

The Last Post
General Thomas A. Holcomb, USMC
A Distinguished Commandant
By
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The major general sat on a canvas camp chair behind a spotting scope and watched the targets rise and fall to the rhythm of the barking rifles. From time to time he would squint through the glass to observe, with an expert's eye, what effect the wind was having on the 30 caliber bullets traveling from Camp Perry's firing line to their final destination 600 yards down range. On this late summer day in 1937 a pair of his Marines lay on the greensward before him, strapped tightly to their Springfield '03s, shooting Vs and 5s with monotonous regularity. The high ranking observer, in slightly rumpled summer khakis and Sam Browne belt, was taking more than a passing and courteous interest in the action before him. Occasionally the sun would glint off the gold acorn shaped badge pinned above the left pocket flap of his blouse. It would be a rare Commandant who would not take interest in the success of the Marine Corps Shooting Team. Rarer still would be one who had competed on the team. The rarest of all would be the one who wore the Distinguished Marksman Badge-Major General Commandant Thomas A. Holcomb, Jr.

Thirty-six years earlier a smooth cheeked, freshly minted, 21 year old Second Lieutenant; Holcomb started out on a military career that would span nearly 44 years. When he was commissioned, on April 13, 1900, the Corps was rich with veterans of the battles of the Spanish American War; the rifle was the bolt action Krag-Jorgenson, and the highest rank a Marine officer could hold was

that of the single star of a brigadier general. When he retired on January 1, 1944 a generation of World War II Marine veterans were being forged in the Pacific, the rifle was the semiautomatic M-1 Garand, and he would be the first Marine to pin on a general's four stars.

Thomas Holcomb was born in New Castle, Delaware on August 5, 1879. His parents, Thomas and Elizabeth Hindman Barney, provided him with a private school education, as befitted the son of an attorney and state legislator. When the senior Holcomb accepted a position with the Treasury Department the family relocated to Washington, D.C. and young Thomas enrolled in Western High School, graduating in 1897. Three years later he would seek and gain a commission in the United States Marine Corps.

Holcomb, as was the custom of the time for young Marine officers, received his initial drill and ceremony training at the Marine Barracks in Washington in the British style. Under Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps Thomas F. Haynes they learned basic soldierly skills, the manual of arms, and squad drill. A combat veteran of the British Army, Haynes had been in the expedition to relieve "Chinese" Gordon at Khartoum.

After passing muster with Haynes Holcomb found himself stationed in Newport, Rhode Island. There he found a readily available supply of ammunition and rifles, free time, a rifle range and a fellow Marine, Sergeant Joseph W. Barkley. The two Leathernecks began to master the Krag and in July of 1901 found themselves detailed to team tryouts at Annapolis. When he and the rest of the Marines arrived on the shores of the Severn River for the training and

selection session Holcomb again found himself toiling under the stern eye of Sergeant Major Hayes, as good a rifle shot as a drillmaster. A month later the Marines traveled to the New Jersey Rifle Association's ranges at Sea Girt. It would be the Marine Corps first foray into the major shooting arena and it would be an enlightening experience.

The Marines were babes in the woods next to the experienced civilian and National Guard teams. However, the Marine novices were beneficiaries of the good sportsmanship that is evident on rifle ranges worldwide. Observing the Marines floundering, the National Guard came to their assistance and showed them how to use their rifle slings, adjust the Krag's sloppy trigger, and even gave them handloaded ammunition to replace the less accurate government issue cartridges they had been shooting. Not unexpectedly, despite all of the help, the Marines placed about halfway down the result bulletin.

Holcomb, with limited shooting experience but unbounded enthusiasm and talent, never the less tried out for the Palma Team while at Sea Girt. The Palma is the world's premier long rifle match, being fired at 800, 900, and 1,000 yards. While many shooters shot prone, Holcomb elected to fire from the supine, or back position. Lying on his back, feet toward the target, with the rifle cradled inside his bent knee, he finished 11th in the field, missing a spot on the prestigious eight man team. In the end the Marines came away from the match with few honors but considerable experience.

After the Sea Girt matches, Holcomb attended the School of Application, the precursor to The Basic School. From September of 1902 until April 1903,

After completing his first formal training he did his initial duty with troops as a member of a seagoing battalion attached to the United States Navy's North Atlantic Squadron. Between school and sea duty he did find time to again tryout, and make, the 1902 Marine team. A still raw, but more experienced, team mustered at Sea Girt and did marginally better. Holcomb found himself the highest placing Marine, seventh place, in the President's Match and with it five dollars. The prize check, no small amount for the time, was not to find its way into Holcomb's pocket. Team Captain Major Charles Lauchheimer informed all that the team was there at government expense and all award checks would be endorsed for payment to the Treasurer of the United States. So it was also with the \$25.00 won for a second place finish in the Skirmish Match, the first team victory by the Marines.

Holcomb made a second attempt to earn a place on the Palma Team and was rewarded for his efforts by placing fifth on the team. The eight men traveled to Ottawa, Canada and the range at Rockcliffe. While the more experienced team from Great Britain won the match, Holcomb, the youngest competitor on the line, fired the high individual score with his Krag and brought considerable attention to himself and credit to the Corps.

When, in 1903, Congress adopted legislation that created the National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice, the National Matches came into being. The Marines now knew that they had to call in expert help if they wished to best the National Guard and civilian teams that dominated the ranges. Through some legerdemain they convinced Dr. Samuel Scott, a 56 year old Washington dentist

and prominent rifleman and coach, to enlist as a private. Three years later Gunnery Sergeant Scott would receive a special order discharge and the thanks of the Corps for helping develop techniques and skills that would lead the Marines to greater success on rifle range and battlefield.

The Marines continued to improve and Scott took them to the 1903 National Matches. During this match they showed continued improvement. Holcomb would place seventh in the 1,000 yard Wimbledon Cup Match and the Marine team would best all of the regular service teams with its sixth place finish. Holcomb, suffering from a touch of a fever picked up during maneuvers at Culebra Island in Puerto Rico, did not score well enough to make the 1903 Palma Team. The team officials, well aware of his skills and triumph of the year before, elected to bring him to Bisley Camp in England anyway. They were not disappointed and Holcomb was fourth on the victorious United States Team. Unfortunately the United States victory was voided when it was revealed that the Krags used were not, strictly speaking, the nation's service rifle. The United States team had fitted its rifles with specially made Pope-Stephens barrels and had certainly violated the spirit, if not, the letter of the law.

Newly promoted to first lieutenant in 1903, Holcomb would begin a long association with the Far East when he was posted to the Philippines in April 1904. Peking would be his next duty station when he was attached to the United States Legation Guard there from 1905 until 1907. Leaving China, Holcomb found himself back on the 1907 Marine rifle team. The Marine showing at the first National Match to be held at Camp Perry was only noteworthy in that, though

it showed a steady increase in the Marines' skill, It highlighted the need for the Marines to improve facets of their competitive marksmanship program. In the future efforts would be made to develop adequate firing ranges, a progressive program of shooter development and, team captains and coaches that could both teach and administer. Brigadier General Commandant George Elliot vigorously set about to remedy these ills.

After the 1907 National Matches Holcomb returned to China where he served as a naval attaché. Promoted to captain in 1908 Holcomb was placed in charge of the legation's Marine detachment. The training of these "China Marines" under his command would be through, with a particular attention to small arms training. This particular view of a Marine's duties and skills would become a hallmark of Holcomb. During this tour, which would last until May of 1911, he would study Chinese building up a vocabulary of about 4,500 words which was much the same as a well educated Chinese. From May to December of 1911, he would again serve as a member of the rifle team, returning at the end of the 1911 shooting season to Peking.

While Holcomb was in China the Marine Corps, following the example of the Army, instituted the award of a Distinguished Marksman Badge for those who demonstrate a high degree of proficiency with the service rifle at the Division and National Matches. The award was retroactive to 1905 making Holcomb one of the first 17 to be awarded the distinct gold badge, there being four awarded in 1908 and 13 previously credited.

Holcomb's 1911 tour with the rifle team would be his last but, in many ways, his most memorable and historic. Returning from China, where he had recently placed second in the North China Rifle Championships, Holcomb reported to the Marine range at Winthrop, Maryland. Here the team was organized and put through its trials. The Marines were sparing no expense, fiscal or organizational, to win at Camp Perry. Each of the 100 candidates had his eyes examined by an optometrist and those with vision less than 15/20 were relieved of duty. Those that remained were each issued a pair of Springfield rifles, spotting scopes, a cornucopia of small accoutrements, including prescription-shooting glasses if needed. After several weeks only the best 24 shooters remained. The coaches had been hard at work pairing up compatible shooters, inspiring them, and learning all about the men. The pride was evident as the men set out for Ohio.

Marine shooting legends such as Calvin Lloyd, Victor Czegka, and Ralph Keyser joined Holcomb in a concentrated attempt to win the National Trophy Team Match. After the first day of short-range competition they stood in fourth place, a second day of long range firing moved them up one place to third. Everything was riding on the third, and final day's competition-The Skirmish Match.

After the team completed the movement down range they had to sweat out the statistical work and could only stare at the blank scoreboard. As the name of the winning team was chalked on the board the tension grew, as the first two letters were a U and an S. The next letter would announce to the world the

winner, the Army, Navy, or Marines. As soon as the capital letter M appeared the Marines began a celebration that was so intense it effected the next day's shooting. But who could blame them! After ten years of hard won lessons and great effort they had won the Holy Grail of service rifle shooting. It was of particular satisfaction to the Holcomb who had been on both the first Marine team to enter the Nationals and the first to win. Savoring the victory he packed his seabag and cruise chest and returned to China, perhaps knowing that this was the last time he would compete.

Holcomb bade farewell to China in 1914 and reported to Marine Corps Headquarters where he was appointed Inspector of Target Practice. This position was not a minor post as it was responsible for all aspects of small arms training and competition in the Corps. Holcomb devoted his considerable intellect and skill to the job. During his tenure the Marines won the Nationals once and finished second. By the end of 1916, Holcomb had been promoted to major and taken Beatrice Miller Clover, the daughter of Admiral Richardson Clover, as a bride. Their marriage would last through two World Wars and produce one son, Franklin Porteous Holcomb, who would serve as a Marine officer during World War II.

As the United States prepared itself for entry in World War I the Marine Corps expanded while Holcomb was serving as an aide to Commandant George Barnett. Holcomb wanted to see action so one day the Commandant had Holcomb at his side and the next he was gone as he had quietly engineered a transfer as the commanding officer of the newly established Second Battalion of

the Sixth Marine Regiment. Applying his customary vigor to the job at hand, he brought the unit up to fighting trim with, as usual, a particular emphasis on marksmanship. Foreign military observers in France would later note that the Marines, even in the heat of battle, would stop to adjust their sights as they advanced toward the enemy. Holcomb's attention to detail and preparation would pay dividends when the Sixth Marines found themselves engaged on the bloody battlegrounds of Château-Thierry, Soissons, Marbache, St. Mihiel, Champagne, and the Argonne. At war's end Holcomb had risen to be the executive officer of the Sixth Marines and been awarded the Navy Cross, four Silver Stars, the Purple Heart, and other lesser awards for his valor. He was advanced to temporary Lieutenant Colonel in 1918. He remained in Europe as part of the Army of Occupation and his promotion was confirmed as a permanent in 1920. He at last left Europe when he was ordered to Guantánamo, Cuba, to command the Marine Barracks, a post he held from September of 1922 until June 1924.

During the inter-war years Holcomb would hold an array of billets and study at the most important military schools. After Cuba he attended and graduated with distinction from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth. Upon completion of C&GSC, in June of 1925, he returned to Marine Corps Headquarters for duty in Operations and Training. Not wanting to waste his knowledge of the Far East the Marines returned him to China in 1927 as Commanding Officer of the Marine Detachment at the American Legation. Promoted to Colonel in 1928, he returned to the United States in 1930 where he had the unusual experience of back-to-back years of

study at the Naval War College and the Army War College This unusual conjunction of schooling indicated his promise for high command. In June of 1932, after completing his studies he was assigned to the office of The Chief of Naval Operations.

Upon being promoted to brigadier general in February of 1935 he was appointed as the Commandant of the Marine Corps Schools at Quantico but he would not remain there long. President Franklin Roosevelt, an old friend of both the Marines and Holcomb since his days as Assistant Secretary of the Navy in 1916, deep selected Holcomb, advancing him over the heads of more senior officers, and appointed him as the Marine Corps seventeenth Commandant on December 1, 1936. While such a rapid promotion over the heads of seniors might have caused bitterness and a spate of retirements the professional admiration and personal popularity of Holcomb forestalled such action. Holcomb was viewed by his peers as "...a grand person, a fine officer-and all Marine."

Early in his tenure as the Major General Commandant Holcomb began one of the more treasured traditions of the Corps. At Marine Barracks, Washington, D.C., on November 10, 1937, he presided over the first recorded cake ceremony. During the Birthday Ball a huge cake in the shape of Tun Tavern, the traditional birthplace of the Corps, was cut with a Mameluke sword and the oldest and youngest Marines present were recognized by being presented with the first and second portions. Ever mindful of Corps tradition he adjusted an old one when, in 1942, he approved a change in 'The Marines' Hymn". In recognition of the increasing importance and valor of Marine aviators

and aircrew, the Corps would now raise its voice in praise of fighting its country's battles, "...in the air, on land, and sea."

His interest in shooting and individual rifle marksmanship would continue unabated. As Commandant, all Marine shooting trophies resided in his office and when he had time to chat the subject inevitable came around to marksmanship. In 1939, following a loss in the 1938 National Trophy Match that broke a five year winning streak, he appointed Distinguished Marksman, Major Merritt "Red Mike" Edson, to be the Inspector of Target Practice. While this intervention was too late to help the team, they did perform very well, winning the 1,000-yard Herrick Cup team match with a record setting perfect score, the only team ever to do so. After a hurricane and storm surge all but destroyed Parris Island in August of 1940 Holcomb reopened the rifle ranges with a ceremonial first shot, a V, slow fire offhand at 200 yards.

Holcomb's leadership of the Marines in World War II was marked by the perfection of the amphibious roll developed by his immediate predecessors Commandants John Lejeune and John Russell. Holcomb's greatest contribution was his resolution of the question of authority between the Navy and Marine commanders of joint operations. After Guadalcanal, the Marine and Navy commander would be equal and the theater commander would decide any conflicts.

This is not to say that the traditional rivalry between the sea services was ended, as illustrated by an event that happened soon after identification cards were introduced. Chief of Naval Operations Ernest King, said to be so tough he

shaved with a blowtorch, was denied admittance to his own headquarters by the Marine sentry on duty when King was unable to produced his ID card. After the fuming King found and presented his card he was passed through. Upon arriving in his office the CNO picked up his telephone and called Holcomb to express his displeasure at the temerity of the sentry. The Major General Commandant, ascertaining that the young private had acted in accordance with standing orders, called for him and immediately promoted him to corporal. The unknown sentry would not be the only Marine promoted for meritorious service. Holcomb would soon be made a Lieutenant General, the first Marine to reach that lofty rank.

Holcomb quietly resisted the racial and gender integration of the Marine Corps. However, despite his own personal feelings, the needs of his country and Corps took precedence, and under his watch the 51st and 52nd defense battalions as well as various service units in the Fleet Marine Force were established and manned by Black Marines in 1943. Within a decade the Corps would be fully integrated, the only color of importance being "Marine Green". On the day he approved the Woman Reservist program Holcomb was said to have reported that the portrait of Archibald Henderson crashed to the floor of the Commandant's House. Brigadier General Henderson was the fifth Commandant and is said to be responsible for the special character of the Corps. Henderson served as Commandant for 39 years, so long that he forgot he was living in government housing, and he actually willed the Commandant's House to his heirs.

As Commandant it was Holcomb's policy never to allow any Marine to stay on active duty past his 64th year and so, upon approaching that milestone,

he recommended Archer A. Vandergrift as his successor and tendered his resignation to President Roosevelt. After seven eventful and productive years as Commandant Holcomb closed out his military career of nearly 44 years on January 1, 1944. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal by President Roosevelt and, because he had been cited for bravery in combat, a new law dictated that he be advanced one grade on the retired list. This 'tombstone' promotion gave him the signal distinction of being the first Marine to attain the rank of general.

Three months later he was called back to public service by Roosevelt who appointed him Minister Plenipotentiary to the Union of South Africa, a post he would hold for almost four years. Despite his upbringing and his earlier history of resistance to the integration of the Corps he was much distressed by the ruthless subjugation of the black majority in that country. However, in the tension filled Cold War era he felt that the United States had to maintain its close ties to the minority white government for reasons of national security.

Holcomb's mind was never far from competitive shooting and the many friends he had made on rifle ranges. While ambassador he managed to track down seven members of the 1903 Natal Palma Team and brought them together at the United States Embassy for a fine dinner and an evening of reminiscing.

Retirement finally beckoned the 67-year-old general and he returned home in May of 1948 to enjoy his twilight years managing his family farm and gardening. Mrs. Holcomb passed away in 1962 and was laid to rest in Arlington to await her husband of 46 years. The last Commandant of the Marine Corps to

serve longer than a four year term joined his wife on August 5, 1965. He was borne to his grave by an honor guard of young Marines not yet born when he last served. The mourners and honored guests stood by as the traditional words were spoken. The flag was taken up and folded and, as the field music drew his breath to play 'Taps', three disciplined volleys of rifle fire sounded a fitting salute and farewell to a man for whom small arms marksmanship meant so much.