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The Formative Years

Marine artillerymen manning their weapons have been silhouetted against the snow covered fields of revolutionary Princeton, the black sand beaches of Iwo Jima, and the red earth of Vietnam's hilltops. (1) Their mission--to provide Marine infantrymen with close and immediate fire support wherever and whenever Marines are committed to battle. The deeds of these artillery units and their men have often been overshadowed by the accomplishments of those they support. One such unit is the 12th Marines. (2) Not unlike other Marine units, the 12th Marines had its beginnings as an infantry regiment in China of the 1920s.

In the summer of 1926, the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek began their triumphal march north from Canton. Wherever the Nationalists made their appearance trained agitators soon directed popular sentiment against foreign treaties, merchants, and institutions, as well as the propertied Chinese upper classes. With a combination of military operations, bribery, and skillful propaganda, the Nationalists by late 1926 controlled the Yangtze Valley of central China and were threatening the international treaty port of Shanghai.

In response to the imminent threat, American Minister to China John Van A. MacMurray cabled the Department of State in January 1927 requesting an increase in the landing forces then stationed at Shanghai "in order to protect foreign life and property at Shanghai and prevent the seizure of the settlement... by mob violence...." (3) Not wishing to arouse American public opinion by deploying a large military force and embroiling the United States in a war with the Chinese Nationalists, President Calvin Coolidge ordered a Marine regiment to the Far East in late January 1927. This was not the first time Marines had been used. In addition to maintaining legation guard, Marines on several previous occasions had been called upon to protect American and foreign nationals and their property under attack by resentful Chinese. (4)

Gathering up Marines from Guam to Shanghai, a small provisional expeditionary battalion was organized and landed at Shanghai in February 1927. The 4th Regiment, less its 2d Battalion, sailed from San Diego on orders of the President and arrived at Shanghai, but did not disembark until 21 March when an emergency was declared by the Municipal Council of the International Settlement. Early in April, the expeditionary battalion and the 4th Regiment formed the nucleus of the newly constituted 3d Marine Brigade under the command of Brigadier General Smedley D. Butler. The new brigade was ordered specifically to protect American lives and property, and in a more general sense to prevent the warring factions from entering the international settlement. (5)

Anticipating an expansion of the disorders to other areas of China, the American government ordered reinforcements to Shanghai later in April. On the 17th, the 3d Battalion, 6th Marines (3/6) and the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines (2/4), in addition to support units, sailed from San Diego on board the SS President Grant for the Naval Station at Olongapo in the Philippines. (6) Upon arrival, 3/6 and 2/4 became the core around which a provisional regiment was formed. Following a month in the Philippines, the Provisional Regiment sailed on 10 June for Shanghai on board the USS Chaumont, arriving 13 June. After laying at anchor for approximately one week in the Shanghai harbor, the regiment moved up the coast to Taku (main port for Tientsin, China) where it disembarked and established residence within Camp MacMurray at the junction of the Hsin and Hai rivers with orders to reinforce American troops in the Tientsin area. (7)

Throughout the summer months, the situation in China eased considerably; fighting ceased, affording American Marines time to consolidate their defensive positions and settle into the routine of garrison duty. On 4 October 1927, the "provisional" designation was dropped and a new regiment designated as the 12th Regiment was organized under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Jesse F. Dyer. The 3d Battalion, 6th Regiment (Hq & Hq Co, 15th Machine Gun & Howitzer Company (MG & How Co), and the 82d, 83d, and 84th Rifle Cos) was redesignated with the same units as the 1st Battalion, 12th Regiment. The 2d Battalion, 4th Regiment (Hq & Hq Co, 10th MG & How Co, and the 29th, 31st, and 32d Rifle Cos) was redesignated and became the 2d Battalion, 12th Regiment. (8)

After a series of battles in which Chiang Kai-shek completely crushed the opposition of the northern warlords in January 1928, the Nationalists marched north and entered Peking in June. Contrary to the belief of many Marines and foreign officials, there was no destruction of foreign property nor attacks on foreign nationals--the transfer of power was carried out in a most orderly manner. Following the establishment of Nationalist control over northern China the American government began a gradual reduction of Marine elements. (9) On 22 April 1928, the 12th Regiment (Headquarters & Headquarters Company) was disbanded with the detached personnel being redistributed among other units. The 1st Battalion, originally the 3d Battalion, 6th Regiment, reassumed its former designation on the same date and was transferred back to its parent unit. The 2d Battalion, (10) instead of resuming its previous designation (2d Battalion, 4th Regiment) was reorganized as the 1st Separate Battalion. (11) The existence of the 1st Separate Battalion was brief. Its headquarters and headquarters company was disbanded on 8 May followed by the disbandment of the two rifle companies at Tientsin, China, on 11 July 1928. (12)

While the existence of the 12th Regiment of Marines in China as part of the 3d Marine Brigade was very brief--due mainly to the exigencies of the situation--Major General Commandant John A. Lejeune commended the units of the brigade for their appearance, conduct, and military efficiency. General Lejeune further noted in his annual report to the Secretary of the Navy in 1928, that the brigade "not only successfully accomplished its mission but established and maintained extremely cordial relations with the military forces of other countries and with the Chinese officials and people." (13)

Although the 3d Marine Brigade was withdrawn in early 1928, Marines of the 4th Regiment remained. Early in 1932, the security of the International Settlement at Shanghai was once again threatened. For the next 10 years as Japanese power and hegemony grew, the 4th Marines formed a bulwark against the complete Japanese domination of the Settlement. Under ever increasing Japanese pressure, Marines defending the settlement were withdrawn in November 1941. Early the following month the Japanese struck at Pearl Harbor and the United States was at war.

The fateful days following the attack on the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor saw the Pacific defenses of America fall in rapid succession. The defense garrisons of Guam and Wake Islands in the mid-Pacific fell after short, furious battles, but Bataan and Corregidor in the Philippines capitulated only after months of fighting. The bastion of British power in the Far East, Singapore, surrendered to the Japanese after they gained entrance by capturing the causeways which connected the island city to the Malay Peninsula. Australia and New Zealand were isolated, and the Hawaiian Islands exposed. Despite this series of defeats American forces began to plan the counter-offensive that would cripple and finally defeat the Japanese Empire.

The American Navy, after being reorganized and reinforced, began to search out and destroy the ever advancing enemy. Two spectacular naval engagements in mid-1942 (the battles of the Coral Sea and Midway) turned back the planned enemy invasion of New Guinea and prevented the Japanese from penetrating the Hawaii defense line. On 7 August 1942, the first offensive amphibious operation against Japanese-held territory was initiated. On that date the 1st Marine Division landed on the beaches of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands and held on to its newly won positions despite intensive enemy counterattacks. With the 1st Division entrenched on Guadalcanal and other Marine units being rapidly committed throughout the South Pacific, it was evident that additional Marine divisions would be required to carry out future operations. To fulfill this need the 3d Marine Division was activated on 29 August 1942 at the New

River Marine Base (later renamed Camp Lejeune), North Carolina. (14)

To provide support for the newly organized 3d Division, the 12th Marines was reactivated at Camp Elliott, California on 1 September 1942. (15) At this time the regiment was revived as an artillery, not an infantry regiment.

Three battalions (75mm Pack Howitzer) of the regiment were already in existence prior to the reactivation of the regimental headquarters on 1 September. The 2d Battalion, 12th Marines was reactivated on 15 July 1942, at the New River Marine Base and attached to the 21st Marines (Reinforced). The battalion, commanded by Major Archie V. Gerard, was built around cadre furnished by the 10th Marines (another artillery regiment). The 2d Battalion was composed of a Headquarters and Service Battery, and three firing batteries--D, E, and F organized on 25 July. (16) A week following the reactivation of the 2d, the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines was organized on 22 July at the New River Base and attached to the 23d Marines (Reinforced). The 3d Battalion, commanded by Major Robert E. MacFarlane, also included a Headquarters and Service Battery and three firing batteries, G, H, and I. (17)

The 1st Battalion, 12th Marines joined the regiment through a more circuitous route. On 10 February 1942, a fifth battalion was organized at Camp Elliott, California for the 10th Marines of the 2d Marine Division. The battalion was later relieved from attachment to the 10th Marines and assigned to the 9th Marines (3d Marine Division) to form Regimental Combat Team-9. (18) On 14 August, the battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel John S. Letcher, was redesignated the 1st Battalion, 12th Marines (1/12) with N Battery redesignated Battery A, 1/12, O Battery becoming Battery B, 1/12, and P Battery becoming Battery C, 1/12. (19)

With the reactivation at Camp Elliott of the regiment (20) commanded by Colonel John B. Wilson, a Special Weapons Battery and a fourth battalion were added. Under the command of Major Bernard H. Kirk, the 4th Battalion, 12th Marines consisted of a Headquarters and Service Battery, and three 105mm Howitzer batteries (K, L, and M). (21) The Special Weapons Battery was disbanded on 28 September with its men being reassigned to the 4th Battalion and Special Weapons Battalion of the 2d Marine Division, and its mission being redistributed to the special weapons battalion and separate defense battalions. (22)

Shortly after activation, the regimental Headquarters and Service Batteries, and the 4th Battalion moved by truck to the Marine Corps Base at San Diego where new recruits were acquired and equipment added. There, on 7 September the 1st Battalion,

recently detached from RCT-9, joined its parent regiment. On 16 September, the regiment was formally assigned to the 3d Marine Division. (23)

The great expanse of the Mojave Desert in the southeastern corner of California, with its sun-bleached sand and intense heat looked anything but inviting as the 12th Marines (less the 2d and 3d Battalions) arrived on 12 October. Camp Dunlap at Niland, California was to be the home of the 12th Marines for the next four months. The sprawling, sandy wasteland with only tents to shelter the artillerymen, provided the regiment with ample space to carry out extensive field training and weapons fire. There the regiment was united on 15 November with its 2d Battalion, which had moved by truck with elements of the 3d Marine Division from New River, North Carolina. (24)

The rigorous physical conditioning, tactical exercises, gun drills, weapons training, and battery landing exercises provided the personnel of the 12th with an invaluable background upon which they would draw in the future. The training culminated in a three-day division exercise staged 27-29 December, which combined the regiment with infantry units and gave artillerymen added schooling in the techniques of support. (25) The 12th Marines was ready for battle, but not yet united with its scattered subordinate units.

The 3d Battalion, which remained at the New River Marine Base attached to the 23d Marines (Reinforced), was not idle. During the middle of January 1943, the battalion participated in 15 days of landing exercises and maneuvers with elements of the 23d Marines in Chesapeake Bay--being denied the use of beaches along the Atlantic due to the hazard of German submarines. (26) On 20 February, the regiment lost the isolated 3d Battalion when it was redesignated 3d Battalion, 14th Marines; but the void was soon filled when on 1 March an existing unit, the 1st Separate Pack Howitzer Battalion, was redesignated the new 3d Battalion, 12th Marines. At this time the battalion was located at Pago Pago on Tutuila in American Samoa. (27)

The 1st Separate Pack Howitzer Battalion had been organized on 25 May 1942 at New River, North Carolina and later became part of the 3d Marine Regimental Combat Team. With the 3d Marines the battalion moved by train to San Diego in August and departed on board the SS Matsonia on the 28th for Samoa. Upon its arrival at Pago Pago on 14 September, the battalion was incorporated into the Samoan Defense Force--2d Marine Brigade (Reinforced), commanded by Brigadier General Harry L. Larsen. Detached the same date from the 3d Marines, the battalion continued as a separate battalion of the 2d Brigade, (28) until its redesignation on 1 March to that of 3d Battalion, 12th Marines.

On 31 March 1943, the 2d Marine Brigade was disbanded, and the battalion stood alone awaiting orders. The orders came in April, but they were not those which would reunite the regiment. With elements of the 3d Marines, the 3d Battalion was ordered to conduct landing exercises in the Upolu Island group of Western Samoa.(29) The battalion had to wait another month to join with the regiment.

In late December 1942, the regiment received orders to prepare for deployment to the battle zone with the 3d Marine Division. Early in January regimental combat teams were again formed--the 1st Battalion, 12th Marines joined the 9th Marines on 1 January 1943, and the 2d Battalion joining the 21st Marines on the 25th.(30) At daybreak on the morning of 24 January, the 1st Battalion plus the entire combat team of the 9th Marines--composed of more than 4,000 officers and men, accompanied by the commanding general of the 3d Marine Division, Major General Charles D. Barrett--slipped silently out of the San Diego Harbor on board the SS Mount Vernon and headed north along the California coast. With darkness that evening the ships steamed out to sea.(31) The remaining elements of the regiment departed San Diego during the closing days of January and into February--Headquarters and Service Batteries (Advance Echelon) on 29 January, 2d Battalion with the 21st Marines on 14 February, 4th Battalion on 22 February, and Headquarters and Service Batteries (Rear Echelon) on 24 February.(32)

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With the strains of the National Anthem and the "Beer Barrel Polka" echoing from the New Zealand Army Band in the background, men of the regimental Headquarters and Service Batteries (Rear Echelon) and the 4th Battalion disembarked at Auckland, New Zealand on 11 March 1943.(34) The following day they moved by rail north to join the advance elements of the regimental headquarters, which had arrived in late February and were encamped near Whangarei--approximately 80 miles from Auckland. Although the headquarters element and the 4th Battalion were united, the same could not be said of the regiment as a whole. The 1st Battalion, which had arrived in early February as part of Regimental Combat Team-9, was at Camp Nathans (Manurewa--20 miles north of Auckland), while the 2d Battalion with Regimental Combat Team-21 had taken up residence at Wyler's Camp (Warkworth--50 miles north of Auckland).(35) With the arrival of the 3d Battalion--which departed American Samoa as part of Regimental Combat Team-3 on 22 May 1943 and arrived at Auckland 10 days later--all four battalions of the regiment were finally brought to New Zealand, but were widely dispersed.(36)

Once the battalions with their equipment had been unloaded and camps established, intensive weapons training, gun drills, and rigorous physical conditioning began. Noting that American youth had become physically soft, Major General Barrett issued training orders requiring all officers and men of the division to take one 60-mile hike with full pack during a three-day period each month, in addition to the regularly scheduled training program. To further prepare the men for the hard fight ahead they were to be issued "R"-rations for the hike consisting of measured portions of rice, bacon, coffee, and raisins.(37) This type of ration was later abandoned since it proved inadequate, and difficult to prepare, requiring men to build small open fires often during rain squalls to cook their meals.(38) As training progressed, the lack of suitable open terrain precluded the staging of division exercises. Regimental combat teams did, however, conduct several firing problems to further indoctrinate their rifle company commanders and other officers with the techniques of fire direction, effectiveness of artillery support, and their men with overhead fire. Speed, flexibility, and accuracy of supporting fire were continually required from each battery within the regiment.

The arrival of the 3d Battalion with Regimental Combat Team-3 on 31 May signaled the final month of intensive training and preparation. Contrary to the practice in the move from California to New Zealand, regimental combat teams were disbanded with the supporting battalions of the 12th Marines reverting to regimental control in anticipation of deployment to a forward area.