Reflections on the Corps . . . Marine Tactical Aviation

by Gen Carl E. Mundy, Jr.

Having aviators as fully integrated members of the combat team is a key part of what makes the Corps unique.

In my travels around the Corps I often revisit the scenes of historic Marine Corps actions. When I do, I am reminded of those intangible qualities of the Corps that comprise our enduring legacy—traditions "such as regiments hand down forever," to use John W. Thomason's famous phrase. Many of the things that make the Marine Corps an unbeatable air-ground combat team are tangible and readily apparent: common training from the ground up, common systems, integrated air-ground organization, integrated logistics, sound doctrine, and so on. But these ultimately derive from the intangibles, which are just as valid and just as important.

Back in December, I had the opportunity to visit Wake Island and walk the beaches where, 50 years ago, the Marines of the 1st Defense Battalion and Marine Fighting Squadron 211 (VMF-211) withstood the onslaught of Japanese landing forces from 8 to 23 December. The heroic actions of Maj Henry T. Elrod during the defense of Wake epitomize the meaning of the Marine air-ground team. As a pilot in VMF-211, he flew 1 of 12 F-4F Wildcats onto the island shortly before hostilities began. Early in the battle, he singlehandedly attacked a flight of 22 enemy aircraft and shot down 2 of them. He repeatedly attacked enemy ships and was the first aviator to sink a major warship with small bombs from a fighter aircraft. When all of the Marines' planes had been destroyed by hostile fire, he assumed command of one flank of the ground forces and led his men aggressively until he fell mortally wounded. Maj Elrod's actions exemplify one of the characteristics that make Marine aviators unique. They are an *integrated* part of a combined arms team, and it is particularly significant that the first Medal of Honor awarded to a Marine in World War II was presented to Maj Elrod for valor in combat both in the air *and* on the ground.

The essential role that Marine aviation plays as an integral element of a combined-arms combat system is not always well understood—even by some Marines. In this era of increasingly tight fiscal constraints, analysts frequently pose the notion that one air force could meet all of the Nation's requirements for tactical aviation. The simplicity of this idea gives it a perennial appeal, but it is akin to the suggestion that a football team needs only wide receivers to catch passes. The fact that wide receivers, tight ends, and running backs can all catch passes does not make that capability duplicative. These players have different but complementary abilities.

Similarly, Marine aviation is like Air Force and Navy aviation in some ways, but the capabilities it provides are fundamentally different and complementary to those of the other Services. Navy and Air Force pilots are first-rate at what they do, but they cannot replace Marine aviators in meeting the requirements of the Marine air-ground team.

Unlike Air Force tactical aviation, Marine aviation is naval; in fact, it is an integral component of naval aviation. Marine pilots are designated Naval Aviators, trained at the Naval Air Training Command. They fly aircraft that are designed for shipboard operations, with folding wings, tailhooks, special corrosion control features, rotorbrakes, and so on. Marine squadrons conduct their training in accordance with standardized Naval Air Training and Operating Procedures. They employ naval maintenance and logistics procedures, and shoot naval weapons. Operationally, this means that they can augment carrier air wings on short notice, host carrier squadrons ashore, and conduct naval air operations from shore. There are countless examples of Marines conducting naval air operations from sea and shore, as long ago as the battle of Wake and as recently as DESERT SHIELD.

Although they are naval, Marine squadrons are also different from Navy squadrons. Marine squadrons are fully trained, organized, and equipped for sustained expeditionary operations ashore. Their intermediate maintenance is provided by deployable Marine aviation logistics squadrons rather than shipboard intermediate maintenance detachments. Their maintenance equipment sets are packaged in vans for rapid deployment ashore, unlike those of their Navy counterparts, which are bolted to ships. Operating from shore gives the Marine squadrons an edge over sea-based squadrons in some scenarios—higher sortie rates, improved endurance over the target, better responsiveness; this has sometimes been the margin between victory and defeat.

Finally, unlike either Navy or Air Force squadrons, Marine aviation units are an integral element of an air-ground combat system. They are not merely joined at the top when the time comes to fight. They are fully integrated from top to bottom, and they train to fight that way full-time.

It is not merely an accident of history that Marine aviation has developed unique capabilities as part of a naval expeditionary air-ground team. These capabilities are the result of years of unremitting effort on the part of Marine aviators and ground officers who attacked the problems of air-ground integration with tireless zeal.

Close air support (CAS) is a case in point. The first CAS sorties were flown by Marine pilots in Nicaragua in 1927, and Marines have been pioneers in the development of CAS tactics and systems ever since. One of many aviators whose efforts were particularly distinguished was Gen Keith B. McCutcheon. As a lieutenant colonel at Bougainville during World War II, he developed and helped implement a new system for controlling CAS. He later went on to become a pioneer in the early development of rotary-wing aircraft and tactics.

Generations of Marines like Gen McCutcheon have been instrumental in the development of heliborne operations, all-weather CAS, airborne electronic warfare support for ground operations, night attack capabilities, deployable air fields, expeditionary air command and control systems, and VSTOL aircraft. Today, another generation of Marine aviators is on the cutting edge of aviation, developing techniques and systems that will support air-ground operations into the next century. All are driven in some small way by the spirit that motivated Maj Elrod and Gen McCutcheon.

Which brings me back to the lessons that can be learned in places like the windswept beaches of Wake Island. Within its family of military capabilities, the Nation needs expeditionary naval air-ground forces that are always ready for immediate employment to influence events and deal with unexpected threats. It will only continue to have such forces through the dedicated efforts of professional aviators and ground officers who share a commitment to integrated air-ground operations. It is not just that the Nation needs aviators who can support Marines; *the Nation needs aviators who are Marines.*