Book Review Essay

Prominent triumvirate focuses on a new history of the Corps

SEMPER FIDELIS: The History of the United States Marine Corps. By Allan R. Millett. The Free Press-Macmillan Publishing Co., New York, 742 pp., $29.95. (Member $26.95)

† *Recognizing that LtCol Allan R. Millett, USMCR, in his new history of the Marine Corps had taken a fresh and comprehensive look at our past, the GAZETTE asked three prominent individuals to review his work, each from their own special vantage point. Here are those reviews:*

reviewed by Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr., USMC(Ret), 23d Commandant

This book, the result of seven years of intensive research, is the high-water mark of Marine Corps history. I predict that it will become the standard reference for our Corps.

Furthermore, it is written in such an engaging style that, once one starts to read, it is hard to put down the book.

For instance, as a sample, take Chapter IV, the story of Archibald Henderson who became fifth Commandant at age 37 in 1820. After preserving the Corps for 38 plus tumultuous years, Henderson died peacefully in bed in 1850 during an afternoon nap in the Commandant's House!

Henderson's problems were many. He assumed office following the Gale* scandal to find a Corps of 47 officers and 875 enlisted plagued with serious internal questions and riven with dissension.

By 1855 there was still only a strength of 63 officers and 1,340 enlisted, but Henderson in his devotion to duty and with great skill had, in the interim, straightened out a lot of problems and people and there was little doubt but what the Marine Corps would weather any storms ahead and was here to stay. Millett's account of these years is a fascinating story of a great Commandant.

"This history of the United States Marine Corps is essentially a story of institutional survival and adaption in both peace and war. It describes how a primitive organization of some 1,000 officers and men in the early nineteenth century grew to a complex organization of 189,000 officers and men by 1979 . . . It would be, however, an error to make a history of the Marine Corps simply a history of the development of amphibious warfare."

Henderson first squared away things in his own headquarters by firing the Adjutant, Paymaster, and Quartermaster and appointing new officers to these posts. He, himself, then weathered the resulting accusation of "conduct unbecoming an officer!"

Henderson firmly believed—and this was a mirror of the times—that the principal mission for Marines was to serve "on board ships of war in distant lands for protection of our widely extended commerce" and to take part in landing parties to preserve our rights ashore. As a consequence, he sought to provide fully manned and trained ships' guards for outward bound naval ships.

However, there was continuous acrimony aboard ship among Navy and Marine officers over pay, messing, privileges and command authority. In fact, some naval officers even questioned the need for ships' detachments of Marines. Even the schoolmaster in the *Constitution* had to have his say by defining a Marine as "as sort of ambidextrous animal—half horse and half alligator"—sharing a reciprocal contempt with the "genuine tar" aboard ship!

Flogging in naval ships continued until 1852. Henderson did not believe in this punishment and tried to improve morale by abolishing flogging among his troops ashore. Over the years, he also succeeded in bettering pay and clothing, limiting the liquor ration and in making Sunday ashore a day of rest.

Barracks' commanders gave him a lot of trouble asserting their independence of his headquarters as well as of Navy Yard commandants! Henderson ordered all commanders of barracks and ships' guards to send their reports directly to his headquarters and not to the Secretary of the Navy or via the Yard commandants.

The Marine Corps was forever plagued with personnel shortages. It was a continuous fight with Secretaries of the Navy and Congress to obtain authority to meet the minimum levels of manpower to maintain ships' detachments and Marine barracks. Even then, because of the hardships and uninviting conditions of life for a Marine afloat or ashore, it was almost impossible to recruit to legal strength. As a result many aliens and minors were enlisted—but no women!

In 1850 Henderson tried to outlaw cursing and drunkeness by invoking the articles of war—which governed the Army—but he was not entirely successful in this endeavor of moral probity!

"Vain, ambitious, and inclined to play favorites, Archibald Henderson . . . preserved an anomalous military force that had outlived most of its original functions. Through his opportunistic commitments of Marines in Army campaigns in 1836 and 1847, Henderson had built a modest public reputation for the Marine Corps as infantry . . ."

He also had haircut problems! One of his captains wrote to complain:

> Some of the officers have cut their hair short behind and shave the face all clean, others leave their hair long behind, and have long whiskers extending around the throat, others in addition wear a mustachio, and others again do not shave any part of the face, and you may suppose they

* LtCol Anthony Gale was the Corps fourth Commandant.

are when together a motley-looking group!

The Commandant, therefore, decreed that "Marines would have cropped hair in back, no hair below the ears and no mustachios or beards—no matter what civilian styles were!"

Henderson loved to soldier and, as we all know, went off to fight the Seminole Indians in 1837. What many readers perhaps don't realize is that en route to Florida in 1836, Henderson also stopped off in Alabama and Georgia to help the Army battle the Creek Indians.

To futher enhance the Marine Corps' reputation as a military force prepared for active service in the field, he committed the Corps to battle in the Mexican War of 1846–1848. At home, Henderson, personally took charge of two companies of Marines to suppress an armed riot of Baltimore "Pug Uglies" staged at the City Hall in Washington.

These are only a sampling of the many events in the Marine Corps story which Millett so richly describes in his writing and which make reading this particular history a special and unique pleasure. His work marks for now the culmination of the long line

"As the first serious fighting by Americans on Cuban soil, it [the Guantanamo Bay expedition] drew a squad of newspaper correspondents, whose reports made it sound as if Huntington's battalion had been on the edge of annihilation . . . When veteran Marine officers treated the situation with aplomb, the reporters waxed rhapsodic . . . If the Commandant had staged the campaign for public effect, it could not have been more successful."

of writings which began with Capt Collum's history published in 1875 and which in turn was followed by many subsequent and well-written accounts of our Corps.

In addition to being well illustrated throughout with photographs and maps, each chapter is also amply footnoted. There are three useful appendices. These are followed by an unusual "Essay on Sources" which discusses official and private documents and the major printed sources of information on the Marine Corps available to any researchers of Marine Corps history.

In every respect this is a mighty fine book worthy of a prominent place on a Marine bookshelf.

reviewed by James Webb

Drive or walk around the Iwo Jima monument in Arlington and pay attention to the campaigns etched onto its walls, all those moments of pain and glory that have made the Marine Corps a memorable fighting force. They make a belt of words around the sculpture, signifying its trek along the cutting edge of American history. Here is the Mexican War. We think of Chapultapec, and the red stripes along our blues. There is the Boxer

"The ships guard controversy [of 1908–1909] marked a political milestone in the Marine Corp's history, for the Corps had now so developed its own popular constituency in the public and the federal government that it could survive an assault on its least defensible function."

Rebellion. We think of Dan Daly's first Medal of Honor. Along the other side comes World War I, each of its campaigns etched out separately. The same occurs after World War II, each Marine Corps effort given individual recognition. And then, later, alone like an afterthought, is the single world "VIETNAM." No enumeration of campaigns or provinces. No remembrance of major battles. The Marine Corps' longest and most costly war, one that produced eight times the casualties of World War I, is an unexplainably brief addendum.

This sad but familiar phenomenon is also the central failing of Allan Millet's otherwise excellent history. *Semper Fidelis,* which in the author's own words seeks to "develop a model of organizational structure and behavior that blends the common characteristics of all organizations and the unique attributes of (the Marine Corps)," does an admirable job of tracing the evolution of the Marine Corps in both war and peace. It is a story of institutional expansion that became necessary in order to project the policies of a nation that itself was inexorably moving toward a principal place in world affairs. Professor Millett who currently also serves as a lieutenant colonel in the Marine Corps Reserve, is careful to examine the effects of external and internal political maneuverings on the size and missions of the Corps. He addresses enlistment and retention policies in every era, right down to the presence or lack of comforts in the barracks and the ease of obtaining discharges. He gives us our legendary figures in dress and undress, and he pops more than a few bubbles—for instance, Presley O'Bannon, "known for his military ardor, thirst for glory, womanizing, and fiddle-playing," actually conducted a "fool's errand" when he marched 600 miles across the desert in order to attack Derna, Tripoli, "for even before the epic capture and defense of Derna, another American had negotiated a peace treaty with the Bashaw of Tripoli." And, most importantly, he shows us that such difficulties as quality recruitment, political intermeddling, frustrations with civilians in combat, and the definition of roles and missions are not new, but rather are cyclical problems. Current Marines might be gratified to learn that, even as early as 1908, the Marine Corps was selling itself as, dollar for dollar, "a better buy than the Army."

Professor Millett's is a labor of love, at least until he reaches Vietnam. He outlines chapter and verse on every major and minor campaign, including sections on China and

"The Marine was the nation's expert in tropical service and was capable of landing without confusion to support American diplomacy—even unto death. Springfield rifle in hand, globe-and-anchor fixed at the front of his peaked campaign hat, sleeves rolled above tanned arms, and khaki uniform bleached and stained by sweat and tropic sun, 'Uncle Sam Marine' in 1914 awaited new challenges. He had no intention of ever 'being in the way' again."

Hispaniola that are so detailed as to become tedious. He addresses World War I, which caused a real turnabout in public perceptions and political uses of the Corps, in adulatory terms that transcend the events on the battlefield, summarizing that the Marines "had drawn strength from their conviction that the Marine Corps was the nonpareil of American military units and from their pride in the Corps's legends and symbols." He rightfully outlines the "numerical

eliteness" of the World War II Marines, mentioning that, with less than 5 percent of the American servicemen, they suffered nearly 10 percent of the casualties. His picture of the World War II Marine is poetic:

> Barely out of boyhood, often scared and sometimes blindly heroic, he fought and conquered—and created the image of the modern Marine Corps . . . . Burned by the tropic sun, numbed by the loss of comrades, sure of his loyalty to the Corps and his platoon . . . he squints into the western sun and wonders what island awaits him.

Similarly, with Korean War Marines:

> . . . the Marines fought with unmatched ferocity and determination. Some of the individual and small-unit heroics matched Greek and Nordic legends—except they happened.

His evaluation of the impact of Korea on the Corps is that:

> if the war was something less than victorious, it remains nearly as important as World War II for its impact on Corps self-esteem and public acceptance.

Unfortunately Professor Millett attributes few of these characteristics to Vietnam Marines or their Corps.

"His [LtCol Earl H. Ellis'] disappearance made him a martyr in the eyes of World War II Marines and gave his studies the heroic glow of prophecy. Ellis's credential as a seer may be suspect, given the advanced state of the Navy's own work on War Plan ORANGE, but Operation Plan 712 had the intended effect. On July 23, 1921 John A. Lejeune approved Ellis's study in its entirety and ordered that henceforth, the Marine Corps would use it to guide war planning, field exercises, equipment development, and officer education."

Perhaps because of his long tenure in academia, where the antiwar movement was the strongest and where its vestiges yet remain, Professor Millett seems embarrassed and tentative when dealing with Vietnam. He speaks of the "prices" levied on the Corps, quoting a nameless gunnery sergeant: "First there was the old Corps, then there was the new Corps, now there's this goddamned thing." He comments that Vietnam was "the ultimate test of the Corps's survivability," and that, "Like a cancer, the effects of the war spread throughout the Corps and weakened its cohesiveness." and "began to tarnish the Corps's relations with Congress."

Nowhere are these observations countered with a full accounting of the very real human costs and successes in the war itself. Contrary to other areas of *Semper Fidelis,* operation names and casualty counts are dropped into the text without full tactical analysis. Much is made of the Corps' nearly 10 percent casualty statistics of World War II, and yet it is not even mentioned that the Corps suffered 30 percent of the casualties in Vietnam. Professor Millett allots 95 pages of his book to the exploits of World War II, 41 to Korea (where the Marines suffered one-third the number of casualties they did in Vietnam) and yet told the story of the longest most complex and costly Marine Corps commitment in only 46 pages, one of which was devoted to the Mayaguez incident.

The Vietnam section of *Semper Fidelis* is dealt with not only in haste, but without proper focus. The Vietnam experience for American servicemen might be described as a "bell curve" with 1968 as the peak year in terms of casualties, numbers of troops, and operations. Professor Millett gives scant attention to the years after 1968, even though 1969 was second only to 1968 in terms of American casualties. 1970 is dismissed with a single sentence: "In 1970 only 403 Marines died in Vietnam, no less hard for the dead, but a substantial reduction of Corps losses." We have perhaps become too used to dying in the 20th century, but these 403 deaths are more Marines than were lost by the Corps in its entire history up to World War I. Some examination might have been in order.

Furthermore, Professor Millett does not render the distinction between DMZ fighting and Southern I Corps fighting with enough insight for the novitiate to have understood the war at all. The DMZ war, with its large battles and great lulls in between, is perhaps easier to capsulize and is thus addressed more fully. The so-called "pacification war" in Quang Nam province, with its incessant small-unit engagements, is never really captured. Millett is quick to point out that "only" 205 defenders died at Khe Sanh, and "only 142 Marines died in the battle" for Hue.

Those who scratch their heads while reading, remembering the Corps' casualty figures for Vietnam and wondering where they occurred, are not told by Millett. While he mentions that Quang Nam operations "usually did not bring on the heavy fighting and casualties that characterized the DMZ," he fails to count the toll of the company and platoon engagements: of the roughly

"It is understandable . . . that the Marine Corps emerged from World War II with an institutionalized sense of self-importance that affected its highest generals and its greenest privates. The Corps had made a major contribution (perhaps *the* major contribution) to creating an essential Allied military specialty, the amphibious assault against a hostile shore.

13,000 Marines who died in the 5 I Corps provinces of Vietnam, 6,000 died in Quang Nam province alone.

But this review is not meant to be a diatribe. Professor Millett has given us a reference filled with anecdote and analysis, suitable for serious research and yet written with a readable style.

† *James Webb served with the 5th Marines in Vietnam in 1969 and wrote* Fields of Fire, *one of the best Marine novels to emerge from that war. He is currently counsel for the minority side of the House Veteran Affairs Committee.*

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reviewed by Dr. Russell F. Weigley,

The Marine Corps has received at last a large-scale, deeply detailed, scholarly, critical, yet sympathetic history. Allan Millett, lieutenant colonel, U.S. Marine Corps Reserve, and also a well established, capable military historian, has achieved a fine blend of the professional historian's objectivity with a Marine insider's perceptive understanding of the values and problems of the Corps. He has achieved also a nice blend of the institutional evolution of the Corps, its organization and doctrine, in the years of peace, with the testing of peacetime developments in the trial of combat. His history is written with lucidity and sometimes with eloquence.

Millett's focusing of his institutional history of the Corps finally upon the combat infantryman, his full summaries of the Marines' battles

and campaigns, give his volume a virtue too often lacking in the "new" military history. This "new" military history involves the efforts of historians of the past few decades to link the history of armed forces firmly with the history of the states and societies the armed forces serve. *The Macmillan Wars of the United States,* the series to which this volume is a contribution, has been intended to synthesize the "new" American military history. Too often, however, the "new" military historians have spent so much time analyzing the social background of military organizations that they scarcely get around to the combat that is the central purpose of the military. Millett redirects the emphasis of his military institutional history toward combat.

"Viewed in emotional terms—focusing on the endurance and heroism of the 1st Division's Marines—the Chosin Reservoir withdrawal remains one of those military masterpieces that occur when skill and bravery fuse to defy rational explanation. However, the campaign in retrospect dramatized the soundness of Marine training and doctrine . . . [Maj]Gen Frank E.] Lowe reassured the President that the Marine Corps was everything it claimed as a force in readiness: 'The First Marine Division is the most efficient and courageous combat unit I have ever seen or heard of.'"

With an organization so combative as the Marine Corps, perhaps he could hardly have done otherwise. Yet he is enough the "new" military historian that he also betrays a touch of discomfort over his emphasis on combat. The discomfort reveals itself in an introductory digression into contemporary organizational theory as developed by social scientists and as that theory might be applied to a military force. The digression features an unhappy departure from the clarity of most of the book into social science jargon, all the more unfortunate because it comes along in the first few pages and might discourage the reader from pushing forward. But the reader uninterested in pretentious conceptualizing and impatient to get to the meat of the history of the Corps should persist; the spasm of theorizing passes fairly quickly.

Less happily, there passes with it much of Millett's effort to deal with the tensions between military force and democratic politics. Of course, Millett returns periodically to the Marine Corps' perennial efforts to defend bridgeheads of congressional and public favor against the real and imagined efforts of the executive branch and the other military Services to cripple or destroy the Corps. But even if the history of a relatively small military organization like the Marines goes less to the heart of the tensions between democracy and military power than the Army's history does, there are still issues of the "new" military history more fundamental than the Corps' lobbying with Congress that Millett might have explored with more profit than is to be found in his flirtation with organizational theory.

We can call this book a "critical" history of the Corps largely because Millett's own Marine affiliations do not prevent him from being candid about the heavy amount of mythologizing that the 19th- and early 20th-century Marine Corps generated and that may have been essential to keeping the Marines in congressional and public favor during most of American history until World War II. In the old days, Millett admits, there was long a considerable distance between the myths of Marine prowess and the more prosaic truth about an organization whose real achievements were still mostly those of ships' guards for the Navy.

Millett's detailed tracing of the Marines' march to Mexico City with Winfield Scott shows frankly, for example, that Commandant Archibald Henderson "convinced himself that [Capt George H.] Terrett's force had captured the San Cosme gate before the Army arrived and that [Brevet LtCol Samuel E.] Watson's battalion stormed Chapultepec castle" (p. 80). The crucial words here are "convinced himself"—in the face of facts to the contrary. Just as frankly, Millett's account of the Civil War shows that the Marine battalion at First Bull Run was routed (understandably, to be sure, because it consisted mostly of recruits) and that the amphibious assault of another Marine battalion against Fort Fisher off Wilmington, N.C., on 14 January 1865 was another debacle. Millett recognizes that it was a triumph of public relations, built on no firmer a foundation than such wishful self-delusion as Henderson's, that transformed such incidents into myths of Marine valor. But it is here that we begin to meet implications that are less than fully explored.

One of the first of the "new" military histories that blazed the trail for *The Macmillan Wars of the United States* was Alfred Vagts' 1937 *History of Militarism.* Vagts would have taken ironically amused satisfaction from Millett's tales of the Marine Corps's 19th-century mythmaking, because this sort of military self-aggrandizement for the sake of parochial interests is the very essence of what Vagts called "militarism." But Millett's account can also be read as an illumination of phenomena that Vagts failed to perceive. Vagts had a blind eye for the value of military tradition. The myths about such matters as the halls of Montezuma contributed not only to the Corps' self-interest in the 19th century but to nurturing the elitist traditions that made the Corps so superb a fighting organization in the 20th century. The myths of the 19th-century Corps might have afforded opportunities not only for Millett's display of an amused objectivity about the Corps' past, but also for reflection upon the limitations of the new military history when, as with Alfred Vagts, a determination to be critically objective prevents recognition of the ultimate worth of the traditions, myths, and emotions of military forces.

From ships' guards to colonial infantry—that is, to the Marines of China and Caribbean service in the first half of this century—and then to amphibious assault force is the sequence of Millett's organizing categories for Marine history to World War II. If it was as an amphibious assault force that the Corps amply redeemed its 19th-century struggle against the threat of dissolution, however, the history of the Corps as an instrument for amphibious war also might have afforded still further opportunities for a volume somewhat more reflective about the tensions between Armed Services and democracy than the work Millett has written.

For too many years into the 20th century, neither the Marine Corps itself nor the executive or congressional branches of government perceived adequately what in retrospect appears the obvious, appropriate, and indispensable role of the Corps in the context of a half century of Japanese-American rivalry

across the Pacific: the role of amphibious assault that the Corps at last took up just in time, shortly before World War II. Both Marines and civilians were too preoccupied with issues less relevant to American national security to develop the Marines' amphibious mission in as timely a fashion as they might have. A century of fending off dissolution had left the early 20th-century Corps irrationally intent on maintaining the historic role as ships' guards. Interpreting the ships' guards mission as the Corps' most enduring raison d'etre blinded Corps leaders in the first quarter of the present century to the possibilities of a much less tenuous mission in amphibious assault. Old democratic distrusts of Marine ships' guards as a dubious legacy from the Royal Navy meanwhile fixed civilian attention also on the most obsolescent of the Marines' missions.

Marines such as Eli K. Cole and Dion Williams who from the beginning of the century foresaw the centrality of amphibious assault in a likely war against Japan and the Corps' manifest fitness to take on the job could hardly make themselves heard above the din of political battle. As Millett observes, as late as 1919–1920 the Corps scarcely seemed to possess enough internal stability and cohesiveness to assume the new mission of amphibious assault. As late as 1924–1925, the advanced students at the Marine Corps Schools spent only two hours studying landing operations.

Commandant John A. Lejeune turned this parlous situation around. The most influential Commandant of the Corps in the 20th century, during his 1920–1929 tenure he almost singlehandedly ensured that the prophetic work of Cole, Williams, Earl H. Ellis, and other advocates of the amphibious assault mission did not come to a dead end. Lejeune pushed the Marine Corps Schools into intensive studies of amphibious war; by 1927 the number of hours of instruction in the subject had soared to over a hundred. He created the Operations and Training Division in Corps Headquarters, making it the center for the development of the new mission. He instituted the first Marine and Navy full-scale beach assault exercises in 1924 and 1925. Lejeune "guided the Corps toward the amphibious assault role while wooing three Presidents, Congress, the Navy, the public, and the apathetic, conservative officers within the Corps itself" (p. 318). Without him, the principal contribution of the Marine Corps to Allied victory in World War II could not have been the doctrinal contribution of creating the theory and methods of modern amphibious war, nor could the Corps have gone on to its own superb applications of the doctrine in the Pacific and in Korea.

"Wartime expansions [during the Vietnam War] and service fell hardest upon Marine aviators, particularly helicopter pilots. Despite some fancy bookkeeping and DOD pressure to hide its problems, the pilot shortage was real. The Deputy Chief of Staff (Air) reported with scant humor: 'Surely everyone knows that there is no pilot shortage; it is merely that requirements exceed resources.'"

Millett's account of the specifics of amphibious doctrinal evolution and eventually application is excellent, as is his coverage of virtually all specific detail. But the question remains whether he has explored the implications of his detailed narrative as much as he might. Those "apathetic, conservative officers within the Corps itself" disappear from Millett's history after the 1930s, leaving his accounts of the Vietnam War and of the present and near-future Corps still admirably full in factual detail but so laudatory and optimistic in tone that the thoughtful reader cannot but suffer misgivings. Can all the apathetic, conservative officers who figure so largely in this history up to World War II really have left no descendants? Can an institution so strained and scarred historically by its political struggles to remain part of the national defense structure have so completely sloughed off the scar tissue? Can the Marines of today unlike those of the recent past plan for the future with no distortion of vision by bitterness inherited from old political wars? Does not Millett's own emphasis on the Corps' never having abandoned a single one of its historic missions suggest rather the possible persistence of an attitude that from 1900 nearly to 1940 almost sacrificed the new missions of amphibious assault rather than give up the historic ships' guards mission? Can we be sure that the Corps in its present-day role of a flexible, combat-ready force will be as flexible as it claims, that institutional insecurity will never impel it to cling to amphibious assault beyond reason as it once clung to the ships' guards mission beyond reason?

The root cause of the Marine Corps insecurity that has spawned conservatism, apathy, and inflexibility in the past has been the tension between American democratic values and the values of an elitist military force. The tension surely endures. *Semper Fidelis* is a first-rate history of the elitist force as seen from inside. This reviewer intends a challenge for further work—very suitably by Allan Millett himself—not a mere quibble about an excellent book, by concluding that the history of the Corps in its social-political setting remains to be told. We still need, in the manner of Samuel P. Huntington's *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations,* our study of "The Marine and the State."

† *Dr. Weigley is a professor of history at Temple University and author of several books including* The American Way of War.

IWO. By Richard Wheeler. Lippincott & Crowell, New York, 1980, 243 pp., $12.95 (Member $11.65.)

reviewed by Henry I. Shaw, Jr.

Richard Wheeler is an Iwo veteran. What is more he is a veteran of Company E, 2d Battalion, 28th Marines, whose 3d Platoon raised the flags on Mount Suribachi. This fact colors the whole book, for the author has chosen Company E as the exemplar unit through which he capably tells the story of the battle. You become familiar with its men and that is the key to the feel of the fighting which pervades Mr. Wheeler's writing. You can identify with these men and with the veterans of other units whose reminiscences are skillfully woven into the history.

Iwo is history, but it is not just a recital of facts. The author has a vivid descriptive style, and he makes the reader know that there were real people on the island, killing and being killed. Like Richard Newcomb did in his excellent book, *Iwo Jima,* written 15 years ago, Richard Wheeler tells a two-sided story. The Japanese are not faceless enemies; they are there, and their actions and feelings are as much evident as are those of the Marines.