



Noted aviation artist Jim Dietz recently rendered his conception of 1stLt Christian F. Schilt (center in flight helmet) at Quilali, Nicaragua, to the Marine Corps Historical Foundation. Schilt (above) took to flying quicker than an otter skimming down a mud slide.

THE NATURAL

Story by Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

Illustration and photos courtesy of Marine Corps Historical Center

Natural: "Any person or thing that is or is likely or is certain to be very suitable to and successful in an endeavor without much training or difficulty"—Webster's Unabridged Dictionary

All of us have heard of someone who was described as a "natural," a person seemingly born with skills and talents the rest of us are able to attain only after long and ceaseless practice and application. Blessed from birth with abilities that make the most difficult tasks appear effortless, the natural excels with a deft grace most others can only envy. Whether it be hitting a baseball or playing the violin, weaving a race car through traffic or plying the surgeon's healing knife, the natural stands alone as one born to the task.

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On April 5, 1928, one such natural, Lieutenant Christian F. Schilt, USMC, stood at attention before the President of the United States on the White House lawn. As Major General Commandant John A. Lejeune and an honor guard of his fellow Marines looked on, President Calvin Coolidge placed the Medal of Honor about the neck of the one-time farm boy from Richland County, Ill. It was the first time a winner of America's highest award for heroism received the decoration personally from a president, and it would establish a tradition that generally endures to this day. The citation that was read commended Schilt for "almost superhuman skill" in carrying out one of the most incredible acts of bravery in the history of Marine Corps

aviation. Perhaps that was only normal, for even before there were airplanes, Christian F. Schilt was born to fly them.

In the beginning there was no hint of the extraordinary things that were to come. In 1917, 22-year-old Schilt, known



as "Frank," was just one of many young men eager to answer his country's call in the war against Germany. Fresh out of Rose Polytechnic Institute in Terre Haute, Ind., Schilt enlisted in the United States Marine Corps on June 23, 1917. In due course he joined the flood of Marines bound for the Marine Corps' new recruit training depot at Paris Island, S.C. He would continue to wear the eagle, globe and anchor for nearly 40 years, and his shoulders would one day bear a general's stars.

Did the new boot Marine have visions of the battlefields of France? Perhaps, but if he did they were destined to go unrealized. Instead, Schilt joined the first American air unit of any service to be sent overseas in World War I, Captain Francis T. "Cocky" Evans' 1st Marine Aeronautical Company ordered to Punta Delgada in the Azores. Expecting to see action in the trenches, the new Marine found himself instead a machine-gunner flying antisubmarine patrols in the unit's Curtiss HS-2L flying boats. It wasn't quite what he had envisioned when he enlisted, but he did the job and did it well. If he was disappointed, it didn't interfere with his performance of duty.

Besides, there was something fascinating about airplanes, something exhilarating about actually being among the clouds. The hours spent cruising above the Atlantic gave Schilt, an observant youngster with much better than average mechanical skills, time to develop an appreciation of what was necessary to get an airplane into the air and keep it there. It began to seem that actually flying an airplane wasn't all that complicated. If he got the chance, he more than likely could do a fair country job of it. If being along for the ride was fun, think of how much fun it would be to sit in the pilot's seat.

Intrigued by that possibility, Schilt, by then wearing a corporal's chevrons, decided to stick around at war's end and explore the chances of becoming a pilot. As it turned out, his chances were pretty good. Early in 1919, orders and seabag in hand, the aspiring aviator reported to the Marine Flying Field, Miami, the site of present-day Opa-Locka Airport, for flight training.

Schilt took to flying an airplane quicker than an otter skimming down a mud slide. He did far better than a fair country job of it. And it really was fun.

On June 5, 1919, Cpl Christian F. Schilt, USMC, was designated a naval aviator detailed for "duty involving actual flying in aircraft, including dirigibles, balloons and airplanes." Five days later he was commissioned a second lieutenant and ordered to duty as a pilot with Squadron D, Marine Air Forces, 2d Provisional Brigade in Santo Domingo.

The show was about to begin.

Expeditionary duty was a fact of Marine Corps life in the 1920s, just as deployments are today. For an aviator it was also an opportunity to log a lot of flight time. Schilt honed his flying skills to a fine edge. Except for a brief stint at Quantico, Va., to attend the Marine Officers' Training School, the forerunner of today's Basic School, the new pilot spent an impressive number of hours in the air over Santo Domingo and Haiti. It was time well invested, for it was becoming increasingly apparent that Schilt had a touch with airplanes few men attain. When the former mechanic took a plane into the air, it was almost as though he was a part of it.

In the decade of the '20s, that was a handy skill to have. Schilt's return to

Quantico in 1923 coincided with the dawn of the golden age of one of aviation's landmark events, air racing. Stronger airframes, better designs and more powerful engines had opened the door to increasingly faster airplanes. Air racing blossomed into a major spectator attraction, with prestigious sponsors lining up to post prizes and trophies to feed the popular appetite for speed, speed and more speed. In no time at all, events like the Bendix Cup, the International Air Races, the Schneider Cup Seaplane Races and the Cleveland Air Show were drawing thousands of spectators.

This was something right down Schilt's alley. There was no prohibition on military pilots participating; in fact, entry was encouraged.

For the next four years, he flew in every major air race, always bringing his plane home among the top finishers, always displaying flying skill that drew the admiration of his fellow competitors. Accounts credit him with being one of America's premier military aviators. When Schilt wasn't racing, he was collecting trophies in the Army Air Service's Machinegun and Bombing Competition, pioneering techniques in aerial photographic surveys and putting airplanes through their paces as a test pilot.

Even as Schilt gained a reputation as an exceptionally gifted aviator, a far greater renown was awaiting him at a flyspeck village called Quilali in the mountainous, jungle-covered interior of Nicaragua's Nueva Segovia Province. It was 1927, and the strategically important Latin American country, only recently wracked by civil war, was experiencing an uneasy peace brokered by American negotiator Henry L. Stimson. Under the terms of the agreement, the leaders of both factions consented to the disarmament of their troops and an American-supervised national election, with Marines serving as guarantors of the peace. From the start it was less a peace than an armed truce as both sides hedged their bets and held on to their guns.

On July 16, 1927, the lid blew off. Nicaragua erupted into civil war as insurgents loyal to the rebel leader Augusto Sandino attacked Marines and government forces of the Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua from one end of the country to the other. The situation rapid-

**"Frank Schilt could
fly a bathtub,
if somebody
put wings on it."**

**—Attributed to
famed Marine aviator
Ross Rowell**



With his Vought O2U-1 Corsair, Schilt made 10 flights into Quilali, evacuating 18 wounded men and earning a Medal of Honor.

ly deteriorated, and the call went out for reinforcements.

Among the first to arrive was Lt Schilt. Another new arrival was a fine new airplane, the Vought O2U-1, the first of the Vought Company's aircraft to carry the name Corsair. The two lost no time in getting acquainted. The Corsair was the newest and best airplane in the Navy-Marine inventory. A sturdy, two-seater biplane, it was the first Marine Corps plane to have a truly powerful engine, and it flew like a dream. Schilt soon was handling the Corsair like a virtuoso handles a violin, along the way becoming proficient in the new technique of dive bombing that had been perfected by Major Ross Rowell's Marine flyers of Observation Squadron 7 (VO-7M). In the months that followed, Schilt put his new skills to good use, as Marine aviation often was called upon to support ground troops. Soon, he would get an opportunity to show just what this

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fine airplane could do when flown by a skilled, courageous pilot.

On Jan. 3, 1928, a combined Marine-Guardia patrol was ambushed by a large force of insurrectos near the remote village of Quilali. A relief column was ambushed as well. Both units found themselves pinned down among the thatch huts that lined the village's single street, under siege by an enemy force that outnumbered them by more than 5-to-1. Casualties were heavy, with food, water and ammunition running low. With nearly two dozen wounded, there was no possibility of breaking out. To stay put was eventually to be whittled down and overrun unless supplies could be brought in and the wounded taken out. An urgent message was signaled to a passing patrol plane by the senior Marine officer, a badly wounded Captain Richard Livingston. He needed air attacks to break up the surrounding rebels and, "if humanly possible," a pilot to

land in the town and fly out his wounded men.

It was a mission for a volunteer, and Schilt stepped forward. There was an immediate problem: where to land. Unless something resembling a landing strip could somehow be roughed out of the town's rutted, bumpy street, the mission would be nothing more than wishful thinking. For three days, Livingston's men, under constant fire from the encircling insurrectos, tore down all the buildings along one side of the dirt street, until they had a landing strip of sorts. It was barely 400 feet long and 70 feet wide, and it ended abruptly at a sheer drop into the valley below. The prospects for the pilot who overshot were not cheering.

Schilt's Corsair was lightened as much as possible to make room for the weight of the medical supplies going in and the wounded coming out. Out went the forward firing machine guns and the machine

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gun mounted at the observer's station in the rear cockpit. There would be no observer. The cockpit would carry supplies and wounded Marines. A half tank of fuel would get the Corsair to Quilali and back. The rest was drained. Finally, seeing to cut down on every ounce of weight, Schilt doffed his parachute. If the Corsair were brought down by ground fire, Schilt would be going down with it.

Over a three-day period, Jan. 6-8, Schilt made 10 flights into the beleaguered town. On each final approach shifting cross winds and air currents bounced the Corsair about like a rubber ball atop a fountain, leaving no room for error and requiring every ounce of concentration. A fusillade of ground fire greeted every attempt. Since the Corsair had no brakes, a half-dozen Marines would manhandle the rolling plane to a stop before it sailed off the makeshift runway and into the valley.

On takeoffs, more Marines would hold the wings down while Schilt revved the engine to full power. Then, on a signal from Schilt, the ground party would let go, and the Corsair, bucketing and bouncing through the ruts, holes and rocks, would lumber into the air.

Ten trips in, 10 trips out. It was something that had never been done before, and few people gave it any chance of succeeding. But Schilt never doubted that he could do it. Do it he did, bringing out 18 wounded Marines, three of whom would have died without immediate medical treatment. Later generations of Marines would come to think in casual terms of medevac. In 1928 it was more of a miracle, and it would lead to Schilt's being awarded the Medal of Honor.

In a roundabout way it would also lead to his passing up the chance to be a millionaire. When his tour of duty in Nicaragua ended, Schilt was offered a flight home by another aviator who had achieved a certain degree of fame himself, Charles Lindbergh. Lindbergh was employed by a new airline called Pan American Airways. Laying out planned trans-Atlantic commercial air routes himself, Lindbergh was looking for a skilled pilot to do the same in the Caribbean and eventually the Pacific. Would Schilt like the job? It paid \$1,000 a month—phenomenal wages in 1928—with stock options.

Schilt thought it over and elected to remain a Marine lieutenant. As much as he loved flying, he loved the Marine Corps, too. So instead of getting in on the ground floor of something that would have made him a rich man, Schilt

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commanded a squadron at Quantico and then served as chief test pilot at the Naval Aircraft Factory, Philadelphia.

In the summer of 1935, Schilt, by then a captain, was one of a group of Marine aviators ordered to temporary duty at the Cleveland Air Show. There, the Marines wowed the onlookers with an exhibition of the dive-bombing techniques developed and used in Nicaragua, placing dummy bombs on simulated targets with unerring accuracy.

Among those most impressed was a noteworthy German officer, General der Flieger Erhard Milch. The same Erhard Milch who had masterminded the secret development of Germany's Luftwaffe in the years when Germany was forbidden military aviation by the Versailles Treaty that ended World War I, he was now in



President Calvin Coolidge began a presidential tradition when he pinned the Medal of Honor on Schilt in 1929.

charge of all German military aircraft production and procurement. One of Milch's first priorities upon returning home was to huddle with design engineers of the Junkers Corporation. The result was the world's first airplane to be planned from the drawing board stage as a dive bomber, the Junkers JU-87 Stuka. In an ironic way it could be thought of as another first for Marine aviation.

The same war that saw German dive bombers helping to clear the way for panzer columns slicing into Poland and France saw Schilt serving in the Pacific. He would serve on Guadalcanal with the First Marine Aircraft Wing (MAW) and later be designated commanding officer of the Strike and Patrol Commands, Solomon Islands. Following a tour organizing and then commanding the new 9th MAW, it would be back to the Pacific commanding the 2d MAW's Air Defense Command. At war's end, as a general officer, Schilt plunged into the task of reorganizing all Marine Corps Reserve aviation units, laying the groundwork for what would one day become the 4th MAW.

In 1951, Schilt took command of the 1st MAW in Korea and promptly became the Marine Corps' first general officer to qualify in jet aircraft. He handled a Grumman F9F as easily as he had handled a Vought O2U-1 and set about flying combat missions over North Korea. In 1955, at the age of 60, Schilt became qualified in helicopters. No one was surprised.

In later years Schilt was asked if he thought earning the Medal of Honor had helped his career. He replied that he had never given much thought to the possibility, but after reflecting upon it he didn't think so. Wearing the pale blue ribbon with the five white stars hadn't kept him from spending 15 years as a lieutenant, he said, chuckling. Still, medal or no medal he must have been doing something right.

Lieutenant General Christian F. Schilt, Director of Aviation, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, having completed nearly 40 years of service, departed the active-duty ranks of the Marine Corps on April 1, 1957. Upon retirement he was advanced to the rank of general. Gen Schilt died in Norfolk, Va., on Jan. 8, 1987, and was buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery, 2,000 miles and a lifetime away from Punta Delgada in the Azores, where Private Schilt first dreamed of flying. From start to finish, Frank Schilt, the Natural, made it all look easy.

