

First to Fight*

By Lieutenant General Thomas Holcomb
Commandant, U. S. Marine Corps

OFFICERS of the Field Artillery Course, the Reserve Officers' Course, and members of the Candidates' Class: I congratulate you upon the successful completion of your courses, and for the Candidates' Class I have a hearty welcome as new members of the officers' ranks of the Marine Corps.

It is no accident that you are wearing bars on your shoulders today. You have earned them—and while they entitle you to certain privileges and recognition, they also place upon you a very definite responsibility. The manner in which you wear them will affect the reputation of the Marine Corps. If you wear them well, with courage, with intelligence, and with due humility you will enhance our reputation. Reputation in the end is only a by-product of our acts. Reputation, to be real, like respect, must be earned—not demanded.

The Marine Corps has earned its reputation—it is not an accident. It comes from two sources—training and experience in combat—more than a hundred and sixty-seven years of both, as far as the Marine Corps is concerned. I repeat, our reputation and proficiency are not accidents.

Each of our previous operations has taught us lessons that are useful in succeeding operations. Warfare is continually changing in a tactical sense—that is, in its employment of new and ever-improving weapons. There can be little change in the strategical sense—that is, in the concentration of force where the enemy is weak, resolve to carry through and press an advantage, use of the element of surprise, meticulous planning in advance, gaining as much knowledge as possible of the enemies' strength, disposition, plans and habits, and a willingness and ability to change and improvise when the occasion demands it.

In the course of this war, on a scale which the world has never before seen, it is possible to lose sight of what your particular job is—of what the Marine Corps' job really is. The Marine Corps' primary function is to prepare the way for other troops. Ours is an amphibious operation—it has been recently called a "triphibious" operation. For that purpose we have trained for over a hundred and sixty-seven years. We are today, I believe, the most proficient amphibious military body in the world, and I say this with due modesty. We are so because of our experience and our training and our morale, which is a result of this experience and training.

It is no accident that the Marines are the First to Fight. They were the first U. S. troops to fight offensively in this war. They are the first because they must prepare the way. Because they are the first they must always be ready—you must be ready. With the many landings which will be required in the Pacific before Japan is finally conquered, many more opportunities will be presented us.

This specialized requirement of the Marine Corps requires specialized training. That is the reason for our schools, for this school. We are proud of our schools. We are confident they are the best in the world for our particular job. They not only give you the experience we have ob-

tained in fighting under varying and ever-changing conditions in many parts of the world, they give you also the most exhaustive research of landing operations of others throughout the world's written military history. And many of us have had the advantage, because of our peculiar amphibious job, of studying in the best of the Army and Navy Schools, an advantage that officers in other branches of the military profession do not often get.

This schooling, this training, however, does not make us better Army officers than the best Army officers or better Naval officers than the best Navy officers. They can run the Army far better than we can. They can run the Navy far better than we can. But by the same token, because of our specialized training, we can run amphibious and landing operations better than they can. With our tradition, experience, and our training, they could run amphibious operations as effectively as we can, but they do not spend their lives in this specialization. We do.

Now all this training, all this experience, will be of little avail unless it is built on the proper material, on men of the right character. We must have men who feel a sense of responsibility to their country, a sense of responsibility which makes them willing to take chances, to risk their lives if necessary, in dangerous and different tasks. We must have men who want to learn; men who realize that discipline is essential for the best results, who recognize they have a responsibility to the men under them as well as to those above them. We must have men who realize that teamwork is important, that it pays dividends. And finally, we must have men who realize that they must cultivate ingenuity, inventiveness for the occasion when those qualities are required.

A Marine, you see, is therefore a man who disciplines himself and accepts discipline from others when required. He is a man who has practiced and learned self-control. Some of the best Marines I have known are soft-spoken, quiet men. They are usually the qualities of the men with the most resolve and the most courage. Loud talkers are often those of little control, often the indication of an inferiority. Now this sounds as if our men are all the ideal—they are not—some have these qualities to a greater degree than others. The greater the degree to which we have them, the greater the success we shall have in the jobs assigned to each of us.

With the proper character and this training you will gain confidence—and confidence you must have—confidence, not cockiness, and confidence comes from knowing how to do your job. It comes from training, from experience—it comes only the hard way.

You officers will be leaders in our future operations. Leadership is not easy, it is not automatic. You must be possessed of those qualities of leadership which command respect and loyalty—which inspire in all hands the determination—and more important—the compelling desire to work together for a common end. No graph, no chart, no rules and regulations or other printed words can take the place of such leadership. May you have it to the greatest degree possible.

*This was the Commandant's address to graduating classes at the Marine Corps Schools, Quantico, Virginia, September 22, 1943.