

Marine football teams were nationally renowned for more than 50 years and the Quantico team, pictured below, was especially memorable during the post World War I era. (USMC Archives)



MARINE FOOTBALL!

Born in the Cradle of War, Leatherneck Teams Once Dominated on the Gridiron

By CWO-4 Randy Gaddo, USMC (Ret)

Part I

Marine football!

There was a time in Marine Corps history when those two words always were uttered with an exclamation point. Premiere Marine Corps teams compiled an enviable record over the years, capturing six interservice championships, with nine undefeated seasons and 355 wins over 119 losses.

Many of today's Marines probably don't know there was a time when Marine football was huge. Marine teams played varsity football against major college teams—and trounced them. Marine football teams were nationally ranked among other interservice and top collegiate elevens in a highly competitive environment featuring an impressive array of high-powered athletes.

The Marine football team's ascent started during a time of leather helmets,

minimal pads, few rules and hitting so intense that anecdotes tell of rival coaches who would pull their teams off the field because the Marines were causing too many injuries with their clean tackles and blocks. Marine teams offered a high-quality program that reflected the Marine Corps' winning attitude, positive values, traditions and culture at a national level. It was a focused recruiting tool that over the years attracted excellent athletes and leaders, largely from colleges. Playing games in venues such as the Houston Astrodome, the Akron Rubber Bowl in Ohio and Archbold Stadium at Syracuse University in New York allowed college athletes and the public an impressive view of the Corps.

"If it hadn't been for football, I never would have come into the Marine Corps," said retired Marine Lieutenant Colonel Ron Eckert, who was just a kid when he saw the 1958 Quantico Marine team beat the undefeated Rutgers University team

13-0 in New Brunswick, N.J. "The sparkle and poise of the Marines was overwhelming," Eckert reflected. "I was so impressed I went over to the recruiting station at Canal Street in New York, New York, when I came of age and took the qualifying test. I was later assigned to the Inactive Reserve at Port Newark, New Jersey."

Eckert went to Officer Candidates School after graduating from New Jersey's Upsala College in 1963 and played on the Quantico team for two years. He would coach the Quantico team later in his career on its slow march into history during the 1971 and '72 seasons.

The Marine Corps football program started 55 years before Eckert unwillingly ushered it out in 1972. It was born in the cradle of war, during the fall of 1917, just a few short months after the United States declared war against Germany in April 1917.

In fact, an unintended consequence of World War I was the spawning of stellar

football programs for all the armed services, according to John Daye in his 2014 book, “Encyclopedia of Armed Forces Football—The Complete History of the Glory Years.” The 470-page tome tells the story of Armed Forces football from its gestation on college campuses to its birth during the war.

“As opposed to the first year of service football in 1917 when the collegiate teams dominated ... the second season brought about a complete turnaround,” writes Daye, a retired high school football coach who spent 25 years researching the book.

Top players from colleges and universities across the country entered military service and chose to continue playing football at their bases and stations. Service teams won close to 70 percent of their games against major colleges in 1918, a 25 percent increase over 1917; and they continued to gain strength after that.

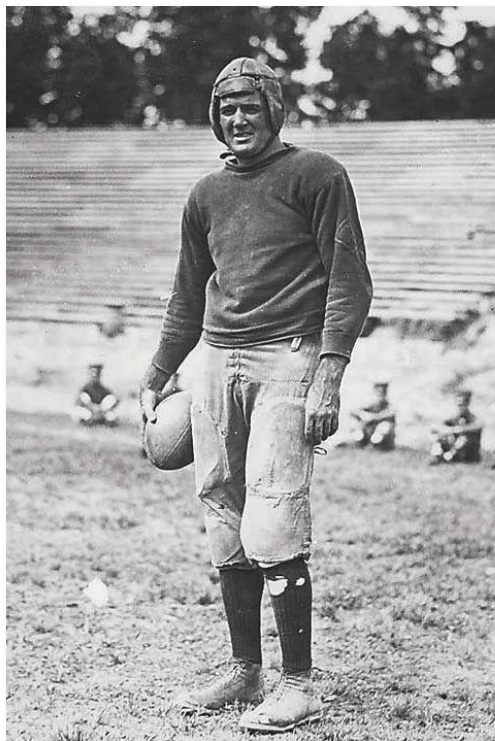
Information provided by the Marine Corps History Division notes that Mare Island, Calif., is the birthplace of Marine football. The small island, 25 miles north of San Francisco, was the Marine Corps’ West Coast boot camp.

“Colonel Lincoln Karmany, who ranked second only to Major General Smedley D. Butler as a leader in organizing Marine Corps athletics, commanded the post,” wrote Corporal Larry Ashman in an article about the program. Karmany, incidentally, was one of the prime architects of the Marine Corps Association, along with then-Lieutenant Colonel John A. Lejeune, in 1913.

Headed by player-coach Captain John W. Beckett, an All-American tackle at Oregon State University in 1916, Marines who had been top players from nine prominent universities responded to the call for volunteers for the 1917 team.

Even in the midst of war—or maybe because of it—the Mare Island Marine team dominated, going unbeaten and untied against teams from powerhouse football universities and rival service teams to take the West Coast Interservice title. The season culminated when the team played in the Tournament of Roses Classic on New Year’s Day 1918 in Pasadena, Calif. That game became the building block of the Marines’ football reputation because it brought them to a national audience and helped to keep the Pasadena attraction alive.

Both the 1917 and 1918 Marine teams stand out in football history as memorable, according to Colonel John Gunn, USMCR (Ret). Gunn, who passed away in 2013,



Left: Frank Goettge, one of the best players in Marine football history, turned down a contract with the New York Giants to remain in the Corps. He later was killed on Guadalcanal. (Courtesy of National Museum of the Marine Corps)

Right: Another of the Corps’ gridiron greats, Lt Walter V. Brown was killed in an aircraft crash in 1921 off the shores of Quantico, Va. Brown Field, the site of the Marine Corps’ Officer Candidates School, is named after him.

Below: MajGen Smedley D. Butler was instrumental in the growth of the Marine football program in the 1920s. The stadium at Quantico bears his name.



published a comprehensive account of Marine football in 1992. He compiled a two-book collection entitled “(Quite) a Few Good Men” and “The Old Core.”

Gunn started following Marine football as a Chicago youngster during World War II through the pages of the *Chicago Tribune*.

According to the introduction in his first book, he regrettably purged all his clippings and records he collected during his high school years. Thirty years later, the career newsman was on a Marine Reserve assignment in Nevada and unearthed old sports books containing information about the Corps’ football program. This led to years of scouring records at bases throughout the Corps as well as newspaper microfilm and other sources to put the books together.

Gunn concedes that finding the material was a challenge. “With WW I going on, record keeping and coverage were at a minimum,” Gunn writes. But find it he did, and in a small room off his garage, he accumulated arguably one of the largest collections of military football memorabilia and information in the country.

(In 2007 the Gunn family donated his collection to the Randall Library on the campus of the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, and more than 8,000 pieces of his collection went on public display in 2011. “Getting it out of the garage and into the open, where it belongs,” according to Brian Henderson in



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The men who played Marine football came to the Corps from major universities throughout the country. Many of these football greats would later earn combat awards fighting alongside their fellow leathernecks in both World Wars, the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

a September 2011 *Sports Illustrated* story.)

In 1919, an East Coast Marine gridiron machine started in Quantico under the supervision of “Dutch” Moulthen, who was killed in a plane crash at Parris Island, S.C., later that year. His death interrupted the team’s development until the next year when Second Lieutenant Walter V. “Boots” Brown, who had quarterbacked the original Mare Island team, took charge of the team at Quantico.

Brown’s gridiron prowess was well-established, and according to Ashman’s article, Brown was the guiding force of this team. They vanquished all competitors in the 1920 season, and in the finale against sailors at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center in Illinois, his defensive tactics and a last-minute 85-yard sprint to a touch-down earned the team a 7-7 draw.

It was also Brown’s final game. A few months later, he was killed in an aerial mishap in the Potomac River off the shores of Quantico during early stages of the Corps’ aviation program. Marine officer candidates to this day tread on Brown Field named after this Marine who was killed in 1921.

The years between 1921 to 1924 “marked the renaissance of football in the Corps,” according to Ashman. It also was when then-Brigadier General Smedley Butler’s influence was felt. “General Butler, in command at Quantico, proved the impetus that gathered momentum each year,” Ashman wrote. “Finally, the Marines took

their place with the major teams of the country.”

BGen Butler’s strong support for the program would have a significant impact on future leaders of the Corps who served with and emulated him and demonstrates the influential impact that leaders can have on athletic programs.



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MajGen Smedley D. Butler cheers on the Marine team on Nov. 11, 1930, as they face the American Legion team at Franklin Field in Philadelphia.

Gunn notes in “The Old Core” that during the early 1920s, “[BGen] Smedley Darlington Butler ... ordered the Marine Corps to field winning football teams and build a stadium good enough for those teams.” The general is quoted as saying, “Football is like war. ... Who in hell wants to lose a war?”

This followed the common belief that there was a parallel between excelling on the gridiron or in team sports in general and excelling in the Marine Corps.

“I read in an after-action report that General Lejeune [then Commandant of the Marine Corps] said something in 1922 suggesting that young men would go where winning is encouraged because they like to be on a winning team,” said Eckert, sharing some of the research he has done.

He noted that the program sustained itself because, over the years, some of the people who played Marine football would end up in the top tier of decision makers in the Corps; men such as retired Marine Lieutenant General Ernest C. Cheatham Jr. (1929-2014), a Navy Cross recipient who played professional football but decided on a Marine Corps career and coached the 1955 MCRD San Diego team. He is recognized in the Pro Football Hall of Fame as the highest-ranking servicemember to have played professional football and is also in the Marine Corps Sports Hall of Fame in Quantico.

When Smedley Butler was a brigadier general in 1920, he was instrumental in forming a Marine football team at the Quantico Marine base. Over the next two seasons, the Marines went undefeated. They suffered their first loss in the third season opener against Virginia Military Institute; however, they outscored their opponents 117-0 from then on.

On Nov. 8, 1923, BGen Smedley Butler addressed more than 2,000 Marines as they prepared to board trains from Quantico to Ann Arbor, Mich., to constitute the cheering section as the Marine football team played the University of Michigan.

Doug Hills’ article, “On This Date in Michigan History—November 10,” found on a website dedicated to the University of Michigan athletics, called “Maizeandbluenews.com,” illustrates the level of importance placed on Marine football at that time.

Hills noted that the game was organized through the efforts of the Michigan athletic director, Fielding Yost, and the Secretary of the Navy (SecNav), Edwin Denby.

Denby had played center at Michigan in 1895 and had enlisted in the Marines during WW I, working his way up to the grade of major before the war’s end.

Denby was joined at the game by Assistant SecNav Theodore Roosevelt Jr., along with the governor of Michigan and a state senator. Henry Ford, founder of Ford Motor Company, also attended the game. The Commandant, MajGen Lejeune, led the Marines in attendance and brought the Marine band to boot.

The field house where opening ceremonies were held before 12,500 fans was a new facility, the largest structure built



LtCol Ronald Eckert, USMC (Ret) played for the Quantico team in the 1960s and later returned to coach the team in the early 1970s.

for competitive athletics in the world at that time, according to Hills. However, to hold the 40,000 fans there to see the game, gridiron action was moved to the outdoor Ferry Field.

SecNav Denby sat with Yost for the first half and joined MajGen Lejeune for the second half. Unfortunately, the Marines lost 26-6, but it was one of only two losses that year as the Marines finished with a 7-2-1 record; the Michigan team finished with an 8-0 season on its way to a Big Ten title and the National Championship. Quantico’s first-quarter touchdown would be the only one scored against Michigan that season!

Another legacy that MajGen Butler, nicknamed “Old Gimlet Eye,” left was a stadium, which still stands today—Butler

Stadium at Marine Corps Base Quantico.

In Gunn’s “The Old Core,” he describes MajGen Butler as one of the most colorful and controversial figures in Marine history who ran the gamut from highly respected to creator of animosity. “Fortunately, he also was a football buff who decided that Quantico should and would have a stadium,” Gunn writes.

Early estimates to build a world-class stadium ran \$650,000; that’s about \$8 million in today’s dollars. Then-BGen Butler and his Marines were not deterred and built it themselves. Using donated, purchased and “borrowed” materials, they constructed the stadium using Marine manpower for about \$5,000, about \$66,000 in today’s dollar.

But coming out of WW I, according to Hills, “Rank made little difference as Marines—including Old Gimlet Eye—worked side by side to build the facility as a memorial to Marines who had died in uniform.”

The stadium paid future dividends for the Corps as it became a show-place for football and track and field, hosting many of the nation’s top athletes. For example, the last year of the Quantico Relays track and field event in 1972 featured more than 8,000 college athletes competing inside the crucible of Butler Stadium.

LtCol Eckert recalled standing on the highest level of the stadium’s stands with BGen Samuel Jaskilka, a future Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, watching the events. “I remember him commenting to me how amazed he was that we were able to get that many college kids here to interact with Marines and to be exposed to our culture,” said Eckert. “He said, ‘Where can we get this kind of return for the level of investment.’”

Butler Stadium’s condition ebbed and flowed with the tide of Marine football over the years, which tended to rise and fall depending on who was in charge and what operational needs existed; however, recent improvements have once more made it a world-class stadium.

“You wouldn’t recognize it now,” asserted Eckert, who was stationed at Quantico as the athletic director in charge of all Marine sports from 1970 to 1972. “They just put about \$4 million into that facility, with artificial turf, world-class lighting, a new all-weather track and an immense track-and-field component.”

The new stadium was rededicated in May 2012. “Since its days of fielding All-Marine sports teams, the stadium had fallen into disrepair and kind of waned

Butler Stadium on MCB Quantico, Va., has been completely renovated with the addition of artificial turf and an all-weather track. The new stadium was rededicated in 2012.



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with regard to what it meant as a community centerpiece,” said Col Daniel J. Choike, Commander, Marine Corps Base Quantico, during the ceremony. When he assumed command of the base, he made renovation of the stadium one of his priorities.

The land upon which Butler Stadium stands is practically hallowed ground to those who know its history; if the ground could talk, the stories it could tell of giants in the Marine Corps who played there. Col Choike, who retired from the Corps in 2012, said he watched the Marine Corps Birthday Uniform Pageant on the field almost 30 years earlier when he was at The Basic School.

To preserve the historic integrity of the original stadium, the rebuilt bleachers retain the same look and the same salvaged metal as the original seating; philosophically, it also retains the same sweat and mettle that then-BGen Butler and his Marines put into it nearly 100 years earlier.

According to “The Old Core,” BGen Butler “scoured the Corps from 1921 to 1924 in his effort to secure team players. Every battleship detachment, Navy yard barracks and Marine post was urged to send its best.” The efforts paid off. The

1921 team went 8-0, beating the Army III Corps, coached by Major Dwight D. Eisenhower, 20-0 for the armed services championship in front of 16,000 fans.

Quantico remained the unofficial home of Marine football until 1931, even though there were years that games were played in Philadelphia; Washington, D.C.; and some years entirely on the road, according to Gunn. Even in later years, as Eckert confirmed, “This was true. We only played four home games per year, since the return on investment was higher from a recruiting standpoint by road appearances.”

Many of the players’ names have been buried in history, but there are a few standouts whom Marines will recognize today. Their names are on ships, buildings, fields, bases and other notable attractions around the Corps—names such as Liveredge, Brown, Foss, Larson, Goettge, Lummus and Johnson.

The men behind the names weren’t all just associated with football achievements but were also high achievers in the Corps; they earned Medals of Honor, Navy Crosses, Silver Stars, Bronze Stars, Purple Hearts. Many more would die or be wounded in combat through WW II, Korea and into Vietnam.

Gunn suggested in “The Old Core” that

after the 1932 season some of the famed All-Marine teams went from “big time to just another team,” with Quantico playing only one game in 1933. The balance of Marine football power began to shift from the East Coast to the West. “Against the twin backdrops of the Depression and San Diego’s emergence as the Marine Corps’ top team, Quantico struggled from 1933 until football was dropped after the 1942 season,” Gunn wrote.

The Marine football program waxed and waned over the years after WW II, generally at the whim of world politics dictating Marine involvement. There were good teams with good seasons, and there were lean years where high-voltage players could not be found.

Editor’s note: Read more about the history of the program beginning with the Quantico team’s resurgence in 1946 in Part II in the January issue.

Author’s bio: The author, CWO-4 Randy Gaddo, USMC (Ret), was a combat correspondent as an enlisted Marine and later a public affairs officer. He retired from active duty in 1996 and now is a contributing editor for Leatherneck.

