

# Commanding the Pacific

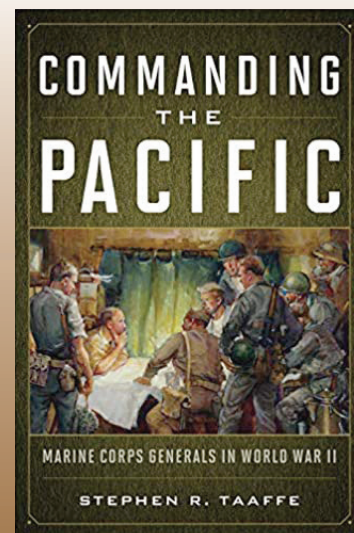
reviewed by Col Eric L. Chase, USMCR (Ret)

In *Commanding the Pacific: Marine Corps Generals in World War II*, Stephen R. Taaffe focuses on the Corps' wartime leadership and seizes a fresh niche among the innumerable published histories of the Pacific War. His previous books span U.S. military leadership from the American Revolution to the Korean War. *Commanding the Pacific* reveals how fifteen Marine generals led their commands or influenced the action during the Pacific War from 1941 to 1945. He describes the ferocious combat that brought out the best and, on occasion, the idiosyncrasies of the small coterie of Marine generals who led combat in the Pacific.

Two Marine Commandants served during World War II: Gen Thomas Holcomb and Gen Alexander A. Vandegrift. From Washington, DC, both continuously influenced the assignments of generals in the Pacific, pro-

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D. Roosevelt delivered the Medal of Honor to Vandegrift for "his tenacity, courage and resourcefulness" on Guadalcanal where he demonstrated "inspiring leadership." As Taaffe makes plain, Guadalcanal was one of those battles that might have been lost but for exceptional leadership from Vandegrift and exceptional determination and courage from Marines of all ranks. How the Marine generals led,



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motions, and—surprisingly—their combat strategies. Holcomb's distinguished combat record was already complete when he became Commandant in 1936. However, it was Vandegrift who set the Pacific's highest standard as a warfighting general on Guadalcanal before succeeding Holcomb on 1 January 1944. Only a month into that office, President Franklin

fought, and interacted with each other and leaders of other Services for the duration of the Pacific conflict is the heart of the story.

Taaffe introduces his theme by quoting GEN Dwight D. Eisenhower's view that "infallibly the commander and the unit are almost one and the same thing." Agreeing with Eisenhower, Taaffe concludes that

"the Marine Corps could not have won its war against the Japanese without the particular leaders in charge of its divisions and corps during the conflict." *Commanding the Pacific* should thus compel the attention of all military professionals, especially in the Marine Corps but also those in other Services.

First, initially concentrating on the sudden U.S. immersion from peace into war on 7 December 1941, Taaffe shows that Marine generals (and leaders of units below them) had to learn and adapt quickly to overcome the incomparable hardships of serial vicious combat arenas in Pacific islands defended by dug-in Japanese, nearly all of whom would fight to the death. The Corps rightly laid claim to the development and deployment of yet untested amphibious warfare doctrine, as it took the main role in conducting island mission after island mission. The pervasive attitude of the Marine generals was one of unbridled confidence, regardless of the deadly rigors they shared with their men that included not only a ruthless and

capable enemy and the grave risks of assaulting hostile shores but also the elements of disease-ridden tropical islands and daily deprivation of basic supplies, ammunition, potable water, and rations. They kept their doubts to themselves, even when the odds favored the entrenched enemy.

Amphibious landings against occupied islands with a well-prepared enemy defined Marines' movements to combat in the Pacific. Just getting ashore generated horrific casualties. The landing craft were primitive and vulnerable. Prep fires were always inadequate. The Navy was not always available for supporting fires, resup-

ply, or evacuation of casualties. Mistakes were costly, and Marine leaders learned to adjust their tactics accordingly. Even then, casualties mounted—too high, many argued at the time, notably including an enraged public after Tarawa's casualty losses during three days of combat. As the island combat neared the end in 1944–1945, the casualty tolls on islands like Saipan (15 June–9 July 1944), Peleliu (15 September–27 November 1944), Iwo Jima (19 February–26 March 1945), and Okinawa (1 April–22 June 1945) saw ghastly spikes. In those circumstances, Taaffe's telling of how the Marine generals coped with such carnage and prevailed is poignant and inspirational, yet heartbreaking.

Second, Marine generals often shelved their egos to abide by orders of more senior commanders when there was disagreement. This was especially true in the Pacific where Marine generals were subordinate to certain admirals aboard ships and, ultimately, to Fleet Commander Chester W. Nimitz. It was not until after the war that

the Commandant gained the equal say with the other Service chiefs that it has today.

In the first chapter appropriately called "SEMPER FI: An Anomalous Organization in Search of a Mission," Taaffe places the "small and insular group" that led the Marine Corps in a pre-World War II perspective:

In July 1941 the Corps had five major generals, 9 brigadier generals, and 70 colonels. The service fortunes in World War II depended as much on the abilities of these men as on anything else. They constituted the only source for the Corps' division, and Corps' commanders, department chiefs, senior staff officers in the field

out their commander. They were resourceful and inspiring, leading Marines to fight their tenacious Japanese rivals with equal fervor. Yet, some carried quirks of personality that created controversies, small and large. No one personified the combination of talent and ability with a prickly personality more than Gen Holland "Howlin' Mad" Smith. His firing of an Army general on Saipan for moving too slowly in the offensive mode ascended into a Marine Corps versus Army legendary dispute that continues in history's written 75 years after the battle.

*Commanding the Pacific* is an indispensable read for anyone aspiring to any leadership level in the Marine Corps. It portrays the numerous trials by fire that Marine generals endured to bring the hardest-fought victory to American forces in United States history. Together, these generals personify a "winning attitude" and fortitude that overcame the worst combat conditions conceivable. Taaffe ends his important contribution to the studies of history and leadership this way:

There was nothing preordained about the war's outcome and the Marine Corps' role in it. At the conflict's start, the Corps possessed an untested amphibious doctrine, an uncertain relationship with the Army, and limited resources. ... The Marines could have ended up spending the conflict as a tiny organization providing shipboard security, guarding Navy bases, and undertaking reconnaissance missions. Fortunately for the Marines, their equipment, doctrine, tactics, and especially commanders proved the Corps' ability to successfully storm hostile beaches. Holcomb and Vandegrift deserve credit for finding enough good combat commanders among their limited pool of high-ranking officers to lead their divisions and corps to victory. In doing so, these generals not only helped to win the Pacific War but also secured for the Marine Corps a prominent postwar role in the U.S. military.

and at HQMC, liaison officers with the Army and Navy, and high-ranking logistical personnel. As it turned out, there were never enough of them to go around because no one else could do these important jobs.

The Marine Corps faced challenges in the war against Japan that "proved to be unlike anything the U.S. Military had ever encountered." The vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean, distances from U.S. staging areas and ports to Pacific islands, and the conditions ashore proved daunting and unprecedented realities. Although American forces leveled a stinging defeat on the Japanese navy in the Battle of Midway in June 1942, it was not until the victory at Guadalcanal (7 August 1942–9 February 1943) that the United States truly turned the war's tide.

Taaffe brings out the great strengths of the Pacific's small fraternity of Marine generals. To a man, they were physically courageous to a fault, sometimes endangering themselves, upsetting nearby subordinates who feared the enemy would take

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