

GENERAL

LOUIS H. WILSON JR.

By Cyril J. O'Brien

Four hundred miles inland in Afghanistan a Marine task force descended suddenly and overwhelmingly on a disputed airstrip and its external field works and executed the Corps' traditional role of projecting American power from the sea.

A quarter century earlier the 26th Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Louis H. "Lou" Wilson Jr. (1975-79), promised the United States as long as it had a Marine Corps that need would be met.

During that time the Senate Armed Services Committee and other leaders of Congress were putting the entire military of the United States under close scrutiny. The review was an aftermath of an unpopular war. As in times past, Congress challenged the Marine Corps to explain its role, both present and future.

In its own bicentennial year (1975), the Corps was under attack. According to J. Robert Moskin in his book "The U.S. Marine Corps Story," Gen Wilson made it clear to the Senate committee: "I am not concerned about the future of the Marine Corps as long as we have ready forces ... because I am convinced that when the call comes, they [the country] have my telephone number, and I do expect a call."

Gen Wilson did not want a big army, "just a force and equipment," he told them, "for high mobility and high-intensity combat." The Corps' role as ever would be to "provide air and ground forces with a ready capability to take those arms ashore."

Hearings and questions took days and days in both the House and Senate. They heard Gen Wilson's concept of integrated

air-ground units "ready to deploy against the widest range of possible foes" at a place and time of the United States' choosing.

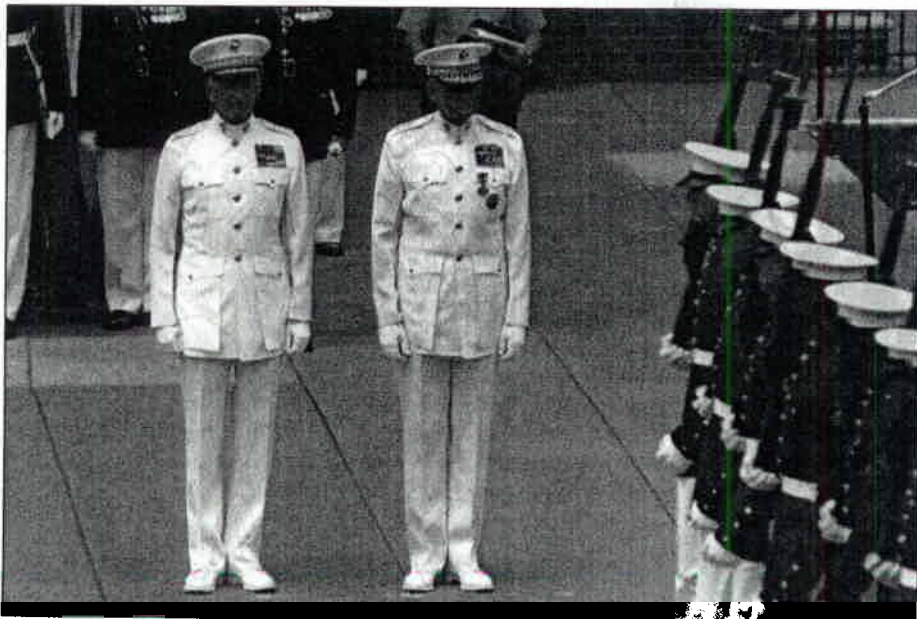
By 1976 a friendly press noted how this new Commandant was expanding "fast and forcefully." Troops were jazzing up mechanized debarkation, sophisticated amphibious support, absorbing in-service education, computer complexities and on and on.

CMC Wilson accelerated development at Marine Corps Base, Twentynine Palms, Calif., as a site to train with zeal and realism. War-fighting readiness was ratcheted up, and combined air-ground arms enveloped even young "boots." Some 300 miles inland from San Diego, Twentynine Palms sported the Buillion Mountains, 112-degree temperatures, sand in faces, fire and movement skirmishes that tore up the deck, the sky and confidence. Twentynine Palms had everything but comfort, and the general wanted it that way. Base historian Colonel Verle E. Ludwig, USMC (Ret) called it a "combined-arms-exercise college."

The general also set up an aviation weapons and tactics squadron commissioned in Yuma, Ariz., to extract the most from man and machine, state-of-the-art tactics and technology. The goal: totally integrated, top-drawer air-ground operations.

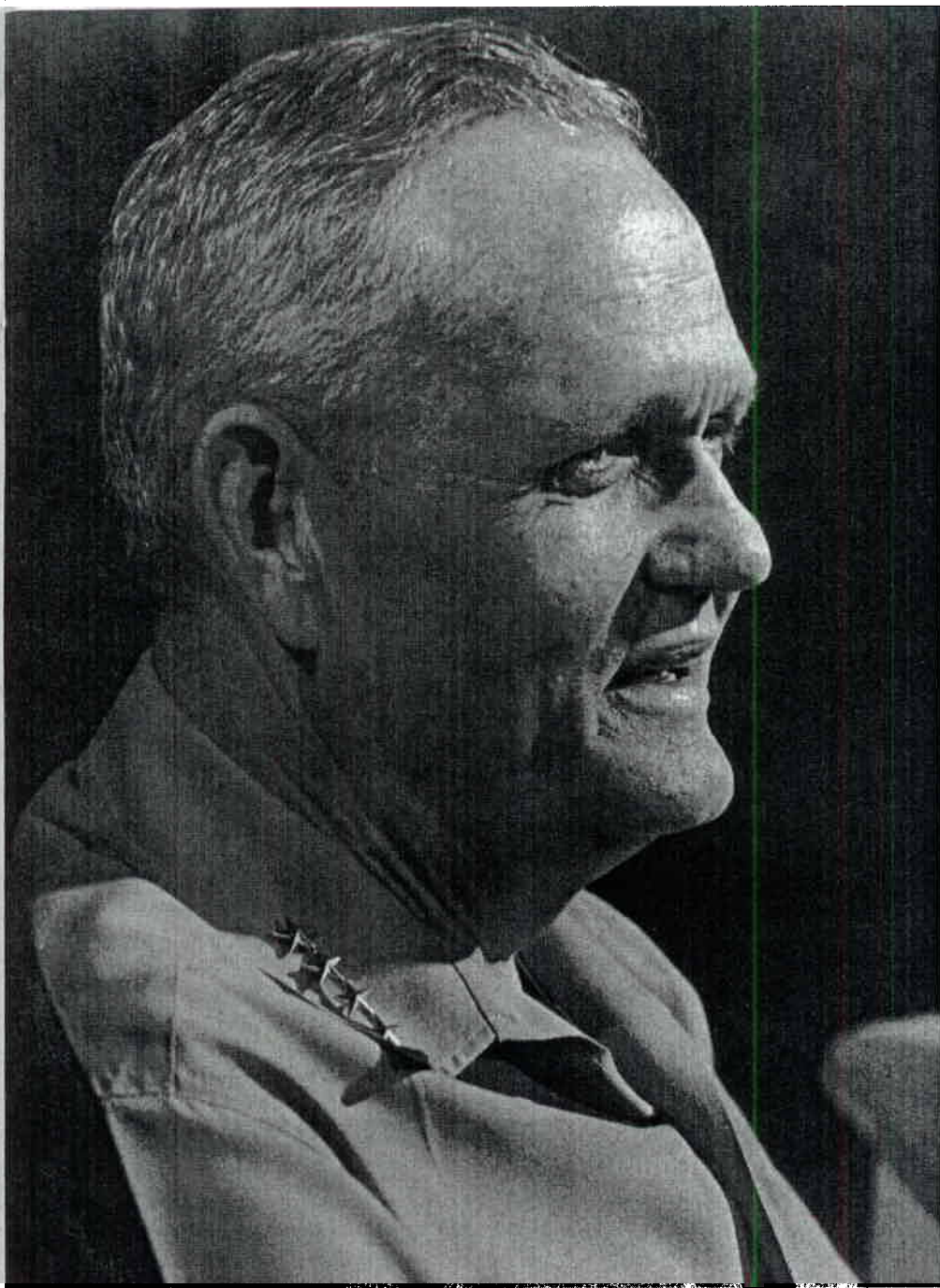
However, in his book "Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps," historian Allan R. Millett notes there were rocks and shoals in the Corps' aviation status. Defining and maintaining its air arm was half the battle. The Commandant had to bid hard for his own combat aircraft.

Before Gen Wilson became Commandant, the Navy had advised the Marines how much it favored its F-14 "Tomcat." The Tomcat was good, but it was strictly a carrier fighter. At the Navy's urging,



SGT A. N. DRAGO

On 29 June 1979, Gen Robert H. Barrow, the Corps' newly appointed 27th Commandant (left), and Gen Louis H. Wilson Jr. stood ready to review the troops at Marine Barracks, Washington, D.C. On that day, after 38 years of distinguished service to Corps and country, Gen Wilson retired from active duty.



the pre-Wilson Marine Corps headquarters decided to adopt it.

Lieutenant General William R. Maloney, USMC (Ret), holder of the Silver Star and two Distinguished Flying Crosses and the commander of a squadron, an air group and three aircraft wings, explained how CMC Wilson decided to cancel the F-14 acquisition for the Marine Corps. Quite simply, it wouldn't fit into the Corps' expeditionary role.

Carriers wouldn't be around always, and Marine expeditionary units needed expeditionary aircraft. CMC Wilson would stick with the F-4 "Phantom" until the more modern F/A-18 "Hornet," capable and moderately fast with a mix of weapons, could join the Marine aircraft wings. Marine aviators vouched that

the F/A-18 could devastate and operate exceptionally well in hazardous tree-top altitudes, just above the troops.

For all its promises, said Gen Wilson, technology was still an adjunct to the "essential element of the Marine Corps," the individual Marine. As he took command, Gen Wilson embraced the Marine majority of "matchless devotion," but there were too many in the Corps who were "marginal, substandard, unwilling to subordinate themselves to the Corps."

CMC Wilson explained: "The draft laws had been gerrymandered so that only the poor, the blacks and disadvantaged were really drafted. A great many fine young men came in. But many draftees, thrown in with them, were the dregs of society [and] many with contin-

Left: Gen Wilson was always available to discuss the state of the Marine Corps when he was on active duty, and occasionally he would reminisce about the Battle of Guam.

Below: The monument to those who were awarded the Medal of Honor in recapturing Guam in 1944 was dedicated on 21 July 1989 during annual Guam Liberation Day ceremonies.



COURTESY OF CYRIL J. O'BRIEN

uing dissatisfaction with the war. They were also spilling into all the services. The Marine Corps as well!"

There were personal and social conflicts, poor grooming, drug-alcohol involvement, disrespect; only 45 of 100 Marines were high school graduates. Society's discontent invaded the military.

"It is not like the old days," he said, "when you could leave your wallet on your sack."

The Commandant meant business the minute he came aboard. During the first meeting of the first duty day, he called the appearance of Headquarters "deplorable" and said that it looked like a "rat's nest." Obesity, haircut and uniform problems were reflected in the unfavorable report from the inspector general on his inspection of Headquarters Battalion.

"If I see a fat Marine," the new Commandant said, "he's in trouble, and so is his commanding officer." Obesity would vanish, and every action of every Marine would be characterized by quality. Marines who had been in six or eight years who didn't shape up would go. "I didn't come here to save them. It is not a goal; it is imperative. I will not relax standards if faced with the choice between quantity and quality." Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger told of "an old 'Gunny'" who lost 13 pounds just by keeping the Commandant's picture on the fridge.

To add impact, Gen Wilson brought aboard LtGen Robert H. Barrow (later to become the 27th Commandant) as Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower. A redoubtable field officer, he wore a Navy Cross from the Korean War and had com-



Each year, 21 July is celebrated as Guam's Liberation Day. The island's liberation from occupying Japanese forces is marked by parades and other festivities honoring the veterans of the Battle of Guam. Gen Wilson and other veterans are routinely honored at the parade.

manded a regiment in Vietnam. LtGen Barrow sparked an all-out attack on sub-standard Marines.

Gen Wilson let Corps, country and Congress know that he would seek intelligence. Seventy-five percent of future Marines would be high school graduates, "who've already proved they can stick it through."

Each year about 50,000 recruits would be transported to Marine Corps recruit depots at Parris Island, S.C., or San Diego and made into dedicated Marines. The Commandant asked Congress for 192,000 total strength by fiscal year 1978.

Soon the press saw this "hard-charging new Commandant" demanding quality enlistments, keeping good Marines in the Corps and upgrading physical fitness. Disciplinary problems were easing, and 69 percent of recruits were high school grads by 1977.

That same year, a still-adamant Commandant said: "Today's Marines are as good or better than any who have served in uniform: smarter, well-motivated, well-led. ... For years I have heard, they said this and they want that. Well, now I'm they, and it will be done. Marines are feeling better, looking better, acting better," but he'd keep their feet to the fire.

Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, Director Emeritus of Marine Corps History, said, "The Corps had weathered yet another testing with a fresh, new spirit and confidence."

During foreign exercises in various climates, environments, wet and dry, with the best troops of our allies, the Marine Corps was demonstrating what was expected: traditional superiority, polish, respect and élan.

Gen Wilson had a presence that evoked authority, said his senior aide for two

years, retired Marine Col Warren H. Wiedhahn Jr. of Alexandria, Va. "His presence was enough; he didn't have to raise his voice, and his words belied his presence: soft spoken, personal, reserved."

Retired Marine Col Conrad M. "Bulley" Fowler was in the Sixth Reserve Officer Class at Quantico, Va., in 1941 with Wilson. He recalled: "He never had pretensions in any way, even when he was on the top; [he] had all the intrinsic qualities of the model Marine, even-tempered, assured with a command presence."

These were handy qualities on Capitol Hill. However, before he bearded the Capitol tribunals as Commandant, he had served as the Corps' legislative assistant. Wilson had gained experience as the Corps' congressional liaison for former Commandants Wallace M. Greene Jr. and Leonard F. Chapman Jr.

"This was the best preparation I had for one of the most difficult jobs of being Commandant," Gen Wilson told BGen Simmons. "I felt comfortable on the Hill: knew a great many of the senators and congressmen from days as legislative assistant [1967-68]. I really enjoyed discussing ... did not mind testifying."

G. V. "Sonny" Montgomery (D-Miss.), former House Armed Services Committee member and chairman of the Veterans Affairs Committee, called Wilson "one of our great Commandants. He always came in so quietly, trim, impressive. ... Never obvious as Commandant or holder of the Medal of Honor. A great listener, always well prepared. When asked a question he simply took it from

Liberating Guam

When it comes to courage, few people appreciate Lou Wilson's true grit more than the citizens of Guam.

In February 1943 as commanding officer, Wilson took Company F, 2d Battalion, Ninth Marine Regiment overseas. Then he led them into the Third Marine Division's baptism of fire on 1 Nov. 1944 at Empress Augusta Bay, Bougainville and in the British Solomon Islands, Empress Augusta Bay was a gauntlet in rain, swamp and a jungle so dense it took a day to go a mile. Guam was next, and his "Fox" Co addressed Chonito Ridge and Fonte Ridge on the crest. There he earned the Medal of Honor for blunting wild and mindless enemy counterattacks and then attacking to break the Japanese in his sector. Wilson gained experience in commanding troops, barracks duty, training assignments and formal education.

The battle for Fonte Ridge, 25-26 July 1944, was for the strategic high ground and the Japanese line. It also held the enemy's island command post.

Intense, sometimes hand to hand, usually in hand-grenade range with Japanese bodies stacked as sandbags, the fighting was so fierce in Wilson's sector that ammunition was run-

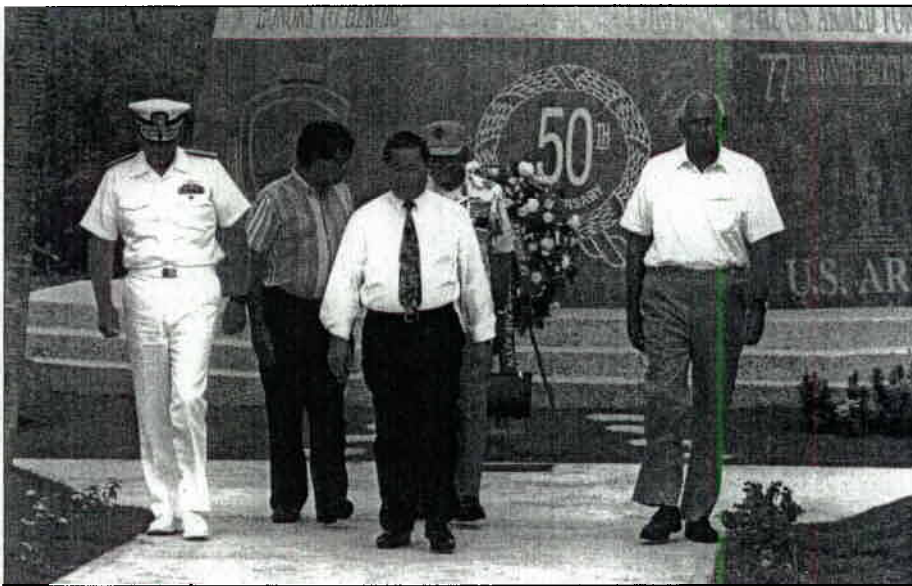
ning out. The captain of Co F, 2d Bn, 9th Marines considered resorting to bayonets. Three times wounded, the 24-year-old "skipper" held the defense through the night and much of the day, braving a fire storm to rescue a Marine from beyond the lines, then attacking through a fire screen with 17 defiant Co F leathernecks to take the high ground.

The Japanese screamed, flung grenades and packaged explosives and slashed tanks with swords and bayonets as the fight spread across the whole division front.

In 11 counterattacks on Co F, the Japanese lost 807 men; Fox Co. 62 dead, 107 wounded. Actually, the combat on Guam was put on the back burner by the press at the time, upstaged by the early thrusts of the Normandy invasion.

Guam's Liberation Day, 21 July 1944, is when the 3dMarDiv, 1st Provisional Marine Brigade and 77th Army Division struck to liberate the island from the Japanese. On Guam, the date is tantamount to the Fourth of July in the United States. As a prominent liberator, Gen Wilson was awarded the Guam Medal of Valor by Governor Joseph Ada in 1990.

—Cyril J. O'Brien



COURTESY OF CYRIL J. O'BRIEN

On the 50th anniversary of the initial assault landing on Guam, retired Gen Wilson (right) was joined by other dignitaries, including then-Governor of Guam Joseph F. Ada, in wreath-laying ceremonies at the memorial on the invasion beaches.

there. You could always see he was proud to be a Marine. I never had to defend him even though he was from my own home state. He knew his way on the Hill, never said too much, knew when to push and when not to do so."

Gen Carl E. Mundy Jr., 30th Commandant, emphasized how Gen Wilson had made quality the keystone, instilled case-hardened discipline and invigorated and expanded training.

Howell T. Heflin was with Wilson and Conrad Fowler in the Ninth Marine Regiment on Bougainville in World War II. Heflin, later a U.S. senator, earned the Silver Star there and was also on Guam when a long-legged Marine captain named Lou Wilson was nailed by the Japanese on the second hill.

"Oh, he did a tremendous job in transforming the Marine Corps back to its great, esteemed and legendary status," the senator said. "He turned the whole Marine Corps around, was a tremendous Commandant."

Senator John C. Stennis, Chairman, Senate Armed Services Committee, was influential in Gen Wilson's elevation to full membership on the Joint Chiefs of Staff in October 1978. It was late in Wilson's tenure, and the general, used to the ebbs of the Chiefs, concluded that the interests of the Corps and national security "would be better served if his successors were full members of [the] Joint Chiefs."

Aided by President Harry S. Truman's 1948 unnecessary imbroglio with the Marines (which the Marines won), the Commandant was allowed by Congress to sit with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but only when Marine Corps matters were on the table. Gen Wilson's recommenda-

tion that the Commandant have full status as a member of the Joint Chiefs had support from members of the House and Senate, Marine veterans and other admirers. The clause, which would have the Commandant as a member of the Joint Chiefs, was written hastily into the Defense Authorization Bill. The leadership of Senator Stennis quenched unfriendly fire or lingering prejudices. According to Senator Heflin, Stennis encouraged President Jimmy Carter, a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, to select Gen Wilson as Commandant.

Full membership on the JCS had been a longtime goal of the Marine Corps. Gen Wilson achieved it.

Retired LtGen Victor H. "Brute" Kullak wrote in "First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps" that full membership in the Joint Chiefs was a victory that was "a tribute to the resourceful courage of Commandant Wilson."

Louis Wilson retired from the Marines after 38 years on 1 July 1979. When it was all over, he fondly tossed four stars to his daughter, Janet. Then the Commandant went home to Jackson, Miss. Only 59, the retired Marine bristled with energy and so accepted membership on several boards of national establishments. Gen Lou Wilson will remain forever a giant of the Corps.

Editor's note: Cy O'Brien served as an infantryman in a rifle company in the 3d Marines on Bougainville. He was later a combat correspondent on Guam and Iwo Jima. Following WW II he spent 12 years in the Marine Corps Reserve, retiring as a captain.

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