations while under the constant threat of attack, that Roosevelt received the Navy Cross.

Some of the Raiders mocked how liberally the Navy Cross was awarded to officers involved in the raid. Their disapproval was probably directed in part at Roosevelt, who undoubtedly had a different experience on Makin than the Marines who fought the enemy head on. He likely faced similar backlash after receiving a Silver Star from the Army during the larger-scale invasion of the atoll in November of the same year. No doubt many viewed his decorations as politically earned and motivated. Indeed, such criticism has only helped to obscure Roosevelt's remarkable service record and ultimately diminish his significant legacy as a military leader and Marine Corps innovator.

Certainly the lore of the Corps favors much more dramatic examples of heroism—Chesty Puller, John Basilone and Dan Daly, to name a few. These men all were fearless warriors who skirmished on the front lines of some of the bloodiest conflicts in modern history. They were defined by their audacious courage in the face of certain death; and in both attitude

and physical appearance, they projected the image of strength and seemingly innate cunning that has become synonymous with Marines.

Roosevelt was different. On the surface he appeared meek, at times even sickly. He seemed more the timid and unsure product of a sheltered upbringing than a man prepared to lead Marines in combat. But in the case of James Roosevelt, his contradictions actually define his importance.

Roosevelt should be appreciated because of, not in spite of, his obvious physical inadequacies. Any one of his maladies would have prevented the average military-aged man from enlisting during World War II, and they definitely would have precluded most men from enduring the rigorous training that Roosevelt underwent as a Raider. In the same way, he should be admired for the persistence he displayed early in his Marine Corps career, not simply discredited for the embarrassing political promotion he received in the very beginning.

That he respected the fraternal order of the Marine Corps enough to accept a lower rank and continue his service is not a blotch; rather it perfectly exemplifies

his humble demeanor and resilience in the face of harsh criticism.

And perhaps most significantly, that he was the President's son should not be held against him. Rather this fact should be held up as an example of his personal honor, courage and selflessness. Roosevelt could have very easily procured political expediency—if that's what he desired—in a much safer role within the Marine Corps. He did not have to be anywhere near the carnage that came to define the Pacific theater during WW II, but he insisted on being in the fight, alongside those who had to be there.

That is the true legacy of James Roosevelt.

Author's bio: LCpl Evan Weiss is from Edison, N.J. He enlisted in the Marine Corps in April 2016 and serves with 3d Battalion, 3d Marines as a field radio operator. Prior to enlisting in the Marine Corps, Weiss worked in the addiction treatment field, first as a case manager and administrator in a nonprofit substance abuse rehabilitation center and later as the coordinator of an adult drug court in New Jersey.



Col Roosevelt, center, looks on as Gen Thomas Holcomb, 17th Commandant of the Marine Corps is congratulated on receiving the Distinguished Service Medal by Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox as LtGen Alexander A. Vandegrift, right, 18th Commandant of the Marine Corps, observes, April 12, 1944.